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edited by DAVIDE BORSANI



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Jean-François Rosset (1703/1706-1786), Buste de Montesquieu, Collection Adolphe Thiers. Musée du Louvre, Aile Richelieu. Photo Siren-Com, 2009, CC BY SA 3.0 Unported. Wikimedia Commons.

Montesquieu's *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734) represents the first instance of "philosophical history" applied to international relations—a work in which history is no longer merely a reconstruction of military and diplomatic episodes, but an interpretation of social factors and long-term historical processes. This book, which has recently been brought to the attention of scholars in the field of strategic studies by Jakub Grygiel (Orbis, 63:4, Fall 2019: 582–607) and John Stone (*Journal of Strategic Studies,* 46:6–7, 2023: 1460–1481), can also be considered the first modern example of "strategic history."

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Reflections on Strategic History and the Need for an Interdisciplinary Debate

by Davide Borsani (*Editor*)
and Lorenzo Bernardini (*Assistant Editor*)

Abstract: This introduction offers a reflection on the epistemological foundations, scope and methodology of Strategic History, with the aim of contributing to a broader debate on its nature as a field of historical inquiry. Taking Colin Gray's definition as a point of departure, it places his contribution within a longer intellectual tradition, examining the work of Montesquieu, Clausewitz, Delbrück and Howard, as well as the evolution of strategic studies and War Studies. It then considers the interdisciplinary character of the field, the variety and critical evaluation of its sources, and the methodological challenges involved in studying contemporary affairs from a historical perspective. Rather than proposing a definitive framework, the article seeks to identify some of the questions that should inform further discussion.

Keywords: strategic history; strategic studies; military history; historiography; historical methodology

Genealogy is akin to hagiography – which is often just one step before eulogy. Nevertheless, recalling Colin Gray and his *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History*[1] seems an appropriate starting point for an introduction to the first issue of *Nuova Antologia Militare* dedicated to Strategic History. Published in 2007, Gray's volume offered a concise definition of the field: "strategic history is the history of the influence of the use (and threat) of force upon the course of the events". The formulation is deliberately broad, placing the use and threat of military force within the wider historical process and inviting scholars to examine how strategic choices have influenced political developments, international orders and relations between states.

1 Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History* (London: Routledge, 2007)

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From this perspective, Strategic History can be understood as the historical study of the relationship between the use, preparation and threat of military force and the political purposes pursued by states and other actors. Its object of inquiry is therefore not limited to the history of military operations, the evolution of armed forces or the development of strategic thought. It also encompasses the political decisions that lead to the employment of force, the institutional and material conditions that make it possible, the perceptions and calculations of decision-makers, and the consequences of strategic choices for domestic and international orders.

Gray's definition deserves attention, although it should not be mistaken for the invention of an entirely new intellectual approach. The relationship between history, strategy and the study of war had been explored long before his work from different perspectives and through distinct methodological traditions. Gray's contribution was not to introduce historical inquiry into the study of strategy, but rather to give this field of investigation a more distinct identity in the literature, to formulate its object in concise terms and to provide a conceptual framework within which its boundaries and methodological implications could be discussed. His contribution should therefore be assessed primarily in definitional and systematising terms. He provided a formulation through which a set of longstanding intellectual concerns could be more clearly identified and debated.

Gray also proposed three broad orientations for researchers working within this field. First, Strategic History should describe the influence of strategic decisions on the international order and the course of historical events. Second, it should seek to understand the reasoning and assumptions underpinning the strategic choices of historical actors. Third, it should investigate the instrumentality of military power, examining how and to what extent military force has been employed to achieve politically determined objectives. Taken together, these guidelines provide a useful framework for historical research. An approach that, in its emphasis on the subordination of military means to political ends, would hardly have been at odds with Carl von Clausewitz's own understanding of strategy.

The distinction between war and warfare is useful in this regard. The former concerns the broader political relationship between belligerents, while the latter refers more specifically to the conduct of military operations. Strategic History must therefore consider both the political context in which force is employed and the operational dimension through which political objectives are pursued. Nor

should its scope be confined to situations of open warfare. Deterrence, coercive diplomacy, military deployments and the threat of force itself also deserve attention whenever they influence political behaviour and international developments.

Gray identified a number of themes that, in his view, remain relatively constant across different historical settings. Among them are the political nature of war; the distinction between war and its operational conduct; the often difficult relationship between political authorities and military professionals; the dependence of military efforts on the societies that sustain them; and the close relationship between war and peace. These themes draw attention to enduring problems that recur across historical periods, even though their manifestations vary considerably. Alongside these invariable themes, Gray identified a series of variable contexts that influence the way military force is conceived and employed. They include the political organisation of states, strategic culture and military structures; economic performance and technological development; geographical conditions; and, finally, the historical circumstances in which decisions are taken.

The latter dimension is particularly important because it brings human agency into the analysis. Strategic decisions are made by individuals who are shaped by the political institutions, social environments and intellectual assumptions of their time. Understanding their choices therefore requires locating them within a specific historical context, rather than examining them in isolation or interpreting them through categories developed for different circumstances. These categories should not, however, be treated as a rigid analytical checklist. Their value lies in providing a framework for examining the different conditions that shape strategic choices and the ways in which they interact in historically specific circumstances. The task of the historian is to reconstruct these relationships, rather than to reduce them to a predetermined explanatory model.

Actually, the interdisciplinary character of Strategic History is not a feature introduced by Gray. It has deep roots in the intellectual history of military and strategic thought. The study of war has long required an understanding of phenomena that extend beyond the battlefield and cannot be adequately examined through military history alone. Political institutions, economic resources, social structures, technological developments, legal practices and geographical conditions have all shaped the preparation and conduct of war. Their consideration was therefore already part of a broader tradition of inquiry well before Strategic History acquired a more distinct identity in the literature.

Hans Delbrück provides a particularly instructive example. In his early twentieth-century work *History of the Art of War within the Framework of Political History*[2], he challenged approaches that treated military history as a succession of campaigns, battles and technical developments. For Delbrück, the conduct of war had to be examined in relation to the political objectives pursued by states, their institutional structures, economic resources, social organisation and demographic conditions. Military events could only be properly understood, in other words, by placing them within the wider history of the societies and political systems that produced them. The relationship between military operations and the material and political conditions of warfare was thus already an integral part of historical inquiry.

Von Clausewitz had approached the problem from a different perspective in the early nineteenth century. His reflections on the nature of war, the relationship between political objectives and military means, and the interaction between chance, uncertainty and human judgement established a framework in which military action could not be separated from its political and social environment. His understanding of war as an instrument of policy placed political purpose at the heart of strategic analysis. Equally important was his insistence on the need to understand war through historical experience, rather than through the mechanical application of abstract principles. In Book II, Chapter 6 of *On War*[3], he examined the different ways in which historical examples could be used in the study of war, warning against superficial or decontextualised readings of the past. History was not simply an illustrative repository for theoretical propositions; it was an indispensable means of understanding the complexity of war.

Much later, in the second half of the twentieth century, Michael Howard developed a similarly broad understanding of the study of war, although within a different academic and institutional context. His contribution to the development of War Studies rested on the conviction that war should be studied as a multi-

2 Hans Delbrück, *History of the Art of War within the Framework of Political History*, trans. Walter J. Renfroe Jr., 4 vols. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975; orig. ed. Berlin: Georg Stilke, 1900–1920). See also Michał Norbert Faszcza, *Hans Delbrück and the Birth of Modern Military History: Creation – Concepts – Reception* (Rome: Nadir Media, 2025).

3 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976; orig. ed. Berlin: Dümmler, 1832). See also Virgilio Ilari, *Clausewitz in Italia e altri scritti di storia militare* (Rome: Aracne, 2020).

faceted historical and social phenomenon. Military events had to be examined through their political, economic, social, legal and military dimensions, while strategic analysis needed to remain grounded in historical experience. Howard's approach helped establish an interdisciplinary tradition in which historians, political scientists, sociologists, economists and military specialists could contribute to the study of war. His reflections on *The Use and Abuse of Military History*[4] also warned against extracting lessons from the past without considering the circumstances in which historical events had taken place.

The roots of Strategic History in Western thought are not confined to the contemporary period; they can be traced back to the early modern era and even to antiquity. An earlier and illuminating precedent is Montesquieu's *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*[5]. Best understood as philosophical history applied to international relations, the work examines the relationship between war and political institutions, showing how the causes of Rome's decline were already present in the military expansion that had produced its greatness. In this respect, Montesquieu's account echoes a central Thucydidean insight: the fortunes of states cannot be understood through military events alone, but through the interplay of power, political choices and the conditions of the societies that sustain them[6].

These examples make it possible to place Gray's contribution in a broader intellectual perspective. The interdisciplinary approach that characterises Strategic History was already present, albeit in different forms, in Montesquieu's holistic analysis, Delbrück's military historiography, Clausewitz's reflections on war, strategy and history, and Howard's conception of War Studies. They were part of a wider tradition in which the study of military affairs and strategy was

4 Michael Howard, "The Use and Abuse of Military History", *Parameters*, 11:1 (1981), pp. 9-14. See also Michael Howard, *The Causes of Wars and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

5 Montesquieu, *Montesquieu's Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur and Decadence of the Romans: A New Translation, Together with an Introduction, Critical and Illustrative Notes, and an Analytical Index*, trans. Jehu Baker (Butzbach: Antigonos Verlag, 2025; reprint of the 1882 edition). See also Virgilio Ilari, *Per un Atlante del classicismo militare. L'invenzione della Storia Militare Antica, 1350-1789* (Rome: Nadir Media, 2026), pp. 199-203.

6 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954; orig. ed. c. 400 BCE).

not confined to the conduct of operations or theoretical thought, but addressed the relationship between military means, political objectives and the societies in which wars were fought.

Indeed, in Europe, the study of strategy, understood as the relationship between political goals and military means, already developed as a distinct field between the Seven Years' War and the Napoleonic Wars. This process was closely connected with the growing professionalisation of armed forces and the increasing demand for systematic knowledge among military institutions and general staffs. Strategic thought progressively extended beyond the technical conduct of operations, addressing the relationship between military action, state power and political ends. The development of this body of knowledge thus reflected changes not only in the practice of warfare, but also in the institutional and intellectual environment in which military affairs were studied.

The two World Wars further expanded the scope of this intellectual enterprise. The unprecedented mobilisation of scientific, technological, industrial and administrative resources demonstrated that modern warfare depended on forms of knowledge extending well beyond the military profession. Scientists, engineers, economists, lawyers, industrial specialists and other civilian experts became increasingly involved in the preparation and conduct of war. As a result, the study of military affairs developed into a broader investigation of the political, economic, social, legal, technological and institutional dimensions of conflict.

During the early Cold War, the emergence of nuclear weapons and the growing importance of deterrence widened the scope of strategic analysis still further. The study of war increasingly encompassed questions of national security, alliance politics, nuclear strategy, technological competition and international stability. It was in this context that, for instance, Howard's War Studies developed as a multidisciplinary field, bringing together history, political science, international relations, diplomacy, sociology, technology and strategic thought. A substantial body of historically grounded scholarship emerged alongside this development, including official histories commissioned by governments and armed forces, many of which relied on extensive archival research and rigorous historical methods.

Over time, however, the study of strategy became increasingly associated with political science and security studies. Within much of the academic literature, strategic studies came to be treated as a subfield of security studies, itself often located within the broader discipline of international relations. This disciplinary re-

organisation did not eliminate historical research. It did, however, contribute to a gradual marginalisation of historiography and of its methodological contribution. Historical evidence was at times used primarily to illustrate or test theoretical propositions, rather than as the basis for an independent historical investigation. The methodology of history consequently received less attention within large parts of the strategic studies literature.

The subsequent emergence of Critical Security Studies, the renewed debate on strategy as both a form of knowledge and a practical activity, and the appropriation of strategic concepts by business and management studies further diversified the field. These developments opened new perspectives, but they also contributed to a fragmentation of the debate across different academic communities. The relationship between history and strategic analysis consequently remained uneven. While historical research continued to inform the study of war, its methods and epistemological assumptions were not always given the attention they deserve.

After all, the study of war and strategy has never belonged exclusively to one academic discipline. At the same time, interdisciplinarity should not entail the dissolution of historical method into a generic combination of perspectives. One must not forget that the main contribution of history lies in its capacity to reconstruct the development of choices and facts over time, to situate actors within their specific contexts and to assess the relationship between intentions, capabilities and outcomes on the basis of critically examined evidence. Other disciplines can certainly enrich this investigation, but they cannot replace the historical reconstruction on which it rests.

This consideration leads to a more specific methodological question: which sources should historians employ, and how should they be evaluated? The answer cannot be reduced to the use of military documentation, even though official records produced by armed forces and defence institutions often constitute an indispensable starting point. Strategic decisions are rarely taken within a single institutional setting. Their reconstruction therefore requires attention to the different actors and organisations involved in the formulation, implementation and assessment of policy.

Government and diplomatic records, cabinet papers, parliamentary debates, military archives, intelligence documentation, operational reports and personal papers can all provide evidence of the processes through which strategic choices were made. Their value, however, depends on the questions being asked and on

the circumstances in which the documents were produced. Official records may reveal institutional procedures and stated objectives, but they can also conceal disagreements, omit informal exchanges or reflect the retrospective rationalisation of decisions. The historian must therefore distinguish between the content of a document and the circumstances that shaped its production. The existence of an official record does not, in itself, guarantee that it provides a complete or unmediated account of the decision-making process[7].

Memoirs, diaries, correspondence, interviews and oral testimony can also help reconstruct the perceptions and motivations of actors. These sources are particularly useful for examining individual agency, professional cultures and informal decision-making. At the same time, they require careful evaluation, since recollections may be affected by selective memory, personal interests and the desire to justify past choices. Their evidentiary value is strongest when they can be compared with contemporary documentation and other independent sources. In this respect, personal testimony should neither be dismissed as inherently subjective nor accepted at face value.

Strategic History also requires the integration of sources that are not traditionally classified as military or diplomatic. Economic data, industrial records, technological documentation, demographic information, scientific publications, maps, geographical surveys, newspapers and visual material may all contribute to understanding the conditions under which military force was prepared and employed. The study of public opinion, social mobilisation and the relationship between armed forces and society may likewise require the use of sources produced outside state and military institutions. The range of documentation should therefore reflect the breadth of the historical questions being addressed, rather than be determined in advance by the academic boundaries of the subject.

This variety of documentation reinforces the need for a critical and comparative approach. No single category of sources can provide a complete account of strategic decision-making. Researchers must assess the provenance, purpose, intended audience and limitations of each document, while comparing different types of evidence whenever possible. The absence of documentation may itself require attention. Archival silences, institutional gaps and the uneven preserva-

7 Massimo de Leonardis, *Storia dei trattati e politica internazionale. Fonti, metodologia, nascita ed evoluzione della diplomazia permanente* (Milan: Educatt, 2011).

tion of records can shape the historical reconstruction and should not be mistaken for evidence that a particular process or debate did not occur. In some cases, what is missing from the record may be as important as what has been preserved, although such absences must also be interpreted with caution.

The methodological lesson is that the breadth of the questions addressed by Strategic History must be matched by an equally careful approach to the evidence. The range of sources employed should follow from the object of investigation, while their interpretation must remain grounded in historical source criticism. The aim is not simply to accumulate documentation from different fields, but to establish how the available evidence can be used to reconstruct the interaction between political purposes, military means and the circumstances in which strategic choices were made.

A further question concerns the temporal boundaries of Strategic History. Although traditionally associated with the study of the past, its scope need not be confined to historical events in the strict sense: it may also extend to contemporary affairs, examining ongoing developments through a historical perspective. The use of force, the threat of military action, deterrence, alliance commitments and the relationship between military capabilities and political goals are not clearly confined to the distant past. They continue to shape international relations and affect current debates on security and defence. Strategic History therefore has a contribution to make to the understanding of contemporary affairs, not least by tracing the historical roots of ongoing developments and placing them within a broader perspective. This does not mean that historical knowledge can provide reliable predictions of future events, nor that past experiences can be mechanically applied to present circumstances. Rather, by examining the origins, dynamics and outcomes of previous decisions in their specific historical contexts, it can offer elements for a more informed assessment of the choices facing political and military actors today. In this sense, the study of the present through a historical lens does not dispense with uncertainty, but may help to understand its origins and to weigh more carefully the available courses of action.

The relationship between historical research and contemporary analysis nevertheless requires methodological caution. For events belonging to the more distant past, researchers may benefit from access to declassified government records, archives and documentation that has become available only after the passage of time, although, as noted above, these sources do not by themselves exhaust the

range of evidence available to scholars of Strategic History. The study of ongoing or very recent events, by contrast, often relies on a different evidentiary basis: official statements, press reports, open-source intelligence, satellite imagery, social media, think-tank publications and other forms of publicly accessible information. These sources can provide valuable evidence, but they are often incomplete, uneven in quality and difficult to verify independently.

The proximity of the researcher to contemporary events also creates specific interpretative risks. The absence of archival distance, the rapid evolution of political and military circumstances, the circulation of incomplete information and the influence of immediate political debates can encourage premature conclusions. Furthermore, the availability of large quantities of digital information should not be confused with the availability of reliable evidence. Contemporary analysis therefore requires an explicit awareness of the provisional character of its findings and a willingness to revise interpretations as new documentation becomes accessible. In this respect, the distinction between what is known, what can reasonably be inferred and what remains uncertain should be maintained throughout the investigation. This means that the historian studying contemporary events must apply the same critical standards that govern the investigation of earlier periods, while recognising the specific limitations imposed by the incomplete availability of sources. The passage of time may eventually make it possible to revise interpretations that, in the present, can only be considered provisional.

To conclude, the purpose of this introduction is not to provide a definitive definition of Strategic History or to establish a closed methodological framework. The field remains open to debate, both in terms of its epistemological boundaries and with regard to the methods and sources appropriate to its investigation. Gray's contribution offers a useful point of departure, but it should be considered within a much longer intellectual tradition. Recognising these precedents does not diminish his contribution. It helps to define it more precisely. Whether his definition adequately captures the variety of historical experiences, whether the proposed analytical categories are sufficiently comprehensive, and how the field should relate to neighbouring disciplines are questions that remain open. They deserve to be examined through further research and a broader discussion of the assumptions on which Strategic History rests.

Not by chance, the new annual Strategic History section of *Nuova Antologia Militare* intends to contribute to this discussion by bringing together scholars

working across different historiographical traditions and disciplinary fields. Its purpose is not to impose a single interpretation or methodological prescription, but to encourage a sustained exchange on the object, scope and methods of Strategic History. More specifically, this editorial initiative aims to clarify the definition, scope and epistemological boundaries of the field; examine its methodological evolution and thematic range; map the literature, authors and institutions that have contributed to its development; and apply Strategic History to the study of war and peace in national and international contexts.

The ambition is to promote a field of inquiry in which historical method and interdisciplinary exchange reinforce one another. It can hardly be stressed enough that Strategic History should neither be reduced to the history of military operations nor absorbed into theoretical approaches that treat historical evidence as merely illustrative[8]. It is equally important to reiterate that its contribution must always be understood in terms of the interaction between political purposes, military means and the historical circumstances in which strategic choices are made. How this relationship should be defined, investigated and situated within the wider study of the evolution of the international system remains a matter for discussion. It is precisely this discussion that NAM intends to foster.

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8 Jeremy Black (edited by), *The Practice of Strategy. A Global History* (Rome: Nadir Media, 2024), particularly the introduction, pp. 11-18.

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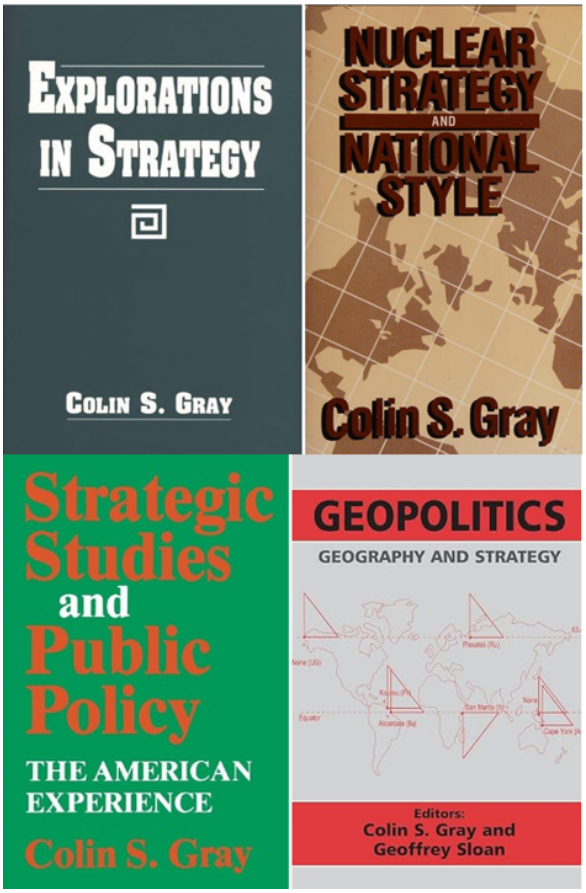

Some books by Colin S. Gray (1943-2020), Author of "Strategic History. " *Infinity Journal*, Volume 6, Issue 2, summer 2018, pages 4-8.

The Politics of Strategic Choice; The Strategies of Political Choice

by Jeremy Black

Abstract: This article examines the relationship between politics and strategy, arguing that strategic choices cannot be understood independently of their political, cultural and historical contexts. Challenging approaches that treat strategy as an autonomous sphere governed by military expertise and enduring national interests, it emphasises the reciprocal influence of political priorities, strategic pressures and contingent circumstances. Using eighteenth-century Britain as its principal historical case study, the article explores how domestic political divisions, ministerial rivalries, parliamentary debate, dynastic concerns, fiscal constraints and international relations shaped strategic decision-making. It considers, in particular, the tensions between interventionism and restraint, the influence of competing conceptions of the European balance of power, and the interaction between domestic instability and external threats. By highlighting the diversity of interests and perceptions within governments and the limitations of deterministic interpretations of strategic geography and national interest, the article demonstrates that strategic choices were neither inevitable nor exclusively military in character. It concludes that integrating political analysis into the study of strategy is essential both to understanding eighteenth-century British foreign and military policy and to interpreting contemporary strategic debates.

Keywords: strategy, politics, strategic decision-making, military history, political history

This is a very timely discussion, not only historically but also for the current situation. For both, this is also very timely for the full range of powers. For the politics of strategic choice and the strategies of political choice, it is necessary, for both past and present, to prioritise the strategic agenda with a realistic approach. Methodological issues correspondingly are to the fore, as in this piece. In particular, the interrelationship of politics and strategy involves broad cultural factors as well as the élitist assumptions that tend to dominate discussion, not least by setting its parameters.

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In discussing strategy, there can be a misleading tendency to focus on prominent strategic thinkers, such as Clausewitz, but without offering due contextualisation, for these thinkers, their lifetimes, or periods of subsequent attention including the present.[1] For contextualisation, in assessing strategy, there is a growing agreement that it is necessary to engage directly with political contexts, choices, and contingencies. At the same time, this was not a one-way process for these themselves are inherently affected by strategic pressures and considerations. This essay will consider this relationship, both in theoretical terms and with reference to the country and period on which I have done most research, eighteenth-century Britain. It will do so in order both to test the general thesis, and to do that for when Britain was of world historical significance.

The two-way flow of politics and strategy is of scant surprise to those who research on the interface; but very few do from either side. Moreover, contributing to the latter, strategy itself is generally approached, and notably so by the military and in the Anglosphere, as an apolitical sphere, goal, and tool, and one that should be kept from politicians. Strategic commentators might emphasise the Clausewitzian 'war as politics by other means', but that does not mean that they devote attention to the latter or display the necessary knowledge.

Indeed far from it. Much of the literature on strategy minimises political factors, treats them as a distraction at best and distortion at worst, or addresses them with inadequate knowledge and understanding. That may seem too harsh, but is in practice very much the case. Indeed, writers on strategy increasingly ignore, or at least underrate, contexts, and the complexities, frictions and alternative interests and views they offer.[2] Clausewitz would have warned them not to. The situation is all very Jominian, especially when they talk Clausewitz.[3] As a related matter, when writers on strategy do address contexts, they are frequently misunderstood, not least by being simplified.

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1 For such a problematic approach, B. Heuser, *The Strategy Makers: Thoughts on War and Society from Machiavelli to Clausewitz* (London, 2010), and *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War form Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge, 2010).

2 D.C. Copeland, *A World Safe for Commerce. American Foreign Policy from the Revolution to the Rise of China* (Princeton, NJ., 2024). See my review on the New Diplomatic History website. See for example, A.W. Mitchell, *Great Power Diplomacy. The Skill of Statecraft from Attila the Hunn to Kissinger* (Princeton, NJ., 2025). See my review on the New Diplomatic History website.

3 I owe this idea to Thomas Otte.

Separately, influential commentators, such as Hew Strachan,[4] have treated strategy as a field that should be kept from the politicians and left, instead, to the military; and to those such as themselves supposedly best placed to understand their views. This is a factor that has gained prominence over the last quarter-century, not least in response both to the Second Gulf War, that of 2003, and to the intervention in Afghanistan. The strategy/politics interface will remain significant to debate in part because it matches established divisions in policymaking. The rhetorical presentation is readily present as in 'I stand for strategic interests, You for political convenience.' Aside from the misleading character of this debate, it relates to different ideas of time, with politics seen as 'short-term' and, therefore, necessarily both of limited value and 'unnatural', while strategy is longer-term and, allegedly, rests on well-understood ideas of the 'national interest'. As such, strategy is 'natural' and draws on organic assumptions, with the value-laden assumptions that come accordingly.

In authoritarian systems, both the military and dictatorships, these assumptions are pushed further as 'political' is more clearly both a practice that has no agreed role and, correspondingly, a term of abuse. This, of course, leads to confusion as there are politics both in such states an din the military. Indeed, the latter are particularly relevant when it comes to consider strategy. Ironically, many military figures are themselves best considered as politicians of a certain type.

It is also fair to say that there has been a degree of disconnect coming from the political side, and notably so with politicians personally having less experience of war. This is a pattern that has gathered pace since the end of national service (conscription), ensuring a multi-generational character to the lack of experience. So also with the increased prominence of female politicians as an even larger percentage have not served in the military while, classically, they do not rise to the top through related ministries.

There is also a degree to which politics does not engage with military affairs to the extent seen in the past. This point can be expanded by considering the extent to which a social disengagement with conflict, and certainly with military service, is more particularly the case for younger generations.

4 H. Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 2013). There are also weaknesses in L. Freedman, *On Strategists and Strategy* (Oxford, 2026). See, my reviews of Strachan and of Freedman.

Underlining the need to be wary of schematic explanations, strategy, in practice, is specific to country, period and ministry, a combination of particularities and responses, with perception and politics both very much aspects of the choices made, choices that were and are inherently political, not least in terms of divisions within ministries.[5] These choices flow not from some inevitable, even immutable, interest but from choices. And these are essentially political and very much driven by circumstances. Thus, David, Viscount Stormont reported from Paris in 1774:

> 'It is most certain that the state of the finances and general situation of the country [France] require a lasting peace, which is more the wish of the nation than ever it was, at any period of time. It seems to be strongly the wish and intention of those at the helm. Various circumstances may however force a war.'[6]

And, indeed, France went to war with Britain in 1778.

The degree to which politics and strategic truth were intertwined in the eighteenth century owed much to the absence of institutional divides or indeed assumptions of any division between the two spheres. The first was readily apparent in ministry, government and Parliament. There has been sceptical discussion as to whether strategy is a meaningful concept for the period.[7] It was[8] but, certainly, compared to the formal, institutional processes of strategic discussion and planning in recent decades, the situation then was at best limited and ad hoc, and lacked both structure and, by modern standards, doctrine. Moreover, despite repeated experience of conflict, there were deficiencies in planning and no equivalent to a General Staff.[9]

Yet, many military and naval figures sat in Parliament and were accustomed

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5 James, Earl Waldegrave, envoy in Paris, to Thomas, Duke of Newcastle, Secretary of State for the Southern Department, 15 Jan. 1740, British Library, Department of Manuscripts, Additional Manuscripts (hereafter BL. Add.), vol. 32802 f. 3.

6 Stormont to William, 4th Earl of Rochford, Secretary of State for the Southern Department, 16 Nov. 1774, London, National Archives, State Papers (hereafter NA. SP), 78/294 f. 45.

7 J.B. Hattendorf, *England in the War of the Spanish Succession: A Study of the English View and Conduct of Grand Strategy, 1701-1712* (New York, 1987).

8 J. Black, *Plotting Power: Strategy in the Eighteenth Century* (Bloomington, Ind., 2017).

9 R.J.B. Muir and C.J. Esdaile, 'Strategic Planning in a Time of Small Government: The Wars against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, 1793-1815,' in C.M. Woolgar (ed.), *Wellington Studies* (Southampton, 1996), I, 1-90.

there to discuss matters. These included the problems of prioritisation that were (and remain) the key issues in the politics of strategy, for example Colonies versus Europe in the 1790s,[10] and, indeed, more continuously, for example in the 1700s, 1740s and in 1754-63.

So also with the politicisation of government and with the degree to which both government and military were affected by ministerial attempts to ensure control through appointments and patronage. Whereas today social policy and economic management attract particular concern, in the eighteenth century the focus was on international relations and that process encouraged the politicisation of strategy. Furthermore, the process itself encouraged both contention and emulation and this helped ensure that the discussion of recent strategy, as well as its current counterpart, were both significant.

It is normal to discuss this subject in terms of political parties and the related ministries. That indeed is a useful approach but it can mean that the politics of strategy are essentially considered in terms of these parties, which is somewhat circular. Thus, alongside the Whig approaches to strategy in the early eighteenth century came the Tory preference for a more cautious stance, one more explicitly mindful of the national interest: Dr John Friend MP, a former Jacobite conspirator, told the House of Commons in 1726, when the ministry was taking a leading role against Austria and Spain:

> 'that in all our treaties with France we have been the dupe.... that as to the ingratitude with which the Emperor [Charles VI, ruler of Austria] is accused by our ministers he thought that if they had considered right, they would have known that there is no such thing as gratitude among princes, but that it is rather an argument of our bad management in enabling the Emperor to annoy us than of his ingratitude, that we ought to be tired of our Knight Errantry which has made us hitherto act so, that a drum is not to be beat in Europe but we straight sound to arms, that our way to hold the Balance of Europe would be sit still, pay our debts, encourage trade, and imitate the wise Queen Elizabeth [I, r. 1558-1603] who thought it enough to send succours to the weak and the oppressed and not to make herself a principle in every little quarrel that happened. The Doctor frequently lashed the Ministry and their whole conduct and said that no Englishman could give his approbation to the Treaty of Hanover [1725], if he had not renounced the interest of his native country, and sold himself a bond slave to foreigners; he exposed the Treaty of Hanover and showed that the whole design of it

10 P. Mackesy, *War without Victory: The Downfall of Pitt, 1799-1802* (Oxford, 1984).

> was to guarantee the Hanover dominions which is directly against the Act of Settlement [1701].'[11]

'Knight Errantry' was a reference to Cervantes' Don Quixote, which had been translated into English in 1612-20, with new versions in 1687, 1700 and 1719.

Two weeks later, on 3 February 1726, the leading Tory newspaper, *Mist's Weekly Journal*, declared:

> 'It is certain that nothing has made us so considerable as we are, so much as holding the Balance of Power in Europe, and taking care, that neither the Emperor, France, nor Spain, should grow too mighty for each other; but if we should lose that post, by making ourselves principals in any unnecessary quarrels, that state, which shall succeed us in holding the scales, may, perhaps, think that we enjoy more of the trade of the world than comes to the share of one nation.'

The influence of opposition views was not direct, but rather influenced those ministers who sought to limit the interventionist line. It might be possible to extrapolate this approach to the present situation with regard to Ukraine. While there is need for caution in such diachronic comparisons, it can also be instructive to see parallels and the related continuities in attitude and context. Furthermore, there is less public criticism of the commitment to Ukraine than there was of the Treaty of Hanover.

There is a tendency to underrate divisions within parties especially over priorities, as well as the political significance of differences within the ministry, as well as between ministers and the Crown. The question of which ministers were to discuss 'foreign questions' was one that could lead to division.[12]

In part, the problem is one of the tendencies, instead, to see politics from the perspective of today and to focus on the public nature of debate and, notably, its political character. Yet, that tells us more about later perceptions. More particularly, this entails the practice of offering a continuity in modernity, one that links the Revolution Settlement, after the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688-9, with the later age of the comprehensive franchise and with the attitudes and techniques of the becoming present.

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11 James Hamilton to Philip, Duke of Wharton, 18 Feb. 1726, Windsor Castle, Royal Archives, Stuart Papers 90/128.

12 Newcastle to Philip, Lord Hardwicke, Lord Chancellor and close ally of Newcastle, 10 Nov. 1744, BL. Add. 35408 f. 88-9.

Ironically, the latter do not tend to focus on foreign policy. Instead, there is a practice of élite direction, with public views in contrast, as over the Second Gulf War of 2003, receiving relatively short shrift. This did not change until the BREXIT referendum of 2016, although there was then a strong attempt to reject the referendum.

An abrupt shift towards a more public politics of strategy and foreign policy might appear incipient in the overthrow of James II in 1688-9. However, that is to compare very different developments, with 1688-9, in particular, also being the traditional practice of a dynastic overthrow, even if it was clothed in a specific constitutional formulation. Furthermore, the last could be seen with declarations of good kingship and governance after previous overthrows.

If the focus is on the broader realms of strategic politics, that, in part, depends on the presentation of competing interests, and, part, on the learning of lessons about contexts, experiences and threats. Strategic choices and political engagement were affected, and differently, by changing pressures in international relations and domestic politics. This dual character underlined the uncertainties of the politics of strategy, as well as helping explain different timetables. The politics were played out within ministries, Parliament, the press and other formats, with no clear correspondence between them. This was seen with the response of Horatio Walpole, an experienced diplomat who was brother of Sir Robert Walpole, to the state of Anglo-Dutch relations in January 1740:

> 'what the printed papers will say I cannot tell, nor are we masters of the authors; some of them at present although they may write in favour of the administration are not under our direction or control, and most of their foreign news is made up of letters pretended to come from Holland.'[13]

The century began with dynastic protection as the key issue in Britain, and, indeed, more generally in the competing Bourbon and Habsburg claims to the Spanish Succession. In 1701, the crisis created in 1688-9 by the exclusion of James II did not end with his death. Instead, this exclusion crisis gathered pace with the recognition by the Jacobites, France and the Papacy of James' son as

13 Horatio Walpole to Robert Trevor, envoy in The Hague, 4 Jan. 1740, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire Record Office, Trevor papers, vol. 20. For the reprinting of a London letter on secret Anglo-Spanish negotiations from the *Leyden Gazette* see the *Craftsman*, 12 Jan. 1740. For Horatio Walpole advising ministers at this stage, Horatio Walpole to Newcastle, 17 Jan. 1740, BL. Add. 32693 f. 31.

James III (and VIII of Scotland). French and Papal recognition was not to happen when this James died in 1766 and was succeeded by Charles Edward Stuart (Bonnie Prince Charlie), but, in the meanwhile, Jacobitism, and the interaction of potential domestic instability with the possibility of international backing, created a fundamental strategic challenge for the British government, one, moreover, that was intensely political in its character. A problem for any invader was posed by the likelihood of popular resistance while, conversely, a degree of support would make more likely a positive outcome in terms of compliance. Yorkist or Lancastrian backing had been such a factor for invading claimants during the Wars of the Roses; while Catholic support had offered this to Spain in 1588 and, more so, in Ireland in 1601. Jacobitism did so from 1689, and with the added strength of the interplay with Irish and Scottish politics.

Given the eventual Jacobite failure, such a discussion might appear redundant, as well as anachronistic in terms of more 'modern' international relations. However, this dismissal is rendered problematic both by the degree to which the Jacobites came close to success in 1745 and due to the example of the American Revolution in 1775-83. Giuseppe Ossorio, the skilful and well-connected Sardinian envoy, noted in 1740 that the news of the moves of prominent Jacobites to Spain, then at war with Britain, were greatly attracting the attention of the British government to which he was close.[14]

A focus on the interplay of domestic and international underlines the folly of keeping foreign policy in a separate category. Considering this interplay also suggests that the same was invalid for military policy including whatever has been subsequently understood as strategy. For if the foremost factor was national security, then that was challenged by rebellion as much as invasion. For both, there were the issues created by contradictory information, for example on invasion preparations and intentions.[15] These were posed for both British and foreign reporters and ministers.

This formula of categorising threats can be unpicked further by reference to

14 Ossorio to his counterpart to France, 8 Feb. 1740, Turin, Archivio di Stato, Lettere Ministri Inghilterra, Francia, vol 180. For scepticism about the viability of invasion plans cf 4 Jan. 1740, despatch from Madrid, Spagna, vol. 69.

15 See, for example, George Jackson, Consul at Genoa, to Newcastle, 6, 30 Jan., 20 Feb. 1740, NA. SP. 79/19.

the dynastic element, for if the nation focused on the monarch who was also head of the government and military, then his assassination was a serious matter as was any suborning of his heir. Assassination was a threat on a number of occasions.

Furthermore, home defence extended to ideological challenges in a way that bridged those of the Wars of Religion with later those of the radical 1790s and of the Cold War. Today, the same can be seen in terms of the challenge from Islamicism.

Returning to the eighteenth century, the Jacobite challenge really ended with the defeat of the French invasion attempt of 1759, although Jacobitism as threat was not to the fore between 1746 and 1759, and, in the latter case, this was more clearly a case of the threat of French enemy. More generally, a weary sense of the transience of international agreements, and the presence therefore of the risk of war, was captured by Oliver Goldsmith when writing in the *Public Ledger* of 13 March 1760.

After 1759, there were nearly two decades in which the domestic/foreign interface was not malign until the French decided in 1778 to support the American Revolutionaries with a declared war as opposed to just supplies. After 1783, there was an absence again of a malign interface until 1792, while the ideological interaction of French revolutionaries and British radicals lasted until Napoleon, in the 1800s, transformed the rivalry into a more obviously great-power one. The latter lasted as the prime factor through the nineteenth century and on until, from 1919 Communism, from 1938 Nazi Germany and, from 1945 anew, Communism, pushed ideological issues to the fore anew.

The patterns of writing on foreign policy were largely set in the nineteenth century, not least because the historical profession moved toward economic, social and then cultural topics from the 1930s and, even more, 1960s. These patterns focused on an administrative approach to the subject, one that concentrated on the Public Record Office, now National Archives. Instruction spoke to dispatch, and vice versa, in what was very much a closed-book approach.[16] In so far as there was an extension, it was to the private papers of the leading diplomats.

This approach, which concentrated on bilateral relations, left little or no role

16 T.G. Otte, '"Indestructible Superiority Complex"? The Uses and Pitfalls of Official History,' *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 36 (2025), pp. 695-717.

for wider pressures on policy, its formulation and implementation, and for other decision-makers or influencers. This 'classic' model is one of effectively depoliticising the subject and can be seen as in tune with 'top-down' and 'élite' attitudes, with outside pressures presented as generally ignorant and often reprehensible. That was matched with the same for the discussion of strategy which was widely presented as a matter for 'the professionals', the military, and one from which politicians should be kept. In part, this is an instance of the so-called 'blob' at work. In the eighteenth century, there was similar criticism, but also the opposing stigmatisation of what was presented as an ignorant multitude.

In part, looking back, there is an irony here given the emphasis for the eighteenth century on 'natural interests', ie obvious and automatic ones, as that approach shows how politicians could have an impact in following or not these interests. Clearly, a failure to do so meant that politicians were of consequence, but the basis for criticism of them was apparently a 'system' that to the diplomats only the priesthood of experts was qualified to assess. In 1740, the British envoy in Dresden showed that this was extended to the assessment of foreign powers: 'it is even said that they [France] have secured that power [Turkey] should the Emperor [Austria] rejoin his natural allies in the defence of Europe.'[17]

This was an instance of a particular cartography of concern and engagement, but such cartography was itself a political statement. There was no inherent, immutable definition of this cartography, and no precision to match the rhetorical freedom of extension. This situation recurs at present, not least as far as the Caucasus is concerned, but also with reference to Russia.

In one respect, 'Europe' was clearly an idea in operation. The idea was present, as was the attempt to influence powers within it in order to have knock-on effects. An essay on 'The Progress and Present State of European Politics' published in the 'Miscellany' supplementing the *Reading Mercury and Oxford Gazette* of 17 May 1773 declared:

> 'The powers of Europe may be regarded as one general state, such as the Grecian Powers were; whose interests, when understood, are common and reciprocal. They are one great machine, which when all its parts are well connected and judiciously regulated, performs the most admirable movements, and yields the most signal advantages; but, one wheel retarded, one ligature broken, every operation is interrupted, and universal disor-

17 Thomas Villiers to Trevor, 3 Jan. 1740, Trevor papers, vol. 20.

> der prevails. All the potentates of Europe are dependent each upon the other by some species of connexion, whether by consanguinity, confederacy, or interest; and upon the harmony of this political union depend their dearest interests, whether power or happiness; yet so nearly does the great body politic resemble civil and domestic life, that the principles and passions which gain in the one, triumph in the other; they are alike sacrifices to jealousy, envy, ambition, or treachery.'

This looks toward the arguments currently made for Western concern about Ukraine, as in the *Times* first editorial of 8 December 2025 which pressed for a shouldering of 'responsibilities…. European allies in Nato must urgently find the will and the means to fill the gap left by the US.'

Again, that offers rhetoric and admonition, but also scarcely describes a reality of there being very different views about engagement, both in Britain and in Continental Europe. In the eighteenth century, British diplomats might try to persuade foreign governments of the common threat allegedly posed by whichever power most concerned Britain, most commonly France, but this notion required both belief in an integrated European system and the acceptance of the British government's view of it. Many subscribed to the former, if only subconsciously, by using the language of the balance of power and of European interests. Yet, in practice, most governments thought in more specific terms and their attention was focused on their immediate region, albeit with the realisation that developments elsewhere could be of importance.

Furthermore, integration was often absent. Thus, in the 1740s the struggle between Austria and Prussia could not readily be seen in terms of a system dominated by Anglo-French rivalry, while talk of the Bourbons repeatedly ignored the major strains in Franco-Spanish relations.[18] Separately, in 1772, what became the First Partition of Poland was not matched by a response. Indeed, the pressures of confrontation and conflict in the east, narrowly averted during the 1764 Polish election, widespread in 1764-74 and 1778-9, and again in 1782-3, before rising to a climax in 1787-92, was not felt throughout Western Europe. In 1774, at a time of reports that France was seeking co-operation with Britain against the partitioning powers seeking fresh victims, the British envoy was warned: 'The Court of France endeavours on every occasion to make their present harmony

18 J. Black, 'Anglo-Spanish Naval Relations in the Eighteenth Century,' *Mariner's Mirror*, 77 (1991), pp. 235-58.

with us subservient to purposes, to which we have not in the smallest degree given encouragement.'[19]

This was very much the British presentation of the 'natural' nature of international relations. The concept and language of 'naturalness' was incessant and communicated a sense of inevitability. Thus, in 1742, John, 2nd Earl of Stair, a veteran of the War of the Spanish Succession and former envoy to Paris, was sent to The Hague to try to inspire opposition to France. He urged the dispatch of British troops to Flanders as soon as possible:

> 'I flatter myself that before the end of the summer, His Majesty [George II] may be in a condition with his other friends, to make the peace of Europe upon such terms, as he himself shall think proper, such a peace as France will not be able to breach through for a great many years…. France, whose natural interest must always lead them to be enemies to Great Britain … we stand and have long stood in their way to hinder them from becoming masters of Europe.'[20]

This was a totally flawed analysis.

Any stress on ideological challenges moves forward an analysis of the strategy/politics interaction because strategy is essentially about prioritisation and the result of such a stress is to push particular issues into greater prominence. This element, at once contextual and contingent, is true of strategy however conceived.

Moreover, prioritisation becomes more acute when fears of vulnerability are strong, however that is defined in 'Realist' terms. As a result, the strategy of foreign policy, as of its military equivalent, is generally prophylactic or preventative, with anticipatory moves frequently to the fore. This is linked to a range from alliance-building to procurement, doctrine and training, the latter three both shaped by military strategy and shaping it.

There is a clear spatial aspect to this situation, one again that can be approached in both 'Realist' and 'Idealist' senses. Thomas Robinson, the envoy in Vienna, wrote of the eventual end of the War of Polish Succession:

> 'In whatever manner the partition of Italy is made, the Emperor loses the footing of 40,000 men with Italy, and according to the hands into which they may fall, that makes a difference of 80,000 men with respect to the

19 Rochford to Stormont, 11 Jan. 1774, NA. SP. 78/291 f. 19.

20 Stair to John, Lord Carteret, Secretary of State for the Northern Department, 27 Ap. 1742, NA. SP. 87/8 f. 54-6.

Balance [of Power].'[21]

Thus, territory was directly linked to the manpower it could yield.

For Britain, as an instance of the spatial aspect, longstanding concern over the Low Countries as a potential invasion source and/or route links the eleventh century to the Cold War. In the eighteenth century, this concern focused on French expansionism, notably in the 1700s, 1740s and 1790s, but there was also anxiety over Austrian intentions when modern Belgium was under Austrian rule, and especially so in 1725-7 when Britain and Austria came close to war. Furthermore, as in 1538, when against the Henrician Reformation, Austro-French co-operation, whether in reality or in prospect, was a serious issue, and notably so in 1715 and, even more, the late 1750s when the British feared that France might be ceded the ports in the Austrian Netherlands as notably Nieuwport.

Yet, the spatial aspect did not dictate responses, for the politics of strategy was less determined than might appear apparent in light of those who mistakenly refer to the imprisonment by geography.[22] Thus, the English, later British sent significant forces to the Low Countries and/or helped finance the assembly of others, in the medieval period, as well as in 1513, 1544, 1585, 1678, the 1690s, 1700s, and 1742, but did not do so on other occasions. The Tory ministry ended participation in the War of the Spanish Succession even though the Emperor Charles VI and his German allies fought on until 1714. When, in 1733-5, Austrian Italy and the Rhineland were invaded by the French during the War of the Polish Succession, the Walpole government ignored its defensive obligations with Austria under the recent Second Treaty of Vienna of 1731.

British foreign policy and strategic geography in the period somewhat misleadingly termed the Second Hundred Years' War [1689-1815] was considerably more complex than is generally appreciated. It is against this background that particular episodes should be assessed in a far from deterministic fashion, while different tendencies and competing strategies up to any one point provide the backdrop for the uncertainty of subsequent choices.

The Low Countries was in no immediate danger in 1733-5 and 1741 because

21 Robinson to Couraud, official in the Secretary of State's Office, 16 July 1735, NA. SP. 80/116.

22 T. Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography* (London, 2015). For an emphasis, instead, on 'possibilism', see J. Black, *Rethinking Geopolitics* (Bloomington, Ind., 2024).

the French respected their neutrality. In 1792, however, the British government's definition of its vital interests there was restricted to the integrity and governmental system of the Dutch Republic. In contrast, there had been a disengagement from the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium) as a result of the long-term collapse in Anglo-Austrian relations that began in 1756. This ensured that France's attack there in 1792 was not a cause of war with Britain. The speed with which this situation as to be transformed by Austria's collapse there that November after defeat at Jemappes on 6 November, was not anticipated, although it followed the French checking the Prussian advance further south at Valmy on 20 September. William, Lord Grenville, the Foreign Secretary, thought the retreat 'truly unfortunate in every point of view,'[23] while William, Lord Auckland, envoy at The Hague, was fearful that Valmy opened up a new chapter in the social and political contexts of military power:

> 'In the experience which I have had of life, I never recollect any event which occasioned so great and so general an astonishment – it is a severe blow to the cause … to put it in the power of the Jacobin clubs to say that an undisciplined rabble of new republicans greatly inferior in honour, has foiled the greatest armies and best generals in Europe.'[24]

John Trevor, the envoy in Turin, asked the following month: 'What may not be expected from a young republic of 25 millions, of which nearly one million is armed, animated by such enthusiasm and flushed with such success.'[25]

Discussion of the fate of the Low Countries repeatedly involved military practicalities, but these could be interpreted in the political 'should-be', as opposed to a realist/rational/informed 'could be'. Such a distinction, however, has many disadvantages as it implies a depoliticised objectivity for the latter category, while deploring the former 'should-be' category in terms of politics and rhetoric. In reality, there was at least a considerable overlap if not a congruence.

The latter was enhanced by the political costs of failure, as with the Walcheren Expedition of 1809 and, to a lesser extent, the invasion of north Holland in 1799, although some failures attracted far less opprobrium than they possibly should have merited. Thus, the fall of the Dutch Republic to French invasion in 1795

23 Grenville to Richmond, 11 Oct. 1792, BL. Add. 58937 f. 164.

24 Auckland to Alexander Straton, Secretary of Legation in Vienna, 9 Oct. 1792, Ipswich, East Suffolk County Record Office, HA 239/2/283.

25 Trevor to Grenville, 24 Nov. 1791, NA., Foreign Office Papers, 67/10.

was more serious than the Walcheren debacle, and the same might be said of the inability to prevent French forces moving into the Dutch Republic in 1747-8.

If there was a clear, present-mindedness to these risks, as in 'here-may-be-invasion-barges', the politics, domestic and international, political risks, strategic commitments and implications, and strategic risks, from 1714 of any threat to the Electorate of Hanover were very different. They were harder to incorporate into a British national 'strategic geography' than those of invasion zones, but that did not make them less present. The danger of the invasion of Britain was highlighted by the vulnerability of Hanover, William, Duke of Cumberland explaining his surrender of the army in Hanover accordingly in 1757: 'His Majesty's German dominions and army, alone, could no longer withstand the whole force of France.'[26] This captured a clear strategic vulnerability, one with major implications for British foreign policy. Lieutenant-Colonel Charles, 3rd Duke of Richmond had anticipated failure: '… they [the French] had nothing else to do with their land forces, and could send as many as they pleased.… It was madness to attempt the defence of the Electorate…. The difference was too great.'[27]

However, the source-based positivism of traditional 'realist' approaches to foreign policy and strategy led to an underplaying of this Hanoverian element in part due to the extent to which royal influence had an indirect archival trace in the records of the British state. The evidence can be in the Hanoverian archives, but these had serious wartime damage, or in those of other states (as the King-Electors could speak to foreign envoys), or in the private papers of British diplomats and ministers. Thus, in December 1739, when Thomas, Duke of Newcastle, the Secretary of State for the Southern Department, wrote to James, Earl Waldegrave, the envoy in Paris, a 'private and particular' instruction 'to be opened by himself', conveying George II's instructions about finding out more concerning French policy in northern Europe.[28]

George was also very much concerned by his honour, a traditional theme in international relations. He told Newcastle that neutrality for Hanover in 1757 following the success of the French invasion was against his orders: 'The King

26 Cumberland to Robert, 4th Earl of Holdernesse, Secretary of State for the Northern Department, 15 Sept. 1757, BL. Egerton Manuscripts, vol. 3442 f. 252.

27 Charles, 3rd Duke of Richmond to his younger brother, Captain, Lord George Lennox, 9 Sept. 1757, f. 111.

28 Newcastle to Waldegrave, 27 Dec. 1739, BL. Add. 32801 f. 355-6.

was pleased to say, that his honour and his interest were sacrificed by it…. That he did not know how to look anybody in the face, that he had lost honour … often saying, that Providence had abandoned him.'[29]

The role of Hanoverian considerations, indeed, takes us to a centre of the strategy/politics interaction because it was not an aspect of the representational accountability of public governance under the Revolution Settlement after the Glorious Revolution. That, however, does not mean that this interaction did not exist or was weak. Indeed, the standard contemporary view was of secret government and influences, one seen for example in the discussion in the 1760s of the influence on George III of his 'favourite', John, 3rd Earl of Bute or in 1785 of the Hanoverian influence on British policy at the time of the *Fürstenbund*. Differences of opinion about secret influences, more particularly the role of Hanover, were expressed not only in Britain but also abroad, with 'Hanover', moreover, disaggregated to include separate roles for the king and for the impact on British ministers of Hanoverian concerns.[30] Yet, these perceptions could vary even between allies, as between the French and Austrians in 1757.[31] Policy, politics and strategy were part of a mix, as the choice of alliance with one power, and therefore of wartime co-operation, was the choice of not allying with another one and/or the response to circumstances, and notably the reaction to the intentions of other powers accordingly. Intentions were gauged in terms of perception and thus were inherently politicised in terms of existing assumptions.

This had necessary consequences in terms of strategic and operational possibilities and (combined) force structures and deployments. If, in the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-13 for Britain), the War of the Austrian Succession (1743-8), and the French Revolutionary War (1793-9), alliance with Austria meant co-operation with one of Europe's largest armies, that was lost by Austria making peace with France, as in 1797, 1801, 1805, and 1809, and, even more, when the alliance was absent from the start, as in the Seven Years' War (1756-63).

There was also the problem, when allied, that the politics of Austrian policy

29 Newcastle to Hardwicke, 19 Sept. 1757, BL. Add. 35417 f. 73.

30 J. Black, *The Continental Commitment: Britain, Hanover and Interventionism, 1714-1793* (Abingdon, 2005).

31 Choiseul, French envoy to Vienna, to Bernis, French Foreign Minister, 7 Sept. 1757, Paris, Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Correspondance Politique, Br. Han., 52 f. 135-7.

meant a geographical concentration not on British needs in the Low Countries, but on opposing France in northern Italy or Prussia in East Central Europe. This concentration was hard to sell in terms of the domestic political debate on foreign policy, as well as the tensions within government; with both exacerbated by the subsidies expected by allies. This situation left the ministry in the acute difficulties that arose from interventionism, difficulties that were political as well as strategic. These difficulties helped ensure that there was a transactionalism to foreign and military policies that was at variance with the more consistent rhetorical politics offered both domestically and internationally.

These latter have been overly adopted by some later scholars of diplomatic history, notably Michael Roberts, Ragnhild Hatton and Hamish Scott,[32] as well as by those who have deployed their work to argue for particular strategies, notably with reference to the War of American Independence. The thesis that Britain would have won had it allied with Continental states and thus diverted French, or French and Spanish, attention and resources, is one that is superficially attractive, and was deployed by William Pitt the Elder to justify the dispatch of troops to Germany in 1758 in return for Prussia maintaining its wartime alliance. However, this argument ignores the earlier experience of allies not heeding British wishes, and understandably so in terms of their own interests and transactionalism. Why Austria and Russia, having abandoned Britain in 1756,[33] should be expected to operate any differently if allied in 1775, and thereafter, is unclear. Nor is it apparent why the vulnerability of Hanover to French threats, as exposed in 1741 and, more brutally, 1757, with all the attendant consequences for Britain, was not better handled by the, in effect, neutrality, or at least safety seen in 1778-83 (as in 1733-5).[34]

Continental interventionism, both diplomatic and military, was troublesome, costly and frequently unsuccessful. It did not deter the French from hostile steps in peacetime and could not decide the fate of the colonial and maritime struggle

32 M. Roberts, *Splendid Isolation, 1763-1780* (Reading, 1970); R.M. Hatton, *The Anglo-Hanoverian Connection, 1714-1760* (London, 1982); H.M. Scott, *British Foreign Policy in the Age of the American Revolution* (Oxford, 1990).

33 J. Black, 'On the "Old System" and the "Diplomatic Revolution" of the Eighteenth Century,' *International History Review*, 12 (1990), pp. 301-23.

34 J. Black, 'The Crown, Hanover and the Shift in British Foreign Policy in the 1760s', in Black (ed.), *Knights Errant and True Englishmen. British Foreign Policy 1660-1800* (Edinburgh, 1989), pp. 113-34, and 'Anglo-French Relations 1763-1775,' *Francia*, 18/2 (1991), pp. 99-114.

in wartime. A stable Western Europe might deny British ministers and diplomats the opportunity of creating anti-French coalitions, but such stability was valuable and notably so when considering the possibility of French expansionism in the Low Countries and the threat to Hanover. It was vexing if, as in 1736-40 and 1763-87, Britain played no role in the diplomatic combinations that created and sustained this stability. Yet, notwithstanding alarmist comments to the country, in neither case is it clear that Britain suffered as a consequence. The psychological necessity to be seen to act was a cost that was disproportionate to the benefit, a point more generally the case with strategy. Britain did not have to be at the centre of diplomacy or to 'punch above its weight', modern concepts that are read back with insufficient care. It is no accident given their assumptions about the present, that Hatton, Roberts and Scott took this view of the past.[35]

The implications of choices were a matter of the choices of implications. Both of these were really political even if the second was more so. That helps encourage attention not only to the paths not followed but also to the views of their protagonists. This is notably so of views within the (broader) government because the latter were not generally as (publicly) rhetorical as the formal critics of opposition. There were institutional centres for such criticism, notably that of the Treasury, as with the critical views of Henry Pelham, First Lord of the Treasury from 1743 to 1754, about interventionism and the similar approaches of Sir Robert Walpole (1721-42), Frederick, Lord North (1770-82), and William Pitt the Younger (1783-1801, 1804-6), notably so in 1783-92. This point about Treasury views can be taken further to consider the fiscal implications of military expenditure linked to bold policy stances and moves, and, correspondingly, their consequences for taxation. So also for the present day.

To take these politics away from strategic choices and processes is profoundly misleading. This is a lesson from the past to the present, and also from the present to the analysis of the past.

I am most grateful to Davide Borsani and Thomas Otte for their comments on an earlier draft.

35 For example, Scott was one of the 300 historians who wrote to the *Guardian* in May 2016 arguing that Britain would be condemned to irrelevance if it voted for Brexit. That is a view on 2016 that can be debated on its own terms and historians anyway, part of the *polis*, are not free from 'presentist' concerns. The significance here is that Scott's perception of the present appears to have influenced his views on the eighteenth century.

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William Hogarth (1697-1764), Simon Fraser, 11th Lord Lovat, the Jacobite Old Fox, at St Albans, on his way to London for trial and later execution (1747). Wikimedia Commons.

How the Cold War Redefined Surrender

by Kenneth Weisbrode

Abstract: The definition of surrender is changeable. During the Cold War, surrender meant a number of things, from capitulating in battle to sacrificing an entire way of life. Seen in retrospect, the most significant shift in meaning during this period saw surrender become less like defeat or destruction per se and more like an active retreat. That is not to say that surrender in the Cold War was primarily tactical. Surrender was also realised strategically by turning the logic of the Cold War against itself: policies of containment and deterrence, when extended beyond Europe, became practically self-defeating; this in turn made possible a mutual surrender in Europe. The speed by which all that happened, in about one generation, suggests that the Cold War was a less momentous world event than it seemed at the time.

Keywords: strategic surrender; Cold War; total war; military retreat; mutually assured destruction; containment; deterrence

Surrender in war is as old as war itself. It is an expression of defeat, because few soldiers surrender when they are not surrounded and few armies surrender when they have a chance of victory. Yet, unlike wars, which have a notable duration, surrender is usually sudden. It can be, at the same time, a tactical, operational, and even strategic means for bringing advantages to the defeated. It is not synonymous with war termination, and certainly not with peace. Surrender, in other words, is a complex and contested element of warfare and statecraft. It offers rich ground for interpretation.[1]

1 Recent works include John A. Lynn II, *Leaving the Fight: Surrender, Prisoners of War, and Detainees in Western Warfare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025); and Holger Afflerbach and Hew Strachan, eds., *How Fighting Ends: A History of Surrender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). See also Robin Wagner-Pacifici, *The Art of Surrender: Decomposing Sovereignty at Conflict's End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Fred Iklé, *Every War Must End* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971).

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The *Cold War* is also contested. There is no firm historical consensus on when it began, when it ended, and why it was fought. As a political conflict among the victors of the Second World War over Central Europe, it appeared in the late 1940s, although the seeds had been planted by 1942, and so may have been less an outgrowth of the Second World War than its continuation. As a military conflict extending beyond Europe, it came in 1950 with the outbreak of the Korean War, joining the introduction of Communist China and later of intercontinental ballistic missiles to a war which was no longer cold. As an ideological conflict, it emerged well before the Second World War, perhaps with the Russian Revolution or earlier. The course I teach on the Cold War starts in 1789.

That the Cold War was a total war in the modern sense is taken for granted. It was political, military, and ideological, as well as cultural and socio-economic. Almost nobody in the world was able to escape it, not entirely. Yet, for many people, the Cold War was an abstraction, a war of ideas, and moreover a war they presumed to be permanent.

But it ended. It did so suddenly, according to most contemporary accounts and, now, most history books, in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Not long after, the Soviet Union dissolved itself more or less peacefully, no doubt relieving many people who, if they did not assume the Cold War's permanence, imagined that it might end with the destruction of life on earth.

Should they have been surprised that the Cold War ended without a hot war between its two principal antagonists? That is the remarkable thing: the adjective is apt but imprecise; the war was cold, but not for everyone. There is no simple explanation for why that was the case. It is not enough to claim that the Cold War remained cold because nuclear weapons made the alternative unthinkable, or at least unacceptable. The Soviet Union and the United States came terribly close to proving that contention wrong. But there were also other reasons.

To state the matter plainly with reference to the subject of this essay: the second half of the twentieth century is called the Cold War for a number of convenient reasons, but the Cold War was not a proper war and, as I have argued elsewhere, came close to being a sideshow to the main development of this period, which was the readjustment (or reintegration) of the world outside Europe to Euro-Atlantic institutions, norms, and practices.[2] At the time, decolonisation and

2 Kenneth Weisbrode, 'Cold War Strategy and Practice', in *The Practice of Strategy: A*

the hot wars which accompanied it were said to be the sideshow; the global Cold War was the main event. In retrospect, this appears to have been the other way around, not least, because the great effects of globalisation on human (and other) life and human consciousness have become more apparent in the past thirty years. So, to imagine the Cold War not as a worldwide event or geopolitical fact, but rather as a mental map for understanding a new and very different global order which had supplanted European colonialism, may lead to two conclusions: first, that the Cold War was not merely a conflict but a prolonged and selective negotiation enjoining the refinement of statecraft; and second, that it may not have ended all at once, or, that it is not yet possible to distinguish between the continuation of the Cold War in some places and what military historians call terminal resistance.

The above propositions must rely on an understanding of what surrender exactly meant during the Cold War, and after it. It is obviously facile to conclude, as commentaries on Francis Fukuyama's famous essay about the end of history still do, that Western liberal-democracy won the Cold War, universally, because its main rival, communism, forfeited and had in any event proved unworkable. That is to say, it may not be helpful to rest on the belief that the West outcompeted, outspent, and outlasted the East, which surrendered.

It is difficult to find many people today in the former Soviet Union, let alone in China or elsewhere in the former Eastern Bloc, as it was once called, who would prefer this version of history. It is true that there was a second Cold War by the late 1970s, lasting into the 1980s. It is also true that certain Western governments, namely those in the United Kingdom and the United States, took advantage of this moment to intensify their rhetorical hostility and their material challenge to Soviet power, just as the Soviet Union had already done to theirs. And it is true that this re-escalation, as it was known, came to a halt in the middle of the 1980s following Mikhail Gorbachev's assumption of power and his agreement with Ronald Reagan to halt their nations' rivalry and then to resolve many other outstanding matters, including a number of conflicts beyond Europe.

This was not a strict or a general surrender. That the Soviet Union and its empire collapsed soon after was not the logical result of concession; in fact, conces-

Global History, edited by Jeremy Black, Fvcina di Marte 17 (Rome: Società Italiana di Storia Militare, 2024), 435–53. Cf. Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

sions were made, according to Gorbachev, deliberately to reform and rejuvenate the Soviet Union. Some people in the West gave him a good deal of tacit or overt support, perhaps with that aim in mind. A more compelling case would declare that the Soviet Union and the United States surrendered together by collaborating to terminate the Cold War by way of a grand negotiation which did not openly prescribe the self-destruction of either party.

Or, it may be said that there was nothing grand about the Cold War or its demise. It was improvised; and if this final improvisation of a denouement suggests anything significant about surrender, it is that the Cold War turned it from an alternative into a euphemism for retreat or, as it was called during the Vietnam War, 'withdrawal on the instalment plan'. Retreat not only happened by ending the arms race or armed interventions; it also came from reimagining what victory and defeat really meant at the time.

A shift in the meaning of those terms, and therefore, of surrender, took place for three principal reasons: nuclear conflict between the superpowers remained cold; few hot wars elsewhere fought in the name or spirit of the Cold War ended conclusively; and the concept of war, notably total war, suffered from the difficulty in assigning a singular political, socioeconomic, military, or cultural-ideological character to superpower rivalry. The first two reasons are already familiar; the third, less so.[3] To understand how and why all three happened together requires revisiting the meaning of surrender in the twentieth century.

I

The use of the term *surrender* has usually been accompanied by an adjective such as *full*, *partial*, *ignominious*, or, the most familiar, *unconditional*. Surrender is a fact of warfighting, of victory and defeat, but also, still today, a moral state, and an agent of sacrifice. This brings to mind Hemingway's romantic distinction between defeat and destruction. Does his distinction hold in a total war where destruction is, or can be, total? Probably not. If technology has made the complete destruction of an enemy possible, desirable, and likely, then the act of surrender must equate surrender with survival. To surrender in a total war meant giving a

3 Cf. Lynn, *Leaving the Fight*, 12ff. and chp. 7.

chance, not just to oneself but also to one's progeny. Choosing to surrender became, in theory, synonymous with choosing the survival of a nation, its people, and life itself.

Surrender's moral calculus of course predates the twentieth century, but the First and Second World Wars, because of their scale, enhanced and promoted it. It was disturbed and possibly altered, but not undone. The First was fought by one side for *Kultur* and against *Zivilisation*, and on the other against Kaiserism, that is, militarism, on behalf of humanity. The Second was fought for and against Communism, Fascism, Nazism, and so on. A fight with so many isms demanded something more than physical capitulation. The language of war had also become total. The Final Solution meant a permanent defeat. Never Surrender offered the prospect of retaining a moral victory in death. But could that have been possible if the nation, its territory, its people, and its culture were also destroyed? Once more – probably not.

In practice, however, Hemingway's distinction has proved rather durable. The casual way by which Franklin Roosevelt is said to have resurrected the doctrine of unconditional surrender at the Casablanca conference in 1943 need not detract from the symbolism of the slogan or its aims, which were important. Ulysses Grant's alleged doctrine, if it really was a doctrine, testified to his belief in victory; it also referred to the American Civil War as a total war, at least for the Confederacy, where the aim of its enemy was to destroy its power and independence, as well as to defeat its way of life, or so it was said.

The Southern way of life, apart from the formal institution of slavery, was never defeated; it was reinvented, and there is a large historical literature on the period of Reconstruction which debates just how much of it was reinvented. For Roosevelt to equate that sort of doctrine with defeating the Axis, therefore, was once more to equate surrender with necessity, destruction, and defeat, in principle. In fact, the surrender of neither the Confederacy nor the Axis was wholly unconditional.

Most of the earlier conquests by Germany, Italy, and Japan were also conditional. They took place in stages, accompanied by diplomatic negotiations and sometimes by popular mobilisation, and often with the collaboration of local authorities. The *Anschluss* cannot be called an unconditional surrender; neither can the annexation of the Sudetenland nor the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia,

however much these events were (and felt like) capitulations. The pattern was repeated elsewhere. Following the defeat of France in 1940 – which left French authorities in nominal control of much of the country – the Japanese moved to occupy French Indochina without the need for an unconditional surrender. This was not the case when the Japanese conquered Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaya, Indonesia, and the Philippines; however, on the ground, a good deal of accommodation still took place.

In wartime, accommodation and resistance can be two sides of the same coin. Together they can make for some odd beliefs, such as the one of the resident of Dubrovnik, who said, when asked how such a beautiful town managed to survive its difficult history: 'we always chose the right moment to surrender.' Many Parisians probably said the same in 1940. Whether it is better to surrender or to see much of one's beloved city bombed to dust poses a difficult dilemma. Yet, no matter how subjective and even irrational it is, the act of surrender usually results from a choice, or several choices.[4] A choice may be imposed (in which case, it is not really much of a choice), but it is often conditioned by costs and benefits as to its timing and nature; and the weighing of costs and benefits also applies to armies. It is possible to examine the weighing in retrospect, as has been done, for example, in a comparative study of surrender rates during the First and Second World Wars.[5] Some Germans rushed westward in 1945; others ran towards the east. It is logical that the more generous the surrender terms or the greater the expectation of such, the more likely surrender, and therefore, victory, will be. But that is not always true.

Surrender in battle and in war are different propositions. There are gradations in definition and in practice; for instance, 'piecemeal' surrender in the case of Germany in 1945, according to Paul Kecskemeti, was consistent with unconditional surrender.[6] Nevertheless, the persistence of the belief in unconditional sur-

4 See Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940*, trans. Gerard Hopkins (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 22ff.

5 Niall Ferguson, 'Prisoner Taking and Prisoner Killing in the Age of Total War: Towards a Political Economy of Military Defeat', *War in History* 11 (2) (April 2004), 148–92; Brian Dollery and Craig R. Parsons, 'Prisoner Taking and Prisoner Killing: A Comment on Ferguson's Political Economy Approach', *War in History* 14 (4) (November 2007), 499–512.

6 Paul Kecskemeti, *Strategic Surrender: The Politics of Victory and Defeat* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1958), x et passim.

render has attained a sort of special status. For instance, there are few historians today who argue that the dropping of two atomic bombs alone forced the surrender of Japan in August 1945. The debate over what actually did force it – from the Soviet intervention to the state of preparation of both the Japanese and Allied armies for an invasion of the home islands – continues.[7] It is not easy to prove that any of these factors rises to the level of causal, as opposed to conditional, significance for the final act of surrender in 1945. What *caused* the surrender of Japan was a decision by the Japanese Emperor to agree to it, on the condition that he remain Emperor.

Nevertheless, the image of surrender in the form of a mushroom cloud persists. It was as much the existence of this terrible new weapon as the awareness that some people were willing to use it that reaffirmed the coupling of surrender with survival. The coupling is not universal. It is still possible, for example, to assert that Better Red than Dead was a Western conceit whose opposite did not translate to the East, either to the Soviet Union, whose war planners were reputedly more willing to regard nuclear weaponry as another military tool, or to others, such as the Chinese, also said to be willing to accept higher numbers of casualties than most Westerners would do. Who can possibly know if these assertions were true? Their veracity is not so relevant to understanding the conceptual evolution of surrender. What mattered was their symbolic power over the collective, Cold War mind – in the West, at any rate.

Total war meant total destruction, i.e., annihilation, and therefore, by definition, total surrender, whether or not some other form of defeat had been intended. With nuclear weapons, that formula applied as much to victors as to anyone else. In a world divided ideologically, capitulation was akin to annihilation – for ideologues, anyway. If this was not unconditional, what was it? Here, *total* refers to the whole of society. Today, the fashionable term is *integrated* – although it is important to define integration in historical context in relation to, and as a policy response to, interdependence. It is fair to say that Cold War policies may have been more integrated than they are today, but they and most problems they were meant to address were no less interdependent; in fact, they are now probably more so. Yet, if the Cold War's definitions varied by type, element, and the part or

7 Alexander Wooley, 'When Will World War II End in Japan?' *Foreign Policy* (August 2025).

parts of society they most involved, then presumably, those parts may be disaggregated, not only conceptually, as discussed above, but also chronologically. In other words, if, in theory, surrender could still be conditional, then might it apply to some of those parts but not to others, and at some times but not at others?

The implication of his argument may be one of the reasons why Kecskemeti's infamous study, *Strategic Surrender*, offended some readers. The aims discussed in the study refer mainly to historical terms of surrender; but one can extend them and the concept forward in time, as he also did. From the vantage point of the late-1950s, it made sense for Germany and Japan to have surrendered when they did so that their societies could survive, and later thrive, in league with their former enemies. Assigning a chronology of the Cold War is critical in that respect, because those former enemies, starting with the United States, probably would not have been so keen to rebuild Japan and West Germany had their status as Cold War allies not been so great, once again, in every realm – political, social, economic, cultural, ideological, psychological, spiritual.

Surrender does not have to be strategic for there to be a retrospective disaggregation. The Germans who rushed east or west to surrender probably calculated similarly in asking themselves not only which occupier would treat them better in the short term but also where they would rather remain in the longer term. The Cold War brought to bear many such calculations, notably among the so-called non-aligned nations, as discussed below. Before reconstructing their collective mind, if such a mind existed, it is important to mention the political and ideological bubble in which many of these calculations took place. The bubble formed from the realisation that, in creating the possibility of the sudden destruction of nearly all life on earth, surrender suspended time and, therefore, compressed space, starting with the realm of decision. Escape was no longer an option. Neither was defeat. If victory was not certain, surrender had to be reinvented.

Mutually assured destruction may have been, like the Holy Roman Empire, a misnomer (neither mutual nor assured) but that was probably a minority view. The dominant view, which became official at the Geneva summit of 1985, was that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. If so, deterrence, as it came to be known and honoured, applied to all sides. In effect, they surrendered to technology, or, better stated, they surrendered some of their freedom of choice and action to the cause of survival, which was, by definition, mutual if not uni-

versal. This basic belief underpinned much of nuclear planning.[8] Nuclear warfare rested upon the interdependence of adversaries. It would be difficult for one side to surrender in a nuclear war without the other side doing the same.

Cold War-era game theorists devised more sophisticated ways of making this point, so here it suffices to say that deterrence, insofar as it subordinated freedom of action and the benefits of survival to a set of expectations about costs, conditionally simulated the act of surrender. If the costs, including the ultimate cost, really were assured, the choice should not have been difficult, in theory, anyway. Someday it may be possible to say with more certainty whether survival in the Cold War was the result of a brave cost-benefit analysis, or that the world was just very lucky. Either way, the meaning of surrender had shifted away from a discrete action or event to something else.

II

Luck was a factor in keeping the nuclear rivalry from becoming hot; but much of the Cold War was waged through negotiation, not only over armaments but also between and among allies, and client states, over their own various aims, interests, and vulnerabilities. Before there was the hardening of nuclear deterrence, the Cold War took shape in a number of political contests: in Iran, Germany, Greece, Turkey, Poland, Italy, Czechoslovakia. This pattern of contestation began during the Second World War, from the occupation of Italy (from which the Soviet Union was excluded) to the belaboured discussions at the wartime conferences of the Big Three (Britain, USA, and USSR) over the composition and allegiance of other successor regimes on defeated territories. The failure to agree on a single post-war settlement came from ideological differences that became inseparable from territorial axioms which, as noted, together gave rise to the Cold War.

They also gave rise to the doctrine of containment, which predominated in strategic discussions during most of the Cold War. The doctrine combined a fixed, territorial idea with a malleable political one. It argued, in effect, that the Soviets' expansive territorial ambitions must be countered with a political determination

8 Ernest R. May, John D. Steinbruner, and Thomas W. Wolfe, *History of the Strategic Arms Competition, 1945–1972* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1981), 221ff. and chps. IX–XI.

to resist so that, eventually, the failure to achieve them would turn aggression back upon itself; accordingly, the Soviet empire, or the Soviet threat at any rate, would dissolve. Containment thus understood was an inversion of surrender. Rather than offering an enemy a choice between defeat and destruction, it forced the enemy to defeat itself by overextension, division, and eventually, self-destruction. The Cold War did not confine that formula to totalitarian regimes. It is echoed in Eisenhower's farewell address and later in the obsession with 'imperial overstretch' during the 1980s. A version of this distinction has also been attributed to the Chinese leader, Marshal Ye Jianying, to the effect that the Cold War suited the confrontational nature of both Americans and Russians but it would probably not end well unless one side abandoned direct confrontation and drew the other out on a limb, then stood back to watch it break.[9]

The obvious problem with containment was that it was first conceived as a political, not a military doctrine. The latter would have required (and eventually did require) vast armaments throughout the world, with the risk of unmanageable escalation in any number of areas. Thus, containment was coupled with deterrence in order to limit such an escalation while preserving the logic of political pressure. But this coupling resulted in another problem because it did not take long for the two doctrines, containment and deterrence, to contradict one another in practice.

Starting with the Korean War, the United States and the Soviet Union became stuck in conventional wars that could neither be won nor lost in the usual way (although the Korean War nearly was, thanks to the Chinese intervention, the Chinese Communists not yet having adopted the hard logic of deterrence). Most of the hot wars fought in the name of the Cold War began as limited, conventional wars that had to remain so, at least for interventionists. But remaining so meant that several became ugly, unconventional wars of attrition in which surrender became nearly impossible.

It was not unreasonable to assume early in the Cold War that a nuclear war could never be a war of attrition, but that was not the same thing as affirming that the Cold War, so long as it remained cold, could become permanent, or that conventional as well as unconventional wars of attrition would not persist in the

9 I have not been able to find an original source for this anecdote. I first heard it used retrospectively in the early 1990s.

nuclear age. The best examples of this strange condition are given by the Afghan and Vietnam Wars, two protracted conflicts or internationalised civil wars which probably could never have been won by outsiders and should never have been fought were it not for the logic and the demands of the Cold War. Both conflicts, although immensely destructive, were territorially contained, in principle. In practice, they extended the battlefield to the political 'home front' of each superpower, and were mainly decided there as each superpower spent much time and effort trying to deter itself from provoking the other. In each case, and in others like them, interventionists found themselves in a catch-22 situation regarding 'credibility', otherwise known as prestige. If their client was too successful, this could encourage, rather than deter, a greater intervention by their adversaries as well as a countervailing demand at home for disengagement, and then a paradoxical postponement of that tough course of action in the face of powerful domestic constituencies. If the client was too unsuccessful, this provoked an escalation of their own commitment.[10] In the event, many of their reputed clients and proxies were fighting very different wars.

The alternative to a frozen conflict like the one in Korea or a humiliation like those in Afghanistan and Vietnam, was a ritual or performative surrender.[11] Hot wars throughout Africa and Asia may have encouraged this form of surrender by way of also affirming that they were not quite separate from, or ancillary to, the Cold War. How much each one was or was not, and how much they occurred from the top down, bottom up, inside out, and outside in, is a large subject of academic debate.[12] From the perspective of interventionists, hot wars may have been

10 Cf. David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–61* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians In Afghanistan, 1979–89* (London: Profile Books, 2011).

11 See Wagner-Pacifici, *Art of Surrender*, 14–17 et passim for discussion of this term and others (*demonstrative* and *representational*) with reference to surrender.

12 See, inter alia, Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Cold War's Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018); Lorenz M. Lüthi, *Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); and Pierre Grosser, *L'histoire du monde se fait en Asie:*

fought in the name of the Cold War but nearly all of them were particular and had more to do with regional or local interests, starting with the warring sides' own sense of sovereignty and power, quite apart from the existence of a global Cold War. For an analogue to the battle, it is better instead to consider them not as Third World wars, or even what the British called *emergencies* in their declining empire, but instead as events commonly known as *crises*.

Crises occurred regularly during the Cold War.[13] They usually began with a local quarrel, escalated to an external confrontation, performed something like a Mexican standoff, and then ended with a backing down, that is, a surrender, by one intervening power or the other. This type of surrender was advertised by both sides as a sacrifice for the greater good, was almost always reached after a long negotiation, usually in secret, and was often limited and temporary. The most famous crises – in and over Berlin, Suez, and Cuba – were also interrelated. Berlin was at the centre of the political confrontation over the orientation and fealty of Europe to two extra-European powers, i.e., two superpowers. Suez, in which the interests of interventionists, including two European powers and one quasi-European power, took a turn against the superpowers, tested the freedom of action of non-European powers. And Cuba involved not only the extent of nuclear confrontation the superpowers were willing to tolerate but also, once more, the status of Berlin.[14] Each of these crises had a transformative effect on military strategy, force structure, and budgets, as well as defence policy broadly.

Cold War crises included uprisings whose purpose was to challenge the status quo of the Cold War, such as those occurring in Czechoslovakia in 1948, in East Germany in 1953, in Hungary in 1956, and in several countries, in both the East and the West, in 1968. Each crisis was different and different in its own way, but all to one degree or another invoked the prestige of the superpowers and of the Cold War as a systemic order, which, perversely, had to be defended against the challenge of disorder or an alternative order. It is probably no accident that this

Une autre vision du XXe siècle (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2017).

13 The best cynical study in the American political setting is still Henry Fairlie, *The Kennedy Promise: The Politics of Expectation* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1973). See also Frank Ninkovich, *Modernity and Power: A History of the Domino Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

14 See W. R. Smyser, *Kennedy and the Berlin Wall* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), chp. 11.

term, *challenge*, has replaced *crisis* in referring to problems to solve or manage for aspiring interventionists. In situations where the challenge was unamenable to an initial negotiation, interventionists could be quick to use force. For an outsider looking back on the latter half of the Cold War, there do appear to be similarities between what the Warsaw Pact did in Prague in 1968 to what the United States did in Grenada in 1983 or in Libya in 1986.[15] Each intervention resembled the classic punitive expedition meant to keep one or another side in line. In fact, the so-called Vietnam syndrome notwithstanding, there is not much that is conceptually distinct about these actions and those that became de rigueur in the period just after the Cold War.[16] They were exhibitionistic and, later, as in the Iraq War, justified as it was by a 'long war' against terrorism, grotesque.

In redefining surrender to apply to the acceptance or rejection of the status quo, Cold Warriors placed the burden of definition on the Cold War itself – notably on what were called its structural conditions, starting with the zero-sum nature of the arms race and the competition for adherents. This is another way of saying that the Cold War inspired more fatalism than other, more conventional wars. Yet, like most other wars, its result was not predetermined. It could have ended with mutual destruction but it did not. The decision to end it peacefully was an act of statecraft. It was moreover a decision that used the structural conditions of the Cold War against themselves following a different logic of surrender.

This reversal, or what can be understood as a virtual form of surrender – whereby the agents of the Cold War surrendered operationally to the condition of antagonism in order to gain strategic advantage over antagonism – began as early as the 1950s. After Stalin's death, each superpower entertained initiatives and reforms with the aim of mitigating hostility. They largely failed but they set a precedent for more practical steps after the Cuban missile crisis. These included the nuclear hotline and the partial test ban treaty, in 1963. People began using a term that would become synonymous with this type of statecraft: *détente*. The term means an easing of tension, but over the course of the 1970s it came to have a couple of different meanings. To its leading American promoters, Richard

15 Cf. Jack F. Matlock, Jr., 'The Christmas Gift that Keeps Giving', *American Diplomacy* (February 2024).

16 Andrew P. N. Erdmann, 'The U.S. Presumption of Quick, Costless Wars', *Orbis* 43 (3) (Summer 1999), 363–81.

Nixon and Henry Kissinger, the meaning came closer to *entente* in that it underwrote a set of direct negotiations between the superpowers to manage or limit the negative effects of their rivalry. To others, namely the West German chancellor Willy Brandt and his fellow believers in *Ostpolitik*, it meant a more bottom-up liberalisation of relationships across the Iron Curtain, undertaken not only for the purpose of easing tension but also to create and sustain new relationships which could transcend and might someday supersede the Cold War.[17]

The two meanings were not necessarily incompatible.[18] They came together during the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, resulting in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and the CSCE's subsequent review meetings. They also put an end to the struggle for Berlin and the likelihood of a direct superpower conflict there. Their adherents laid the basis not for ending the Cold War per se but for ending it peacefully by way of a proposition, *Wandel durch Annäherung*, which was in theory the opposite of diplomacy designed to protect the status quo. The celebrated Helsinki effect has been credited with promoting the growth of civil society throughout the Eastern bloc, and with giving people throughout Europe confidence and hope in what the American president George H. W. Bush later called a Europe, Whole and Free, and Mikhail Gorbachev called the European Common Home. Both formulations were, in their own way, declarations of victory over the political logic of the Cold War and its replacement by another logic that was simultaneously super- and supra-regional.

Marshal Ye may not have had the Helsinki effect in mind when he gave his dictum, but he lived long enough to see another important structural condition break. This was the Sino-Soviet split, which took root also in the 1950s, and would also, like détente, culminate some 30 years later with the shift of China in the direction of state capitalism. This was not, as some Western observers said, inspired by the ideology of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, but instead borrowed from some of China's neighbours, later known as the Asian tigers. That shift also was a kind of systemic surrender.

17 See Stephan Kieninger, *Dynamic Détente: The United States and Europe, 1964–1975* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), a history mainly of the latter type.

18 However, sometimes they justified the positions of opposing sides, as during the Portuguese Carnation Revolution.

III

A dialectically minded observer may have noticed a Cold War synthesis emerging by the middle of the 1980s. The East and the West had resisted each other for so long that, having rejected the option of their mutual destruction, decided instead to muddle through towards an alternative, which was to join together to put an end to rivalry. China had already taken that step, as had some of the larger non-European states – Indonesia, Brazil, India, Egypt, Congo – in choosing one side, playing several sides, or simply refusing to take sides on principle while regularly doing so in practice.[19] Thus, at the Geneva (1985) and Reykjavik (1986) summits, the principal parties to the Cold War reviewed the menu of disputes and decided to resolve most of them one after another, rather than conditioning or 'linking' them as Henry Kissinger opted to do in enacting the flawed logic of pre-emptive concession – a logic that sometimes led to negotiating mostly with oneself. Conceding (or surrendering, to use the term loosely) in practice was not meant to bring about a wider agreement; rather, an agreement in principle to negotiate openly and separately over each matter without jeopardising the others, built trust across the board, as it were. There were a good number of concessions, but they were made à la carte. The result of these negotiations was the opposite of the one that Gorbachev probably intended, however.[20] It resembled a strategic surrender. The irony in rejecting the premise of containment at the moment of its fulfilment was apparent to some people at the time, but few of them actually imagined the Soviet Union would collapse in the manner that it did.

It is easy to interpret this event as a Western victory, or at any rate as a vindication of pragmatism. Its manifestation so soon after Reagan and Gorbachev (and Deng Xiaoping) gave in to pragmatism forms such an impression. But history does not usually happen in this way: the dramatic effects of a great change are not essentially one with its causes; and one person's pragmatism may be another's romanticism. Rather, it is fair to say that surrender happened another way. The main actors in the Cold War did not surrender to one another or to anyone else;

19 John Lamberton Harper, *The Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 246 and chp. 6.

20 See Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); cf. Kenneth Weisbrode, 'America's Strategic Surrender', *Internationale Politik* 7 (3) (Summer 2006), 52–56.

the Cold War and its logic surrendered to them as soon as they found the means to surpass it.

The point is not as glib as it sounds. An alternative logic of stable peace took hold in the second half of the 1980s. It was not the same as the top-down arrangements imposed by the victors after most major wars, including the Cold War's 'long peace'. Instead, it emerged from below, or really, from the middle, as collaborators in various governments worked together across national and bureaucratic lines to formulate, strengthen, and expand their institutional and habitual cooperation by way of what came to be called confidence-building measures.[21] Defended as a means of stabilisation, they became instead a means for resisting by overtaking, the logic and the condition of permanent, total war. Building confidence, in other words, became coterminous with retreating from the aggressive confrontation that total war demanded.

Working against this activity were the partisans of another, persistent logic (and an ideology) of territorialism, which held that the borders on a map still define and extent a nation's power. This logic has brought about a perverse formulation of policy – we divide and you conquer – as the wars of Yugoslav succession and one or two others, such as Chechnya, accompanied and, for some, justified the establishment of a Cold War successor regime in the enlargement of NATO and the later eclipse of the CSCE (renamed the OSCE in 1994). In effect, that amounted to a retreat from retreat; whether it also amounts to a more permanent resurrection of the confrontational logic of the Cold War remains to be seen.

A liberal use of the term *surrender* therefore has two implications for its significance beyond the end of the Cold War. The first is that the act of surrender was no longer indivisible. Ending the Cold War in the 1980s amounted not to a full defeat, but instead, as noted, to a strategic retreat for some but not for all Cold War participants. The second was that retreat was also divisible. The West joined with East in retreating militarily from the Cold War, finally, with the aim of ending it once and for all, yet much of the Western bloc advanced economically and culturally – that is, it became more politically assertive – in the second half of the

21 James E. Goodby, *Europe Undivided: The New Logic of Peace in U.S.-Russian Relations* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998); Michael Howard, *The Invention of Peace: Reflections on War and International Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

1980s just as the Eastern bloc had done a decade earlier. Something similar took place with the nations from what today is known as the Global South, variably in league with the West or the East. The demarcation is loose and by the end of the 1980s all three areas no longer resembled traditional blocs so much as a new form of bloc akin to a cultural and ideological zone which overlaps with others in advancing policies, patterns, and allegiances. The world at the end of the twentieth century was no longer divided between capitalists and communists, or between democracies and autocracies, so much as most states, including those that promoted themselves as democracies and those that did not, situated themselves somewhere along a spectrum of market to state capitalist, and participated and resisted to varying degrees a condition of global interdependence. This was not quite Fukuyama's world but in making use of a Hegelian abstraction to describe it, he may have had a point: several isms became wasms.

It is easy to argue that using *surrender* to refer both to a conflict and to a system, only to have both the conflict and the system dissolve, suggests that the Cold War rendered the term meaningless. But that is not exactly what happened. The definition became more expansive during the Cold War by encompassing what would more accurately be called strategic retreat, and by becoming, at the same time, more operationally and tactically precise and feasible. For instance, in a number of low-intensity conflicts – insurgencies, guerrilla wars, and the like – it has been observed that the appearance and sometimes the reality of surrender can have important advantages.[22]

The preoccupation with surrender has grown in recent decades, explicitly or not. That is because more than anything else, the Cold War extended the logic of surrender into the future. How else can one explain the existence of so many frozen conflicts and forever wars since the 1990s? In the best-known cases – in Bosnia, Kosovo, Nagorno-Karabakh, Afghanistan, Iraq – the terminal phrase of conflict was nearly as protracted as the entire conflict. In many of those cases, negotiations coincided for a long time with fighting, as they had done in the Korean War, and they continued after a military surrender, or a near-surrender was put into effect.

Where and when to draw the line between political and military surrender in

22 Tusi (Ündes) Wen 'Essays on the Political Economy of Authoritarian Rule', unpublished PhD dissertation (Duke University, 2020), chp. 4.

post-Cold War wars of attrition can be very difficult. That difficulty demonstrates that both the terms and the meaning of surrender are something other than what they were. Surrender is premised on the belief that one must accept defeat in order to avoid destruction, but in the Cold War, destruction was presumed to be mutual; so, there could be neither victory nor defeat in the traditional sense. The logic of surrender went against the logic of the Cold War, resulting in the suspension and ultimately the termination of the latter by the withdrawal, or retreat, of the conditions of the former. The superpowers did not surrender during, in, or to, the Cold War; they surrendered the Cold War, objectively, without a preposition.

* * *

Few people who remember the Cold War expected it to end in their lifetime, so long as it remained cold, and then were surprised by how quickly it did end. But surrender's fuse was long. If the *Cold War* had never existed as a concept, the various conflicts enacted in its name would for the most part still be known as traditional contests over political, cultural, socioeconomic, and ideological spheres of influence, some of which continue in one form or another. What made the Cold War unique was the nuclear aspect, which in certain respects, made that war qualitatively different from past wars and, so too, surrender. For any surrender to happen, an opposing side had to give way. That has not changed. What has changed is the manner by which giving way is done – in effect making surrender equivalent to its opposite, a strategic, operational, or tactical retreat undertaken in order to preserve, protect, redirect, or otherwise retain power and status under a new or altered set of technological and psychological conditions.

The basis of this transformation was, I have argued, the Cold War's status as a secondary or virtual conflict. Its stakes were said to be mortal but in practice they turned out to be something less than that with regard to many states though, tragically, not to many human beings. A similar judgement may apply today to 'great power competition' and other abstract formulations which aim to describe one or another enduring contest. In theory, they augur the obsolescence of deterrence, with or without the much-anticipated boost to nuclear proliferation.[23] On

23 See Erik Sand, 'Strategy in the New Missile Age', *Security Studies* (March 2026).

the ground they still have mortal consequences. Today there are many hot wars, notwithstanding the failure to eliminate nuclear arsenals. Whether international relations will continue to become more barbaric, or will resume the project of building a stable, and ideally liberal, global community, may mean admitting that surrender has come full circle, and is once more incompatible with survival.

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From Paris to Washington and Beyond.
The Italian Navy and Foreign Policy in the 1920s

by Alessandro Vagnini

Abstract: The Italian Navy and its role in foreign policy in the 1920s can't be understood without looking at how Mussolini envisioned Italy's role as a great power. The *Regia Marina* became a key instrument of this vision, while naval power was seen less as a tool for immediate war and more as leverage in diplomacy. On the other hand, the pillars of Italian naval policy have been drafted between the Paris Peace Conference and the Washington Naval Conference, when Italy agreed to naval armaments limitation. In a first phase the strategic priority was the Adriatic, later it became the balance with the French Navy and to acquire a power projection capacity as far as the Indian Ocean and China. Accordingly, a brief analysis of Italian diplomacy and the Navy during this two conferences may help us to understand the evolution of the country's naval strategy.

Keywords: *Regia Marina*; Paris Peace Conference; Washington Naval Conference;

It is generally believed that the relationship between the Italian Navy and foreign policy in the 1920s can't be understood without looking at how Mussolini envisioned Italy's role as a great power, with a more assertive foreign policy once Fascism came to power, aiming to turn Italy into a dominant Mediterranean power. The *Regia Marina* became a key instrument of this vision. As a matter of fact, naval power was seen less as a tool for immediate war and more as leverage in diplomacy. On the other hand, the pillars of Italian naval policy have been drafted—before Fascism went to power—between the Paris Peace Conference and the Washington Naval Conference, when Italy agreed to naval armaments limitation. The Washington Naval Treaty restricted battleship construction and shaped Italian naval planning. While not embarking on massive naval expansion, due to limited economic resources and international agreements,

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Italy focused on maintaining a credible presence in the Mediterranean, protecting sea lanes and colonial routes, and supporting diplomatic pressure in regional disputes—the Corfù Incident is a clear example—with the Navy functioning as a potential coercive diplomatic tool. Italian naval policy also reflected its position between stronger naval powers, with Great Britain dominating the Mediterranean and France as Italy's main regional rival. In short, in the 1920s, the Navy enabled Italy to project power and pursue regional influence while staying within the constraints of international treaties and economic limits. All this is more or less correct, yet the development of the Italian Navy and the strategic lines of Italian naval policy in those years were the inevitable result of the diplomacy of the liberal regime which, between 1919 and 1922, was committed to defining Italy's role and responsibilities in the international system in the aftermath of the Great War. Accordingly, to better understand the development of the *Regia Marina*'s strategic vision during the 1920s, we must look at two crucial moments: the Paris Peace Conference and the Washington Naval Conference respectively. It is in fact between these two events that the Navy's goals in the years that followed developed. For this reason, we should begin seeing how the discussion of naval issues during the Paris negotiations initiated a reshaping of Italian strategy, revisiting and achieving—when possible—what pursued in previous years.

Controlling the Adriatic Sea had historically been a serious concern for the *Regia Marina* and, therefore, a key aspect of the strategic goals of Italian diplomacy. Securing access from the south, through the Strait of Otranto and the Dalmatian coast, had consequently occupied a central place in Italian plans. In fact, in the spring of 1915, negotiations with the *Entente* took place in the light of Italy's desire to free itself once and for all from the condition of inferiority in the Adriatic imposed on it by the geographical configuration of the two coasts.[1] Consequently Italy could not have accepted any arrangement which did not guarantee it effective control of the Adriatic. The signing of the London Pact on 26 April 1915 constituted a milestone in Italian foreign policy, leading to intervention in the Great War and a collaboration with London and Paris that lasted until the mid-1920s.[2] Notwithstanding, at the Paris Peace Conference, United States' position

1 M. Gabriele - G. Friz, *La politica navale italiana dal 1885 al 1915*, Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare, Roma 1982. See also M. Toscano, *Il Patto di Londra. Storia diplomatica dell'intervento italiano (1914-1915),* Zanichelli, Bologna 1934, pp. 96-97.

2 A. Salandra, *L'Intervento*, Mondadori, Milano 1930, p. 186; P. Pastorelli, *Dalla Prima*

had to be taken into account. As an associated power, Washington had in fact not recognised the agreements previously signed by its partners.[3]

The Peace Conference was not a sudden event; it was the result of long years of struggle and numerous agreements on cooperation and coordination concluded during the war by the Allies. Collaboration between the Allied navies had not always been easy, and in particular, with regard to Italy, during the summer of 1918 there had been considerable resistance to British plans to create a unified command for the Mediterranean. Misunderstandings arose, especially with British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, and at times a divergence in strategic vision seemed to emerge, which the end of the conflict could only have further widened.[4] The end of the war immediately raised the question of the fate of the enemy fleets. From Italy's perspective, the issue concerned both a share of enemy's naval assets and equipment, and the removal of any naval threat in the Adriatic. From this perspective, the priority was the neutralization of the Austro-Hungarian fleet. This outcome was believed assured by the provisions of the armistice of Villa Giusti and the effective occupation of large swathes of the eastern Adriatic coast.[5] According to Foreign Minister Sidney Sonnino, it was therefore necessary to ensure the full implementation of the London Pact.[6] This vision was supported

alla Seconda Guerra Mondiale. Momenti e problemi della politica estera italiana 1914-1943, LED, Milano 1997, pp. 67-68.

3 M. de Leonardis, La diplomazia italiana e l'intervento americano, in AA. VV., *Over There in Italy. L'Italia e l'intervento americano nella Grande Guerra*, Società italiana di storia militare, Roma 2017, pp. 13-24.

4 E. Ferrante, *La Grande Guerra in Adriatico. Nel LXX anniversario della vittoria*, Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare, Roma 1987; P.G. Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis 1994; R. Nassigh, *La Marina italiana e l'Adriatico*, Ufficio Storico Marina Militare, Roma 1998; F. Favre, *La Marina nella Grande Guerra*, Gaspari, Udine 2008; A. Gionfrida, *L'Italia e il coordinamento militare interalleato nella prima guerra mondiale*, Ufficio Storico Stato Maggiore Esercito, Roma 2008; D. Borsani – A. Vagnini, *La Regia Marina e le questioni navali alla Conferenza di Parigi*, Ufficio Storico Marina Militare, Roma 2020.

5 For Italian occupations in the Adriatic region see U. Ceci, *Le occupazioni adriatiche*, Ufficio Storico della Regia Marina, Roma 1932; R. Pupo, *La vittoria senza pace. Le occupazioni militari italiane alla fine della Grande Guerra*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2022.

6 A. Torre, *La politica estera italiana dal 1914 al 1943*, Eri, Torino 1963; L. Monzali, La questione jugoslava nella politica estera italiana dalla prima guerra mondiale ai trattati di Osimo (1914-75), in F. Botta-I. Garzia (a cura di), *Europa adriatica. Storia, relazioni, economia*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2004, pp. 15-72; M. Cattaruzza, *L'Italia e il confine orientale*, il Mulino, Bologna 2007.

by the Navy Chief of Staff, Paolo Thaon di Revel.[7] According to the admiral, in fact, the full application of the London Pact was necessary because Italy had entered the war only to guarantee its domination of the Adriatic.[8]

However, the emergence of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes—supported by US President Woodrow Wilson—according to Thaon di Revel, constituted a potential strategic threat to Italian shores.[9] During the negotiations, strategic security aspects were always carefully considered by the Italian delegation and its military experts. It should be noted that on several occasions, Army and Navy Chiefs of Staff were directly involved in discussing the Adriatic question and strategic goals.[10] Admiral Thaon di Revel, whose thinking embodied the widespread sentiments in the *Regia Marina*, admitted the possibility of a minimal derogation from the full application of the London Pact, believing that for strategic reasons it was not appropriate to renounce what had been established in the treaty about the Adriatic, but that he would not oppose renunciations that proved absolutely necessary for political or territorial reasons.[11]

Strategic considerations were the main focus of the Italian negotiating line. The geography of the Adriatic region created the conditions for permanent coastal insecurity. An enemy that controlled the central part of the coast between Zara (Zadar) and Spalato (Split), with the port of Sebenico (Šibenik), and simultaneously the islands, would always have the possibility of turning the entire Adriatic Sea into the theatre of a naval battle. In this case, the Italian fleet would have been exposed to enemy threat.[12] The Italian delegation therefore demanded that, in order to eliminate any threat to its shores, the Dalmatian coast should be neutralized and fortifications prohibited or, if existing, dismantled. However, while Italy was presenting its requests, the United States officially recognized the Kingdom of

7 L. Monzali, *Italiani di Dalmazia 1914-1924*, Le Lettere, Firenze 2007, p. 58.

8 See E. Ferrante, *Il Grande Ammiraglio Paolo Thaon di Revel*, in «Supplemento alla Rivista Marittima», 2017, pp. 79-80.

9 It is no coincidence that, after the armistice of Villa Giusti, in agreement with the Chief of Staff, the government decided not to lift the naval blockade of the Adriatic. DDI, Sesta Serie, vol. I, doc. 539.

10 DDI, Sesta Serie, vol. II, doc. 118.

11 P.P. Ramoino, *Una storia "Strategica" della Marina Militare Italiana*, in «Supplemento della Rivista Marittima», dicembre 2018, pp. 58-59; Borsani – Vagnini, *La Regia Marina e le questioni navali*, cit., pp. 110-111.

12 DDI, Sesta Serie, vol. II, doc. 728.

Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.[13] London and Paris, for their part, while taking due caution, did not disdain the possibility of limiting Italy. However, Great Britain had to proceed carefully. On the one hand, it aimed preventing Paris from becoming too powerful in the Mediterranean, while on the other avoiding the risk that Rome might threaten British maritime interests once it gained absolute control of the Adriatic. Italy therefore had to proceed with caution as well. Sonnino and Thaon di Revel remained convinced of the need to implement the London Pact, while Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando could have accepted a compromise without breaking with the other powers.[14]

A particularly important aspect was the fate of enemy fleets. Article 23 of the armistice with Germany stipulated that Berlin would immediately hand over to the Allies 10 battleships, 6 heavy cruisers, 8 light cruisers, and 50 destroyers. These vessels were to remain under Allied surveillance at the Scapa Flow base, but under the command of a German admiral, while the remaining German naval forces were to be handed over only in a second moment. For what it concerns the Austro-Hungarian fleet, at Villa Giusti it had been stipulated its concentration in Venice, Buccari (Bakar), and Spalato. As for the merchant fleet, in accordance with Article 5 of the armistice naval clauses, the blockade of the Adriatic remained in force, and former Austro-Hungarian merchant ships could sail only if requisitioned by the Allies.[15] Although the armistice seemed to have ensured Italian interests, the news of the transfer of the Austro-Hungarian fleet to the Yugoslavs would soon undermine these hopes. As early as November 5, Admiral Thaon di Revel wrote to Prime Minister Orlando that, following the transfer of those ships to other flags, it would become impossible to implement armistice.[16] At the same time, Orlando instructed the Navy to deploy Austro-Hungarian ships to various safe ports, also to avoid the risk of a «widespread Bolshevik infection among the crews».[17] It was then decided to concentrate all Austro-Hungarian warships and other military equipment in the ports of Pola (Pula), Spalato, and Cattaro (Kotar),

13 FRUS, 1919, vol. II, pp. 899-900. See also I.J. Lederer, *La Jugoslavia dalla Conferenza della Pace al Trattato di Rapallo 1919-1920*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1966, p. 161.

14 Orlando actually appeared worried about the admiral's «obstinacy». DDI, Sesta Serie, vol. II, docc. 773, 899.

15 FRUS, The Paris Peace Conference, vol. II, 1919, US Government Printing Office, Washington 1942, pp. 793-794.

16 DDI, Sesta Serie, vol. I, doc. 9.

17 DDI, Sesta Serie, vol. I, doc. 133.

where they would be guarded by the Allies forces. The fate of the Austro-Hungarian fleet and relations with the Yugoslavs would become a determining factor in Italy's position on naval matters at the subsequent Peace Conference. Particularly important was the decision, dated December 2, 1918, to establish the Inter-Allied Commission of Admirals, charged with studying the main naval issues and suggesting possible solutions. The Allies, however, also focused on the merchant fleet, and in fact, as early as the beginning of November, the French had presented a proposal regarding the distribution of Austro-Hungarian merchant ships. These vessels were primarily located in the Adriatic and the Black Sea, and were in part claimed by some Allied governments as spoils of war. On 21 December an inter-Allied agreement established that Austro-Hungarian merchant ships would be requisitioned on behalf of the Allies by the power or powers best placed to put them into service. This was a temporary measure, which did not affect ownership, and their actual use would be regulated by the Inter-Allied Council for Maritime Transport. However, as the state under whose flag these ships had been registered no longer existed, soon a heated dispute had emerged over who had the right to use them.[18] Naval issues to be addressed in Paris were many and complex.[19] The blockade against the defeated countries was another factor that needed to be taken into due consideration, especially since there was no unanimous position among the great powers on this issue. The Americans, for example, were not satisfied with the restrictions placed on commercial traffic, nor did the they seem fully convinced by the British attitude towards the freedom of the seas. The fate of merchant ships interned in neutral ports also needed to be resolved. The case of Spain is noteworthy. Its government attempted to secure the right to use, if not actually acquire, those ships interned in their waters, which the Allies categorically refused, as these vessels were largely to be assigned to Italy and France. A similar situation existed in the Netherlands, where several steamships belonging to the governments of the Central Powers were interned. Between December 1918 and January 1919, the issue was discussed in Paris, and it was decided to ask the Dutch government to hand over the ships, that were to be used by the Allies, without prejudice to their final assignment.

18 Borsani – Vagnini, *La Regia Marina e le questioni navali alla Conferenza di Parigi*, cit., pp. 25-26.

19 J.W. Jones, *The Naval Battle of Paris*, in «Naval War College Review», Vol. 62, n. 2, 2009, pp. 77–89.

The Italians were also concerned about the ongoing blockade of enemy ports, which posed a significant impediment to Italy's business. Although, as far as the Adriatic was concerned, admiral Thaon di Revel maintained that the blockade was appropriate, since it prevented the establishment of a Yugoslav merchant fleet. Otherwise, the admiral argued, Belgrade might claim that «having a merchant fleet to protect, it also needs a navy».[20] Under the pretext of protecting a merchant fleet, and with French and British moral and financial support, Italy in the Adriatic would be in the same difficult position of the pre-war years. In short, one of the very reasons for Italy's intervention in the Great War would have been in vain, and for this reason the admiral asked Orlando to promptly intervene, adding that with the lifting of the Adriatic blockade, he would have almost no means of hindering Yugoslav maritime ambitions. The blockade would indeed be lifted only on March 30, 1919. However, the other powers had reasons for disagreement as well, especially over their respective positions in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Moreover, since a reduction in the Royal Navy was unlikely, some circles in Washington began to consider a further increase in the US Navy, thus creating the conditions for a risky arms race with London.[21]

Once the Paris Peace Conference began, the *Regia Marina* continued to prioritize the Adriatic question, ending up eventually monopolizing the Italian delegation's approach during the negotiations. Control of the region's coasts and islands—though less relevant now that Austria-Hungary had collapsed—continued in fact to be extremely important for Rome. As already mentioned, the partition of enemy shipping was particularly relevant. On this specific issue, Rome favoured an equitable distribution, but demanded primacy over the fate of the Austro-Hungarian fleet. This led to numerous problems, not only because of Yugoslav demands, often supported by the Americans, but also because, in principle, it conflicted with the fairness Italy demanded in the case of the German fleet. Ultimately, Rome advocated the dismantling of all surface units, believing it would be better to definitively deny its rivals part of the Austro-Hungarian fleet rather than risk allowing it to be appropriated by others. The rationale for this approach, which effectively coincided with that adopted by the other powers, except France, was to limit armaments and the associated costs.

20 DDI, Sesta Serie, vol. II, doc. 58.

21 D.J. Lisio, *British Naval Supremacy and Anglo-American Antagonisms, 1914-1930*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2014.

The first extensive discussion on the partition of the German fleet took place at the beginning of May 1919. What emerged from this first meeting was a shared position of Great Britain, Italy, Japan and the United States for the destruction and recovery of the material, while the French supported the conservation and distribution of the shipping, including submarines. The delegations did not actually share the same position on the fate of enemy military fleets. The United States proposed scuttling or scrapping, but preferred scuttling; Great Britain maintained scrapping was the best solution; Italy supported scrapping as well, but in the event this principle was not fully implemented, demanded a fair share; Japan favoured scuttling or scrapping, possibly demanding a share if another solution was chosen; France, for its part, opposed both scuttling and scrapping, proposing instead partition. Proposals drawn up by naval experts included the destruction of Heligoland's installations and defences, as well as the opening of access routes to the Baltic, including the Kiel Canal, while the German merchant fleet was to be partially confiscated as part of war reparations.[22] Similar conditions were envisaged for the Austro-Hungarian fleet. All Turkish warships instead, «delivered in accordance with the armistice clauses will be sunk in deep water under Allied control within a maximum of three months from the signing of the preliminary peace agreements».[23] The small Bulgarian fleet was also to be entirely sunk. Possible solutions were actually all still on the table and ranged from destruction by sinking, supported by London and Washington but opposed by France and, to some extent Italy, as economically unprofitable, to demolition with subsequent recovery of the materials; in addition, there was the French proposal to distribute the ships among the Allies. The Straits represented another point of great interest during the Conference. Freedom of passage for merchant ships and responsibility of the Straits area were discussed on several occasions. It should be noted, however, that unlike other issues, in this case there was no particular friction between the Allies. The unanimously supported solution was internationalization, which was promptly incorporated into the text of the future peace treaty with Turkey.

The main concern, however, remained the future of the German fleet. Its elimination as a political-military factor was a priority for the British; for the other powers, however, the issue was rather economic and had military consequences

22 For the provisions relating to the German merchant fleet see FRUS, The Paris Peace Conference, vol. III, 1919, p. 611.

23 AUSMM, Fondo Base, Busta 1440/2, *Clauses navales proposes par les amiraux - Turquie*.

only when it affected the principle of the balance of power, as in the discussions on the future of submarines, in which two distinct positions clearly emerged: one represented by Great Britain and the United States, generally in favour of their complete elimination, and the other by France and Italy, favourable to submarine warfare in general and therefore reluctant to introduce regulations that morally condemned its use, as this would also have repercussions on their own navies. Here one could already glimpse the possible developments of the doctrine and the overall naval strategy of the powers. All, however, agreed on the limitations to be imposed on Germany regarding the future construction of surface vessels.

The future of the Austro-Hungarian fleet continued to pose a problem given the failure to respect previous agreements which provided for the provisional delivery of all units to Italy «in ports to be determined by it».[24] The issue dragged on without any apparent solution in the following weeks. On October 29, Thaon di Revel wrote to Admiral Grassi that in order to neutralize the eastern Adriatic coast, he had to support any solution that would exclude SHS from the acquisition of any naval unit, whether from former enemy or allied naval forces. In the event of a decision for total demolition, Italy, according to Thaon di Revel, would have to assume the responsibility of the entire Austro-Hungarian fleet, reserving the profits for itself and, if possible, participating in a share of any German demolitions.[25] The economic aspect was therefore undoubtedly a significant factor. Wasting resources or allocating them ineffectively was a possibility that no power could afford.

The partition of enemy shipping, both military and commercial, represented an important aspect with delicate consequences. On this issue, as already mentioned, Italy first and foremost wanted to be given priority over former Austro-Hungarian assets; a thesis which, however, was strongly opposed by the other powers. Another aspect of the same issue was access to vehicles and materials of various types belonging to enemy navies, some of which were already in the possession of individual powers. On 7 November 1919, Admiral Cagni suggested to new Foreign Minister Tommaso Tittoni to support the destruction of large surface units,

24 This formula was included in the agreement reached in Paris on 29 October 1918. AUSMM, Fondo Base, Busta 1439, *Relazione sulle vicende della flotta austro-ungarica - ottobre-novembre 1918* (Riservatissimo).

25 AUSMM, Fondo Base, Busta 1440, Revel ad Addetto Navale Italia, n. 98294, Stato maggiore, 29 ottobre 1919.

considered useless and expensive in the short term, proposing that all the former Austro-Hungarian ships be assigned to Italy for subsequent demolition.[26] However, negotiations on naval issues dragged on for some time and the partition of surface units, submarines, and all of German port equipment was approved only on 13 January 1920. The fate of the enemy merchant fleets remained instead far from a solution as regards quotas and methods of assignment, and consequently several conferences were necessary to reach an agreement. Eventually, the peace treaty with Austria stipulated that all warships and submarines were to be handed over to the Allies and Associated Powers. For its share of competence, Hungary would also have had to renounce ownership rights to military and merchant ships. In the meantime, Italy had obtained its quota of German ships, which were later incorporated into the *Regia Marina*.

It is now necessary a small digression on submarine warfare, whose impact in strategic and conceptual terms cannot be underestimated. The issue, in fact, developed with alternating phases during the entire duration of the Peace Conference. On this matter there were different positions among the Allies, due to the military and psychological impact of that specific aspect of naval warfare, as well as the interest that each powers had in its use in the future. A proposal to limit submarine warfare emerged on the initiative of the British Admiralty and was opposed within the Naval Council by the French and Italian representatives, who were instead inclined to include submarines, considered a defensive weapon, in the future German fleet. This position served to reject the Anglo-American thesis of the total abolition of submarines as a legitimate mean of naval warfare. In spite of this opposition, the French and Italian representatives nevertheless ended up accepting the English proposal for what it concerned the future German navy. Even if, as the Italian Navy Chief of Staff recalled, a similar limitation could not and should not have been applied to France and Italy which, as continental powers, with long coastal stretches to defend and relatively limited naval means, needed to maintain underwater forces. This was precisely the crux of the matter on which the different strategic visions—France and Italy on the side, Great Britain and the United States on the other—clashed.[27] The abolition

26 AUSMM, Fondo Base, Busta 1440, Cagni al Ministro della Marina, n. 8, Parigi, 7 novembre 1919.

27 See AUSMM, Fondo Base, Busta 1440/2, *Verbali riguardanti la riunione degli Ammiragli Alleati circa il destino dei sommergibili nemici*, n. 300R, Parigi, 9 maggio 1919.

of submarines as a naval legitimate weapon would in fact have been favourable to British and Americans interests, but absolutely disadvantageous for Rome and Paris which were rather oriented towards a defensive naval policy. Giving up submarines would have meant that Italy would have to increase its fleet and fortifications along its extensive coastline, with predictable consequences in terms of costs and without offering any guarantee of effectiveness in the event of a new conflict. According to Thaon di Revel, the naval power of the two Anglo-Saxon powers would be increasingly asserted and due to their «maritime overpower» the two countries would try to economically and politically dominate the world. It was therefore necessary to prevent limitations from being imposed on the use of submarines, of which «each maritime power must have full freedom of action, as well as with regard to their use in war».[28] The admiral clearly identified the future problems of naval supremacy and took into due consideration the position of relative weakness of Italy compared to other naval powers. The fate of German submarines and submarine warfare in general were therefore linked to the different strategic visions. The definitive abolition of submarine warfare was eventually rejected since it was not supported by France, Italy, and Japan.

After long and difficult negotiations, all issues were resolved and by the end of 1920 the Paris Peace Conference finally came to an end. Italy had not achieved full satisfaction on many points—especially territorial—which would have heavily influenced the growing myth of the so called mutilated victory. On the other hand, Italy had undoubtedly managed to play an important role and achieved many of its original strategic goals.

Let us now address the question of post-war naval disarmament. This is a fundamental theme for understanding—also at industrial level—Italy's strategy in the 1920s The starting point is undoubtedly represented by the Washington Naval Conference, which took place between 12 November 1921 and 6 February 1922. Together with the Paris Peace Conference, these were in fact the two events that most influenced great powers political, diplomatic, and strategic choices for the next fifteen-year. The outcomes of the Washington Conference, not only for its strict naval dimension, must indeed be analysed on the basis of an ideal continuity between the two moments. It should also be remembered that attempts were made in Washington to confirm the new naval balance combined with a progres-

28 DDI, Sesta Serie, vol. III, doc. 439.

sive limitation of naval armaments. It was an aspect which, for economic and ideal reasons, found many supporters worldwide, and that was closely correlated to the goals of the newly established League of Nations, which strongly promoted the idea of general disarmament.[29] For what it concerns Italy, the conference also represented a transition from a purely conservative naval strategy limited to the defence of its own waters to one possibly capable of extending beyond the Central Mediterranean, as far as the Indian Ocean and the Far East.

In the aftermath of the Great War, many saw the arms race as one of the main reasons for the conflict and the Covenant of the League of Nations explicitly imposed on member countries the obligation to reduce armaments. In the following years, disarmament found itself at the centre of the international debate and attracted the attention of important sectors of world public opinion, while various governments proved to be sensitive to cost savings deriving from the application of an armaments reduction policy. Large navies easily became the target of a large debate about arms reduction. Those interested in supporting peaceful cooperation among the nations and reducing costs could not in fact fail to seriously address the possibility of naval disarmament. The issue, however, presented itself in a dual guise. If it is true, in fact, that this had a clear and decisive political dimension and as already mentioned in terms of net savings in public spending, which in some countries, such as the United States, also influenced the overall approach to diplomacy, disarmament represented at the same time a tool capable of strengthening the League of Nations and multilateralism. In fact, disarmament received widespread support and was presented by most as an essential basis for a new lasting and peaceful approach to international relations. However, the issue was influenced by what every country considered to be its priority in terms of

29 Disarmament remained a key issue until 1933. See G. Bernardi, *Il disarmo navale fra le due guerre mondiali (1919-1939)*, Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare, Roma 1975; C. Hall, Britain, America & Arms Control, 1921-37, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 1987; R.W. Fanning, *Peace and Disarmament, Naval Rivalry and Arms Control, 1922-1933*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington 1995; C. Kitching, *Britain and the Geneva Disarmament Conference*, Palgrave MacMillan, Houndmills-New York 2003. On Italy and disarmament see F. Lefebvre D'Ovidio, *Le conversazioni anglo-americane della primavera del 1929 sul problema del disarmo navale*, Giuffrè, Milano 1978; S. Minardi, *Il disarmo navale italiano (1919-1936). Un confronto politico-diplomatico per il potere marittimo*, Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare, Roma 1999; A. Vagnini, *Gli armamenti navali nel periodo interbellico. Controllo, riduzione, riarmo*, Ufficio Storico Marina Militare, Roma 2022.

national security. It could therefore not be separated from some objective factors, such as the Anglo-American rivalry, the conflicting interests in the Pacific area or the special interests that each power believed it had to defend. It remained closely linked to a vision of international relations of which, as is known, Washington was the promoter. However, the United States had a special interest in limiting the risk of a strengthened Japanese fleet and were now looking with annoyance at the alliance between London and Tokyo. Indeed, it would not be possible to fully understand the origins of the Washington Conference without taking into consideration the new position that Japan had been acquiring in China between 1914 and 1919. For its part, Great Britain resented the rise of US naval power, while at the same time under pressure from the *Dominions*, which for what it concerns Japan were—especially Canada—in fact aligned with Washington.

As already mentioned, the other crucial aspect linked to disarmament policy was the financial one. The need to reduce public spending had obvious consequences on the state finance and for this reason it was inevitable to approve significant budget cuts for the Armed Forces and for the Navy in particular. Yet, the war itself had once again demonstrated the essential contribution of the fleet and the vulnerability of entire economic systems in the face of attacks to long maritime supply routes, the lifelines of global trade, connecting Asia, Europe, and the Americas. A powerful and well-structured navy was therefore considered essential for the security of a country and to assert its power, precisely at a time when the costs of maintaining large fleets seemed unsustainable. To pay the price for this approach to saving were primarily battleships, powerful, large and consequently expensive vessel. In the post-war period a broad debate soon developed precisely around this type of ship. A debate that cannot and must not be underestimated, since it also implied an overall rethinking of the types and functions of light units as well. While a program to strengthen the fleet was underway in the United States, news of similar plans on the part of the British and Japanese pushed the US Senate to propose consultations with London and Tokyo in order to reach an agreement for naval armaments limitation. This was the origin of the subsequent proposal of a Naval Conference to be held in Washington.

In Italy, as in other countries, there was a broad debate on the issue, with different schools of thought, divided between those who asked respectively to upgrade submarines and aircrafts, focusing on technological developments and experience of the Great War, and those who wanted to preserve the traditional

structure of the fleet, believing the capabilities of submarine warfare to be overestimated and the construction of aircraft carriers to be useless. There was also a more moderate group that proposed an intermediate solution. Naturally, the adoption of the proposals of each of these schools would have entailed specific directions of industrial development and investments which in turn would have required a complex political, strategic and doctrinal framework. The debate was all the more relevant given the difficult financial conditions in which Italy found itself at the end of the conflict. The scarcity of available resources and a limited industrial base could in fact only work in favour of those who supported the opportunity to concentrate on smaller units, abandoning projects for new capital ships.

At the end of the war, Italy had 16 battleships, many of which were outdated. The naval construction program approved in 1921 should have remedied them, but it required time and money to be completed. As admiral Thaon di Revel declared in the Senate at the end of 1920, the era of battleships was not over, rather it was ending only for those countries lacking industrial capacity and financial means to build them.[30] He was among those who preferred to maintain the old strategy based on battleships and was not wrong when linking the fate of the battleships to a country's economic capabilities. However, he failed to consider that in the long term Italy would never be able to afford such a burden. The different positions then existing within the *Regia Marina* did not contribute to creating the conditions for a shared long-term policy and for this reason it is not surprising that the Italian delegation arrived in Washington without a defined action plan and clear purpose.[31] There was however agreement in believing that the point of reference for the Italian delegation should be to reach a balance with the French fleet, summarized in the formula of 8/10. Therefore, initially Italy had no specific requests relating to minimum and maximum tonnage, as long as a satisfactory ratio was achieved with respect to the size of the French fleet. On this basis, Italy would conduct its action during the Conference.

The Washington Naval Conference was attended by the representatives of the

30 *Atti Parlamentari*, Senato del Regno, XXV Legislatura, I sessione 1919-1920, p. 2286.

31 On Italy and the Washington Naval Conference see Minardi, *Il disarmo navale italiano*, cit., pp. 19-20; A. Vagnini (a cura di), *Politica estera e questioni navali. L'Italia e la conferenza di Washington*, Ufficio Storico Marina Militare, Roma 2020.

United States, Japan, China, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Portugal, regarding interests in the Pacific Ocean and East Asia, while only the five major powers were involved in negotiations for the naval aspects. It resulted in three major treaties, the Five-Power Treaty, more commonly known as the Washington Naval Treaty, the Four-Power Treaty, and the Nine-Power Treaty, that affected China and the Pacific respectively.

To resolve technical disputes over the quality of warships, a standard based on tonnage displacement was adopted. A ten-year agreement set the battleship ratio between the United States, Great Britain, and Japan at 5:5:3. Lower limits of 1.67 applied to France and Italy. Battleships could not exceed 35,000 tons. The Washington Conference halted the naval race by establishing a balance of power between the United States, Great Britain, and Japan, consolidating Tokyo's position as a great power. It effectively held parity in the Pacific with the world's two major navies, and was authorized to maintain a larger naval force than France and Italy, which in turn found themselves on equal footing with each other. This aspect would shape the diplomacy and naval strategy of both countries for years to come, with inevitable repercussions on their naval construction and doctrinal orientations. The Naval Treaty led to an effective end to building new battleships, and those ships that were built were limited in size and armament. Many existing capital ships were scrapped while some ships under construction were turned into aircraft carriers instead, whose number and tonnage had been limited as well. France emerged partially penalized, but overall in a strong position. Italy, however, as already mentioned, obtained the right to naval parity with the French fleet. Parity with France was also guaranteed in all categories of ships, even though the naval agreement was supposed to cover only battleships.[32] This undoubtedly represented a significant victory, beyond the actual need to strengthen its naval forces. Rather, parity demonstrated the recognition of Italy's right to be included among the great powers. However, there were also some not-so-pos-

32 See also J. Blatt, *The Parity That Meant Superiority: French Naval Policy towards Italy at the Washington Conference, 1921-22 and Interwar French Foreign Policy*, in «French Historical Studies», Vol. 12, No. 2 (Autumn, 1981), pp. 223-248; D. Pardini, *La parità navale italo-francese tra le due guerre mondiali. Parte prima: La Conferenza di Washington e le relazioni politiche fra l'Italia e la Francia nell'ambito delle conferenze navali e dei più importanti avvenimenti internazionali (1921-1928)*, in «Bollettino d'Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare», dicembre 2000, pp. 167-240.

itive aspects for Italy. Its exclusion from the Pacific agreement was a symptom of Italy's regional dimension, which meant it was not properly recognized as a world power. It's no surprise, then, that in the years that followed, Rome would strive to strengthen its naval presence in China, precisely to demonstrate its role as an Asian power.

The 1920s were a period of great upheaval for China, with a long series of clashes between warlords, eventually followed by the rise of the KMT and Communist parties. These two forces through the Northern Expedition aimed to establish a stable central government and to modernize the country by limiting foreign influence. In those years, Italian diplomatic personnel in the China had limited resources. Accordingly, it was the *Regia Marina* to play a major role for Italy's policy in the region. The Navy had several assets available in the country, collecting information and showing the flag when needed. This contributed to strengthening Italy's image as a great power and to protect the Italian limited economic interests in China. Not surprisingly, between 1925 and 1928, the Navy would also represent the main source of information, offering the only in-depth analyses on Chinese events. In early 1925, Italian cruiser *San Giorgio*, under the command of Rear Admiral Ugo Conz, arrived in China, where he assumed command of the Far East Naval Division (*Divisione Navale dell'Estremo Oriente*).[33] In February the Navy began organizing an Italian Corps in China that would later become the *Battaglione italiano in Cina*, quartered with personnel of the *San Marco* Regiment, in the new barracks in Tianjin.[34] In the late 1920s, the Italians also held small forts such as in Hankow and at Shanhaiguan, near the Great Wall.

This was a period of great changes for China, just before in 1926 the Kuomintang National Revolutionary Army in alliance with the Communist Party launched the Northern Expedition, a military campaign against the Beiyang government and other regional warlords. These events began at a time when the Italian authorities seemed unwilling to increase spending for their forces in China. Several proposals, from the construction of several river gunboats, to the creation

33 M. Sciarretta, *Le operazioni navali italiane in Estremo Oriente (1866-2017)*, in «Bollettino d'Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare», Anno XXXIV – Gennaio-Marzo 2020, pp. 8-36. For the activities of the Italian Navy in China see also C. Paoletti, *La Marina italiana in Estremo oriente 1866-2000*, USMM, Roma 2000, pp. 135-148.

34 S. Meconi, *Il Battaglione Italiano in Cina*, in «Bollettino d'Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare», Anno IV, I/1989, pp. 260-289.

of a small station in Canton, had in fact been rejected due to their extensive costs.[35] Italy's interests in Asia, according to a March 1925 memorandum, while susceptible to positive developments, appeared to be limited compared to those of Japan, Great Britain, the United States. Italy, with its inferior resources, should instead, according to Conz, focus on the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean. Nonetheless, Italy's commitment in China could not be underestimated. To understand Italy's position in the Far East it is also worth mentioning the importance of the *Lloyd Triestino*. This was a major shipping company, created in 1919 when Trieste became part of Italy.[36] It ran regular passenger services on ocean liners around the world from Trieste to the Near East, India, China and the Far East, as well as Brazil, the US and Northern Europe, becoming one of the world's biggest shipping companies. At that time, it faced major restructuring to recover losses incurred during the war, constantly recovering during the 1920s. By the end of the 1930s it was once again a major world shipping company.

Overall, between 1924 and 1925, the *Regia Marina* deployed in China the old protected cruiser *Calabria* (until May 9, 1924), later replaced by the scout cruiser *Libia* (from May 29, 1924), the gunboats *Sebastiano Caboto* and *Ermanno Carlotto*, and the armoured cruiser *San Giorgio*. Admiral Conz therefore had a considerable naval force at his disposal. Along with British, French, and American detachments, during unrest and factional clashes between 1925 and 1926 it was possible to protect foreign interests in Shanghai, Hankou, and other locations. Despite this, and despite strategic prospects, Rome wanted to be cautious. As Mussolini wrote to his minister in Beijing, Vittorio Cerruti, without violating the duty of international solidarity or jeopardizing military prestige, it would be desirable for Italian forces to be «employed to protect our exclusive interests».[37] In short, prestige and ambitions had to be balanced with available resources and above all it was crucial being careful in order not to be associated with British

35 For the various projects see a February 1925 report by Admiral Conz. AUSMM, Raccolta di base, b. 1694, Conz al Ministero della Marina, n. 25RR, Pechino, 18 febbraio 1925. Allegato 3.

36 Founded as *Österreichischer Lloyd* as an insurance company in 1833 and three years later it went into shipping. The company's name was changed to *Lloyd Triestino* in 1919. By the end of the 1930s *Lloyd Triestino* owned a fleet of 85 vessels with 17 services to Africa, Asia, and Australia.

37 DDI, Settima Serie, vol. IV, doc. 30.

imperialism, jeopardizing relations with the Chinese.[38] As examples of Italian activity in that period we can mention the dispatch of the *Caboto*, together with British forces, to ensure free navigation along the Pei Ho (Hai Ho) and to assist the Italian garrison of the Taku forts in March 1926, and the cruise that in August Admiral Conz made aboard the *Caboto* along the Yangtze.

The Northern Expedition began on July 9, 1926, and continued until December 1928. On September 23, 1926, the *Libya* arrived in Hankou to monitor the fighting around Wuchang—on the other side of the Yangtze—where other powers' forces were also deployed.[39] The *Regia Marina* was in Hankou to show the flag and monitor Italian-flagged steamships on the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, a task assigned to the *Carlotto*, which cruised along the river in November. There were then some changes in the organization of the *Regia Marina* in China, with the departure of the *San Giorgio* and Admiral Conz for the Red Sea, while Rear Admiral Luigi Miraglia assumed command aboard the *Libia*. The Italian naval forces in China now included the *Libia*, the destroyer *Muggia* (from February 7, 1927), the gunboats *Caboto* and *Carlotto*, the steamships *Africa* and *Venezia*, and the support ship *Alessandro Volta*.

After NRA's victories it became necessary to face the political consequences of KMT's rise. In this regard, Mussolini declared that Italy had no aggressive intentions in China and that he only wanted to protect national interests in collaboration with London on what he considered to be some of the major problems in world politics.[40] Italian foreign policy aimed at placing the country at the centre of major international issues as a leading player and on an equal footing with the major powers. In this regard, it is worth recalling that, on September 7, 1928, the ambassador to Tokyo, Pompeo Aloisi, had met with Prime Minister Tanaka Giichi, who mentioned possible agreements on China.[41] The Italians still had no clear answer for the Japanese. After a few weeks, Mussolini sent Aloisi instructions regarding the balance of power in the Pacific, stating that although Italian interests in China were less important than those of other powers, they should

38 DDI, Settima Serie, vol. IV, docs. 64, 78.

39 AUSMM, Raccolta di base, b. 1694, *R. Navi in Cina – Comando Superiore Navi in E.O. (R.N. Libia) – 1926*, Miraglia a Ministero della Marina, n. 1292/VIII, In navigazione, 29 ottobre 1926.

40 DDI, Settima Serie, vol. V, doc. 12.

41 DDI, Settima Serie, vol. VI, doc. 629.

not be considered negligible.[42] How to achieve this was a different story. As a matter of fact, Italy wanted to implement his bilateral relations with China. The subsequent stabilization of the Nationalist government would indeed have made it possible to increase Italian interests in the country but for the moment, what mattered it was just to be there; an aim well assured by the *Regia Marina*.

To conclude this brief analysis of the Italian naval strategy in the 1920s, let us return to the important changes that occurred during that decade. If in the first phase the strategic priority for Rome was undoubtedly securing the Adriatic, in a second moment, the main concern became the balance of forces with France and acquiring a power projection capacity, not necessarily limited to the Mediterranean, but as far as the Indian Ocean and China.[43] The cornerstone of Italian naval strategy was parity with France and the security of the Mediterranean. As a consequence of the Washington Naval Treaty, in the following years Italy scrapped many older vessels and began investing in modern, fast, and light units to enforce control of the Mediterranean and beyond. The strategic role of the *Regia Marina* remained essentially unchanged from the late liberal period to the early years of Fascism. Indeed, it became essential for the new regime to protect what had been achieved in Washington and, as already mentioned, to use the Navy to strengthen the country's image as a great power, especially in Chinese waters, where a constant internal struggle created and made necessary repeated, though usually limited, interventions by the great powers. Subsequent negotiations for the extension of the Washington Naval Treaty and the resulting industrial policies continued to unite strategic vision, diplomacy, and the role of the fleet, significantly influencing crucial decisions—always in competition with France—such as the type and size of ships. All this represented the true benchmark for the Italian fleet well into the 1930s.

42 DDI, Settima Serie, vol. VII, doc. 42.

43 On the *Regia Marina* and the Indian Ocean see F. De Ninno, I piani della Regia Marina per l'Oceano Indiano, 1925-1934, in *Naval History - La SISM ricorda Alberto Santoni (1936-2013)*, Società Italiana di Storia Militare, Quaderno 2014, pp. 541-562.

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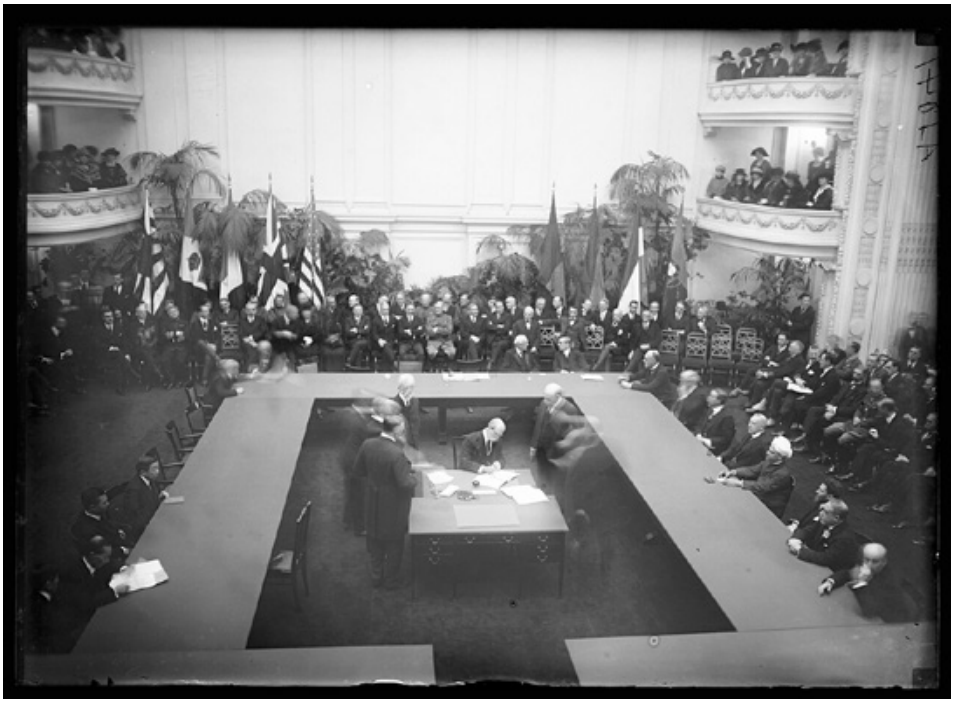

Photo shows the Wahington Disarmament Conference,
Nov. 12, 1921 or February 6, 1922

Europe and Space Governance: an analysis of the trilateral relation between ESA, EUSPA and the European Commission

by Dario Germani and Sirio Zolea

Abstract: This article explores the architecture of European space governance in the light of the European Space Shield, included in the Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030. To this end, the article also provides an analysis of the trilateral relation between ESA, EUSPA and European Commission, deriving its critical issues and offering prospects for overcoming them. Through such analysis, we want to highlight how space has become a central element of European security and how this evolution requires a more or less profound adaptation of the existing institutional, legal and industrial arrangements.

Keywords: European Union, Ffpa, Space Shield, Esa, Euspa, Dg Defis, Space

1 Introduction

In the last two decades, European space governance has undergone a profound transformation, moving from a predominantly intergovernmental structure, centered on the European Space Agency (ESA), to a hybrid model in which the European Union plays an increasingly incisive role in regulatory, financial and strategic terms. This evolution is part of a broader process of European integration in areas of high technological and strategic intensity, such as space, security and defense. The creation of the European Union Agency for the Space Programme (EUSPA) and the adoption of Regulation (EU) 2021/696[1] are key steps on this path.

1 Regulation (EU) 2021/696 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 April 2021 establishing the Union Space Programme and the European Union Agency for the Space Programme and repealing Regulations (EU) No 912/2010, (EU) No 1285/2013 and (EU) No 377/2014 and Decision No 541/2014/EU.

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In this context, the multilateral partnership between the European Commission, ESA and EUSPA – formalized in the Financial Framework Partnership Agreement (FFPA)[2] – is now the cornerstone on which institutional space cooperation in Europe rests. Such agreement follows the previous Framework Agreement between ESA and EUSPA, which came into force on 28 May 2004, much before the creation of EUSPA (in 2021). The present contribution will analyze the European and international scenario, within the increasingly rapid evolution of technologies and policies, seeking to explore the state of the art of the European approach to space, identify critical issues and offer perspectives for overcoming difficulties.

2 Space as a strategic domain of the European Union

The qualification of space as a strategic domain of the European Union represents one of the most important and structural developments of European action in the last two decades. It is not a simple terminological or programmatic adaptation, but reflects a profound transformation of the way in which space is conceived within the project of European integration. It can be affirmed that the progressive politicization of space is the result of a process of functional integration, through which initially technical and sectoral areas are gradually absorbed into the sphere of European public action, becoming the object of political direction, regulation and institutional conflict[3].

Historically, the European space approach has been mainly associated with scientific, technological and industrial purposes, embodied by the central role of the European Space Agency as an intergovernmental organization oriented towards the development of advanced capabilities and cooperation between states. However, starting from the 2000s, and with increasing intensity in the last decade, this approach has been progressively overcome. Space is now recognised as a critical infrastructure for the functioning of European societies, as well as a multiplier of economic, political and military power. Regarding this latter aspect,

2 Hereafter named FFPA: European Commission – European Space Agency – European Union Agency for the Space Programme, *Financial Framework Partnership Agreement (FFPA)*, Bruxelles–Paris–Prague, 2021.

3 Thomas Hoerber, Paul Stephenson, *European Space Policy. European Integration and the Final Frontier*, London–New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 1–30.

it is useful to note[4], in general, from a point of view of international law, that the concept of exploration and use of outer space for peaceful purposes, as affirmed by the Outer Space Treaty of 1967, has been accepted and applied by most states in the rather restrictive sense of 'non aggressive', not therefore of complete demilitarisation, according to the wording of the text of the Treaty which specifically requires full demilitarisation only of the celestial bodies. Countries and geopolitical blocs, as far as is known, have refrained from placing weapons of mass destruction in orbit, but this has not prevented them from developing and testing anti-satellite weapons and establishing specific armed corpses with space tasks with declared defence purposes, while military doctrines increasingly tend to contemplate and include the extra-atmospheric environment as well. Furthermore, artificial space objects serving partially or exclusively military purposes are quite common in today's armed conflicts.

Satellite systems for navigation, communication and Earth observation are the essential support of activities ranging from emergency management to mobility, from border security to the protection of critical infrastructures, up to military and intelligence operations. This growing structural dependence has made clear the vulnerability of space infrastructures, exposed to risks that include electromagnetic interference, cyber-attacks, the use of anti-satellite weapons and orbital congestion deriving from satellite traffic and the presence of space debris. In response to this context, the Union institutions have progressively adopted a lexicon and conceptual framework typical of the security and defence sectors. The Commission and the European Council have explicitly recognised space as an operational domain, placing it on an equal footing with land, sea, air and cyber domains, and permanently including it in the Union's security strategies, as highlighted by the European External Action Service[5] Strategic Compass[6], the EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence[7], the political guidelines of the cur-

4 See *amplius* Sirio Zolea, *Comparative Space Law. The Space Frontier from a Private Law Perspective*, Leiden–Boston, Brill-Nijhoff, 2025, p. 232, and the bibliographic references mentioned at that page; see also Diego Zannoni, «The Slow Atrophy of the Principle of the Peaceful Use of Outer Space», in *La comunità internazionale*, 2023, n. 4, pp. 657-685.

5 Hereafter named EEAS.

6 Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, 21 March 2022, 7371/22, particularly p. 13.

7 European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Euro-*

rent European Commission[8], and supported by the Draghi report on the future of European competitiveness[9], and, finally, by the recent proposal for a EU Space Act[10] prepared by the Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS, a department of the European Commission). In fact, despite the fact that the proposal, in order to preserve the competences of the member states, does not, in itself, apply to space objects that are exclusively used to enable defence or national security objectives, irrespective of the entity carrying out such space activities (recital n. 36), focuses on space-based data and space services for the reason that they provide invaluable contributions to a vast range of domains (internet connectivity, satellite television, navigation management and environmental monitoring, etc.) and they enable applications for both scientific purposes and security and defence operations (recital 2).

The ongoing evolution marks a crucial step: space is no longer just a means of supporting other policies but becomes itself an object of protection, strategic planning and political investment. In this context, the concept of strategic autonomy in space assumes central importance. Authors stress that European autonomy should not be understood in terms of self-sufficiency or isolation, but as the abil-

pean Union Space Strategy for Security and Defence, JOIN(2023) 9 final. See in particular p. 1: "Space is critical for the strategic autonomy of the EU and its Member States. The functioning of economies, citizens and public policies increasingly relies on space-related services and data, including those in the field of security and defence. Space also contributes to achieving the EU's political agenda, enabling the digital and green transitions, and enhancing its resilience. […] Additional measures are needed to defend the EU's strategic interests and to deter hostile activities in and from space. While privileging international cooperation and promoting responsible behaviours in space, the EU will also strengthen its strategic posture and autonomy in the space domain. It will make space systems and services more resilient, respond to any hostile activities or threats and further develop space-enabled services for security and defence".

8 See Ursula Von Der Layen, *Europe's Choice: political guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029*, 18 July 2024, p. 14: "We will continue to extend our cooperation with NATO to cover all threats, including new dangers linked to cyber, hybrid or space, and to strengthen our transatlantic partnership. […] We will build up the European Defence Fund, investing in high-end defence capabilities in critical areas such as naval, ground, air combat, space-based early warning and cyber".

9 Mario Draghi, Report *The Future of European Competitiveness. Part B: In-depth analysis and recommendations*, September 2024, pp. 172-186.

10 Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the Safety, Resilience and Sustainability of Space Activities in the Union, 25 June 2025, COM (2025) 335 final.

ity to ensure operational continuity, infrastructure resilience and political control over essential space functions. Strategic autonomy is therefore configured as a relational and functional notion, which presupposes the possibility of choosing and acting in a credible way within a competitive and interdependent international context[11].

Applied to the space sector, this approach makes it possible to understand the trajectory followed by the European Union. Rather than trying to replace entirely the European Space Agency – an intergovernmental organisation, created in 1975, before the EU, which also includes non-EU countries such as Switzerland and the United Kingdom – the Union has chosen to progressively strengthen its institutional role through its own legal, financial and regulatory instruments, while maintaining the added value of intergovernmental cooperation. The creation of fully European programmes such as Galileo and Copernicus, financed by the EU budget and governed by EU law, was already an initial concrete manifestation of this strategy. At the same time, the use of ESA as the main technical-industrial player highlights the desire to avoid duplication and preserve consolidated skills.

The increasing politicization of the European approach to space is therefore located at the crossroads of two apparently opposing dynamics: on the one hand, the deepening of European integration and the growing centrality of the Union's institutions; on the other hand, the persistence of a multi-level and hybrid governance model, in which international organizations, Member States and EU agencies coexist and cooperate. In this regard, it has been observed that this particular architecture reflects a specificity of European integration in space, characterized by a strong interdependence between both technical and political environments, with a continuous negotiation of competences[12].

Ultimately, the qualification of space as a strategic domain does not only represent a change in political priorities, but marks a structural transformation of European governance. It lays the foundations for a growing integration between space, security and defense policies, while raising crucial questions about the

11 Jan Wouters, Rik Hansen, Strategic Autonomy in EU Space Policy: A Conceptual and Practical Exploration, in Cenan Al-Ekabi(ed.), *European Autonomy in Space*, Cham, Springer, 2015, p. 49.

12 Thomas Hoerber, Paul Stephenson, *European Space Policy. European Integration and the Final Frontier*, London–New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 143–176.

role of the institutions, the distribution of competences and the Union's ability to translate strategic ambition into coherent governance frameworks. It is within this framework that the polycentric partnership between the European Commission, ESA and EUSPA must be analyzed, as a central instrument through which the Union seeks to reconcile strategic autonomy, multilateral cooperation and institutional complexity.

3 European Space Power and Multi-Level Governance

The analysis of European space power is an essential interpretative key to understanding the evolution of the Union's governance in this area and, in particular, the role played by the complex partnership between the European Commission, ESA and now (since its creation) EUSPA. Placing this partnership within a long-term trajectory makes it possible to go beyond a merely institutional or procedural reading, to grasp instead its strategic and systemic dimension.

Space power has been defined as

> the ability to transform space resources into political, economic and strategic influence[13].

This definition is particularly relevant in the case of the European Union, whose power is, in general, not based on classical state sovereignty, but on a set of shared competences, regulatory instruments and operational capacities distributed among several levels of government. European space power is therefore intrinsically derived and relational: it emerges from the interaction between Member States, Union institutions and intergovernmental actors, rather than from a unitary decision-making centre.

In this perspective, the debate on space power allows us to shift the focus from the mere availability of technological capabilities to their integration into a coherent political and regulatory framework. As authors point out, the presence of satellites, access to space, or the availability of data are not in themselves sufficient elements to generate power; what matters is the ability to govern these resources, guide their use and translate them into strategic advantages[14]. This ob-

13 Marco Aliberti, Matteo Cappella, Tomas Hrozensky, *Measuring Space Power. A Theoretical and Empirical Investigation in Europe*, Cham, Springer, 2019, p. 6.

14 Ibid., pp. 5–27.

servation applies as much to the outer space sector as, in parallel, it does to the digital sector, which the EU has also been striving to regulate in recent years by limiting the systematic extraction of valuable resources (data) by the most powerful digital powers (the United States and China)[15]. In the space field, this process of conversion into strategic advantages has been (embryionically) made possible through the progressive Europeanisation of the major space programmes.

The Galileo, Copernicus, EGNOS, GOVSATCOM and IRIS² programmes are emblematic examples of how the EU has sought to convert technical capabilities into instruments of political and economic influence. Galileo, in particular, is a paradigmatic case: conceived as a civilian alternative, under European control, to existing military navigation systems, it strengthens the Union's decision-making autonomy in critical areas such as transport, security and crisis management. Similarly, Copernicus provides essential data for environmental, climate and security policies, helping to strengthen the EU's regulatory and regulatory projection at the global level.

However, as has been pointed out, the construction of European space power takes place within an inherently multi-level and fragmented governance with

> […] diverse configurations and rules under which space programmes are developed in Europe [that] can be seen as barriers when addressing key challenges: maintaining independent access to space; increasing efficiencies by developing synergies between the civil and defence space programmes; securing space infrastructures; ensuring the uptake of space data and services; or adopting a long-term vision and financial commitments to increase private investment in the sector[16].

Space competences are distributed between Member States, EU institutions and intergovernmental organizations, resulting in a system in which national sovereignty, supranational integration, and intergovernmental cooperation coexist and overlap. This configuration reflects a structural feature of European integration, but in the space sector it is particularly important.

In this set-up, ESA maintains a central role in the development, design and procurement of space systems. As an international organization independent of

15 See.Vincenzo Zeno-Zencovich, «Data Protection(ism)», *Media Laws*, 2022, n. 2.

16 Vincent Reillon, *European Space Policy: Historical Perspective, Specific Aspects and Key Challenges*, In-Depth Analysis PE 595.917, European Parliamentary Research Service, European Parliament, Jan. 2017, p. 34.

the EU, it embodies a logic of intergovernmental cooperation based on consensus between states and the enhancement of national industrial skills, through the principle of geographical return[17]. At the same time, the European Union, through the Commission and, increasingly, through EUSPA, tries to exercise increasing control over the operational phases, the security of systems and the use of space services. This progressive extension of the Union's role responds to its will to ensure strategic coherence, political accountability and alignment with its general priorities.

However, the coexistence of these levels of governance generates structural tensions. On the one hand, it makes it possible to combine consolidated technical expertise and European political legitimacy; on the other hand, it risks producing overlapping competences, political interferences, decision-making ambiguities and procedural slowdowns. There is a need, for the effectiveness of European space power, to coordinate all the levels, avoiding institutional fragmentation resulting in strategic dispersion[18].

The ESA-EUSPA-Commission inter-institutional partnership is therefore part of a mediation mechanism between different logics of power and governance. It represents the Union's attempt to govern its space power without resorting to complete centralization – however, the approval of the proposal for a EU Space Act would imply a relevant step towards centralization – but through instruments of coordination and functional integration. In this sense, multilevel governance not only is a structural constraint, but might also be a potential asset, provided that it is accompanied by a clear strategic vision and institutional mechanisms capable of translating complexity into capacity for action.

17 See Maxime Nicholas, Sarah Lieberman, *Public-Private Partnerships and Foreign Direct Investment for Space*, in S. Lieberman *et alii* (eds.), *The Commercialisation of Space: Politics, Economics and Ethic*s, London-New York, Routledge, 2023, p. 119: "ESA has an obligation to respect *juste-retour*, which means that ESA's member states must receive a return on their annual contributions. This constraint is then further imposed on tendered private companies, who must make investment or partnership choices based on the return on investment rather than based on the principle of competitive advantage and neo- liberal market freedom. Indeed, when a private company responds to a call for tenders and is accepted, it becomes a prime company and must then make a series of choices regarding partner companies based on skills, but also according to the geographical constraints of *juste-retour*".

18 Marco Aliberti, Matteo Cappella, Tomas Hrozensky, *Measuring Space Power. A Theoretical and Empirical Investigation in Europe*, Cham, Springer, 2019, p. 89.

This examination of European space power shows that multi-level governance is both the foundation and the main challenge of the Union's action in space. The success of European programmes and the EU's credibility as a global space player depend not only on the availability of technological resources, but on the ability to integrate these resources into a coherent governance system, in which the partnership between the Commission, ESA and EUSPA can play a central role. This perspective makes it possible to understand why institutional and legal issues are not ancillary, but constitutive of European space power itself. Furthermore, the reliance on third parties with respect to the Union and, in particular, to international organizations whose members may differ, in number and identification, with EU member states, can pose issues of access to information and technologies considered critical that might potentially raise doubts with respect to the Union's objectives of non-technological dependence as part of the effort of strategic autonomy[19].

4 ESA–EUSPA–Commission trilateral coordination and the Framework Agreement

The multi-stakeholder partnership between the European Commission, the European Space Agency (ESA) and the European Union Agency for the Space Programme (EUSPA) is now the focal point of the Union's space governance. This partnership is not limited to technical or administrative cooperation, but is expected to constitute a genuine mechanism for institutional integration, through which the European Union exercises increasing influence on a sector historically dominated by intergovernmental logic. The FFPA, an evolution of the 2004 Framework Agreement, adopted in 2021 and in force until 2027, constitutes its legal and operational implementation, serving as a key instrument for the realization of the EU Space Programme under the Multiannual Financial Framework.

From the point of view of EU law, the FFPA is an atypical instrument, located

19 See European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: European Union Space Strategy for Security and Defence*, 10 Mars 2023, JOIN(2023) 9 final, par. 2.2: "To increase the resilience of space infrastructure and ensure security of supply, the EU will strengthen its technological sovereignty by reducing strategic dependencies on third countries and boosting the resilience of critical industrial value chains".

in a border area between an administrative agreement and an institutional integration mechanism. It is not comparable to an EU legislative act or to an international agreement in the strict sense, but operates as a flexible legal framework capable of regulating complex relationships between entities with different legal status. This peculiarity reflects a structural feature of the Union's action in an area where it does not have exclusive competence, but must operate through forms of coordination and advanced cooperation. In fact, according to Article 189 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU):

"1. To promote scientific and technical progress, industrial competitiveness and the implementation of its policies, the Union shall draw up a European space policy. To this end, it may promote joint initiatives, support research and technological development and coordinate the efforts needed for the exploration and exploitation of space.

2. To contribute to attaining the objectives referred to in paragraph 1, the European Parliament and the Council, acting in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure, shall establish the necessary measures, which may take the form of a European space programme, excluding any harmonisation of the laws and regulations of the Member States.

3. The Union shall establish any appropriate relations with the European Space Agency."

The historical moment in which the FFPA is inserted is not secondary: its approval dates back to 2021, a temporal junction between the birth of the EUSPA (May 2021)[20], the pandemic crisis (which ended in the EU states at different times, including Italy for the longest emergency period, which ended in March 2022) and the rekindling of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict (which reopened in February 2022)[21]. A watershed, therefore, between a European need to restart and allocate EU funds and budgets to key sectors (e.g. industry, agriculture, consumption efficiency) and a war at the eastern gates of the EU. The first factor meant that the choice to rely on a third party such as ESA went in the direction of guaranteeing the quality and efficiency standards of space programs while shifting

20 Regulation 2021/696 of 28 April 2021.

21 See European Council, European Council Conclusions on Ukraine, 24 February 2022; cf. Alessandro Somma, «L'Unione Europea nel sistema di guerra: il conflitto russo-ucraino e le evoluzioni del capitalismo», *Costituzionalismo.it*, 2025, n. 2, pp. 18-54.

their governance; the second meant that the entire European architecture should be rethought, even very quickly, for an age of geopolitical tensions, giving greater importance to dual-use technologies, first and foremost space technologies.

It has been observed that the space sector is emblematic of the phenomenon of progressive penetration of European law into areas traditionally outside its sphere of competence[22]. In this perspective, the FFPA represents an instrument through which the EU is able to exercise substantial control over space programmes formally implemented by a separate international organization such as ESA. This control is not so much manifested through the direct imposition of binding rules, but through the definition of the financial, procedural and operational conditions that guide the action of the partners: thus, preferring governance instruments over government instruments[23].

The content of the Framework Agreement reflects this integrative function. The agreement regulates the financial flows between the Union budget and the entities entrusted with the implementation of the programmes, setting out principles of financial management, reporting and control. At the same time, it defines operational responsibilities and provides the legal basis for the conclusion of specific contribution agreements related to individual space programmes. In this way, the FFPA fits fully into the logic of the Multiannual Financial Framework, acting as a bridge between EU budgetary planning and the concrete implementation of space policies.

From a functional point of view, the multilateral partnership is based on a division of tasks that reflects the complementarity between the different actors involved. The European Commission has a role of strategic guidance, political oversight and budgetary responsibility, in line with its role as guardian of the general interest of the Union. ESA retains responsibility for the design, development and acquisition of space systems, leveraging its consolidated technical and industrial experience. Finally, EUSPA plays a central role in the operational management of services, in the security and accreditation of systems, as well as

22 Mahulena Hofmann, *Penetration of Union Law into the Space Sector*, in D. Petrlík *et alii* (dir.), *Évolution des rapports entre les ordres juridiques de l'Union Européenne, international et nationaux*, Bruxelles, Bruylant, 2020, pp. 211–230.

23 On the issues of hard law and soft law, see Alessandro Somma (ed.), *Soft Law e Hard Law nelle società postmoderne*, Torino, Giappichelli, 2009.

in supporting market uptake and user adoption.

This division of tasks, however, does not imply a rigid separation of powers. On the contrary, as authors point out, the model outlined by the FFPA gives rise to a composite and hybrid governance, in which the functions of the different actors are interdependent[24]. Union law does not replace the intergovernmental legal order embodied by ESA, but is grafted onto it, creating a multi-level system in which rules, procedures and practices overlap and influence each other.

In this context, the FFPA can be interpreted as a mechanism of functional integration between different legal orders. It allows the Union to guide the action of an intergovernmental organization without formally amending its statute, through enhanced soft law instruments and financial conditionality. At the same time, it allows ESA to continue to operate as a technical reference actor, preserving its operational autonomy and the legitimacy deriving from the participation of the Member States, mostly also members of the EU.

The ESA–EUSPA–Commission multilateral partnership therefore reflects a pragmatic institutional solution, which responds to the need to reconcile the Union's ambition to play a strategic role in space with the legal and political constraints deriving from the Treaties. However, this solution is not without tension. The growing importance of programs with strong security and dual content (to be understood as civilian and military at the same time) tests the balance outlined by the FFPA, raising questions about the clarity of responsibilities, accountability and the ability to adapt the governance model.

More specifically, according to similar worldwide regulations and current European landscape, it is possible to hypothesize four macro areas of attention: general obligations of the ESA and regulatory hierarchy; protection of the EU's financial interests and limits of control; foreground intellectual property; cross-waiver of liability.

24 Clément Evroux, Aleksandra Heflich, Jérôme Leon Saulnier, *Towards EU Leadership in the Space Sector Through Open Strategic Autonomy*. European Parliamentary Research Service, European Parliament, Jan. 2023, p. 79.

4.1 ESA general obligations and the problem of the regulatory hierarchy

As an autonomous international organisation, ESA is primarily bound by its own Convention and Financial Regulations, while EU law is not directly applicable to it. This leads to ambiguity as to the degree of binding nature of EU rules, which risks leading to conflicts of interpretation, especially in cases where ESA and EU rules diverge significantly (e.g., principle of geographical return).

A similar issue has been widely discussed in legal literature with reference to the relationship between the European Commission and international organisations in charge of implementing EU funds, such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development or some United Nations agencies. In such cases, practice has shown how the absence of a functional override clause can weaken the effectiveness of Union control[25].

In the light of these experiences, a coherent legal solution would be to introduce, at the level of FFPA or contribution agreements, a functional override clause, under which, for activities fully funded by the Union, EU rules prevail in the event of a conflict of interpretation. Such a solution would not imply an institutional subordination of the ESA, but would constitute a contractual condition linked to the use of European public funds. This could be accompanied by the adoption of more detailed implementing arrangements, similar to binding soft law instruments, on the model of those used in Horizon Europe programmes with external executive bodies[26].

In addition, according to the Framework Agreement between ESA and EUSPA[27], of 2004, the EU is not bound to apply the rule of geographical distribution (enshrined in Art. IV of Annex V to the ESA Convention), which characterizes the intergovernmental logic underlying the European Space Agency, but not the single market logic underlying the European Union.

25 See Paul Craig, *EU Administrative Law*, Part II Chapter IV, 4th ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 112-113.

26 European Commission, *Horizon Europe Model Grant Agreement*, 2021, artt. 6–8; 22–24.

27 European Commission – European Space Agency, *Framework Agreement between the European Community and the European Space Agency,* OJ L 261, 6 August 2004, art. 5, par. 3.

4.2 The protection of the financial interests of the Union and the limits of control

The main criticality of this point lies in the friction with the jurisdictional and administrative immunities of the ESA, expressly recognized by the Convention establishing the Agency and its associated Protocol on Privileges and Immunities (Art. XV of the Convention and its Annex I). In the absence of a detailed procedure for managing conflicts between EU audit powers and ESA internal rules, the risk is that control will be reduced to an essentially cooperative tool, devoid of real coercive mechanisms.

A similar problem has been addressed in relations between the European Union and the European Investment Bank, where the effectiveness of controls is guaranteed not by the erosion of immunities, but by their functional recalibration with respect to the obligations deriving from EU funding[28].

Applying this logic to the EU-ESA relationship, a viable solution might be to explicitly clarify that Union controls do not affect the institutional immunities of the ESA but constitute an essential contractual condition for access to funds. In parallel, the establishment of an EU-ESA joint audit board, with functions of prevention and technical resolution of conflicts, would make it possible to manage critical issues before they take on a legal-institutional dimension, strengthening mutual trust and the efficiency of the system.

4.3 Assets ownership and intellectual property rights

Whitin the Framework Agreement between Commission and ESA, the ownership of tangible and intangible assets developed in the context of the activities entrusted to the ESA is regulated, providing that, in principle, such assets belong to the Union, although they may be used and operationally managed by the ESA. The provision aims to ensure that European public investment translates into effective Union control over infrastructure, data and technological results produced.

28 European Investment Bank, *Statute and Other Treaty Provisions*. Consolidated version, 1 Mar. 2020, European Investment Bank, pp. 40–41: "The European Investment Bank enjoys privileges and immunities as laid down in Protocol No. 7 on the Privileges and Immunities of the European Union, which apply insofar as necessary for the performance of the Bank's tasks and are tied to its statutory obligations".

A significant critical issue concerns the ownership of derived rights, in particular the so-called foreground intellectual property. A clear distinction between legal ownership and exploitation rights appears fundamental, in order to avoid risks of conflicts with non-EU ESA Member States and with private industrial operators involved in the programmes through sub-licenses and sub-contracting functions. Doctrine has repeatedly pointed out how such ambiguities can weaken European strategic autonomy, especially in sensitive technological sectors[29].

A useful term of comparison is offered by the intellectual property management models developed under Horizon Europe, where ownership of the results remains with the Union or the beneficiaries but is accompanied by standardized, irrevocable and free licenses for public use[30]. The application of a model similar to FFPA, based on an explicit distinction between legal ownership of the Union and the operational exploitation rights of the ESA, could help to reduce legal uncertainty and prevent future conflicts.

4.4 Liability regime and cross-waiver of liability

In trans-national practice, it is usual to find, in space contracts, exculpatory reciprocal clauses aiming to impose the risk of first-party damage on the party sustaining it. Such clauses aim to limit costs and the need for additional liability insurance, in this way restricting launch costs. The presence of waivers of liability is to be combined with a wisely designed content of the first-party insurance policies of the launch customers, often required by the launching contracts. Cross-waiver clauses were originally conceived in the United States, when NASA, according to the financial interest of the government, imposed them to the owners of payloads launched by it, and – in spite of having being qualified by some legal scholars as a provisional overprotecting measure just adapted for an immature phase of developing private launch industry – they soon spread as es-

29 Armin Steinbach, «The EU's Turn to 'Strategic Autonomy': Leeway for Policy Action and Points of Conflict», *European Journal of International Law*, 2023, vol. 34, n. 4, p. 999.

30 European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency, *Your Guide to Intellectual Property Management in Horizon Europe*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, especially "IP rules" and "Access rights to background and results" sections.

tablished standard clauses in space contracts, not only in the United States[31]. For example, in the general clauses and conditions for ESA contracts, Clause 18 on damage to staff and goods provides specific provisions on inter- party cross-waivers of liability[32].

In a cross-waiver of liability mechanism architecture between the European Union, ESA, their Member States and Contracting Parties, providing mutual waiver of claims for compensation for damage could guarantee sustainability for activities carried out under space programmes. Liability waiver clauses respond to the need to reduce financial risk and encourage cooperation in projects with high technological complexity. However, this mechanism could also give rise to uncertainties and conflicts between rules of strict liability towards third parties, governed under international law by the 1972 Space Liability Convention (to which the ESA but not the EU is a party), and the liability of the European Union, under Article 340 TFEU. Issues might arise concerning coverage for damage caused by EU programs (such as Galileo) managed by the ESA, especially in the absence of EU participation in the 1972 Convention. This raises the prospect of an uncertain mechanism for sharing certain potential economic burdens between the EU and the ESA, which could violate the Union's budgetary principles or impose inappropriate costs on the ESA. Scholars have more generally shown that waiver of liability clauses, in certain cases and contexts, if applied indiscriminately, may result in a substantial avoidance of public liability[33].

31 Sirio Zolea, *Comparative Space Law. The Space Frontier from a Private Law Perspective*, Leiden–Boston, Brill-Nijhoff, 2025, pp. 207-208; see also the bibliography mentioned there.

32 ESA/ REG/ 002, rev. 4, 5 July 2024. See in particular par. 18.1, on Inter-party cross-waiver of liability: "The Parties shall have no claim and no recourse against each other and against the other Party's Sub-contractors, including the Agency's consultants and/or agents involved in the execution of the Contract:

- for injuries to its employees (staff), including death, sustained by virtue of their involvement in the execution of the Contract.
- for damages to goods owned by the Party (excluding items covered by clauses 11 and 12 above and Deliverable(s)), if the occurred damage arises from the execution of the Contract".

33 Stephan Hobe, *Space Law*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2022, p. 134.

5 *Militarisation, security logic and the limits of liability governance in EU space law*

The progressive militarisation of European space policy constitutes an essential background for understanding the growing tension between operational cooperation mechanisms – such as the FFPA cross-waiver of liability – and the requirements of public accountability and compliance with international space law. As highlighted in recent literature, the European Union's space policy has increasingly shifted from a predominantly civilian and market-oriented approach towards a security-driven paradigm, in which space infrastructures are conceived as strategic assets exposed to hostile acts, hybrid threats and geopolitical competition. Authors underline how this evolution has led to a gradual blurring of the traditional distinction between civilian and military uses of space, fostering a governance model in which security and defence considerations permeate regulatory, industrial and financial instruments of the Union. In this context, legal tools originally designed to facilitate cooperation and risk-sharing – such as liability waivers and contractual immunities – risk becoming mechanisms of excessive de-responsibilisation, particularly when applied to programmes with a pronounced strategic and defensive dimension[34].

The proposal for a EU Space Act, prepared by DG DEFIS within the European Commission, can be read against this background. Its emphasis on resilience, security and sustainability of space activities reflects the consolidation of space as an operational domain closely connected to the Common Security and Defence Policy[35]. At the same time, this development reinforces the need to ensure that EU contractual practices, remain compatible with the international space liability regime – established by the 1972 Liability Convention and comprising soft law instruments as well – and with the concept of exploration and use of outer space only for peaceful purposes, to the extent that it is generally accepted and applied in international practice. All this applies, also and particularly, in scenarios in-

34 Frank Slijper, *Europe's "Defensive Militarisation" of Space,* in Thomas Hoerber, Iraklis, Oikonomou (eds.), *The Militarization of European Space Policy*, London–New York, Routledge, 2023, pp. 11–29; see also Chiara Cellerino, «EU Space Policy and Strategic Autonomy: Tackling Legal complexities in the Enhancement of the 'Security and Defence Dimension of the Union in Space'», *European Papers*, 2023, vol. 8, n. 2, pp. 487-501.

35 Alberto Miglio *et alii*, *Space and Defence: a Hybridisation of EU Space Policy and CSDP*, research paper of the Centro Studi sul Federalismo, December 2024, pp. 12-15.

volving serious violations, gross negligence or, in general, any damage caused in the context of security-related operations.

6 The proposal for a European space act: what might change?

It has already been observed in par. 2 how the proposal for a EU space act does not apply to space objects that are exclusively used for defence, but the focus of the text on space-based data and space services is grounded on their importance for a vast range of domains and the fact that they enable applications for both scientific purposes and security and defence operations. Its legal ground is not Article 189 TFEU, excluding any harmonization of legal provisions, but – not without uncertainties and ambiguities regarding the consistency of the instrument with the objectives of the proposal[36] – its Article 114, on measures for the approximation of the provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in member states which have as their object the establishment and functioning of the internal market. In essence, the harmonization of broad aspects of national space legislation, structured around the key words of resilience, security and sustainability of space activities, seems to prevail over any aspect of harmonization of the European common market[37]. At a time of internal and external political tensions, this proposal can be interpreted as an attempt to assert the Union's sovereignty, both internally, even at the cost of forcing the settlement crystallised in the TFEU, and externally, in an attempt to reaffirm the paradigm of the "Brussels effect", which, after initial success, seems to be suffering from a certain backwardness of European industry in sectors undergoing rapid technological development (first of all, digital industry) and the complication of transatlantic trade relations.

As concerns relations with ESA, the proposal, in its article 108, defers their adaptation to a future (new) agreement in light of the innovations in the legal regime of space activities in the EU that the proposal, if approved, would entail. It is stated there that

36 See Karolina Muti *et alii*, «The Proposal for an EU Space Act: an Italian Perspective», *Documenti IAI*, 2025, vol. 13, n. 25, pp. 3-4.

37 Sergio Marchisio, «Le novità del 25 giugno 2025: la Legge n. 89 sull'economia dello spazio e la proposta di Space Act dell'Unione europea», *Federalismi.it*, 2025, n. 20, p. XXVIII.

> 1.The Union shall endeavour to conclude an agreement with the European Space Agency (ESA) to advance the objectives pursued by this Regulation and to strengthen the cooperation between the Union and ESA.
>
> 2.The agreement referred to in paragraph 1 shall set forth the conditions for the implementation by ESA of the requirements laid down in Title IV[38], and the practical and operational arrangements for ensuring the control of the application of such requirements, and in particular:
>
> (a) where ESA is not the operator of the Union-owned assets, the arrangements needed for ESA to carry out the technical assessment allowing the Commission to assess the compliance of the Union space operator of Union-owned space assets, with the requirements laid down in the Regulation, with a view to issuing the authorisation and carrying out the ongoing supervision referred to in Article 11(1), first subparagraph;
>
> (b) where Union-owned assets are either operated or owned by ESA, the needed arrangements and conditions for allowing the technical assessment activities and the tasks of authorisation and supervision;
>
> (c) any support which may be provided by ESA regarding the technical specifications needed for standardisation, under the supervision of the Commission, while taking into account the existing international technical standards for space activities.
>
> 3.ESA may provide support to Member States by carrying out technical assessments, pursuant to Article 8(1), point (b).
>
> The agreement referred to in paragraph 1 shall set out the conditions for ESA to be recognised as a qualified technical body for space activities.
>
> 4.Upon request by the Commission, ESA may attend as observer or member, any relevant advisory group of technical nature that may be established under this Regulation.

Commentators observe that the proposal does not address the structural fragmentation of European space governance, even though it reinforces the Commission's prerogatives in the control and coordination of space activities. In fact, similarly to the defence sector, space governance – which encompasses security, defence and dual-use and military research – remains characterised by a multiplicity of decision-making centres at the EU level, alongside a delicate balance between the EU and ESA[39]. In this perspective,

38 Title IV contains "Technical Rules".

39 Karolina Muti *et alii*, «The Proposal for an EU Space Act: an Italian Perspective», *Documenti IAI*, 2025, vol. 13, n. 25, pp. 4-5.

> In its current form, the Space Act appears to consolidate EUSPA's role, granting it a central role in close coordination with and in support of the European Commission, while ESA remains largely a technical, technological and operational arm, without a substantive policymaking role. This emerges from the Regulation's wording (Article 108) [40].

7 The European Space Shield and new institutional tensions

The European Space Shield represents one of the most significant test beds for the institutional and legal set-up of European space governance. It is part of a historical phase characterised by a growing interconnection between the European Union's space, security and defence policy, marking a further step in the process of politicisation of space, already started in previous years. As has been recently highlighted, the evolution of the EU's space policy is increasingly marked by a logic of hybridization with the Common Security and Defence Policy, giving rise to a model in which civilian and military instruments tend to overlap[41].

Included in the broader framework of the Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030, the European Space Shield initiative aims to strengthen the resilience and protection of European space infrastructures, now considered essential elements of the Union's collective security[42]. Within the Rearm Europe agenda (whose whole estimated value is of eight hundred billion euros, the European Space Shield is not configured as a single program or system, but as a coordinated set of capabilities ranging from secure satellite communication to the surveillance and tracking of space objects, up to the development of broader space domain awareness.

> The initiative aims to promote interoperable national defence capabilities with a particular focus on equipment enabled by Galileo, space domain awareness, the mitigation of jamming and spoofing activities, and in orbit operations and related services. These are areas where Europe currently faces recognised strategic shortfalls and dependencies. The objective is to

40 Karolina Muti *et alii*, «The Proposal for an EU Space Act: an Italian Perspective», *Documenti IAI*, 2025, vol. 13, n. 25, p. 5.

41 Alberto Miglio *et alii*, *Space and Defence: a Hybridisation of EU Space Policy and CSDP*, research paper of the Centro Studi sul Federalismo, December 2024, p. 44.

42 European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council*: *Preserving Peace - Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030*, 16 October 2025, JOIN(2025) 27 final, p. 8.

> establish and safeguard a coherent European system of space capabilities that can serve defence purposes and that builds on both EU space systems and existing national capacities[43].

This integrated approach reflects the view that security in space can no longer be guaranteed through sectoral interventions, but requires a systemic and transversal vision.

From a political point of view, the European Space Shield represents a turning point in the integration between space policy and defence. It contributes to redefining the role of space as an enabling infrastructure not only for the Union's civilian policies, but also for its defence and security ambitions. In this sense, the initiative further strengthens the strategic dimension of the European space programmes, accentuating their dual character and their link with the EU's strategic autonomy objectives.

However, it is precisely this evolution that accentuates the latent tensions within the European space governance system. As emerges from the Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030[44], the expansion of initiatives with a strong security content may tend to put pressure on the existing institutional structure, based on a functional distinction between systems development, operational management and political control in a tripartite perspective. In civilian and defensive dual-use programmes, this distinction is increasingly difficult to maintain. Security needs directly influence the design and development phases, while technical choices have immediate implications for the operational management and strategic use of systems.

In this context, the multilateral partnership between the European Commission, ESA and EUSPA is called upon to deal with increasing complexity. ESA, traditionally oriented towards technical and industrial development, is involved in programmes in which safety considerations take on a decisive weight from the early stages. EUSPA, for its part, has an increasingly expanded role in the fields of safety, accreditation and service management, operating in a context in which

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43 European Parliament, *European Space Shield – Action Plan. Legislative Train Schedule,* 20 Nov. 2025, p. 1.

44 European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council*: *Preserving Peace - Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030*, 16 October 2025, JOIN(2025) 27 final.

the lines of demarcation with the competences of ESA and the Commission become less clear.

Finally, the European Commission is tending and trying to exercise more incisive political coordination, while formally operating within the limits of the competences conferred by the Treaties in the field of defense. The European Space Shield thus highlights a structural tension between the will to strengthen the effectiveness and speed of European action in space and the wish to preserve a complex institutional balance. On the one hand, growing geopolitical competition and the perception of new threats require rapid, integrated and coherent responses. On the other hand, the multi-level nature of European space governance implies complex decision-making processes, which may appear ill-suited to a rapidly changing security environment. In other words, the hybridization between space policy and the Common Security and Defense Policy raises not only operational questions, but also legal and political issues[45].

In particular, the question of the legitimacy and accountability of decisions on space security emerges, as well as that of the compatibility between EU civilian instruments and defense objectives, which remain largely the responsibility of the Member States.

The European Space Shield, in this sense, acts as a catalyst for pre-existing tensions, making the ambiguities and overlaps of the current governance structure more visible. Looking ahead, the initiative can be interpreted both as a stressor for the multilateral partnership and as an opportunity for evolution. In fact, it requires a reflection on the ability of existing instruments – first and foremost the FFPA – to adapt to programs characterized by a high security content. The challenge is to ensure that the integration between space and defense does not result in further fragmentation of competences but rather contributes to strengthening the strategic coherence of European action. Even more importantly, the more intrinsically political and strategic issues, such as defense policies, are involved, the less advisable it is to delegate decision-making processes to purely technocratic bodies, which lack the democratic legitimacy deriving from a *demos*, the sole possible safeguard against automatisms that may lead peoples to the catastrophe of war without even full awareness of it. This should therefore imply

45 See Alberto Miglio *et alii*, *Space and Defence: a Hybridisation of EU Space Policy and CSDP*, research paper of the Centro Studi sul Federalismo, December 2024, pp. 45–46.

certain insurmountable limits to what democratic countries can delegate, without retaining adequate control mechanisms, to supranational or intergovernmental bodies that, by their very nature, lack or are deficient in democratic legitimacy.

8 Conclusions

In conclusion, it is possible to derive factors contributing to fragility of the European *status quo* in the space sector: the most noticeable is the functional overlap between practical expertise (research and development, etc.) of ESA and supervision of space programs as services of EUSPA, which testifies and confirms how European politics is generally characterized by permanent tension between cooperation and institutional competition[46]. This tension is reflected both in the relationship between bodies that differ in political and legal legitimacy, such as ESA, EU, EUSPA and the Commission, and in the relations between the EU member states themselves, as well as between ESA member states which are and which are not (e.g. Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) EU member states. In this perspective, it can be observed how European institutional fragmentation could negatively affect the competitiveness of the space sector, slowing down decision-making processes and limiting the ability to effectively support space commercialization and industrial innovation[47]. There is also an economic-strategic challenge, concerning the effective European capacity to support the ongoing process of commercialization of space. In fact, the European model, while offering economic and humanitarian benefits, suffers from a slower decision-making speed than others, such as the United States[48]. Unlike the latter, characterized by a strong integration between public objectives and market dynamics, the European system tends to distribute skills and responsibilities among a plurality of actors, with a risk of strategic dispersion, while the private space ecosystem is not yet fully developed and exploited.

Overcoming the critical issues identified does not necessarily require a radical

46 See the considerations of Bohumil Doboš, *Geopolitics of the Outer Space. A European Perspective*, Cham, Springer, 2019, in particular pp. 83-105.

47 Matthea Brandenburg, *American and European Space Commercialisation. Providing Economic and Humanitarian Benefits while Complementing State Objectives*, in S. Lieberman *et alii* (eds.), *The Commercialisation of Space: Politics, Economics and Ethics*, New York, Routledge, 2023, pp. 33–55.

48 Ibid.

reform of the European institutional architecture of space, but rather its progressive adaptation. In particular, the Financial Framework Partnership Agreement could evolve from a predominantly financial and procedural instrument to a real strategic governance platform, capable of modulating the involvement of the various actors according to the nature of the programmes and their degree of security relevance.

The European Space Shield represents a crucial step in the process of transforming the Union's space policy. It highlights how space has become a central element of European security and how this evolution requires a more or less profound adaptation of the existing institutional, legal and industrial arrangements. How the ESA–EUSPA–Commission partnership responds to these new tensions will be a key indicator of the Union's ability to govern the hybridization between space, security and defense, while preserving the principles of cooperation and legitimacy that characterize its governance model.

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From "Ἢ τὰν ἢ ἐπὶ τᾶς" to "Freedom or Death": The Cultural Mechanics of Greek Military Identity

by Marios Kyriakidis

Abstract: This study examines the longue-durée cultural mechanics that shaped Greek military identity from antiquity to the modern era. Tracing the symbolic continuity between the Spartan maxim "Ἢ τὰν ἢ ἐπὶ τᾶς" and the revolutionary motto "Freedom or Death," the article argues that Greek military identity functions as a deep cultural system rather than simply an institutional tradition. Integrating heroic ethos, Orthodox ritual symbolism, and localized forms of military pedagogy, it explores how charismatic leadership figures - most notably Theodoros Kolokotronis and Ioannis Kapodistrias - mediated the transformation of heroic ideals into collective military behavior. Using microhistorical analysis, discourse mapping, and prosopographical methods, the study reveals enduring patterns linking honor, sacrifice, and existential concepts of freedom to national identity formation. It further shows how these cultural mechanics informed Greece's strategic culture and its responses to persistent regional pressures. In doing so, the article contributes to broader debates on the cultural foundations of military action and identity formation across time.

Keywords: Greek military identity, heroic ethos, freedom narrative, cultural mechanics, strategic culture, Orthodoxy

1 Introduction

The study of military identity has long stood at the intersection of history, anthropology, cultural studies, and strategic theory. Yet, despite substantial comparative research on warrior traditions, national armies, and the cultures that sustain them, the Greek case continues to present a unique analytical challenge. Greece is one of the few societies in which military identity does not emerge simply as a by-product of state formation, imperial expansion, or modern national ideology. Instead, it constitutes a deep, self-reinforcing cultural system whose origins precede the nation-state and whose symbolic grammar extends

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across more than two and a half millennia. From the classical Spartan maxim "Ἢ τὰν ἢ ἐπὶ τᾶς" to the revolutionary motto "Freedom or Death," Greek military identity appears less as a historical sequence and more as a long-lived cultural mechanism - an enduring set of narratives, rituals, and ethical expectations that shape collective behavior in times of conflict and crisis.

This article proposes the concept of cultural mechanics as a theoretical framework to understand how such an identity system operates. Cultural mechanics refer to the patterned processes through which societies encode, transmit, and reactivate symbolic values in ways that influence both individual conduct and collective strategy. Rather than treating identity as a static reservoir of meanings, this approach views it as a dynamic set of mechanisms through which cultural material becomes actionable - guiding decisions, legitimizing violence, defining loyalty, and sustaining cohesion under conditions of extreme pressure. In the Greek case, these mechanics rely heavily on the interplay between heroic ethos, ritualized notions of sacrifice, religious symbolism, and a deeply rooted narrative of existential freedom.

The endurance of these mechanisms raises important historical and analytical questions. How can cultural forms originating in classical Sparta reappear, in transformed but recognizable shapes, within the popular and political rhetoric of a nineteenth-century revolution? How do religious performances - particularly within Orthodox liturgical traditions - contribute to military pedagogy and the internalization of heroic ideals? What role do charismatic leaders play in translating inherited cultural schemas into organizational practices and political programs? And how does this identity shape the strategic behavior of a modern democratic state within the shifting terrain of regional tensions and alliances? These questions point toward a broader argument: Greek military identity is neither the residue of a heroic past nor the ideological creation of a modern nation-state, but rather the product of longue-durée cultural mechanics that remain operative across radically different historical environments.

To situate the argument historically, one must acknowledge a fundamental characteristic of Greek collective memory: the persistent linkage between freedom and existence, between honor and survival. The Spartan injunction to return "with the shield or on it" encapsulated not a cult of death, but a culturally conditioned insistence that individual conduct must align with the integrity of the community. To fight dishonorably or to flee was not simply to fail; it was to break

the bond between self and polis. Similarly, the revolutionary motto "Freedom or Death" did not serve as a rhetorical flourish but as a binding statement of identity, one that defined freedom not as a political right granted by institutions but as an ontological condition without which life loses meaning. The longevity of this structure - from heroic antiquity to modern nationalism - suggests that Greek military identity relies on the continuous reactivation of a cultural code in which freedom is equated with collective dignity and where sacrifice is framed as a legitimate, even necessary, expression of that dignity.

Yet the persistence of these ideas cannot be understood solely at the level of abstract values. The transmission of such forms requires mechanisms, and these mechanisms operate within specific social, religious, and political contexts. During the Greek Revolution, for instance, war was simultaneously a military endeavor, a pedagogical environment, and a cultural performance. Fighters learned not only skills of combat but also the narratives, songs, oaths, symbols, and rituals that bound them to a shared cause. Charismatic leaders such as Theodoros Kolokotronis occupied a central position in this pedagogical system: they embodied the heroic ideal, articulated the meaning of the struggle, and provided organizational coherence to groups that lacked formal military training. Their authority rested not merely on battlefield success but on their ability to marshal the deep cultural repertoire of heroism and sacrifice that their followers already recognized.

Parallel to this process, the figure of Ioannis Kapodistrias offers a compelling example of how early state-building efforts intersected - and at times collide - with existing cultural mechanics. Kapodistrias sought to institutionalize military organization, foster discipline, and modernize the army by replacing local networks of loyalty with centralized structures of command. However, his reforms encountered resistance precisely because they challenged entrenched, culturally grounded forms of military identity and authority. The tension between charismatic, heroic leadership and rationalized state-building was not simply a clash of personalities or political factions; it reflected deeper structural frictions between traditional cultural mechanics and emergent institutional frameworks. These tensions illuminate why certain military reforms succeeded, others failed, and some produced hybrid arrangements that continue to shape the Greek armed forces.

Religious symbolism, particularly within Eastern Orthodoxy, also functions as a critical mechanism in the reproduction of Greek military identity. Orthodox rit-

uals - blessings, icons, processions, communal prayers - have historically served not only devotional but also socio-political purposes. They sanctify the cause, legitimize collective action, and provide a shared moral vocabulary that helps fighters interpret the meaning of conflict and sacrifice. Far from being peripheral, religion acts as a cultural mediator bridging heroic ideals with communal experience. Its role becomes especially visible in moments of crisis, when identity must be reaffirmed and collective cohesion restored.

Taken together, these elements call for an analytical framework capable of integrating cultural symbolism, historical continuity, micro-level practices, and strategic outcomes. Traditional military history, with its focus on tactics, battles, and institutional developments, provides valuable insights but remains insufficient for explaining the profound cultural resilience of Greek military identity. Likewise, purely anthropological or cultural approaches often lack the ability to account for the political and strategic implications of such identity structures. The concept of cultural mechanics is proposed here precisely to bridge these gaps. It allows us to trace how cultural forms become operative in concrete historical settings and how they shape the strategic orientations of groups and states.

Moreover, the persistence of Greek military identity cannot be divorced from the presence of a long-term external "Other" - first embodied by imperial Persia, later by the Ottoman Empire, and in contemporary contexts by ongoing regional frictions. The existence of this recurring adversarial figure reinforces the cultural mechanics of identity: threat necessitates cohesion, cohesion activates heroic narratives, and heroic narratives sustain the primacy of freedom as an existential value. The repetition of this structure across centuries suggests not a deterministic cycle but a culturally patterned response to geopolitical pressures. Understanding the formation and endurance of Greek military identity therefore contributes to broader discussions in strategic culture studies, particularly concerning how historical memory and symbolic repertoires shape contemporary strategic behavior.

Finally, the significance of this research lies in its interdisciplinary ambition. By combining microhistorical case studies, narrative and discourse analysis, prosopography methods, and conceptual modeling, the article aims to reveal the underlying mechanics that convert cultural material into actionable military identity. This approach challenges linear narratives of modernization and state formation by demonstrating that continuity and transformation coexist within the same cultural system. The Greek case thus provides an ideal context for testing

larger theoretical claims about how cultures remember, adapt, and mobilize their symbolic pasts in service of collective action.

In synthesizing these themes, the introduction lays the foundation for a comprehensive analysis of Greek military identity as a system of cultural mechanics that stretches from antiquity to the present. It underscores the need to rethink conventional boundaries between history, culture, and strategy, and to recognize that the symbolic grammar of military identity - its heroes, rituals, narratives, and moral imperatives - can possess remarkable durability. The chapters that follow will explore these mechanics in detail, demonstrating how they shape not only the memory of the past but the strategic decisions of the present. With this framework, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to understand the cultural foundations of war, identity, and political action across time.

2 Literature review and theoretical framework

The scholarly examination of Greek military identity spans multiple disciplines, yet remains strikingly fragmented. Historians of antiquity, theorists of nationalism, scholars of Orthodoxy, and analysts of strategic culture have each contributed valuable insights, but rarely converge into a unified interpretive model. This fragmentation has allowed important continuities - particularly those linking ancient heroic norms, Byzantine religio-political symbolism, revolutionary mobilization patterns, and modern strategic behavior - to remain under-explored. A review of the existing literature reveals the absence of a framework capable of capturing the longue-durée mechanisms through which Greek military identity is constructed, transmitted, and reactivated across vastly different historical contexts.

Classical scholarship provides the earliest foundation for understanding the cultural depth of Greek martial identity. Jean-Pierre Vernant's anthropological approach to Greek heroic values underscores the degree to which concepts of honor, agonistic virtue, and sacrificial ethics were embedded in social norms rather than merely in literary myth.[1] Similarly, Victor Davis Hanson's analysis of hoplite warfare reveals that the Greek battlefield was not simply a site of military contest but a ritualized arena in which civic identity and moral legitimacy

1 VERNANT, Jean-Pierre. *The Origins of Greek Thought*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.

were performed.[2] Paul Cartledge's seminal work on Sparta further illuminates the disciplined pedagogical mechanisms that produced a distinctive warrior ethos, showing how the agoge institutionalized values of self-denial, loyalty, and heroic death.[3] Collectively, these scholars demonstrate that ancient Greek military identity was not solely the product of political structures but the expression of a deeply rooted cultural system - an observation that proves essential for understanding its later reactivations.

The transition from antiquity to Byzantium introduces an additional symbolic layer, one in which martial identity becomes inseparable from Orthodox Christian cosmology. John Haldon has shown that Byzantine military organization carried forward classical tactical traditions while reframing them within a theological interpretation of imperial mission and divine sovereignty.[4] George Ostrogorsky's comprehensive history similarly emphasizes the fusion of Hellenic and Christian elements in the self-understanding of Byzantine soldiers, who were expected to defend not only territory but sacred order.[5]Anthony Kaldellis's work adds a crucial corrective, arguing that Byzantine identity preserved stronger ties to Hellenic cultural memory than previously acknowledged, thereby creating a dual symbolic heritage that blended heroism with sanctified struggle.[6] This synthesis would later enable the reactivation of classical motifs - such as noble death and communal sacrifice - during the early modern and revolutionary periods.

Modern Greek identity formation has been studied extensively in the fields of nationalism and political culture, yet often without adequate attention to the military dimension. Benedict Anderson's influential theory of nations as "imagined communities" provides a foundational understanding of how symbolic narratives foster collective belonging.[7] However, Anderson's framework underplays the role of pre-modern cultural repertoires - precisely the repertoires that Anthony D.

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2 HANSON, Victor Davis. *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

3 CARTLEDGE, Paul. *The Spartans: An Epic History*. London: Pan Macmillan, 2003.

4 HALDON, John. *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World 565-1204*. London: Routledge, 1999.

5 OSTROGORSKY, George. *History of the Byzantine State*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968.

6 KALDELLIS, Anthony. *Hellenism in Byzantium*. *The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the classical tradition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

7 ANDERSON, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso, 2006.

Smith, through his ethno-symbolist approach, identifies as critical to the endurance of national identity.[8] Smith's insistence that myths, memories, and symbols can shape political cultures across centuries resonates strongly with the Greek case, where heroic narratives and religious motifs predating the nation-state remain central to contemporary military ethos. Paschalis Kitromilides further illustrates how Enlightenment ideas fused with Orthodox and classical traditions to generate a distinctively Greek model of political identity, one in which freedom retains an existential rather than solely political meaning.[9]

These insights become particularly relevant in the context of the Greek Revolution of 1821, which presents one of the most vivid historical examples of the reactivation of long-term cultural material under conditions of conflict. Historians such as Mark Mazower and David Brewer have detailed how revolutionary fighters drew simultaneously on local traditions of armed banditry, Orthodox symbolism, and classical heroic ideals to legitimize their struggle.[10, 11] Yet beyond descriptive accounts, recent reinterpretations emphasize the importance of informal authority structures and symbolic repertoires in shaping military behavior during the Revolution. The figure of Theodoros Kolokotronis, in particular, exemplifies the convergence of charismatic leadership, heroic mythmaking, and mobilizational rhetoric. C. M. Woodhouse has noted that Kolokotronis's leadership style was intelligible precisely because it drew on pre-existing cultural codes, enabling him to articulate the revolutionary cause in terms that resonated with widely held values.[12]

Equally significant is the case of Ioannis Kapodistrias. His attempts to rationalize and centralize military forces illuminate tensions between traditional cultural mechanics and modernizing state structures. As Richard Clogg observes, Kapodistrias's reforms encountered resistance not merely for political reasons but because they challenged established forms of authority grounded in regional

8 SMITH, Anthony D. *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1988.

9 KITROMILIDES, Paschalis. *Enlightenment and Revolution. The Making of Modern Greece.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.

10 MAZOWER, Mark. *The Greek Revolution: 1821 and the Making of Modern Europe*. London: Allen Lane, 2023.

11 BREWER, David. *The Flame of Freedom: The Greek War of Independence*. London: John Murray, 2001.

12 WOODHOUSE, C. M. *The Story of Modern Greece*. London: Faber & Faber, 1968.

loyalty, heroic reputation, and Orthodox moral vocabulary.[13] This clash highlights an important theoretical insight: military modernization in Greece cannot be understood solely as an institutional process but must be analyzed in light of the cultural mechanics that shape perceptions of legitimate authority.

The field of military pedagogy reinforces this argument by demonstrating that the internal culture of armed forces reflects broader societal values. John Keegan's conceptualization of command styles, which emphasizes the cultural underpinnings of military authority, provides a useful comparative framework.[14] More specifically, Evanthis Hatzivassiliou's work on Greek military institutions shows that despite periods of formal reform, narratives of sacrifice, honor, and collective struggle continue to influence the internal ethos and professional identity of Greek officers.[15] This literature suggests that military pedagogy in Greece has acted as a conduit for the transmission of older cultural patterns into modern professional contexts.

The intersection of identity and strategic behavior brings the review into dialogue with scholarship on strategic culture. Scholars introduced the concept to highlight how historical experience and cultural norms shape perceptions of threat and military options. Alastair Iain Johnston later refined the theory, stressing the need for systematic empirical analysis of strategic beliefs.[16] Colin Gray, meanwhile, argued that culture permeates all levels of security behavior, from operational preferences to national grand strategy.[17] Greece presents an exceptionally rich case for strategic culture analysis due to its long-term experience of external threat and its reliance on narratives of historical continuity as sources of legitimacy. The structural dimension of this threat perception is captured in Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's model of regional security complexes, which situates Greek strategic behavior within enduring patterns of antagonism in the Eastern Mediterranean.[18]

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13 CLOGG, Richard. *A Concise History of Greece*. Ibid.

14 KEEGAN, John. *The Mask of Command*. London: Penguin, 1988.

15 HATZIVASSILIOU, Evanthis. *Greece and the Cold War*. Frontline State 1952-1967. London: Routledge, 2006.

16 JOHNSTON, Alastair Iain. *Cultural Realism. Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

17 GRAY, Colin. *Modern Strategy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

18 BUZAN, Barry & WÆVER, Ole. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Se-*

Within this context, contemporary studies of Greek / Cyprus - Turkish relations, such as those by Zenonas Tziarras illustrate how historical memory continues to shape strategic expectations and political discourse.[19] This work reinforces the argument that Greek military identity cannot be analyzed in isolation from the presence of a recurring "Other," whose role in Greek political imagination reinforces cohesion and reactivates cultural narratives of defense, sacrifice, and freedom.

Taken together, the literature reviewed here reveals substantial insight yet lacks a unifying framework capable of explaining how cultural forms originating in classical antiquity become operative in modern strategic contexts. This gap motivates the adoption of cultural mechanics as a theoretical model. Unlike traditional approaches to identity, which focus on static symbols or discrete historical moments, cultural mechanics emphasize the patterned processes through which cultural material becomes actionable. These processes include symbolic reinterpretation, narrative reactivation, intergenerational transmission, and charismatic mediation - phenomena observed in classical hoplite ethics, Byzantine sanctified warfare, revolutionary mobilization, and contemporary strategic behavior. By drawing on anthropological theories of ritual, ethno-symbolist perspectives on nationalism, and the empirical rigor of strategic culture analysis, this framework provides an integrated lens through which Greek military identity can be understood not as a historical remnant but as a dynamic, evolving system.

3 Methodology

The methodological design of this study is shaped by the need to capture the longue-durée, culturally embedded, and multi-layered nature of Greek military identity. Because the research aims to explain how cultural mechanisms originating in antiquity persist, transform, and reactivate across time, a single disciplinary method - whether historical, anthropological, or strategic - would be insufficient. Instead, the study employs an integrated qualitative research strategy synthesizing discourse analysis, micro-historical case examination, prosopographical mapping, and interpretive cultural analysis. This combination allows

curity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

19 TZIARRAS, Zenonas. *The New Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean: Trilateral Partnerships and Regional Security.* Nicosia: Friedrich-ebert-stiftung, 2019.

the research to move beyond descriptive historiography and instead identify the patterned mechanisms - the cultural mechanics - that drive the continuity and reappearance of particular symbolic forms.

The decision to rely primarily on qualitative and interpretive methodologies is guided by several scholarly precedents. Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology, especially his argument that culture is a web of symbols through which meaning is constructed and interpreted, provides a foundational justification for treating heroic ethos, religious symbols, and narratives of freedom not as static relics but as dynamic social practices.[20] The interpretive framework enables this study to approach military identity as a meaning-making structure rather than a purely institutional phenomenon. Similarly, Paul Ricoeur's insights on narrative identity reinforce the methodological assumption that communities articulate their collective identities through stories that link past events to present circumstances.[21] This narrative-centered approach is essential for understanding how the Greek cultural imagination continually reintegrates classical motifs such as "Ἢ τὰν ἢ ἐπὶ τᾶς" into modern contexts.

Given the historical scale of the research, the methodology draws significantly on the Annales School tradition of longue durée analysis, particularly as articulated by Fernand Braudel.[22] The longue durée perspective allows the study to identify deep structures - heroic codes, sacrificial ethics, ritual forms - that remain remarkably stable even as political and social conditions transform. Although this approach has been criticized for underestimating contingency and human agency, the present study integrates it with micro-historical analysis to ensure that individual actors, such as Theodoros Kolokotronis or Ioannis Kapodistrias, are not dissolved into structural generalizations. Microhistory, as advanced by Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi,[23] focuses on specific individuals or communities whose experiences reveal broader cultural patterns. In this study, micro-historical lenses are used to illuminate how charismatic leaders act as mediators of cultural mechanics, translating inherited symbolic repertoires into strategic action.

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20 GEERTZ, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

21 RICOEUR, Paul. *Oneself as Another*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

22 BRAUDEL, Fernand. *On History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

23 GINZBURG, Carlo. *The Cheese and the Worms*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980; LEVI, Giovanni. *Inheriting Power*. *The story of an exorcist.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

The emphasis on leadership necessitates a methodological bridge to military sociology and command theory. The works of Anthony King on military professionalism and organizational culture[24] and Samuel Huntington's theory of the military profession[25] provide analytical tools for understanding how cultural narratives are institutionalized within the military. King's observation that modern armed forces sustain distinctive cultural identities through rituals, narratives, and professional socialization supports this study's assumption that Greek military identity is not merely inherited but constantly reproduced within military pedagogy. This insight is complemented by C. Charles Krulak's theory of the "strategic corporal," which emphasizes how individual soldiers internalize cultural narratives that shape decision-making even at the lowest tactical levels.[26] These perspectives justify the inclusion of contemporary military pedagogy as part of the methodological apparatus for examining cultural continuity.

To analyze the discursive dimensions of Greek military identity, the study employs a refined model of discourse analysis, drawing particularly from Norman Fairclough's critical discourse theory.[27] This method enables the identification of how concepts such as freedom, sacrifice, Orthodoxy, and heroism are linguistically constructed in political speeches, historical writings, military manuals, and public commemorations. Fairclough's emphasis on the interrelationship between discourse and power structures allows the research to trace how symbolic language reinforces political legitimacy and collective mobilization. Discourse analysis is also applied diachronically to compare how similar symbolic forms appear in classical texts, Byzantine chronicles, revolutionary memoirs, and modern strategic documents. The goal is not simply to identify rhetorical similarities but to reveal how certain narrative templates remain culturally privileged and repeatedly mobilized during moments of perceived existential threat.

Another critical methodological component is prosopographical analysis - the investigation of collective biography to identify patterns of shared characteristics

24 KING, Anthony. *Command: The Twenty-First Century General*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

25 HUNTINGTON, Samuel P. *The Soldier and the State*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957.

26 KRULAK, C. Charles. "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War." *Marine Corps Gazette*, January 1999, pp. 14–17.

27 FAIRCLOUGH, Norman. *Critical Discourse Analysis*. *The critical study of language*. London: Longman, 1995.

or cultural orientations among key actors. Drawing on Lawrence Stone's reconceptualization of prosopography as a tool for understanding elites,[28] this study examines generals, political leaders, clergy, and military educators whose careers illuminate the transmission of cultural mechanics. Prosopography is particularly useful for identifying the recurring traits of charismatic leadership in Greek military history, as well as the shared symbolic vocabulary through which leaders articulate authority. By mapping commonalities in rhetoric, ritual participation, and self-representation across figures from different centuries, the study highlights the mechanisms through which cultural forms persist across changing historical environments.

Given the importance of symbolism and ritual, the methodology incorporates approaches from ritual studies and symbolic anthropology. Catherine Bell's work on ritualization[29] offers a conceptual framework for analyzing how military and religious rituals function as embodied practices that reinforce cultural memory and identity. Bell's emphasis on ritual as strategic practice - rather than passive tradition - aligns with this study's focus on cultural mechanics as active processes of meaning-making. This theoretical orientation justifies the analysis of rituals such as oath-taking, blessings of arms, commemorative ceremonies, and funerary practices within the Greek military tradition.

The study also employs a comparative dimension, albeit in a controlled manner. While the primary aim is not to compare Greece with other cultures, selective comparison with cases of strong warrior traditions - such as Japan, Israel, or Serbia - serves as a methodological reference point. Comparative insights drawn from John Lynn's work on battle cultures[30] and Alasdair MacIntyre's virtue ethics[31] help clarify which aspects of Greek military identity are culturally distinctive and which reflect broader patterns in societies with strong warrior mythologies. This comparative perspective prevents the analysis from sliding into cultural exceptionalism while reinforcing the theoretical robustness of the cultural mechanics' model.

Because the subject matter spans multiple historical eras, the reliability and

28 STONE, Lawrence. "Prosopography." *Daedalus*, Vol. 100, No. 1, 1971, pp. 46–79.

29 BELL, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

30 LYNN, John A. *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2003.

31 MACINTYRE, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

interpretation of sources require methodological transparency. For ancient and Byzantine periods, primary sources are analyzed through a hermeneutic approach guided by philological criticism. Classical texts are contextualized using contemporary scholarship to avoid anachronistic interpretations. For the revolutionary and modern periods, the study incorporates archival materials, memoirs, military documents, and political speeches. The critical examination of these sources follows the principles of historical methodology outlined by Marc Bloch,[32] emphasizing the need to interrogate authorial intention, audience, political context, and narrative strategy.

Finally, the study aligns with contemporary qualitative standards in security studies. Patrick Jackson's argument for "analytic eclecticism"[33] supports the combination of explanatory traditions that typically remain isolated: cultural analysis, historical sociology, and strategic theory. This eclectic approach is methodologically necessary for a research subject that encompasses mythic memory, religious ritual, revolutionary mobilization, and modern geopolitical behavior.

In sum, the methodological framework of this study is integrative, multi-layered, and deeply interpretive. It is designed to capture not only historical continuity but the mechanisms by which cultural meaning is activated during moments of crisis, conflict, or strategic uncertainty. By combining discourse analysis, microhistory, prosopography, ritual theory, longue durée structural analysis, and military sociology, the study is methodologically equipped to illuminate the cultural mechanics that shape Greek military identity across millennia. Moreover, this framework should be understood explicitly as a qualitative, historically grounded research design. It does not seek to quantify attitudes or behaviors, but to interpret the deep semiotic, institutional, and cultural structures that shape military consciousness across time. Through the systematic examination of primary texts, symbolic practices, and institutional continuities, the study adheres to rigorous standards of source criticism while remaining sensitive to multi-layered meanings embedded in historical experience. In this way, the methodology maintains both analytical precision and interpretive depth, ensuring that its findings emerge from a disciplined and coherent scholarly process.

32 BLOCH, Marc. *The Historian's Craft*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1954.

33 JACKSON, Patrick Thaddeus. *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

4 The deep cultural foundations of Greek military identity

Greek military identity emerges not as a product of a single historical era but as a composite cultural formation anchored in patterns recognizable across millennia. To understand the mechanisms through which this identity has endured - surviving political collapse, imperial transitions, and radical transformations of social organization - it is necessary to locate its roots in the cultural structures that define Greek perceptions of freedom, duty, sacrifice, and collective belonging. This chapter argues that Greek military identity is best understood as a deeply embedded cultural matrix shaped by the interplay of heroic ethos, religious cosmology, ritualized notions of citizenship, and historically conditioned patterns of collective mobilization.

The classical period provides the earliest discernible articulation of these cultural foundations. Greek communities conceived warfare not simply as a technical enterprise but as a moral arena where the worth of citizens was tested. As Moses Finley notes, citizenship in the ancient polis was inseparable from military participation, meaning that political identity was inseparable from martial obligation.[34] This fusion created a structural expectation that individuals prove their loyalty through willingness to risk death. The famous Spartan injunction ""Η τὰν ἢ ἐπὶ τᾶς" captures this cultural expectation: the shield becomes the symbol of returning with honor or dying with it. This injunction is not merely rhetorical; it reflects what Jean-Pierre Vernant identifies as a foundational link between personal identity and communal recognition within the heroic world.[35] The cultural mechanics embedded in this injunction - honor through sacrifice, communal dependence, valor as identity - resurface repeatedly in later Greek history.

A second foundational mechanism emerges from the ritualized collective practices of the polis, which transformed warfare into a shared civic performance. As Victor Hanson demonstrates, the hoplite phalanx demanded discipline, unity, and mutual trust among citizens fighting in close formation.[36]

34 FINLEY, Moses. *The Ancient Greeks*. New York: Penguin, 1977.

35 VERNANT, Jean-Pierre. *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*. New York: Zone Books, 1990.

36 HANSON, Victor. *The Western Way of War*. *Infantry battle in Classical Greece*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.



Figure 1. Hoplite Phalanx on the Chigi Vase (ca. 650 BC).
Public Domain. Source: Wikimedia Commons

These tactical requirements reinforced the cultural idea that the survival of the community depended on collective cohesion rather than individual prowess. This structural linkage between unity and survival would later reappear in Byzantine military organization and revolutionary-era mobilization, where the threat of external domination created conditions in which communal solidarity became existential.

The Byzantine era adds a new dimension to these cultural foundations by merging classical heroic values with Christian cosmology. Byzantine soldiers inherited military traditions from antiquity but framed their purpose in spiritual rather than civic terms. As George Dennis notes, Byzantine military manuals such as the Strategikon integrate tactical advice with moral exhortations empha-

sizing divine assistance and spiritual purity.[37] This fusion produced a military identity in which the soldier becomes both defender of the empire and guardian of sacred order. The integration of Orthodoxy into military life created what Anthony Kaldellis describes as a dual cultural consciousness: a people who considered themselves Roman in political terms yet Greek in cultural memory.[38] This cultural duality preserved pre-Christian heroic archetypes while embedding them within Christian narratives of righteous struggle.

The significance of Orthodoxy extends beyond theology; it establishes a moral vocabulary capable of binding fragmented communities. Through ritual, liturgy, iconography, and commemorative practices, the Church provided a symbolic structure that gave meaning to warfare. Dimitri Obolensky's work on the Byzantine Commonwealth shows how Orthodox identity served to unify culturally diverse populations under a shared religious-political worldview.[39] In the Greek context, this worldview framed military struggle as a defense not simply of territory but of a sacred way of life. This dimension becomes crucial during the Ottoman period, when Orthodoxy served as the primary institution preserving Hellenic cultural memory.

Under Ottoman rule, Greek military identity did not disappear; instead, it shifted into forms of localized resistance embodied by "klephts" and "armatoloi". Far from being merely bandit groups, these armed communities preserved a heroic ethos and collective memory of resistance. As John Koliopoulos argues, klephtic traditions maintained cultural norms of bravery, autonomy, and defiance that would later power revolutionary mobilization.[40] Their songs and oral traditions functioned as cultural archives, transmitting heroic values through generations. These traditions serve as a living record of how Greek communities preserved military identity without state institutions.

The Greek Revolution of 1821 reactivated these cultural foundations in a

37 DENNIS, George. *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1985.

38 KALDELLIS, Anthony. *Hellenism in Byzantium*. *The transformations of Greek identity and the reception of the classical tradition.* Ibid.

39 OBOLENSKY, Dimitri. *The Byzantine Commonwealth*. *Eastern Europe, 500-1453.* London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000.

40 KOLIOPOULOS, John. *Brigands with a Cause: Brigandage and Irredentism in Modern Greece, 1821–1912*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987



Oil painting of Kolokotronis by Dionysios Tsokos (1861). National Historical Museum (Athens)

remarkably concentrated form. The symbolic declaration "Ελευθερία ή Θάνατος" echoed the ancient Spartan maxim, reinterpreting heroic death in a Christian idiom of martyrdom. Mark Mazower notes that revolutionary leaders consciously framed the struggle as both national liberation and moral purification.[41] The mobilization of fighters who had no formal military training demonstrates the enduring power of cultural narratives to generate collective action. Kolokotronis, for example, legitimized his authority not through institutional rank but by aligning himself with ancestral heroic archetypes and invoking divine sanction, a pattern consistent with Max Weber's model of charismatic authority.[42]

This alignment between personal charisma and cultural memory underscores the relevance of cultural mechanics: leaders become effective when they activate deep symbolic structures embedded in collective consciousness.

The early Greek state, particularly under Kapodistrias, attempted to rationalize military structures according to European models. Yet these reforms encountered resistance because they conflicted with entrenched cultural expectations regarding leadership, honor, and autonomy. As Richard Clogg observes, many

41 MAZOWER, Mark. *The Greek Revolution*. Ibid

42 WEBER, Max. *Economy and Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

revolutionaries viewed bureaucratic discipline as an erosion of personal valor and traditional authority.[43] This clash reveals a tension between modern state-building and cultural mechanics that continue to influence Greek military identity. Even today, the Greek armed forces navigate the dual expectations of professional military conduct and heroic national tradition.

The twentieth century further shaped Greek military identity through experiences of occupation, civil war, and alliance formation. The Greek resistance during World War II, particularly groups such as ELAS and EDES, drew heavily on cultural narratives of ancestral struggle, framing their actions as continuations of ancient and revolutionary traditions. Fighters often perceived themselves as heirs to klephtic valor. Similarly, the Cypriot struggle of EOKA in the 1950s explicitly invoked classical and revolutionary symbols. These examples illustrate how the cultural mechanics of heroism, sacrifice, and national liberation remain potent mobilizing forces under radically different historical circumstances.

Greece's integration into NATO and alignment with Western strategic culture introduced new institutional frameworks but did not replace the deeper cultural foundations of military identity. Even within the context of alliance politics, Greek strategic thinking continues to be influenced by historical memory and identity-based threat perceptions. In particular, the persistent tensions with Turkey activate symbolic narratives that frame national defense as existential rather than merely geopolitical. This continuity reinforces the argument that Greek military identity is not shaped exclusively by contemporary threats but by historically embedded cultural frameworks.

Ritual and commemoration further sustain these cultural foundations. National holidays, military parades, school ceremonies, and church memorials serve as what Pierre Nora calls "lieux de mémoire" - sites where memory becomes material and shared.[44] In Greece, such rituals frequently invoke classical references, Byzantine symbolism, and revolutionary imagery simultaneously, reflecting the layered structure of collective memory. The repetition of these rituals reinforces the cultural mechanics that shape Greek military identity: heroic sacrifice, collec-

43 CLOGG, Richard. *A Concise History of Greece*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

44 NORA, Pierre. *"Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." Representations, no. 26, 1989, pp. 7–24. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520*

tive suffering, divine protection, and the centrality of freedom.

These deep cultural foundations continue to shape contemporary military pedagogy. Studies show that Greek military education incorporates historical memory as a core component of identity formation, integrating classical virtues with modern ethical frameworks.[45] This pedagogical approach ensures that the cultural mechanics identified throughout this chapter remain active in shaping new generations of officers.

Ultimately, Greek military identity must be understood as the product of overlapping cultural systems - heroic, civic, religious, and national - interacting across time. These systems create a set of stable symbolic patterns that reappear in moments of crisis, enabling communities to interpret conflict through familiar narratives. The persistence of these patterns across vastly different historical circumstances demonstrates the resilience of the cultural mechanics that underpin Greek military identity.

5 Cultural transmissions, heroic memory, and the unrecorded mechanisms of Greek military identity

Greek military identity is not sustained merely through explicit historical narratives, canonical texts, or commemorative practices. A deeper system of transmission, one far subtler and largely unrecorded in formal historiography, ensures its endurance. This chapter examines the "silent mechanisms" of cultural continuity - embodied practices, informal pedagogies, emotional grammars, and communal micro-rituals - through which Greek society reproduces its military ethos across generations. While previous scholarship has illuminated official forms of memory, such as national holidays, state curricula, or military rituals, the everyday transmission of martial culture remains underexplored. The present analysis identifies the ways in which Greek communities internalize the values of sacrifice, autonomy, and freedom through cultural processes that operate beneath the threshold of formal institutionalization.

The first of these mechanisms is the phenomenon of embodied historical mem-

45 KYRIAKIDIS, Marios. "Post-Lausanne Greece: Military Pedagogy of the Greek Army, Diplomatic Strategies, and Civil-Military Dynamics in the Interwar Period (1923-1939)". Isrg..3.1 (2025) 46-57. 10.5281/zenodo.14615079.

ory. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus highlights how cultural values become ingrained through repeated practices that individuals perceive as natural rather than constructed.[46] In the Greek context, the habitus of resistance—expressed through gestures, idioms, humor, and emotional reactions to injustice - embeds a latent readiness for collective mobilization. For example, expressions like "δε μασάμε" or "έχουμε τσαγανό" encode a moral expectation of fortitude. While seemingly mundane, such expressions function as cultural micro-acts that reproduce the symbolic vocabulary of heroic steadfastness. These forms of embodied memory have seldom been connected to military identity, yet they shape the emotional predispositions that make martial narratives intelligible and resonant.

A second unrecorded mechanism lies in familial transmission. Oral history across Greek households often preserves localized accounts of resistance—tales of grandfathers in the Balkan Wars, stories of villagers who resisted Ottoman authorities, memories from WWII and the Civil War, or recollections of Cyprus in 1974. Alessandro Portelli emphasizes that oral narratives do not aim to provide factual accuracy but emotional truth, shaping collective identity through shared affective structures.[47] In Greek families, stories of hardship, defiance, and survival become emotional templates that align closely with national heroic myths. This transmission is especially potent because it bypasses state-controlled channels and embeds military identity in intimate social spaces, giving it a moral legitimacy that institutional narratives alone cannot achieve.

Another mechanism of transmission operates through the symbolic grammar of Greek topography. Yi-Fu Tuan's notion of "topophilia" - the affective bond between people and place[48] - helps explain how Greece's landscape functions as an archive of military identity. Mountains associated with klephts, monasteries linked with resistance, and battlefields marked by modest memorials generate a spatial continuity that reinforces cultural memory. The Greek terrain itself becomes a mnemonic device: crossing Thermopylae, climbing Palamidi, or walking through Mani activates cultural associations tied to heroism and autonomy.

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46 BOURDIEU, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

47 PORTELLI, Alessandro. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1991.

48 TUAN, Yi-Fu. *Topophilia. A study of environmental perception, attitudes, and values*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1974.

These landscapes, saturated with historical meaning, contribute to what Tim Ingold calls "taskscapes" - environments that shape human behavior and identity through lived patterns of engagement.[49] In Greece, such taskscapes reinforce the association between harsh geography, communal defense, and the moral imperative of resistance.

Cultural transmission also occurs through the emotional structure of music and song. Traditional Greek music, especially klephtic ballads, laments, and δημοτικά, preserves an ethos of defiant sorrow - what Michael Herzfeld calls "cultural intimacy," the emotional repertoire through which communities affirm their moral identity despite social contradictions.[50] Lyrics describing heroic death, betrayal, or vengeance embed ethical messages about honor, sacrifice, and masculine virtue. Unlike structured military pedagogy, these musical traditions transmit affective knowledge capable of shaping collective perceptions of crisis and duty. The rhythmic patterns of laments and μοιρολόγια in Mani, for instance, encode an emotional script of mourning blended with pride, reflecting a cultural fusion of grief and honor that mirrors ancient heroic beliefs about glorious death. This emotional grammar, although rarely discussed in military literature, nurtures a cultural predisposition toward valor and communal solidarity.

An additional mechanism is the cultural practice of improvisation under pressure, a trait deeply rooted in Greek social behavior and bearing strategic significance. Anthropologist Keith Hart's analysis of improvisational social economies[51] helps interpret Greek "philotimo" [φιλότιμο] not merely as a moral ideal but as a cultural resource enabling adaptive responses during crisis. In military contexts - whether in klephtic bands, guerrilla movements, or modern small-unit leadership - improvisation becomes a strategic asset shaped by centuries of navigating foreign domination and resource scarcity. This improvisational ethos has not been systematically studied in Greek strategic culture, yet it forms a critical component of operational behavior, influencing both leadership and tactical decision-making.

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49 INGOLD, Tim. *The Perception of the Environment. Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge, 2000.

50 HERZFELD, Michael. *Cultural Intimacy*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

51 HART, Keith. *The Memory Bank: Money in an Unequal World*. London: Profile Books, 2000.

At the intersection of social and military spheres lies the often-overlooked mechanism of moral pedagogy through suffering. Greek collective memory does not romanticize comfort; rather, it valorizes hardship as formative. As Nicole Loraux observed in her analysis of Athenian funerary orations, communal suffering is transformed into a political virtue.[52] This transformation persists today. Stories of famine, exile, oppression, and death during wars and occupations do not merely recount pain - they construct a moral universe in which endurance becomes identity. This process creates a cultural framework capable of justifying extraordinary sacrifice, a phenomenon crucial to understanding the mobilization of ordinary Greeks during conflicts such as 1821 or 1940.

Another critical but underexplored mechanism is the integration of religious ritual into secular military meaning. While scholars have studied Orthodoxy's institutional role, few have examined how ritual actions - such as blessings of arms, processions of icons, or collective prayers before deployment - operate as psychological and symbolic anchoring mechanisms. According to Victor Turner's theory of ritual liminality[53], such practices transition individuals into new states of identity, preparing them psychologically for high-risk situations. In Greece, the blending of Orthodox ritual with military action creates a unique liminal space where soldiers perceive themselves simultaneously as protectors of nation and faith. This dual identity enhances cohesion and moral resolve, bridging the heroic and the sacred.

Moreover, the Greek educational system, despite its secular framework, continues to reproduce historical narratives emphasizing collective struggle. Textbooks, museum visits, student parades, and commemorations cultivate what Eric Hobsbawm calls "invented traditions" - ritualized practices that reinforce national identity by creating a sense of historical continuity.[54] However, in Greece these traditions seldom feel "invented" because they draw directly from authentic cultural materials deeply embedded in communal memory. The result is a hybrid system where official and informal narratives merge, strengthening the cultural

52 LORAUX, Nicole. *The Invention of Athens. The Funeral Oration in The Classical City.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.

53 TURNER, Victor. *The Ritual Process*. *Structure and Anti- Structure*. Chicago: Aldine, 1969.

54 HOBSBAWM, Eric & RANGER, Terence. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

mechanics underlying military identity.

The contemporary geopolitical environment perpetuates these mechanisms through what Ole Wæver terms "securitization" - the framing of political issues as existential threats.[55] In the Greek - Turkish security complex, periodic crises reactivate historical memories of occupation and resistance, reinforcing cultural narratives of vigilance. Modern media, political discourse, and social networks amplify these securitized narratives, ensuring that military identity remains relevant even in peacetime. This feedback loop - historical memory shaping perception, and perception shaping identity - constitutes one of the most potent modern mechanisms of cultural transmission.

The final mechanism explored here involves communitarian forms of moral recognition, especially "philotimo". While the term defies direct translation, sociological work conceptualizes "philotimo" as a relational moral economy that conditions behavior by linking personal honor to communal expectation. This relational structure encourages individuals to prioritize collective welfare over personal gain during crisis. In military contexts, "philotimo" functions as an informal code that enhances trust, cohesion, and self-sacrifice. Its cultural power derives from its informality: it is not written in manuals, yet it shapes conduct more profoundly than abstract professional doctrines.

Collectively, these mechanisms reveal that Greek military identity is reproduced not only through formal institutions or historical narratives but through a complex ecosystem of cultural practices, emotional grammars, symbolic landscapes, and relational ethics. This ecosystem ensures that the values of freedom, sacrifice, autonomy, and resistance remain active and transmissible. Understanding these silent mechanisms offers a deeper insight into the cultural mechanics that allow Greek military identity to persist across time - a subject largely absent from existing scholarship. This chapter aims to fill that gap by presenting a holistic account of how military ethos becomes embedded in everyday life.

55 WAEVER, Ole. *Securitization and Desecuritization*. In *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998.

6 *The deep psychology of Greek military identity: affective structiures, mythic echoes, and the semiotics of collective survival*

The persistence of Greek military identity cannot be fully understood unless one examines the affective structures that underlie collective responses to threat, freedom, and communal survival. While historical narratives illuminate institutional and political developments, they often overlook the psychological substratum that shapes military ethos. This chapter investigates the deeper affective and semiotic layers that sustain Greek martial identity across centuries, emphasizing emotional inheritance, mythic resonances, ritualized fear, and the culturally specific logic of existential interpretation. These elements collectively constitute what William Reddy terms an "emotional regime" - a structured system of feeling that conditions behavioral expectations within a given cultural milieu.[56] Within the Greek case, this emotional regime is uniquely oriented toward the preservation of autonomy, making freedom not merely a political aspiration but an existential imperative.

One aspect central to this emotional regime is the phenomenon of emotional inheritance: the transmission of affective dispositions across generations through narrative, silence, and embodied reaction. Drawing on Daniel Siegel's theory of interpersonal neurobiology, emotional inheritance operates not only through explicit teaching but through attunement, mimicry, and patterned emotional responses.[57] In Greek collective psychology, reactions to injustice, humiliation, or coercive pressure are disproportionately intense when compared to other cultural contexts. This intensity is not simply a product of contemporary geopolitics; rather, it reflects centuries of lived experience under foreign domination, producing a collective neural patterning that interprets threats through a lens of existential struggle. This phenomenon has rarely been integrated into analyses of Greek strategic culture, yet it is indispensable for understanding how contemporary Greek society reacts to regional provocations or security challenges.

A second underexplored element concerns mythic echoes within modern emotional life. Jungian and post-Jungian scholars have long argued that myth-

56 REDDY, William. *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

57 SIEGEL, Daniel. *The Developing Mind*. New York: Guilford Press, 1999.

ic structures persist as unconscious templates guiding collective perception.[58] In Greece, mythic figures such as Leonidas, Achilles, or Odysseus function not only as pedagogical symbols but as archetypal frameworks shaping modern attitudes toward courage, cunning, endurance, and defiance. Even when not consciously invoked, these archetypes' structure emotional responses: resistance becomes noble, suffering becomes meaningful, and sacrifice becomes a pathway to collective redemption. This echoes Mircea Eliade's argument that mythic patterns provide "models for human behavior," anchoring contemporary actions in narratives of primordial significance.[59] In the Greek military ethos, the archetype of the hero who faces overwhelming odds recurs with striking consistency - from the klephts of the Ottoman period to the defenders of the Metaxas Line in 1940. These mythic echoes create a continuity between ancient and modern Greek identity that transcends formal historiography.

Another dimension of the deep psychology of Greek military identity is the semiotics of collective survival. Cultural semioticians like Yuri Lotman emphasize that societies in conditions of recurrent existential threat develop heightened symbolic boundaries distinguishing self from other.[60] In Greece, centuries of conflict, occupation, and coercive assimilation pressures have produced a cultural semiotic system where identity markers (language, religion, customs, historical memory) are perceived not merely as heritage but as survival tools. Thus, threats to cultural continuity are interpreted as existential dangers irrespective of their actual strategic magnitude. This is evident in public reactions to issues such as territorial disputes, airspace violations, or minority rights debates, where symbolic concerns often outweigh material calculations. Such reactions reveal a cultural logic in which survival is tied not to physical security alone but to the preservation of meaning systems, a phenomenon largely absent from rationalist interpretations of Greek foreign policy.

An equally important yet understudied component is the role of ritualized fear. Building on the work of Martha Nussbaum on political emotions,[61] fear in Greek

58 JUNG, Carl. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.

59 ELIADE, Mircea. *Myth and Reality*. New York: Harper & Row, 1963.

60 LOTMAN, Yuri. *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1990.

61 NUSSBAUM, Martha. *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*. Cambridge:

culture is not merely a defensive reaction but often a ritualized element embedded in narratives of vigilance. The recurring theme of μὴ χαλαρώσουμε ("let us not relax") reflects a cultural memory in which complacency historically precedes catastrophe. During Ottoman rule, the slightest misjudgment could have fatal consequences; during WWII and the Civil War, communities learned to associate vigilance with survival. This historical patterning transforms fear into a socially sanctioned emotional stance that reinforces cohesion and preparedness. Contemporary defense discourse frequently reproduces this ritualized fear through media narratives, political speeches, and public commemorations, reinforcing collective identity through shared emotional tension.

The affective dimension of honor also plays a critical role in shaping military identity. As Julian Pitt-Rivers argues, honor is fundamentally relational - constructed through recognition and vulnerable to shame.[62] In the Greek context, honor intersects with "philotimo", producing a potent emotional motivator that binds soldiers to their community and legitimizes extraordinary acts of sacrifice. Unlike contractual models of military duty common in Anglo-American contexts, Greek military ethos is deeply relational: duty emerges from belonging rather than from institutional obligation. This relationality explains why acts of betrayal or perceived dishonor generate disproportionately strong collective reactions. The wounds of national humiliation - whether at the Fall of Constantinople, the catastrophe of 1922, or the invasion of Cyprus - remain etched in the collective psyche, shaping future military and diplomatic expectations.

Another understudied psychological mechanism concerns the notion of "collective threshold experience," inspired by Viktor Frankl's observations about meaning-making under extreme conditions.[63] When communities undergo hardship collectively, the shared suffering becomes a powerful source of identity formation. Greek history is punctuated by such threshold moments: sieges, uprisings, famines, occupations. These experiences accumulate into a cultural expectation that identity is forged through trial. Consequently, military identity becomes inseparable from moral narratives of endurance and purification. This

Harvard University Press, 2013.

62 PITT-RIVERS, Julian. *Honour and Social Status*. In "Honour and Shame". J. G. Peristiany, ed. Pp. 19-77. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 1965

63 FRANKL, Viktor. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1959.

explains the persistent glorification of hardship in Greek historical memory, from the "παιδιά της Πίνδου" in 1940 to the guerrillas of the Resistance. Hardship becomes not merely a past condition but an idealized emotional state reaffirming collective integrity.

The role of communal mourning also represents a unique affective mechanism. As anthropologist Loring Danforth notes, Greek mourning practices emphasize communal expression and shared emotional labor.[64] Within this framework, military loss is not privatized but public, transforming individual grief into collective identity. The communal laments for fallen soldiers, the annual commemorations of battles, and the ritualization of sacrifice inscribe loss into the fabric of national meaning. This emotional collectivization reinforces the idea that military service is not an individual endeavor but a communal contract that transcends the boundaries of life and death.

Additionally, Greek military identity is profoundly shaped by a cultural orientation toward narrative justice. Building on Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity,[65] Greek society frequently interprets historical events through a moral narrative structure: heroes who fight for freedom, oppressors who fall due to hubris, and communities that endure despite suffering. This narrative Justice acts as an affective filter, influencing how contemporary threats are interpreted and responded to. Even diplomatic disagreements are often framed in moral rather than strategic terms, reflecting a narrative template in which identity and morality are inseparable.

A final layer of psychological analysis concerns cultural resilience. Ann Masten defines resilience as "ordinary magic" - the capacity of communities to adapt and recover through culturally embedded strengths.[66] Greek resilience is not merely psychological but semiotic and emotional: it is built from symbols, rituals, myths, and relationships. This resilience sustains military identity by fostering continuity across ruptures, enabling the culture to preserve its core values despite crises. The resilience framework helps explain how Greek military ethos

64 DANFORTH, Loring. *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece*. Princeton: Princeton University Prss, 1982.

65 RICOEUR, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

66 MASTEN, Ann. *Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development*. New York: Guilford Press, 2014.

survived centuries of fragmentation, occupation, and geopolitical pressure. It also reveals why contemporary Greek military identity exhibits such a strong orientation toward historical continuity, symbolic meaning, and moral obligation.

Collectively, these psychological, emotional, and semiotic processes form a coherent system that has not been sufficiently explored in existing scholarship. The Greek military ethos is not reducible to strategic necessity or institutional development; it is deeply embedded in psychological inheritance, mythic structure, relational ethics, and ritualized affect. Understanding this deep psychology provides a more comprehensive framework for interpreting Greek military behavior, strategic culture, and national responses to contemporary challenges.

7 *The ontology of the Greek Warrior: Sacrifice, Temporality, and the Metaphysics of National Survival*

The Greek warrior tradition cannot be understood exclusively within the frameworks of military history, political sociology, or strategic culture. These disciplines illuminate institutional behaviors, tactical evolutions, and geopolitical orientations, but they do not account for the deeper ontological dimensions that structure Greek collective identity. This chapter argues that Greek military ethos emerges from a culturally unique understanding of being- an ontology of existence shaped by sacrifice, temporality, metaphysical continuity, and the belief that national survival transcends biological life. Such an approach draws from existential philosophy, symbolic anthropology, and historical phenomenology, providing an interpretive model capable of explaining the extraordinary longevity and emotional force of the Greek martial tradition.

Sacrifice lies at the core of this ontology. While sacrifice is a universal feature of military ethos across cultures, in Greece it assumes a uniquely metaphysical function. Drawing on René Girard's theory of sacrificial logic,[67] sacrifice in Greek tradition is not merely a transaction to secure communal continuity; it is a form of existential reaffirmation. The hero who dies "καλώς" does not merely protect the community but ensures its metaphysical regeneration. This is evident in ancient narratives such as the self-sacrifice of Leonidas, but also in modern ac-

67 GIRARD, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

counts such as the defense of Crete in 1941 or the stand at Gravia. The continuity between these events is not one of historical analogy but of ontological expectation: the community anticipates that true leadership manifests in the willingness to bear existential burden through self-sacrifice.

Temporality forms the second pillar of Greek warrior ontology. Following Paul Tillich's interpretation of "Kairos" [καιρός] as the "rupture of historical time by existential decision",[68] Greek military identity is structured around the expectation of decisive moments in which the community must assert its freedom. Unlike cultures that conceptualize history as linear progression or cyclical recurrence, Greek historical temporality integrates both modes: the repetition of suffering and the emergence of decisive action. This dual temporality allows Greeks to interpret contemporary events through ancient paradigms while simultaneously framing them as unique existential challenges. Such a temporal structure explains why modern military crises - such as the 1940 invasion or the 1974 Cyprus conflict - were easily framed within the symbolic language of earlier epochs. The past is not merely remembered; it is ontologically present, shaping emotional readiness and moral obligation.

A third dimension of this ontology is the metaphysics of homeland. It is argued that Greek conceptualizations of place exceed geographical meaning and assume existential significance. The homeland is not a space to be defended but a space that defines being. This resonates with Martin Heidegger's discussion of dwelling, in which place forms the ground of identity.[69] In the Greek case, this takes on heightened intensity due to historical experiences of exile, occupation, and forced migration. The loss of territory becomes a metaphysical rupture, while its defense becomes a defense of identity itself. This understanding underlies the persistent willingness of Greek populations to mobilize in defense of even symbolically charged territories, such as islands or isolated outposts. The metaphysical weight of place transforms military defense into an existential duty.

Another underexamined component of Greek military ontology involves the notion of reciprocal guardianship: the belief that the community protects its warriors as much as warriors protect the community. This relational ontology is visible in both ancient and modern practices. In Homeric literature, heroes fight not

68 TILLICH, Paul. *The Protestant Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948.

69 HEIDEGGER, Martin. *Building Dwelling Thinking*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

only for glory but for the recognition of their people.[70] In contemporary Greece, communal forms of remembrance - public funerals, national anniversaries, monuments - symbolically reaffirm this reciprocal relationship. The soldier's sacrifice binds the community, and the community's memory binds the soldier's identity beyond death. This reciprocal guardianship is largely absent from Western liberal models of military service, where service is contractual rather than ontological.

The role of metaphysical continuity becomes even more pronounced when examining the concept of collective survival. Scholars such as Benedict Anderson have described nations as "imagined communities",[71] but this model inadequately captures the way Greeks imagine themselves as a temporal chain of custodians. The Greek nation is not imagined merely as a horizontal network of present-day citizens but as a vertical continuum of ancestors and descendants. This verticality heightens the moral weight of military service: defending the homeland is simultaneously an act toward predecessors and successors. As Emmanuel Levinas argues, moral obligation emerges most strongly when one perceives oneself as responsible for the Other.[72] In Greece, the "Other" includes both the dead and the unborn.

This ontological framework is reinforced by the unique Greek relationship with death. Robert Hertz's classical study on the collective representation of death[73] suggests that societies with elaborate death rituals often integrate death into the social order more explicitly. Greek traditions of mourning, commemoration, and ritual purification create a cultural environment in which death is not the end of identity but its reaffirmation. In military contexts, the fallen soldier becomes not a symbol of loss but of continuity. The ψυχοσάββατα, the μνημόσυνα, and the annual commemorations invest death with communal meaning, transforming military sacrifice into a metaphysical bridge between life and the historical community.

The symbolic language of heroism also plays an essential role in sustaining this ontological structure. Roland Barthes describes myth as a semiological

70 SNELL, Bruno. *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Dover, 2003.

71 ANDERSON, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. Ibid.

72 LEVINAS, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*. *An Essay on Exteriority.* Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

73 HERTZ, Robert. *Death and the Right Hand*. London: Cohen & West, 1960.

system that naturalizes cultural values.[74] Greek heroic myths - from Achilles to Kolokotronis - function not as historical narratives but as ontological diagrams illustrating how existence should be lived in times of crisis. The hero embodies an existential model: one must live in such a way that one's actions transcend personal survival. This symbolic structure conditions contemporary expectations of military leadership, explaining why Greek society often demands a form of moral exemplarity from its officers that exceeds professional requirements.

A further component of Greek military ontology concerns the ethics of defiance. Drawing on Albert Camus's reflections on rebellion,[75] defiance in Greek culture is not merely resistance to oppression but a means of declaring one's existence. This existential defiance, evident in both ancient and modern narratives, expresses the belief that dignity precedes survival. Thus, military resistance becomes an act of ontological affirmation rather than a strategic calculation. This ethos shapes Greek interpretations of national crises, where the preservation of dignity often outweighs the preservation of material interests.

Finally, this ontology is sustained through ritualized enactments that reaffirm collective identity. Victor Turner's concept of communitas[76] helps explain the dissolution of social hierarchies during commemorations, parades, and national rituals. In these liminal moments, Greeks experience a sense of unity that transcends class, region, ideology, or generation. This ritual unity reinforces the idea of shared existential purpose, strengthening the ontological foundations of military identity.

Collectively, these elements - sacrifice, temporality, metaphysics of place, reciprocal guardianship, vertical communal identity, symbolic heroism, existential defiance, and ritual unity - constitute a uniquely Greek ontology of the warrior. The significance of this ontology has been largely overlooked in military studies and strategic analysis, yet it provides a critical interpretive framework capable of explaining the profound emotional durability and symbolic power of Greek military ethos across centuries.

74 BARTHES, Roland. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.

75 CAMUS, Albert. *The Rebel*. New York: Vintage, 1956.

76 TURNER, Victor. *The Ritual Process*. Ibid.

8 *Trauma, memory, and the collective Neuropsychology of the greek warrior identity*

The Greek warrior identity cannot be entirely explained by historical continuity, symbolic traditions, or metaphysical ontologies alone. Beneath these layers lies a deeper and more elusive substratum: the collective neuropsychology of trauma, memory, and identity formation. This chapter develops a new theoretical model - introduced here for the first time - arguing that Greek military ethos emerges from a unique historical neuro-pattern produced by repeated cycles of existential threat, displacement, and heroic response. This model integrates theories of cultural trauma, memory studies, and neuroanthropology to reveal an underlying mechanism that has not been adequately recognized in existing scholarship.

Cultural trauma theory provides the foundation for this argument. Jeffrey Alexander defines cultural trauma as a rupture that leaves lasting marks on collective consciousness.[77] In Greece, trauma is not episodic but cumulative. From the Persian Wars to the fall of Constantinople, from Ottoman domination to the Asia Minor Catastrophe, and from the occupation of 1941 - 44 to the 1974 invasion of Cyprus, the Greek people have been repeatedly subjected to experiences that threaten not merely political sovereignty but cultural existence. Yet, unlike other societies where trauma leads to fragmentation or collective withdrawal, Greek cultural trauma generates a counter-mechanism of heroic activation. This activation manifests as a neuropsychological pattern in which threat triggers not fear-based paralysis but culturally encoded defiance.

Modern neuroanthropology provides further insights. Studies by Downey on embodied learning demonstrate how cultural practices shape neural pathways.[78] In the Greek case, intergenerational narratives of heroism, martyrdom, and resistance cultivate neural predispositions toward elevated emotional arousal and moral absolutism in moments perceived as collective threat. This does not imply genetic determinism; rather, it reflects the powerful role of narrative exposure during the formative years. Children raised with stories of Thermopylae, Mes-

77 ALEXANDER, Jeffrey. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

78 DOWNEY, Greg. *Learning Capoeira: Lessons in Cunning from an Afro-Brazilian Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

solonghi, or the Albanian front internalize emotional scripts that structure future responses to crisis. These scripts produce what can be described as a culturally specific neuro-emotional reflex of defiance.

Collective memory theory further strengthens the argument. Maurice Halbwachs asserted that memory is socially framed.[79] In Greece, the social framing of memory is exceptionally dense: commemorative rituals, national anniversaries, stories of heroic ancestors, and religious liturgies create an environment where historical memory becomes neuropsychologically embodied. Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory[80] is particularly relevant here. Greek society maintains both: communicative memory transmitted through family narratives, and cultural memory institutionalized through education, church traditions, and national symbols. The dual reinforcement of memory forms a neurocultural architecture that stabilizes warrior identity even in eras of peace.

A distinctive feature of Greek memory culture is its integration of trauma into national self-definition. While many states attempt to neutralize traumatic memory through distancing or depoliticization, Greece retains trauma as a constitutive element of identity. This aligns with Cathy Caruth's concept of "unclaimed experience," in which trauma remains active and unprocessed within collective consciousness.[81] However, the Greek case diverges from Caruth's general model: instead of producing collective disorientation, unprocessed trauma becomes a generative force that shapes national narratives of defiance. Trauma does not dissolve identity; it consolidates it.

From a psychological perspective, this phenomenon resembles what Vamik Volkan calls "chosen trauma," in which communities selectively preserve traumatic memories as identity markers.[82] Greek cultural history contains several such chosen traumas: the Fall of Constantinople, the Destruction of Smyrna, the

79 HALBWACHS, Maurice. *On Collective Memory.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

80 ASSMANN, Jan. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

81 CARUTH, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

82 VOLKAN, Vamik. *Blood Lines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997.

German occupation, and the events of 1974. These traumas provide emotional fuel for collective cohesion and mobilization. They also contribute to a neuropsychological expectation of threat - a readiness that manifests in military ethos as heightened vigilance and rapid mobilization of moral emotions such as honor, rage, and solidarity.

This emotional architecture explains the remarkable persistence of heroic ideals in Greek military identity. While other Western militaries have shifted toward technocratic models, Greek society continues to valorize archetypes of personal courage and heroic sacrifice. This is not mere nostalgia; it is a neurocultural imprint derived from the integration of trauma and memory. Antonio Damasio's theory of somatic markers[83] offers a theoretical lens: historical narratives generate emotional associations stored in the body, guiding responses during crises. Greek somatic markers - formed through collective memory of resistance - produce embodied dispositions that elevate concepts such as honor and communal survival above individual safety.

These neuropsychological dynamics have direct implications for strategic behavior. Greek threat perception is deeply shaped by the emotional weight of historical memory. As Richard Ned Lebow argues, emotions play a decisive role in international relations.[84] Greek strategic culture is infused with emotional residues of past conflicts, resulting in heightened sensitivity to perceived violations of sovereignty. This is not irrationality but a neurohistorical logic: the memory of past losses conditions the perception of future risks. Thus, Greek responses to geopolitical challenges often display a moralistic intensity absent in states with less traumatic histories.

Furthermore, the integration of trauma into national identity generates a phenomenon that can be described as "anticipatory heroism." Unlike societies in which heroism is recognized retrospectively, Greek culture embeds an expectation of heroism in its military actors before crisis occurs. This anticipatory heroism shapes training, leadership, and public perception. As Joanna Bourke notes, cultural scripts of bravery influence how soldiers imagine their potential actions

83 DAMASIO, Antonio. *The Feeling of What Happens*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999.

84 LEBOW, Richard Ned. *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

in war.[85] In Greece, such scripts are saturated with historical and religious imagery, producing a heightened sense of metaphysical duty.

Religion plays an essential role in reinforcing this neuropsychological structure. Rituals such as μνημόσυνα, ευχέλαια, and παρελάσεις do not merely commemorate the dead; they provide neuropsychological processing of trauma by integrating it into communal identity. The church's liturgical language emphasizes martyrdom, sacrifice, and resurrection, reinforcing emotional expectations regarding military service. This religious-symbolic system forms a bridge between trauma and transcendence, shaping a warrior identity that perceives death not as annihilation but as transformative offering.

A crucial but neglected dimension concerns the aesthetics of trauma in Greek culture. Mark Mazower has argued that Greek historical consciousness is profoundly shaped by the aesthetics of catastrophe.[86] Paintings, poems, folk songs, and memorials visually and emotionally encode traumatic events. These aesthetic forms create what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls "presence effects",[87] allowing trauma to be felt rather than merely remembered. The embodied experience of such aesthetic forms contributes to neuropsychological imprinting, strengthening emotional readiness for sacrifice.

The culmination of these dynamics is a uniquely Greek "neuro-ethos of resistance." This neuro-ethos is characterized by: (a) emotionally charged memory, (b) embodied trauma narratives, (c) elevated moral expectations, (d) anticipatory heroism, and (e) metaphysical framing of national duty. These elements generate a collective psychology in which military service is not perceived as contractual obligation but as neurocultural destiny. This theoretical model, developed here for the first time, offers a powerful explanation for the extraordinary continuity and emotional intensity of Greek military identity across centuries.

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85 BOURKE, Joanna. *An Intimate History of Killing*: Face-to-face killing in twentieth-century warfare. New York: Basic Books, 1999.

86 MAZOWER, Mark. *Inside Hitler's Greece. The Experience of Occupation, 1941-44* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

87 GUMBRECHT, Hans Ulrich. *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.

9 *Performative sovereignty, distributed heroism, and the architecture of ritual deterrence in Greek military identity*

The preceding chapters have traced cultural mechanics, ontologies, affective structures, and neuropsychological patterns that sustain Greek military identity. Building on those layers, this chapter advances three interrelated, novel claims - each grounded in comparative literature but here articulated as an integrated explanatory architecture that, to my knowledge, has not been laid out in this particular form. First, Greek military identity operates through a practice I term performative sovereignty: a repertoire of symbolic acts and ritualized displays that constitutively produce state legitimacy and deter adversaries by transforming identity into enacted authority. Second, the classic figure of the solitary hero is complemented in Greek practice by a dispersed phenomenon I call distributed heroism, wherein civic networks, religious sites, and family lineages jointly instantiate heroic capacity across social strata. Third, a systemic mechanism - ritual deterrence - links commemoration, liturgy, public ceremony and military rehearsal into an anticipatory signaling architecture whose strategic effect is to socialize both domestic audiences and external rivals into a shared script of existential stakes. Together these concepts form an analytical synthesis that explains why Greek military identity remains operationally potent across epochs and why it continues to shape strategic behavior in ways that conventional institutional analysis does not predict.

Performative sovereignty operates at multiple registers. At the public register it includes state ceremonies, military parades, the ritualized blessing of units, and patriotic education - all conventional instruments - but effectiveness derives from their embeddedness within deeper cultural repertoires that pre-exist the modern state. At the community register it comprises localized rites - blessings in mountain monasteries, village memorials, family μνημόσυνα - that perform sovereignty in contexts where central institutions historically were weak or absent. The crucial analytic move here is to recognize these practices not as mere reflections of sovereignty but as constitutive acts: they produce recognition, obligation, and an embodied sense of political belonging. When mapped diachronically, such acts reveal continuity with Byzantine sanctification practices and klephtic patronage rituals, suggesting performative sovereignty is a durable institutional form in Hellenic political culture. Empirically, this explains patterns in which

symbolic acts (e.g., a high-profile parade, the consecration of an island chapel, or a public oath) succeed in rallying broad societal support and shaping tactical decision-making - effects that conventional materialist models of deterrence often miss.

Distributed heroism reframes the locus of valor from individual virtuosity toward a socially diffused capability. Classic historiography privileges figures such as Leonidas, Kolokotronis or other charismatic commanders, but a sociological reading reveals a recurrent pattern: heroism is sustained through networks of relational support - families that receive and transmit reputational capital, monasteries that provide moral and logistic backing, and local institutions that codify honor through ritual reciprocity. This distribution has three strategic consequences. First, it lowers the threshold for mobilization: when the capacity for heroic action is distributed across kinship and religious networks, spontaneous collective resistance becomes feasible even absent centralized command. Second, it provides redundancy: the loss of individual leaders does not collapse the capability because the heroic function is encoded in wider social practices. Third, it amplifies moral pressure for reciprocity - communities that benefit from heroic acts have obligations to honor and to reenact the script, strengthening intergenerational transmission. Viewing heroism as distributed illuminates how the 1821 uprising or WWII guerrilla resistance could scale rapidly despite weak formal institutions: existing social architectures already embodied the capacity to enact valor.

Ritual deterrence synthesizes performative sovereignty and distributed heroism into a measurable strategic logic. Unlike classic deterrence models which rely on capabilities and rational signaling, ritual deterrence emphasizes cultural signal fidelity: ceremonies, commemorations, and liturgical invocations function as low-cost, high-fidelity signals of resolve because they tap into shared moral grammars[88]. The credibility of these signals stems not from ephemeral rhetoric but from cumulative ritual histories; a nation that annually enacts martyrdom narratives and cyclically sanctifies sacrifice creates predictable behavioral expectations - both internally (mobilization readiness) and externally (perceived thresholds of provocation). In the Greek - Turkish context, ritual deterrence helps explain episodes where rhetorical escalation translated into real diplomatic con-

88 BUZAN, Barry & WÆVER, Ole. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Ibid.

straints: ritualized domestic mobilization increased political costs of de-escalation, thereby making certain bargaining moves untenable. Ritual deterrence thus provides a mechanism linking cultural memory to interstate bargaining dynamics.

These three mechanisms interact through a distinctive infrastructure I term the memory-ritual complex - an institutional ecology of museums, school curricula, church calendars, local commemorations, veterans' associations, and media representations that routinize heroic scripts into everyday expectation. While elements of this complex have been studied separately, their integrated function - as an engine of persistent strategic signaling - has been insufficiently theorized. The memory-ritual complex performs three tasks: encoding (transforming events into canonical narratives), rehearsal (re-enacting narratives through ceremonies and education), and calibration (updating scripts in response to geopolitical change). Calibration is particularly important: crises prompt adaptive retuning of rituals - new commemorative dates, adjusted curricula, or the elevation of contemporary figures into canonical status - thereby maintaining relevance while preserving continuity.

Importantly, the memory-ritual complex is not passive; it is reflexive and produces feedback loops. Media amplification of commemorations interacts with political opportunism to create cycles of securitization.[89] Political actors may instrumentalize ritual practices to expand political capital, while military institutions leverage cultural narratives to legitimize procurement choices or doctrine. Yet such instrumental uses feed back into communal expectations, further entrenching ritual deterrence. The reflexivity of the complex explains instances in which domestic political actors find themselves constrained by the performative scripts they helped activate - a phenomenon observed in other securitized contexts but here rooted in particularly deep cultural continuity.

A final novel finding concerns the institutional shadow networks that sustain cultural mechanics during periods of state weakness. Where the central state was absent or delegitimized, informal networks - monastic orders, local clans, diaspora associations - acted as canonical custodians of martial identity, preserving rituals and reputational systems that could be reactivated when moments of crisis arrived. This explains how, following periods of occupation or collapse, Greek

89 WAEVER, Ole. *Securitization and Desecuritization*, in *On Security*, ed. Ronnie D. Lipschutz. Ibid.

society has repeatedly mobilized resilient martial capacities: the social infrastructure never fully atrophied. The institutional shadow networks operate trans-locally - diaspora commemorations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries preserved memory, funded monuments, and influenced metropolitan politics - so the architecture of identity is distributed beyond territorial borders.

Collectively, these contributions offer an explanatory model with testable implications. Researchers can operationalize performative sovereignty by coding ritual density and state recognition events; distributed heroism can be tested via network analysis of kinship and monastic links in mobilized units; ritual deterrence can be evaluated through case studies linking ceremonial escalation to bargaining outcomes; institutional shadow networks can be traced through archival records of diaspora associations and monastic patronage. The theoretical claims made here therefore transform qualitative insights into a program for mixed-methods inquiry, enabling empirical validation while preserving conceptual novelty.

This chapter's synthesis reframes Greek military identity not as a static cultural heritage but as an active, institutionally mediated, and strategically consequential system. By articulating performative sovereignty, distributed heroism, ritual deterrence, and institutional shadow networks as interacting mechanisms, the chapter provides an original architecture that explains both historical resilience and contemporary strategic behavior. The following chapters will operationalize these claims with micro-historical case studies and prosopographical evidence to demonstrate the empirical weight of the model.

10 Findings and Analysis

The findings of this study converge on a central insight: Greek military identity is not a static cultural relic nor a conventional national tradition but a multilayered, self-generating system composed of interlocking symbolic, affective, neuropsychological, and strategic mechanisms. Across historical periods, from classical antiquity to the present, the Greek case reveals a unique synthesis in which existential memory, ritual practices, heroic ethics, and collective trauma do not merely coexist but mutually reinforce one another in ways that continuously regenerate the capacity for organized resistance. This system functions through an internal logic of activation: moments of perceived threat trigger a mobilization of cultural memory, emotional repertoires, and ritualized behaviors that rapidly

transform symbolic heritage into strategic resolve. The findings therefore point to a distinct model of military identity not adequately captured by existing theories of nationalism, civil–military relations, or strategic culture.

One of the most original findings is the identification of performative sovereignty as a core engine of Greek military identity. The data indicate that sovereignty in the Greek case is enacted more often than it is merely declared. The state does not simply possess authority - it performs it through rituals, oaths, commemorations, liturgical associations, and symbolic gestures that materially construct political legitimacy[90]. These performative acts acquire their authority not because they are commanded by the state but because they draw from older cultural reservoirs that predate the modern Greek polity. The finding challenges the conventional Weberian assumption that monopoly of force is the basis of sovereignty; instead, the Greek case reveals that sovereignty is co-produced by a cultural ecosystem in which the state, church, family networks, and local communities each contribute elements of symbolic authority. The performative character of sovereignty explains why military identity retains unusual resilience even during periods of institutional fragility. It also explains the remarkable elasticity of Greek mobilization patterns, where symbolic acts can generate real political and strategic consequences.

A second, equally significant finding concerns the concept of distributed heroism, which reframes the source of Greek martial capability. Traditional historiography emphasizes exceptional individuals, yet the research here demonstrates that heroism in Greek society has long functioned as a dispersed system of relational expectations tied to kinship structures, communal reciprocity, and ritual obligations. Heroic capacity is not the possession of a few extraordinary figures; it is distributed across social networks that cultivate, transmit, and sanctify heroic norms.[91] This finding has profound implications for understanding the recurrent appearance of mass participation in resistance movements: the cultural architecture preconditions ordinary actors to view heroic action as socially expected rather than individually exceptional. It also provides an explanatory mechanism for the rapid regeneration of military morale after periods of collapse or occupation. When heroism is socially distributed, its reactivation does not depend on the con-

90 TURNER, Victor. *The Ritual Process*. *Structure and Anti- Structure*. Ibid

91 TILLY, Charles. Coercion, Capital and European States. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

tinuity of leadership but on the continuity of communal structures and narrative repertoires.

A third major finding emerges from examining the interaction between memory, trauma, and ritual, which together form what this study terms a memory-ritual complex.[92] This complex operates as a self-reinforcing cultural technology that preserves historical experience, encodes emotional responses, and provides scripts for future action. The research shows that traumatic episodes - such as the fall of Constantinople, the Asia Minor Catastrophe, and the occupation during World War II - are not simply historical events but active memory nodes integrated into communal rituals, liturgy, artistic representation, and state commemorations.[93] These nodes produce emotional resonance that transcends generations, embedding trauma within collective identity not as a wound but as a template for resilience. The memory-ritual complex therefore constitutes a mechanism through which the past is mobilized in the present, allowing historical trauma to shape contemporary strategic behavior in ways that are predictable within Greek cultural logic but unusual in comparative perspective.

Building on this architecture, the study's analysis reveals the existence of an emergent phenomenon conceptualized as ritual deterrence. Unlike conventional deterrence, which relies on the strategic manipulation of military capabilities and rational expectation, ritual deterrence operates through signals embedded in cultural memory and collective identity. The research demonstrates that ritualized commemorations, military parades, religious blessings, and symbolic assertions of sovereignty serve as credibility-producing devices precisely because they align with deeply internalized narratives of sacrifice and resistance. These signals function both domestically and externally: domestically, they reinforce mobilization readiness by invoking shared scripts; externally, they communicate a threshold of moral tolerance beyond which national cohesion will intensify rather than falter. The strength of ritual deterrence lies in its recursive nature: rituals generate credibility, credibility enhances resolve, and resolve sustains rituals. This mechanism provides a novel explanation for Greek strategic behavior in crises where symbolic acts influence diplomatic outcomes.

The research also uncovers the central role of institutional shadow networks

92 ASSMANN, Jan. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*. Ibid.

93 VERNANT, Jean-Pierre. *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*. Ibid.

in preserving military identity during periods of political disintegration or occupation. These networks - composed of monasteries, diaspora organizations, familial kin-groups, and informal communal councils - sustain ritual memory and symbolic authority when state structures collapse. The findings show that Greek identity possesses a decentralized resilience architecture: even when formal institutions are disrupted, the cultural mechanisms that sustain military identity remain intact and can be reactivated with minimal latency. This model challenges linear narratives of state continuity by demonstrating that cultural identity, not institutional bureaucracy, is the primary repository of martial resilience.

Collectively, the findings reveal a system that is far more cohesive and dynamic than previously understood. Greek military identity emerges not from any single source - neither ancient tradition, nor Orthodoxy, nor nationalism alone - but from a polycentric cultural constellation that transforms symbolic inheritance into strategic effect.[94] The findings illuminate how the Hellenic experience connects existential values with political practice: freedom is not a rhetorical ideal but a culturally encoded response to threat; heroism is not an exceptional virtue but a distributed social expectation; memory is not archival but performative; trauma is not a rupture but a generative force; ritual is not decorative but strategic.

This model offers explanatory power for both historical and contemporary phenomena. It clarifies why small populations have repeatedly mobilized against overwhelming adversaries; why national cohesion spikes during external crises; why geopolitical rivalry with Turkey acquires existential dimensions; and why symbolic gestures - from flag raisings to liturgical blessings - carry strategic weight disproportionate to their material cost. The findings demonstrate that Greek strategic culture cannot be understood without recognizing the recursive interplay between narrative, ritual, emotion, and identity.

Ultimately, this chapter establishes that Greek military identity is best conceptualized as a living system: self-organizing, self-renewing, and dynamically responsive to threat. Its endurance is not accidental but structurally produced by the interdependence of cultural memory, communal networks, symbolic practices, and embodied emotional repertoires. The analysis therefore positions Greek military identity as a paradigmatic case for understanding how nations transform historical consciousness into strategic capability. This framework provides a

94 SMITH, Anthony D. *The Cultural Foundations of Nations*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.

foundation for future comparative research and sets the stage for the concluding reflections in the final chapter of this study.

11 Conclusion

The present study set out to investigate the deep cultural, symbolic, and structural mechanisms through which Greek military identity has been generated, sustained, and continuously transformed from antiquity to the contemporary geopolitical landscape. What emerged through the analysis is a multilayered and self-renewing system: one that fuses ancestral memory, heroic ethics, ritualized practices, collective trauma, and state institutions into a coherent, though dynamic, framework of meaning and action. Far from representing a static cultural inheritance, Greek military identity appears instead as an adaptive ecosystem—capable of reshaping itself in response to historical ruptures, foreign domination, and shifting strategic environments.

At the heart of the findings lies a fundamental insight: freedom, for the Greeks, is not merely a political condition but an existential principle inseparable from collective identity. From the ancient maxim *Ἢ τὰν ἢ ἐπὶ τᾶς* to the modern rallying cry *Freedom or Death*, the research demonstrates that the Greek notion of freedom operates simultaneously as an emotional imperative, a cultural script, a ritualized social expectation, and an operational doctrine. This multi-dimensional understanding of freedom explains the persistent historical phenomenon whereby small Greek populations repeatedly mobilized against numerically or materially superior powers. The research shows that freedom is understood less as an objective state to be attained and more as a relational condition—something that demands constant defense, reenactment, and reaffirmation. This explains why Greek military identity has historically been triggered not merely by external threats, but by challenges to dignity, autonomy, or symbolic sovereignty.

A second major conclusion relates to the distributed nature of heroism in Greek society. Throughout the research, evidence accumulated that the Greek heroic ideal does not function in the Western romantic sense of extraordinary individuals whose greatness is defined by isolation. Rather, Greek heroism is fundamentally communal: a product of kinship networks, local solidarities, and shared rituals that collectively create a cultural expectation for courageous conduct. This distributed heroism dissolves the boundary between the ordinary and the excep-

tional, rendering bravery not an anomaly but a normative behavioral horizon. Thus, the same system that produced legendary figures like Kolokotronis also sustained countless anonymous acts of resistance, sacrifice, and steadfastness. This insight reshapes our understanding of Greek military history, revealing that collective patterns of courage were not spontaneous anomalies but manifestations of an underlying cultural mechanism.

The third major finding concerns the memory - ritual complex identified through the study. Rather than treating memory and ritual as separate phenomena, the research shows that Greek collective memory is performed, enacted, and reinscribed through ritualized practices - religious liturgies, national commemorations, military oaths, and symbolic gestures. Trauma plays a generative role in this complex: defeats and catastrophes are not simply remembered but metabolized into guiding narratives that shape future action. The fall of Constantinople, Ottoman domination, the Asia Minor catastrophe, and other historical ruptures function as activated memory nodes embedded within communal rituals. These memory nodes supply emotional energy, normative direction, and strategic clarity. They cultivate what the study defines as *performative sovereignty* - the enactment of national selfhood through embodied practices rather than purely institutional assertions.

The conclusions also reveal a previously underexplored interplay between Greek military identity and the domains of military pedagogy and military leadership. The research demonstrates that Greek military pedagogy has historically operated not only as a transmission of tactical skills, but as a powerful mechanism for cultural encoding. Through pedagogical rituals - oaths, training practices, symbolic narratives, and exposure to shared historical memories—new generations of soldiers are inducted into a moral universe that frames military service as a continuation of ancestral struggle. This pedagogical system embeds emotional knowledge and cultural expectations within the cognitive architecture of military training, producing leaders who are not merely tacticians but custodians of collective identity.

Military leadership in the Greek context emerges, therefore, as a culturally embedded practice that adds a new dimension to standard leadership theory. Whereas modern leadership models often emphasize individual charisma or bureaucratic competence, Greek military leadership - both historically and in the present - functions as a process of symbolic mediation between the past and the

present, between collective memory and strategic decision-making. Leaders derive legitimacy not solely from rank or expertise, but from their capacity to personify shared values, articulate inherited narratives, and mobilize distributed heroism within the ranks. This culturally specific model of leadership offers a novel contribution to global military studies: leadership as an act of cultural continuity.

Finally, the research led to significant conclusions regarding the nexus between Greek military identity and international relations. Greek strategic behavior cannot be fully understood through rationalist models that treat states as unitary actors maximizing material interests. Instead, Greek foreign policy and security postures are deeply shaped by the cultural system outlined in the study. Memory, trauma, symbolic gestures, ritual deterrence, and distributed heroism influence threat perception, alliance formation, and diplomatic signaling. This explains why relationships with neighboring states - particularly Turkey - take on existential dimensions, why alliances such as NATO are perceived not only in terms of security but cultural belonging, and why symbolic provocations often elicit strategic responses disproportionate to their material content. Greek participation in international organizations thus reflects not only geopolitical calculations but a cultural imperative for securing existential recognition.

In synthesizing all findings, the study concludes that Greek military identity is best understood as a self-organizing cultural system rooted in emotional memory, heroic ethics, ritualized sovereignty, and communal pedagogy. This system exhibits remarkable continuity despite historical fragmentation because it does not depend on any single institution; instead, it operates through polycentric networks - family, church, diaspora, local communities, and the military itself. The Greek case challenges traditional theories of nationalism, deterrence, leadership, and identity formation. It shows that military culture, far from being subordinate to politics or strategy, can play a constitutive role in shaping the state, guiding foreign policy, and defining national purpose.

Ultimately, this study reveals a distinctive and deeply coherent model of military identity - one that transforms memory into action, trauma into resilience, ritual into strategy, and cultural legacy into contemporary geopolitical agency. In illuminating these mechanisms, the research not only contributes a new theoretical framework for understanding Greece, but offers a broader paradigm for examining how nations convert historical consciousness into strategic behavior.

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Greek poster remembering Greek resistance against Italian aggression,
28 October 1940

Containment in the Pacific Ocean: The Obama Administration and China's Sea Power

by Bruno Pierri

Abstract: This study analyses the Obama Administration's Pivot to Asia, evaluating US efforts to balance diplomatic engagement with military containment as China expanded its sea power. Although early diplomatic efforts welcomed Beijing as a responsible stakeholder, structural competition quickly resurfaced over vital sea lines of communication. Beijing sought to secure vulnerable maritime chokepoints by transitioning the People's Liberation Army Navy from coastal defence to a modern blue-water force capable of Far Seas Protection under Hu Jintao's New Historic Missions mandate. Hillary Clinton's 2010 Hanoi Declaration and President Obama's 2011 address to the Australian Parliament enshrined the Asia-Pacific Rebalance, formalising six key lines of action centred on alliance modernisation, multilateral trade, and freedom of navigation. Beijing perceived the US pivot as a pincer and containment strategy, responding with expansive land reclamation in the South China Sea, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, and a resolution to become a premier maritime power.

Keywords: Pivot to Asia, Maritime power, Alliances in Asia-Pacific, Multilateral trade, Containment vs engagement.

Introduction

«Asia and the United States are not separated by this great ocean […] This is where we engage in much of our commerce and buy many of our goods. […] We look to emerging nations that are poised to play a larger role […]So the United States does not seek to contain China […] On the contrary, the rise of a strong, prosperous China can be a source of strength for the community of nations[1]. This is how President Barack Obama spoke in Tokyo on

From the author to the Duchess

1 *Text of President Obama's Speech*, November 18, 2009, on line on site www.voanews.com.

NAM, Strategic History
DOI: 10.36158/97912566955397
November 2026

November 18, 2009. By assessing his words, we may assume the American Administration was shifting the pivot of its foreign polices from the Middle East to the Asia Pacific region, where the global challenges of the XXI century were already surfacing. Two days before the afore mentioned address, Obama had been to Shanghai, on the occasion of which he had spoken about the interconnectivity of the world. On grounds of that, power in the 21st century was no longer regarded as a zero-sum game. That was why the giant of the Far East was welcomed as a prosperous and successful member of the community of nations[2].

Such an apparently friendly atmosphere followed the pattern begun under the previous Republican Administration inaugurating the US-China Senior Dialogue and the US-China Strategic Economic Dialogue. As Henry Kissinger reminds, Beijing was trying to allay apprehensions on its growing power by explaining the proposition of China's peaceful rise. Influential scholars and policy makers offered the assurance that the PRC was seeking a new political and economic order to achieve through the democratisation of international relations[3]. Washington responded by formulating the concept of China as a responsible stakeholder in the global system. As a matter of fact, on September 21, 2005 in New York City, the Deputy Secretary of State, Robert Zoellick had stated that the United States had to help foster constructive action by encouraging China to become a responsible stakeholder in the international system[4]. Such an address followed President Hu Jintao's speech at the United Nations, when the leader of the People's Republic had reminded the importance of the UN system as a framework for international security and development. Hu openly welcomed the deepening trend towards a multi-polar world with a globalised economy. Instead of leading to a more polarised world, countries' interests were said to have become mutually intertwined, and their respective development was assessed to depend more closely on global development[5].

2 Barack H. Obama, *Shanghai Town Hall with Future Chinese Leaders*, 16 November 2009, Shanghai Technology and Science Museum, Shanghai, China, on line on site www.americanrhetoric.com.

3 Henry A. Kissinger, *On China*, London, Allen Lane, 2011, pp. 497-499.

4 R. Zoellick, *"Whither China? From Membership to Responsibility"*, Remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, September 21, 2005, New York City, on-line on site www.ncuscr.org.

5 *Build towards a Harmonious World of Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity*, Statement by H.E. Hu Jintao, President of the People's Republic of China, at the United Nations

On the ground of these words, it looks as though there were excellent relations between the two Pacific powers, especially after the PRC had joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001. Nevertheless, Kissinger thinks that the collapse of American end European financial markets in 2008 undermined the mystique of Western economic prowess. The outcome was that a new tide of opinion was prompted, according to which a pivotal shift in the structure of the international system was taking place[6]. In actual fact, a few years afterwards, in giving his testimony before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Captain James Fanell stated that China's path to global maritime hegemony had already begun as a slightly capable brown water force in the 1970s. In the following decade, the PRC's naval forces have started conducting small scale, routine operations in both the South and East China Seas. Finally, by 2000 the People's Republic's strategic goals had become clear[7]. As it is easy to realise, these words look like a contradiction to the speeches delivered during the second Bush Administration and the very first year of Obama's Executive. In fact, the available documentation shows a different story and we may assume that the necessity to cooperate with the Chinese did not rule out the rivalry that was surfacing in the Asia-Pacific region. As evidence of such a confrontation, Jennifer Rice and Erik Robb state that the origins of China's new naval strategy may be traced back to Hu Jintao's call for the People's Liberation Army to undertake New Historic Missions. In light of that, Hu delivered a speech in late 2004, laying out four tasks for the PLA, that is: 1) consolidating the ruling status of the Communist Party; 2) safeguarding the period of important strategic opportunity for national development; 3) safeguarding China's expanding national interests; 4) safeguarding world peace and promote common development[8].

In the meantime, in 2005 Obama articulated a foreign policy view questioning the decisions taken under the Bush Administration. While acknowledging

Summit, New York, September 15, 2005, on-line on site www.un.org.

6 Kissinger, *On China*, cit., p. 501.

7 *China's Global Naval Strategy and Expanding Force Structure: Pathway to Hegemony*, Testimony by Captain James Fanell (USN, Ret.), May 17, 2018, on-line on site intelligence.house.gov.

8 Jennifer Rice and Erik Robb, «The Origins of Near Seas Defense and Far Seas Protection», *CMSI China Maritime*, 13, 2 (2021), p. 7, on-line on the site digital-commons.usnwc.edu.

the need to ensure the Atlantic power's security in a world vastly different from the Cold War, the future President refuted the idea of isolationism and saw challenges to global order and security coming mainly from those parts of the world on the margins of the global economy[9].At the same time, David Scott reminds that China was by then making its presence felt in the Pacific and Indian basin, which reflected Beijing's maritime strategy to get access to the resources of those deep-sea waters and sea beds holding fisheries and minerals[10].As far as the South China Sea is concerned, this was crucial not only because of the importance of the oceanic straits, but also because maritime disputes might place China's westbound shipments at risk[11]. To sum up, in order to guarantee the security of sealines of communication (SLOCs) in Southeast Asian seas and the Indian Ocean, the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party believed that a strategic alliance with the nations of the area was beneficial to counter American hegemony[12]. As a matter of fact, Christopher H. Robertson writes that since the mid-1990s China had been carrying out rhetorical and physical confrontations with US interests in the Asia-Pacific region. For example, PRC military officers and academics had been claiming the United States as a threat. In particular, human rights and trade linkage were regarded as a new form of imperial colonialism, while China's sales of military equipment around the region increased and challenged US concerns over proliferation[13].

Meanwhile, in October 2007 the commanders of US Marine Corps and the Coast Guard, and the Chief of Naval Operations had presented a document called "A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower". The report was based on the assumption that over the previous four decades total sea borne trade had more than quadrupled, so that ninety per cent of world trade and two-thirds of its petroleum were transported by sea. Having said that, US sea-power was supposed to be globally postured with the aim to strategic imperatives, that is: 1) forward

9 Barack H. Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, New York, NY, Crown Publishers, 2006, pp. 302-305.

10 David Scott, «China's Indo-Pacific Strategy: The Problems of Success», *Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies*, 6, 2 (2019), pp. 100-101.

11 You Ji, «China's Emerging Indo-Pacific Naval Strategy», *Asia Policy*, 11, 22 (2016), p. 17.

12 Lee Jae-Hyung, «China's Expanding Maritime Ambitions in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean», *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 24, 3 (2002), p. 553.

13 Christopher H. Robertson, *The Obama Administration's Pacific Pivot Strategy: An Assessment*, Fort Leavenworth, KS, School of Advanced Military Studies 2017, p. 13.

presence to reassure allies and deter adversaries; 2) deterrence by discouraging aggression through deployable combat power; 3) sea control to guarantee absolute freedom of navigation; 4) power projection to launch operations from sea to shore; 5) maritime security to challenge piracy, smuggling, and terrorism; 6) humanitarian assistance by providing swift civil and medical relief during natural or man-made crises[14]. One of the optimists of those years was Andrew S. Erickson, who reminded that American and Chinese military platforms were increasingly encountering each other in near or territorial waters. Hence, the US and the PRC were encouraged to establish at least a joint threat-reporting collaboration[15]. On the other hand, the importance of sea lines of communication was reminded by Secretary of State Hilary Rodham Clinton a few years afterwards in Hanoi, when she stated that the United States had a national interest in open access to Asia's maritime commons[16].The following year US policy on the Asia Pacific area had been framed, so much so that in Honolulu Secretary Clinton stressed that it was becoming increasingly clear that the world's strategic and economic centre of the new century would be the Asia Pacific, from the Indian subcontinent to the Western shores of the Americas. As it is easy to understand, the most complex and consequential relationship with an emerging power was the one with the People's Republic of China. In conclusion, Hillary Clinton summed up six key lines of action, that is strengthening bilateral security alliances; deepening working relationships with emerging powers; engaging with regional multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence; advancing democracy and human rights[17].

A few days later, President Obama enshrined this concept during his address to the Australian Parliament. The undeniable truth, said the Commander in Chief, was that the United States would always be a Pacific nation. As the world's fastest-growing region, and home to more than half the global economy, the Asia

14 James T. Conway, Gary Roughead, and Thad W. Allen, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, October 2007, on-line on site climateandsecurity.org.

15 Andrew S. Erickson, «Chinese Views of America's New Maritime Strategy», in Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, and Nan Li, *China, the United States and 21st Century Sea Power* (eds.), Annapolis, MD, Naval Institute Press, 2010, pp. 455-456.

16 *Remarks at Press Availability*, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State, National Convention Center, Hanoi, Vietnam, July 23, 2010, on-line on site 2009-2017.state.gov.

17 *America's Pacific Century*, Remarks by Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State, East-West Center, Honolulu, HI, November 10, 2011, on-line on site 2009-2017.state.gov.

Pacific was considered as critical to the United States. Hence, the Anglo-Saxon superpower was supposed to play a larger and long-term role in close partnership with allies and friends. First of all, Washington sought security, therefore standing for an international order in which the rights and responsibilities of all nations were upheld and commerce and freedom of navigation were not impeded, while emerging powers contributed to regional security. As far as military forces were concerned, it was difficult for the Chinese not be worried about Obama's words, as he said that Washington would keep a strong presence in Japan and the Korean Peninsula, while enhancing its presence in Southeast Asia, thus helping allies and partners build their capacity. Finally, the North Atlantic power was going to welcome India looking East and playing a larger role as an Asian power[18]. Although the President said an ongoing effort to build a cooperative relationship with China was necessary, it is easy to assume that Beijing's leadership saw such a project as a pincer strategy. Particularly worrisome was the reference to the South China Sea, due to the presence of the world's busiest SLOCs, the rich hydrocarbon resources and maritime border disputes. As far as all this is concerned, in a very recent article Muhammad Zubair Cheema and Lubna Sunawar wrote that the Chinese economy was critically dependent on the uninterrupted supply of energy resources. That is why the Malacca Strait connecting the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean is regarded as the Achilles Heel of the Chinese economy. In short, the changing world order in the XXI century brought maritime competition to new heights in that area[19]. As an outcome of that, a year later at the XVIII Communist Party of China's Congress, President Hu Jintao claimed the task to develop the marine economy, resolutely safeguard maritime rights and interests, and build China into a maritime power. Such an objective was to pursue through powerful and modernised armed forces commensurate with China's international standing. Hu's words showed no inferiority complex towards the United States, therefore getting more actively involved in international affairs to meet global challenges[20].One of the main authors assessing this question is certainly Robert

18 *Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament*, Parliament House, Canberra, Australia, November 17, 2011, on-line on site obamawhitehouse.archives.gov.

19 Muhammad Z. Cheema and Lubna Sunawar, «The Changing World Order and US-China Maritime Power Contestation in the Indo-Pacific», *NUST Journal of Social Science Humanities*, 10, 2 (2024), p. 37.

20 *Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at 18th Party Congress*, November 27, 2012, on-line on

S. Ross, according to whose research the Far Eastern nation pursued a long-term strategy to challenge US military presence. Beijing had been developing low-cost, secure platforms able to challenge the ability of the United States to protect its war-fighting ships[21].

Prelude to the Pivot: The Second Bush Administration

Just to give an example of how the People's Republic of China was monitored by American institutions, suffice is to quote the Secretary of Defence's Annual Report to Congress, which as early as 2005 did not show any confidence in the so-called peaceful rise to describe China's emergence. Even more important was the fact that in 2003 the Dragon had become the world's second largest consumer and third largest importer of oil. Resource concerns, among others, played a role in increased Sino-Japanese tensions over the disputed East China Sea[22]. As far as this was concerned, the Defence Department was not yet able to assess China's strategic behaviour and future strategic direction. Nevertheless, it was possible to rule out the possibility for continued strong economic performance, combined with rising nationalism and confidence, to lead the PRC to translate its economic gains into fielding an increasingly capable military power to attempt to dictate the terms of foreign security and economic interactions[23].To tell the truth, by assessing Congressional records, it was true that the Americans were monitoring Chinese activities in the Asia-Pacific region and their conclusions were rather worrisome. As an evidence of that, we may quote the November 2005 Report to the Congress of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, which stated that the PRC was pursuing a military capable of performing a variety of

site us.china-embassy.gov.cn.

21 Robert S. Ross, «US Grand Strategy, the Rise of China, and US National Security Strategy for East Asia», *Strategic Studies Quarterly: Asia-Pacific Special Edition*, 7, 2 (2013), pp. 25-31.

22 According to Chinese calculations, the South China Sea was estimated to yield 130 billion barrels of oil or more. In that case, the PRC might have been able to lessen its reliance on the narrow and vulnerable Strait of Malacca. Patrick M. Cronin, Robert D. Kaplan and Patrick M. Cronin, «Cooperation from Strength: U.S. Strategy and the South China Sea», in Cronin (ed.), *Cooperation from Strength: The United States, China and the South China Sea*, Washington, DC, Center for a New American Security, 2012, p. 9.

23 Office of the Secretary of Defense, Annual Report to Congress, *The Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2005*, on-line on site nuke.fas.org.

essential offshore missions. Such a posture, and in particular Beijing's aggressive pursuit of territorial claims arising in the East China Sea and in the South China Sea, was giving rise to growing regional security concerns in Japan, India, and Southeast Asia. China's military modernisation was said to be driven by factors beyond its immediate focus on Taiwan. As a matter of fact, the Far Eastern giant had several unresolved security issues that were maritime in nature, such as pursuit of territorial claims in the East and South China Seas, ensuring the security of imported energy and raw materials, and protecting its Eastern seaboard, where US forces remained a dominant presence[24]. In addition, the Congress was aware that growing dependence on imported energy resources exposed China to new vulnerabilities, thus heightening its need to secure new energy sources and the sea lines of communications[25].

In view of such a debate, the US National Security Strategy of 2006 regarded East Asia as a region of great opportunities with regional economies effectively harnessing the engines of technology and globalised trade. As far as China was concerned, American policy makers were concerned about the PRC's continuing military expansion in a non-transparent way, as well as the attitude to direct markets rather than opening them up[26]. In the same year, the Annual Report to the Congress on the military power of the People's Republic warned that China's foreign policy was by then global and that Beijing was investing in maritime surface and sub-surface weapon systems that could serve as the basis for a force capable of power projection. Such a report is of paramount importance as it highlighted the long-term shift of the People's Liberation Army from a mass army designed for wars of attrition to a modern force capable of fighting short, high-intensity conflicts against high-tech adversaries[27].As it is easy to realise, the most threaten-

24 Since the end of the twentieth century, China's rapid economic development had made it dependent on imports from abroad for more than half of its fossil fuel needs, with about eighty per cent of them passing through the Strait of Malacca. Aaron L. Friedberg, *Beyond Air-Sea Battle: The Debate over US Military Strategy in Asia*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2014, p. 106.

25 *2005 Report to the Congress of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, One Hundred Ninth Congress, November 2005, on-line on site www.uscc.gov.

26 *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, March 2006, on-line on site georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov.

27 Annual Report to Congress, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2006*, on-line on site www.globalsecurity.org.

ing factor from Beijing's point of view was the United States realigning and reinforcing its military presence by buttressing alliances and accelerating deployment of missile defence systems. At the same time, Japan was reported to be adjusting its military and security policies and developing the missile defence system for future deployment. On the ground of this, the PLA Navy was expanding the space and extending the depth for offshore defensive operations[28].The reasons why the South China Sea was a region of growing importance with increasing power rivalry is given for example by Frank Jannuzi, who reminds that those waters are estimated to hold ten per cent of the world's fishery resources. In addition, the South China Sea holds about 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and eleven billion barrels of oil in proved and probable reserves. Within this context, China's claims are the most expansive, so that a map published by the Nationalist government in 1947 outlined China's territorial influence[29].In geo-economic terms, East Asia is a sprawling archipelago from Japan to Malaysia to New Zealand and Eastern China. Trade with and throughout the archipelago is all sea-borne. This implies that the ability of the United States to maintain economic access, stability, and influence depends on its sea power. As far as all this is concerned, David C. Gompert says that the weakening of American sea power could be interpreted by allies and China alike as the precursor of a Chinese sphere of influence[30].

To understand Chinese maritime intentions, says Keitaro Ushirogata, it is necessary to look at China's security policy from a larger perspective. First of all, the preservation of maritime transport routes through the Strait of Malacca to the Indian Ocean and the oil-producing countries of the Middle East is of paramount importance. Therefore, the South China Sea might be compared to what the Caribbean Sea means to the United States[31]. On the ground of that, in November 2003 President Hu Jintao had declared that certain major powers were determined to control the strait, so that he called for the adoption of new strategies to

28 *China's National Defense in 2004*, on-line on site www.china.org.cn.

29 Frank Jannuzi, «U.S. Interests in the South China Sea: Defending Norms, not Territory», in Nguyen Hung Son and Nguyen Thi Lan Anh (eds.), *The South China Sea: The Geo-political Epicenter of the Indo-Pacific?*, Singapore, Springer, 2025, p. 28.

30 David C. Gompert, *Sea Power and American Interests in the Western Pacific*, Santa Monica, CA, Arlington, VA, and Pittsburgh, PA, Rand Corporation, 2013, p. 90.

31 Keitaro Ushirogata, *Global Maritime Military Strategy, 1980-2023*, Singapore, Springer, 2025, p. 163.

mitigate the perceived vulnerability. In a few words, such an issue had become so essential that Chinese propaganda affirmed that whoever controlled the Strait of Malacca would also have a stranglehold on the energy route of China[32]. Having said this, it was obvious for the PRC to position sea lane and choke point security high on its maritime strategy. Tellingly, in March 2002, President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan andt he visiting Chinese Vice-Premier Wu Bangguo had laid the foundation stone of the Gwadar Deep Sea Project (GDSP), easing the Far Eastern power to monitor the sea lanes from the Persian Gulf[33]. According to Christopher H. Harman, China's geographic location between the Middle East and the United States is a strategic challenge for the PLAN, thus requiring the Navy to deploy regularly to the far seas of the Eastern Indian Ocean and farther East in the Pacific[34].As Professor Avery Goldstein had stated, soon after the end of the Cold War Chinese analysts had recognised that unipolarity would last for decades with the US as the world's sole superpower. Nevertheless, the People's Republic's global relations were by then reflecting a grand strategy whose main purpose was to enable the country to emerge as a true great power[35]. However, as Gompert stresses, China was showing neither the revolutionary zealotry nor the expansionist drive that the Soviet Union had had for a long time. Moreover, while the Soviet Union was economically and politically completely isolated from Western Europe, China was an inseparable part of East Asia[36].

To summarise Washington's stance during the Bush Administration, both pragmatists and hawks shared Condoleeza Rice's assessment, described in a Foreign Affairs article in 2000, *Campaign 2000: Promoting the National Interest*, on a confrontational stance towards the People's Republic. Succinctly, the future National Security Adviser and Secretary of State emphasised clear-eyed management of relations with major powers like Russia and China alongside decisive

32 Ian J. Storey, «China's "Malacca Dilemma"», *China Brief,* 6, 8 (2006), on-line on site jamestown.org.

33 Vijay Sakhuja, *Maritime Power in the 21st Century: Strategic Transactions China, India and Southeast Asia*, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011, p. 84.

34 Christopher H. Sharman, *China Moves out: Stepping Stones toward a New Maritime Strategy*, Washington, D.C., National Defense University Press, 2015, pp. 6-7.

35 *Avery Goldstein, Professor of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania, before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission - China's Growing Global Influence: Objectives and Strategies*, July 21, 2005, on-line on site www.uscc.gov.

36 Gompert, *Sea Power and American Interests*, cit., pp. 166-167.

containment of rogue states[37]. Essentially, Bush's foreign policy towards China showed a commitment to balancing between engagement and deterrence, especially once realised that the technologic-military gap between the United States and China was narrowing[38]. As Nina Silove says, a number of negative trends able to erode the United States' military advantage was analysed. With respect to these trends, China's rise was the key case of concern, and the national security strategy was described by the Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, as a long-term shift in focus towards Asia[39].In order to highlight the pivotal importance of the Asia-Pacific, we cannot underestimate that at least five important US global interests were represented in that area, and in particular in the South China Sea: 1) protecting free and unimpeded commerce worldwide; 2) securing peace and stability; 3) supporting diplomacy and rule-based conduct; 4) ensuring US military's freedom to operate in compliance with international law; 5) supporting allies and partners[40].On the other hand, China saw this as an excuse for the Americans to intervene in South China Sea issues, for example through exercises with Vietnam and other powers[41]. The National Defence Paper issued in 2006 focused in particular on the Nippo-American military alliance and operational integration. As far as the maritime dimension was concerned, the People's Republic had issued the Law on National Defence, the Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone, and the Law on the Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf. Essentially, the 2006 White Paper marked a foundational shift emphasising the transition from coastal defence towards a modern regional power focused on Offshore Defence within the First Island Chain, formalising informationisation and joint warfare capabilities as the primary drivers of naval modernisation, thus laying the groundwork for what would eventually become the PLAN's modern Far

37 Aiden Warren and Adam Bartley, *U.S. Foreign Policy and China: Security Challenges during the Bush, Obama, and Trump Administrations*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2021, pp. 21-22.

38 Zeno Leoni, *American Grand Strategy from Obama to Trump: Imperialism after Bush and China's Hegemonic Challenge*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 79.

39 Nina Silove, «The Pivot before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia», *International Security*, 40, 4 (2016), p. 55.

40 Clarence J. Bouchat, *The Paracel Islands and U.S. Interests and Approaches in the South China Sea*, Carlisle, PA, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2014, on-line on site press.armywarcollege.edu.

41 Hong Nong, *UNCLOS and Ocean Dispute Settlement: Law and Politics in the South China Sea,* New York, NY, Routledge, 2011, p. 30.

Seas Protection doctrine[42].

As a matter of fact, we may conclude that in the United States there were three views on how to deal with rising China. One was the so-called "dragon-slayer", thinking Beijing's influence in the Asia-Pacific area would rise at the same time as economic and military strengthening. Another one was called "panda-hugger", believing that the Far Eastern power was continually integrating into the world order. Finally, there was the one referred to as "fence-sitter", which saw the rise of China as both opportunities and challenges. On the other coast of the Pacific, Chinese scholars also put forward two different views on US policy towards China. The former thought that Washington had been undergoing "qualitative change", acknowledging that China's rise could not be halted. This group was the optimistic one. Instead, the so-called pessimists believed that the Americans had set off a new round of China threat arguments to create friction and obstacles[43].As far as this is concerned, the 2007 Annual Report to Congress detailed that the Chinese were developing the ability to conduct multi-ship coordination, long-range deployments, and electronic warfare[44]. As Thomas M. Kane reports, the regions of greatest importance to China are mostly accessible by sea. Despite overland routes between the People's Republic and the rest of Eurasia, it was far cheaper to trade with Europe, Southeast Asia and the Middle East by water. In short, sea power ranked by then alongside economic development and political stability as one of the most critical factors determining the potential to become a global power[45].

Just to give an example about that, we may quote what General Liu Huaqing, Beijing's highest ranking military officer and Politburo member, had written in 1994. Since the early 1970s, the strategic importance of the oceans had so increased that the PRC was supposed to safeguard its maritime rights and interests

42 China's National Defense in 2006, on-line on site www.china.org.cn.

43 Yu Wanli, «Breaking the Cycle?: Sino-US Relations under George W. Bush Administration», in M. Iida (ed.), *China's Shift: Global Strategy of the Rising Power*, Tokyo, The National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan 2009, p. 93.

44 Annual Report to Congress, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2007*, online on site www.globalsecurity.org.

45 Thomas M. Kane, *Chinese Grand Strategy and Maritime Power*, London and New York, NY, Routledge, 2016, p. 1.

at sea and therefore build a powerful coastal defence[46]. Tellingly, the Navy was expected to operate within and around the so-called first island chain, or in China's "near seas," for a long time to come. However, Liu also suggested that the growth of the economy and technology would translate into expansion of Chinese naval power in the long run, therefore allowing the PLAN to extend its operational range to the second island chain, from Northern Japan to the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, and farther southwards[47].

Obama in Charge: The Pivot Unfolded

As reminded by James Johnson, in the military arena the Obama Administration carried on several policies undertaken by the Bush executive. Furthermore, President Obama expanded other Bush-era policies that were widely accredited to the pivot, such as promoting a broad-based maritime coalition in the South China Sea and expanding defence cooperation with Australia, the Philippines, and Japan[48]. Hence, the pivot is best understood as more a change in means rather than representing a major reorientation of the key pillars, mainly based on freedom of navigation, military primacy, free market. In other words, while engaging and cooperating with China to integrate it further into the global rule-based system, simultaneously Washington wanted to assert its military pre-eminence to reassure allies and deter Chinese regional hegemonic aspirations[49].Geopolitical and geo-economics transformations caused the Obama Administration to change its strategic thinking from a "weak China" to a "strong China". In actual fact, security was regarded as the foundation of economy and China's commitment in regional security had become imperative. Over the long term, the PRC's emergence as a regional power was expected to affect the US economy and its securi-

46 Liu Huaqing, «Defense Modernization in Historical Perspective», in Michael Pillsbury (ed.), *Chinese Views of Future Warfare*, Washington, DC, National Defense University Press, 1998, p. 118.

47 Nan Li, «The Evolution of China's Naval Strategy and Capabilities: From "Near Coast" and "Near Seas" to "Far Seas"»,in Phillip C. Saunders, Christopher D. Yung, Michael Swaine, and Andrew Nien-Dzu Yang (eds.), *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles*, Washington, D.C., National Defense University Press, 2011, p. 129.

48 James Johnson*, The US-China Military and Defense Relationship during the Obama Presidency*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 4.

49 Zoellick, «U.S., China and Thucydides», *The National Interest*, 19, 126 (2013), pp. 28-29.

ty. Therefore, China's development and growth was by then a "vital component" of the US strategy and involvement in Asia[50].

On the Eastern shores of the Pacific, the last Annual Report to the Congress of the Bush Administration put emphasis on Beijing's growing dependence on secure access to markets and natural resources as a factor shaping strategic behaviour[51]. Such a shift highlighted a significant gap in long-range naval power projection, necessitating a strategic, long-term pivot towards building a blue-water navy to protect vital maritime choke points. As a matter of fact, the People's Republic had set up a plan called "Go out", or "Going Global", to deal with the ongoing reliance on world markets, dating back to the 1997 15th Party Congress. On that circumstance, Jiang Zemin had stated that the PRC was ready to deepen the reform of the system of trade and economic relations with foreign countries, expanding the power of enterprises to handle their own foreign trade so as to create a policy environment for competition on an equal footing[52]. To sum up, the Chinese Communist Party encouraged state companies to export commodities that were plentiful on the domestic market, but also to rely on foreign markets to secure natural resources. Moreover, encouraging foreigners to invest in China was no longer enough. Chinese enterprises had to go abroad[53].

As a consequence of this, since the beginning of the new century, Chinese records themselves state that the Navy had been striving to improve its capabilities of integrated offshore operations in order to develop the ability to carry out cooperation in distant waters. Focusing on regional security, the White Paper presented an overall optimistic view of the Asia-Pacific region, even if the document underlines many factors of uncertainty, among which American strategic attention through military alliances and deployment. According to China's 2008

50 Hassan Hosseini, Mohammad A. Mousavi, and Mohammad K.H. Azad, «Obama's "Pivot to Asia" Policy (2011- 2016): The Case of China», *Journal of World Socio-political Studies*, 2, 4 (2018), pp. 644-646.

51 Office of the Secretary of Defense, Annual Report to Congress, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2008*, on-line on site www.andrewerickson.com.

52 Jiang Zemin, Report Delivered at the 15th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on September 12, 1997: *Hold High the Great Banner of Deng Xiaoping Theory for an All-round Advancement of the Cause of Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics into the 21st Century*, on-line on site www.peoplechina.com.cn.

53 Franck Dikötter, *China after Mao: The Rise of a Superpower*, London and Dublin, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023, pp. 246-247.

White Paper on Defence, it looked as though Beijing was satisfied about its security situation, as the achievements made in the modernisation drive had drawn worldwide attention. However, the country was said to be still confronted with long-term security threats and challenges. In a few words, while avoiding an overtly confrontational tone towards the United States, Beijing showed measured criticism of US-led security alliances in the Asia-Pacific[54].

The first meeting between President Obama and his Chinese homologue took place in London in April 2009, on the occasion of which the two heads of state remarked the importance of the China-US relationship to stability in the Asian-Pacific region[55]. Despite those nice words, the Department of Defence reports to the Congress highlighted advancements in blue-water naval operations, long-range air strike capabilities, and space-based technologies, all driven by the New Historic Missions mandate to secure global economic interests. In particular, Sino-Indian defence ties had been institutionalised in 2007 with the establishment of an Annual Defence Dialogue and three bilateral exercises since the same year. However, the People's Republic remained concerned about the strategic ramifications of India's rising economic, political, and military power[56].

According to Zeno Leoni, it is important to grasp that Obama's ideological affinity with this region was well articulated and went beyond mere propaganda. In fact, since the early stage of his mandate the first black American President wanted to divert the geographical imperatives of American power to Asia. Moreover, his regional view contained references to key US cultural themes such as the Western frontier and the importance of economic and cultural exchange with the Pacific[57]. His confidence was rooted in the fact that the United States and China were believed to share mutual interests. First of all, said the President, the two nations could cooperate to advance a lasting economic recovery. Second, Washington and Beijing were the two largest energy consumers in the world, as well

54 *China's National Defense in 2008*, Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, Beijing, January 2009, on-line on site www.china.org.cn.

55 *Remarks prior to a Meeting with President Hu Jintao of China in London*, April 1, 2009, in Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States (thereafter PPPUS), on-line on site www.govinfo.gov.

56 Office of the Secretary of Defense, Annual Report to Congress, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2009*, on-line on site maps.lib.utexas.edu.

57 Leoni, *American Grand Strategy*, cit., pp. 147-148.

as the two largest emitters of greenhouse gases. Hence, Obama hoped the two of them would promote the clean and efficient use of energy. Third, cooperating to stop the spread of nuclear weapons was pivotal to achieve the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula[58]. The President remarked these concepts during his first trip to China in November of the same year, so that Hu Jintao spoke about an international situation undergoing profound and complex changes. As usual, maintaining open markets and free flows of commerce was one of the most debated principles[59], so that the leader of the United States stressed the importance to move towards a more market-oriented exchange rate[60]. The joint statement following the summit stressed that the PRC and the US would take concrete steps to advance sustained and reliable military-to-military relations in the future, thus acknowledging the mutual responsibility to address regional and global security challenges[61].

Four priorities were highlighted for the region, once Obama had taken office: 1) deeply engaging China; 2) strengthening the alliance with Japan; 3) trying to address the North Korea nuclear issue; 4) re-evaluating free trade agreements. The first objective was of paramount importance, since a new G2 relationship needed a balance with strong alliance relations, first of all with Tokyo[62]. In order to better understand American policy towards the People's Republic of China, more than the common statements of that first meeting between the two presidents, we had better read the reports to the Congress delivered in the same days. The maritime environment was thought to be vital to China because of its increasing reliance upon seaborne trade in terms of overseas oil imports, as well as mar-

58 *Remarks at the United States-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue*, July 27, 2009, in PPPUS, on-line on site www.govinfo.gov.

59 As an export-oriented nation with a growing domestic market, China needed integration into a global supply chain to get easy access to foreign markets. This goal was much easier to achieve with regional partners. Joachim Klement, *Geo-Economics: The Interplay between Geopolitics, Economics, and Investments*, Charlottesville, VA, Institute Research Foundation, 2021, p. 153.

60 *Remarks Following a Meeting with President Hu Jintao of China in Beijing*, November 17, 2009, in PPPUS, on-line on site www.govinfo.gov.

61 *Joint Statement by the United States of America and the Republic of China*, November 17, 2009, in PPPUS, on-line on site www.govinfo.gov.

62 Nicholas D. Anderson and Victor D. Cha, «The Case of the Pivot to Asia: System Effects and the Origins of Strategy», *Political Science Quarterly*, 132, 4 (2017-2018), pp. 602-603.

itime resources, such as hydrocarbons, minerals, and fishing. As a consequence of this, the Americans assumed that countries with Chinese investments could perceive the Chinese as neo-imperialists. According to US analyses, the Chinese government presented several reasons for its large scale naval modernisation. Apart from the classical prevention of Taiwan from declaring independence, in order to safeguard China's continued economic development the PLA Navy needed to defend the coast from any maritime assaults, as well as defending disputed maritime territorial claims. Dubbed as ''anti-access strategy'', this policy rested on the ability to exert control over China's coastal seas in order to deny an opponent the ability to operate safely in those areas in the event of a conflict over an area expanding outwards[63].

Just to underline the importance of freedom of navigation, suffice it to say that the People's Republic is the most prominent actor seeking to change the praxis of foreign warships to sail through Exclusive Economic Zones without permission[64]. The problem, as stated by Bill Hayton, is that changing the nature of EEZ like that could alter the rule of the global system. Furthermore, it could cut off American direct access between the Middle East and the Pacific Ocean[65]. On the ground of that, Beijing was expected to improve its capacity to inhibit US access to the region in the event of a crisis. In addition, the PRC anti-access strategy was also thought to threaten regional land bases, such as the ones in Okinawa and Guam[66].Furthermore, Beijing's new naval capabilities were assessed to impact other Asian and Pacific states, including key US allies and friends, and possibly

63 *2009 Report to the Congress of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, One Hundred Eleventh Congress, First Session, November 2009, on-line on site www.uscc.gov.

64 After having joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001, China's share of global GDP more than doubled within less than two decades, reaching almost nineteen per cent in 2020. During such a span of time, all countries embraced a more open trading system. Within an environment like that, China enjoyed a virtually inexhaustible supply of extremely low-cost labour (only 1.29 per cent of that of the United States in 1990), as well as a large consumer base. Keyu Jin, *The New China Playbook: Beyond Socialism and Capitalism*, London, Swift Press, 2023, pp. 229-231.

65 Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*, New Haven, CT and London, Yale University Press, 2014, p. 213.

66 Paul S. Giarra, *A Chinese Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile: Implications for the USN*, The Implications of China's Naval Modernization for the United States, Hearings before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, One Hundred Eleventh Congress, First Session, June 11, 2009, on-line on site www.uscc.gov.

provoke a naval arms race. Such a situation was due to the fact that the PLA was knitting together a joint structure composed of a very effective open-ocean surveillance system used to locate approaching naval forces[67]. Just to give an example, in 2009 Australia released a defence white paper stating that China's military modernisation was of potential concern to regional states due to the PLA's lack of transparency[68]. In addition, it was not by chance that in 2008 Tokyo had released its Basic Plan on Ocean Policy. The document established strategic goals to enhance national security, safeguard international shipping routes, and mitigate risks from marine-derived natural disasters like *tsunami*. Among the core tasks of the policy there was securing the safety of long maritime routes to share with the international society. In particular, Japan focused heavily on the Strait of Malacca and Singapore, promoting a Cooperative Mechanism between coastal states and user countries to maintain navigational aid facilities[69].

Due to all this, a year after Obama had begun his first mandate the Department of Defence released the annual report to Congress acknowledging Beijing's participation in international security efforts, but at the same time highlighting concerns on aggressive anti-access strategies. To manage these risks, the United States stressed the importance of sustained military relations and regional partnerships. In the context of China's military development as described in the 2010 Department of Defence report, naval warfare and maritime strategy had undergone a comprehensive transformation, characterised by a move from focusing solely on coastal defence to developing capabilities for extended-range power projection and specialised warfare, such the development of a future nuclear submarine force. In summary, the document framed the South China Sea not just as a territorial dispute, but as a critical zone for securing energy supplies and testing unconventional maritime forces like the Maritime Militia to assert control without triggering a full-scale war[70].

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67 *Statement of Rear Admiral Michael McDevitt*, USN (Retired), Vice President and Director, CNA Strategic Studies, CNA, Alexandria, VA, on-line on site www.uscc.gov.

68 Australian Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force* 2030, 2009, on-line on site apo.org.au.

69 *Basic Plan on Ocean Policy (I)*, Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, March 18, 2008, on-line on site worldjpn.net.

70 Office of the Secretary of Defense, Annual Report to Congress, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2010*, on-line on site www.andrewerickson.com.

The year 2010 was pivotal to define Obama's policy, as Secretary Clinton fired the opening salvo through her Hanoi Declaration. Such a statement marked a major geopolitical shift that openly challenged China's sweeping maritime claims. In actual fact, the former First Lady underlined American navigational interests in the South China Sea, and proposed that jurisdictional disputes be addressed by a collaborative multiparty process. The declaration aimed at pushing back against Beijing's strategy of dividing weaker Southeast Asian nations through mandatory bilateral negotiations bringing the South China Sea onto the formal agenda of multilateral organisations, and reassuring regional allies that the United States was committed to staying in the region[71]. As reminded by Renato Cruz De Castro, the 2010 Hanoi Declaration was announced after the Pentagon had revealed that China's PLA was strategically transforming its ground force into combined naval and air power[72]. To tell the truth, since the post WW2 era the Americans had always been the elephant in the room in the region. After a decade of decline due to a massive involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts, in 2010-2011 it had become clear that the United States was determined to win back the lost ground[73]. If we see things from the Chinese point of view, we have to remind that in 2000 Beijing's GDP from the marine economy accounted 2.6 percent of the total GDP. Within five years it had increased to 9.8 percent. Some Chinese writers described the twenty-first century as the "maritime century", suggesting that naval development and maritime security would become major priorities[74].

As already said, the year 2010 witnessed a major shift in American policy, as also testified by the document on National Security Strategy, the first one published by the Obama Administration. Released while the Americans were still heavily engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan, the document laid the intellectual foundation for what would formally become the Pivot to Asia by explicitly prioritising re-engaging the Asia-Pacific. As far as China was concerned, on one hand the

71 *Remarks at Press Availability*, Hillary Rodham Clinton, July 23, 2010, cit.

72 Renato Cruz De Castro, «The Obama Administration's Strategic Pivot to Asia: From a Diplomatic to a Strategic Constrainment of an Emergent China?»,*The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 25, 3 (2013), pp. 336-337.

73 Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*, Second Edition, London, Penguin Books, 2012, pp. 401-403.

74 Edward Sing Yue Chan, *China's Maritime Security Strategy: The Evolution of a Growing Sea Power*, London and New York, NY, Routledge, 2022, p. 94.

NSS welcomed a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China and sought cooperation on global issues. On the other hand, it simultaneously urged the PRC to act as a responsible stakeholder, demanding transparency in military modernisation and rejecting coercion. In order to safeguard US interests in the Asia-Pacific and put pressure on Beijing, the strategy emphasised updating core bilateral alliances while actively embedding the US in regional economic and security institutions[75]. The NSS document partially mirrored Obama's words, which on public circumstances were always focused on the cooperative part of the relationship to promote economic growth and trade[76].

Nonetheless, reports to Congress did not show the same confidence towards the People's Republic. As far as South East Asia was concerned, China's interests and policies were accused to be characterised by a multifaceted strategy combining economic integration, diplomatic charm, and increasing military assertiveness. By virtue of that, Beijing's primary political goal was said to balance the presence of extra-regional actors like the United States and Japan. Economic engagement was therefore the cornerstone of China's regional policy, thus providing both profits for Chinese firms and access to vital resources. However, despite the so-called peaceful rise rhetoric, PRC's actions in maritime and environmental domains had alarmed its neighbours, as the People's Republic was claiming indisputable sovereignty over nearly the entire South China Sea. Consequently, many Southeast Asian nations had adopted a hedging strategy, welcoming the economic benefits of Chinese growth, but actively courting the United States to prevent Chinese domination[77].

Once again trying to assess the Chinese stance, the South China Sea, often dubbed the "second Persian Gulf" in Chinese reports, had been regarded as one of the ten most important strategic oil and gas sources for the nation. Succinctly, the East Asian giant believed that starting in the 1980s other claimant states had taken advantage of Chinese weakness in technology and stepped up their efforts

75 *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, May 2010, on-line on site history.defense.gov.

76 Barack H. Obama, *Letter to the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue*, May 24, 2010, in PPPUS, on-line on site www.govinfo.gov.

77 *2010 Report to the Congress of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, One Hundred Eleventh Congress, Second Session, November 2010, on-line on site www.uscc.gov.

in drilling for energy resources in the area. Moreover, given the fact that the United States intended to preserve a strong military presence in the West Pacific, Beijing felt that a strong foothold in the South China Sea would give China at least some more strategic manoeuvring space[78]. Another scholar stressing Beijing's vision is Hu Bo, who writes that China is confronted by a complex geopolitical environment that other global maritime powers do not face. Being situated in East Asia, where major world powers are concentrated, since modern times China has frequently suffered significant double jeopardy from both land and sea. Furthermore, the United States, Japan and other countries retain the control of almost all key islands on the island chains and important waters in their vicinity[79].The importance of the year 2010 is also certified by the publication of the White Paper on China's National Defence. By highlighting participation in global security cooperation, the text sought to project an image of transparency and commitment to international stability. Focusing our attention on the Asia-Pacific, the Paper stated the strategic landscape was further shifting as major powers increased their investment in the region, specifically with the United States reinforcing military alliances. China's maritime dimension was regarded as a critical component of national security, as the country faced heavy demands in safeguarding its vast territorial seas and maritime rights and interests. On grounds of this, the Navy played a central role by enhancing its capacity for strategic deterrence and counterattack. Finally, distant water operations represented a key development area to safeguard China's expanding maritime interests[80].

The President's Message from Australia and the XVIII Congress of the China Communist Party

The United States returned to Southeast Asia after three decades of "neglect" since its withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973. One of the main objectives was the attempt to influence China, for the PRC's military might posed a short-term dan-

78 Mingjiang Li, «Reconciling Assertiveness and Cooperation? China's Changing Approach to the South China Sea Dispute», *Security Challenges*, 6, 2 (2010), pp. 51-52.

79 Hu Bo, *Chinese Maritime Power in the 21st Century: Strategic Planning, Policy and Predictions*, London and New York, NY, Routledge, 2020, p. 17.

80 *China's National Defense in 2010*, Information Office of the State Council The People's Republic of China, March 2011, Beijing, on-line on site eng.mod.gov.cn.

ger to regional balance and American undisputed dominance. In addition, the South China Sea was estimated to pass more than half of the world's annual merchant fleet tonnage and about one-third of global maritime commerce, as well as containing three of the sixteen international key waterways the US claimed to control, that is Lombok Strait, Sunda Strait, and Malacca Channel[81].

On the ground of the available documentation, what is interesting is that President Obama was trying to avoid awkward discussions with the Chinese. During bilateral meetings, as we read in the Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, the African American statesman focused his speeches on Sino-American cooperation, especially in the trading field. As he himself said during a roundtable with Hu Jintao and American and Chinese business leaders, China was by then one of the top markets for American exports, with a trade flow shifted from less than 2.5 billion dollars in 1979 to 380 billion in 2010[82]. However, the US leader also stressed American forward presence in Asia as one of the reasons of China's extraordinary economic success within an international system championed by Washington. With regard to regional stability and security in East Asia, Obama reminded that the United States had a fundamental interest in maintaining freedom of navigation and unimpeded commerce[83].The successful summit helped sustain positive momentum, but Obama had made it clear that closer engagement with the People's Republic was seen as part of his Administration's overall policy of reengagement in the Asia-Pacific. In case of Chinese assertive actions or pressure, the White House was going to respond with appropriate military, diplomatic, or other means necessary[84].

If we analyse Congress records, we realise how different attitude the Americans had. As an evidence of that, we may quote the 2011 Department of Defence

81 Hung Vo Minh, Nguyen Tuan Binh, Hiep Tran Xuan and Thao Bui Thi, «US-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia Region: A Study on the South China Sea Case», *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, 9, 1 (2023), pp. 340-346.

82 *Remarks with President Hu Jintao of China during a Roundtable Discussion with American and Chinese Business Leaders*, January 19, 2011, in PPPUS, on-line on site www.govinfo.gov.

83 *The President's News Conference with President Hu Jintao of China, January 19, 2011*, in PPPUS, on-line on site www.govinfo.gov.

84 Robert G. Sutter, *U.S.-Chinese Relations: Perilous Past, Pragmatic Present*, Second Edition, Plymouth and Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littledfield Publishers, Inc., 2013, pp. 161-165.

Report detailing major technological strides in Beijing's stealth aviation, nuclear submarines, and space-based surveillance. As far as China's maritime dimension was concerned, its interests were said to be expanding its comprehensive national power to ensure domestic stability, maintain the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, and secure China's status as a great power. What always stroke the attention of the Americans was that the PLA Navy was transitioning from a traditional focus on Offshore Defence (Near Seas) to including Far Seas Defence (Distant Seas) to protect its growing global commercial and diplomatic interests[85]. In addition, according to the 2011 Report to Congress of the US-China Economic and Security Commission, China's rapid military modernisation implied profound national security consequences for the United States and its allies. As a matter of fact, rather than focusing solely on a Taiwan conflict, Beijing's military strategy had by then expanded to a broader Area Control Strategy, explicitly designed to defeat a technologically superior opponent. As far as this was concerned, the development of the DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile – with a maximum range of 2,700 kilometres and the ability to strike moving targets at sea – was specifically intended to hold US aircraft carriers at risk. Moreover, the sea trials of China's first aircraft carrier (*Varyag*) and the development of the J-20 stealth fighter and J-15 carrier-based fighter indicated a long-term transition towards robust regional power projection, thus bearing the risk to drag the United States into a conflict[86]. On the other hand, Nori Katagiri says that the strategy of the US Administration made it difficult for the Americans to keep Asia stable. In actual fact, it gave China an untimely and unnecessary excuse to react negatively and use it as a means of justifying its military modernisation. Secondly, the rebalance deprived the US of its ability to respond as effectively as before to security contingencies outside East Asia[87].

When questioned on how he assessed the US-China relationship voices calling for a harder line, Obama answered that the PRC presented an enormous mar-

85 Office of the Secretary of Defense, Annual Report to Congress, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2011*, on-line on site nsarchive2.gwu.edu.

86 *2011 Report to Congress of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, One Hundred Twelfth Congress, First Session, November 2011, on-line on site www.uscc.gov.

87 Nori Katagiri, «A Critical Assessment of the Asia Rebalance», *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 12, 1 (2019), p. 44.

ketplace for American businesses and exports, though the Chinese were always expected to play by the rules[88]. In addition, in his address to the Australian Parliament Obama described the strategic importance of the Asia-Pacific through several key economic, geopolitical, and historical lenses, on the ground of which the United States would not cut military spending at the expense of the region. Ultimately, the White House viewed the Asia-Pacific as the defining arena for the XXI century, where the United States were to be all in to help shape a future of security, prosperity, and dignity for all. As far as China's rise was concerned, the Chief Executive interpreted this issue through a framework of cooperation paired with a firm insistence on international standards[89]. A few months afterwards, the Department Defence Report to the Congress informed that the PLA's modernisation bore the risk for local wars to turn into regional ones[90]. As far as military modernisation is concerned, we cannot ignore that in the volume *The Science of Military Strategy*, published in 2013 by the Academy of Military Sciences of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, the issue of national security in the maritime domain was directly addressed, stating that the danger of war in the maritime, air, space, and/or cyber domains was increasing[91].

What is important to record is that President Obama was always speaking about the importance of China to respect international rules. In actual fact, the American statesman underlined the same concept during his first meeting with Xi Jinping – then still Vice President of the People's Republic of China – in February 2012. The US was going to work with the PRC to make sure that everybody was working by the same rules to ensure a balanced trade flow between the two Pacific powers[92]. Through words like these, it looked as though Obama was warning the future President of China about the importance to be on the same page on some pivotal issues. To give confirmation, suffice is to say that just the month before

88 *Remarks at an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation CEO Summit Question and-Answer Session in Honolulu*, November 12, 2011, on-line on site www.govinfo.gov.

89 *Remarks By President Obama to the Australian Parliament*, November 17, 2011, cit.

90 Annual Report to Congress, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2012*, on-line on site www.globalsecurity.org.

91 Michele Cosentino, «Il Potere Marittimo della Repubblica Popolare Cinese nell'era della globalizzazione», *Supplemento alla Rivista Marittima*, November 2021, p. 29, on-line on site www.marina.difesa.it.

92 *Remarks prior to a Meeting with Vice President Xi Jinping of China*, February 14, 2012, in PPPUS, on-line on site www.govinfo.gov.

Xi's visit to the US, the Department of Defence had issued the report *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21th Century Defense*. To address different goals within budget constraints, the guidance emphasised technological innovation, readiness, and strong partnerships rather than large-scale, long-term stability operations. In particular, the rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific was driven by the close link between US economic and security interests spanning from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean and South Asia, such as emphasising established alliances and expanding cooperative networks with new partners. Moreover, a long-term strategic partnership with India was to build up by supporting its role as an economic anchor and security provider in the broader Indian Ocean region[93]. In order to better assess the American policy towards the People's Republic, we must always remember that at the end of the Bush Administration the trade deficit with China was about 250 billion annually. Hence, a policy based on military muscle, economic blandishments, and pressure and sanctions on human rights was not regarded as an effective strategy. At the same time, a policy of indulgence and accommodation of assertive Chinese conduct was said to embolden bad behaviour and frighten American allies and partners[94].

Essentially, China was unlikely to give in to the US strategic containment policy, being the main stakeholder in spite of its existing military and technological weakness vis-à-vis the Anglo-Saxon counterpart. Hence, the PRC was expected first of all to strengthen its economic base before robustly embarking upon modernising its armed forces to counter-balance US military primacy[95]. As an evidence of that, a few days before leaving office, Hu Jintao delivered his report to the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. While the report did not explicitly use the term Asia-Pacific, it outlined a comprehensive strategy for China's posture towards regional economic integration, maritime security, and neighbourhood diplomacy. Moreover, Hu Jintao underlined Beijing's focus on the seas as a significant element of regional security and economic posture. On the ground of that, the report highlighted goals to safeguard China's maritime

93 *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21th Century Defense*, January 2012, online on site ntrl.ntis.gov.

94 Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy*, Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2012, p. 3.

95 Zulfqar Khan and Fouzia Amin, «"Pivot" and "Rebalancing": Implications for Asia-Pacific Region», *Policy Perspectives*, 12, 2 (2015), p. 20.

rights and interests resolutely, build the Far Eastern nation into a maritime power, and finally attach high importance to maritime security as part of its updated active defence military strategy[96].

In the same days, the US Congress received the annual report of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission. Such a document highlighted deepening economic imbalances and a record-high trade deficit. Regional tensions in the South China Sea were also given paramount importance, such as Beijing's global quest for natural resources and energy. As far as PRC major goals in the South China Sea were concerned, the leadership aimed at asserting the legitimacy of expansive territorial claims, controlling maritime periphery to guarantee the safety of sea lines of communication, and finally denying what was viewed as threatening foreign military activities within its claimed waters. What was even more worrisome was the risk for increased Chinese assertiveness near the coastlines of neighbouring nations to lead to a clash drawing the United States into an active conflict[97]. As David Lai states, in the post-Cold War era Southeast Asian nations had shifted towards free market and democracy, so that the United States had a strong interest to integrate the region into the Washington-led international order. Specifically, such a relationship was supposed to help the United States deal with the emergence of a great power challenging US supremacy, controlling strategic chokepoints, resources, and markets, as well as developing an American-led regional order[98].

White Papers and National Security Strategy: Rebalancing the Asia-Pacific

Publishing in real time, Suisheng Zhao wrote in 2012 that the Obama Administration's policy adjustment was deeply rooted in US anxiety over China's re-emergence in the twenty-first century. Once powerful, the Chinese Empire had been one of the most dominant nations before the Industrial Revolution. Account-

96 *Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at 18th Party Congress*, November 27, 2012, on-line on site iq.china-embassy.gov.cn.

97 *2012 Report to Congress of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, One Hundred Twelfth Congress, Second Session, November 2012, on-line on site www.uscc.gov.

98 David Lai, *Asia-Pacific. A Strategic Assessment*, Carlisle Barracks, PA, US Army War College Press, 2013, p. 53, on-line on site press.armywarcollege.edu.

ing for about one third of the world's output as recently as the early nineteenth century, China's share of the global production had shrunk in the twentieth century. In light of all this, the rise of China is said to have transformed Sino-US relationship, becoming increasingly strategic and globally significant, but not so easy to manage[99].The second Obama Administration began with the so-called Sunnylands Summit held on June 7-8, 2013, in Rancho Mirage, California, thus marking the first face-to-face meeting between Obama and Xi Jinping as President of the People's Republic. As far as maritime territorial disputes were concerned, Obama affirmed that the US would honour treaty obligations and urged Beijing to de-escalate tensions and resolve claims through diplomatic norms rather than coercive actions[100]. However, the Chinese dictator firmly defended China's territorial claims, stating Beijing's absolute resolve to safeguard its national sovereignty and core interests. According to available reconstructions, Xi tried to signal China's goodwill by claiming that the Pacific Ocean was so vast to have enough space for two large countries like the United States and the People's Republic. It looked as though Obama had chosen a low profile, as allies such as Japan and the Philippines quietly lamented Washington's decision to eschew mention of the East and South China Sea disputes in formal statements. From their perspective, China was pushing for a *de facto* co-dominion with the United States in the Western Pacific. On the contrary, the American homologue pushed back on any implicit division of influence, highlighting that the US was a Pacific power supporting open sea lines of communication and rule-based freedom of navigation[101].

According to Christopher Willis, Obama's most notable bilateral relationship building in the region was the one with India. The second dimension of the pivot was economic, whose main component was the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an American-led free trade agreement between twelve countries around the Pacific Rim. The final dimension of the pivot policy was security focused,

99 Suisheng Zhao, «Shaping the Regional Context of China's Rise: How the Obama Administration Brought back Hedge in its Engagement with China», *Journal of Contemporary China*, 21, 75 (2012), pp. 380-381.

100 Richard C. Bush, *Obama and Xi at Sunnylands: A Good Start*, June 10, 2013, on-line on site www.brookings.edu.

101 Richard J Heydarian, *Asia: All Eyes on the Obama-Xi Summit*, September 25, 2015, on-line on site amti.csis.org.

involving shifts in the priorities and resources of the American military[102].While Obama was having the summit with Xi, the 2013 Department of Defence report highlighted China's advancements in cyber warfare, space capabilities, and long-range missiles designed to limit adversary access to the Western Pacific. Beyond hardware, the report examined Chinese military diplomacy, international peace-keeping, and the strategic pursuit of maritime sovereignty in the South and East China Seas[103]. Essentially, Beijing's long-term goal was said to transition into a stronger regional force capable of global power projection for high-intensity operations lasting several months. The evidence that China was acquiring a true blue-water force was by then that the PRC was actively pursuing an indigenous aircraft carrier programme and was expected to build multiple carriers over the following decade[104].

At the same time, China's systematic military modernisation was said to be altering the security balance in the Asia-Pacific, thus raising the operational costs and risks for the United States to intervene in potential regional conflicts. As for maritime disputes, the problem for the Anglo-Saxon power was that, rather than resolving territorial disputes through multilateral negotiations or international law, the PRC was using its growing power to employ coercive tactics[105]. In this way, Beijing was trying to prevent the diplomatic involvement of the United States, preferring to negotiate disputes on a bilateral divide and conquer basis[106].

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102 Christopher Willis, *The Obama Pivot to Asia: An Analysis of the Fundamentals*, UNF Graduate Theses and Dissertations 779, 2017, on-line on site digitalcommons.unf.edu.

103 In 1843, the Chinese historian Wei Yuan published his Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms, stressing the need for China to take the control of the seas washing its oriental coasts in order to avoid European invasions. To his eyes, Chinese influence and power in maritime Eastern Asia was of paramount importance, both to protect mainland China and safeguard its global role. Michael Wood, *Storia della Cina: le origini di una civiltà millenaria*, Milano, Mondadori, 2024, p. 406.

104 Annual Report to Congress, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2013*, on-line on site digital.library.unt.edu.

105 A few years afterwards, in 2016, once an international court had rejected Beijing's claims, the leadership of the Communist Party stated that the People's Republic would not claim an inch of land not belonging to China, but neither would give up an inch belonging to the country. Michael Schuman, *L'impero interrotto: la storia vista dalla Cina*, Milano, UTET, 2021, p. 372.

106 *2013 Report to Congress of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, One Hundred Thirteenth Congress, First Session, November 2013, on-line on site www.uscc.gov.

American analyses were also based on the White Paper that Beijing had issued in April 2013, which detailed how the armed forces were evolving to address modern security challenges. In particular, exploiting and protecting sea areas was regarded as an essential national development strategy designed to build the People's Republic into a maritime power. As China's economy integrated further into the global system, its overseas interests, such as energy resources and strategic sea lines of communication had become integral to its national interests[107].

In addition to all this, the importance of the maritime dimension of the Asia-Pacific was also shown through Japan's 2013 Basic Plan on Ocean Policy, which issued a comprehensive national strategy designed to transition the country into a robust oceanic state. The plan prioritised the commercialisation of marine energy and mineral resources while detailing specific measures for securing maritime safety, defending territorial waters, and establishing an international order based on the rule of law. As far as relations with the People's Republic were concerned, the Plan addressed challenges frequently related to neighbouring countries or foreign vessels, for example by calling for coordinated responses to prevent activities violating Japan's sovereign rights[108].As far as Australia was concerned, having no territorial claims in the South China Sea and overwhelmingly relying on maritime shipping routes through these seas for its trade with China, Canberra's concerns with freedom of navigation essentially revolved around the freedom of navigation for warships rather than commercial shipping[109].

Seeing the same question from the Chinese point of view, the strengthening of the US-Japan alliance was often interpreted as a direct response to the PRC's growing naval strength and as a way to constrain, if not openly to contain, Chinese power in maritime Asia. In the medium to long term, however, Beijing was worried that a possible US retreat would lead to Japan's emergence as an autonomous defence actor. In spite of that, there was another strand of thinking doubting the

107 *The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces*, Information Office of the State Council, The People's Republic of China, April 2013, Beijing, on-line on site english.www.gov.cn.

108 *Basic Plan on Ocean Policy (II)*, Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, April 26, 2013, online on site worldjpn.net.

109 Christian Wirth, «Whose "Freedom of Navigation"? Australia, China, the United States, and the Making of Order in the "Indo- Pacific"», in Yih-Jye Hwang and Edmund Frettingham (eds.), *Maritime and Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea: Faces of Power and Law in the Age of China's Rise*, London and New York, NY, Routledge, 2021, p. 161.

US ability to maintain its regional leadership in the long term, thus suggesting it would be unnecessary for China to confront a declining power[110]. In line with this assessment, President Xi Jinping at the 2014 Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) presented an alternative vision, stating that regional security issues should be managed and resolved by Asian countries themselves. In light of this, the Declaration adopted at the summit affirmed that the parties were committed to seek common development and progress, build a security environment in Asia based on partnership and cooperation among all States deeply rooted in the heart of the Asian people[111].«China will take solid steps to strengthen security dialogue and cooperation with other parties, and jointly explore the formulation of a code of conduct for regional security and an Asian security partnership program, making Asian countries good partners that trust one another and cooperate on an equal footing», said Xi at the summit in Shanghai[112].

On the contrary, the United States witnessed the growing Chinese influence and presence in the region as a potential threat. In a few words, if the Americans wanted to keep their predominant position in the Asia-Pacific they needed to lean on more proactive partners. Such a strategy was thus characterised by: a) maintaining a world order structured around the United States; b) granting more autonomy and responsibilities to allies and partners, which had to be selectively engaged[113]. At this point, experts had by then testified that the People's Liberation Army had transitioned from a coastal defence force to a sophisticated military capable of projecting power into the Western Pacific. Rather than focusing solely on raw vessel counts, China's naval expansion was regarded as a profound qualitative shift towards larger, multi-mission platforms equipped with advanced anti-ship, anti-air, and anti-submarine sensors and weapons. Just to give an exam-

110 Elena Atanassova-Cornelis, «Japan, China and the Territorial Disputes in the China Seas: The Uncertain Dynamics of Asian-Pacific Geopolitics», in *Ibidem*, pp. 118-119.

111 *Declaration of the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia on Enhancing Dialogue, Trust and Coordination for a New Asia of Peace, Stability and Cooperation*, Shanghai, 21 May 2014, on-line on site www.s-cica.org.

112 Xi Jinping, *Remarks at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia*, Shanghai Expo Center, 21 May 2014, on-line on site www.mfa.gov.cn.

113 Tanguay S. de Swielande, «The Rebalance under the Obama Administration: Transformational Leadership and Selective Engagement», in Hwang and Frettingham (eds.), *Maritime and Territorial Disputes*, cit., pp. 27-38.

ple, in 2013 the PRC had laid down, launched, or commissioned over fifty naval ships. Consequently, freedom of action was in jeopardy, according to American analyses, while forward bases and carriers had become vulnerable. On the other hand, China was assessed to be increasingly emboldened to use its demonstrated or latent naval capabilities to coercively resolve territorial disputes on its own terms. Had the US failed to counter this intimidation, we may read in Congressional records, regional allies might have begun to question Washington's willingness and ability to uphold its security commitments[114]. Despite such advancements, logistics and intelligence support was said to remain the primary obstacles preventing the PLAN from operating extensively at long ranges. To overcome this, China sought to establish several access points in the Indian Ocean over the following decade, through agreements with host nations for refuelling, replenishment, and maintenance[115].

Tensions with the People's Republic surfaced in Obama's words as well, though on public circumstances the President used moderate tones. Nevertheless, it was impossible to deny by then that there were frictions in the South China Sea and in the Pacific region, to which his Chinese homologue only responded that the two powers were committed to a position of no confrontation and mutual respect[116]. On the ground of this, Xi made it clear that the People's Republic was a major Pacific actor accepting that the region was broad enough to accommodate the development of both China and the United States, but certainly Beijing did not accept any subordinate role[117]. However, while keeping an ongoing dialogue with the PRC, US policies became quite assertive. International rules, said Obama, were pivotal to safeguard freedom of navigation, while coercion and intimidation were not regarded as the right way to manage territorial disputes. Washington had signed a defence agreement with the Philippines, with the goal to build Manila's capacity to engage in training and coordination. Moreover, Obama did not miss

114 *China's Military Modernization and its Implications for the United States*, Hearing before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, One Hundred Thirteenth Congress, Second Session, Thursday, January 30, 2014, on-line on site www.uscc.gov.

115 Annual Report to Congress, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2014*, on-line on site indianstrategicknowledgeonline.com.

116 *Remarks prior to a Meeting with President Xi Jinping of China in The Hague, Netherlands*, March 24, 2014, on-line on site www.govinfo.gov.

117 *The President's News Conference with President Xi Jinping of China in Beijing*, November 12, 2014, in PPPUS, on-line on site www.govinfo.gov.

a chance to remind the Chinese that larger countries had a greater responsibility in abiding by international norms because otherwise smaller countries could be worried and seriously affected[118].Nonetheless, the November 2014 summit in Beijing between Barack Obama and Xi Jinping marked a pivotal threshold in 21st-century diplomacy, managing to show that the two largest economies could achieve major bilateral breakthroughs on global issues, even while fundamental structural tensions were worsening[119]. As for the Asia-Pacific area specifically, the November 2014 summit highlighted two opposing economic and security frameworks for the region's future[120]. While Washington sought to anchor American economic leadership in Asia under strict standards, Xi Jinping countered by signalling China's intent to lead regional integration, for example stressing that the PRC had undisputed sovereignty over island chains in the region and warning against foreign intervention. As Jung Taek Lim says, China was substantially trying to exclude the US from Asian multilateralism in order to preserve its own version of the Monroe Doctrine, for example by providing economic incentives to ASEAN through ratifying a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and perceiving the ASEAN Regional Forum as a vital Asian security forum[121].In a nutshell, while neither superpower was ready for open conflict in the Asia-Pacific, they were locked in an intense campaign to shape the economic integration and security architecture of the region on their own terms.

The relevant number of reports on China's military modernisation and challenges to US interests show very well how worried the Americans were about the Asian giant. Such an effort by the Chinese leadership was therefore marked by double-digit annual increases in the defence budget. By virtue of that, the People's Republic was rapidly producing multi-mission destroyers and frigates

118 *The President's News Conference with President Benigno S. Aquino III of the Philippines in Manila, Philippines*, April 28, 2014, in PPPUS, on-line on site www.govinfo.gov.

119 The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *President Obama's Visit to China*, November 11, 2014, on-line on site obamawhitehouse.archives.gov.

120 According to Jonathan Fenby, gone were the days when Deng Xiaoping suggested the PRC to follow a low profile while building up the economy. Making the People's Republic a great presence on the international scene was also a way for the leader to achieve his own ambitions. Jonathan Fenby, *The Penguin History of Modern China: The Fall and Rise of a Great Power 1850 to the Present, Third Edition*, New York, NY, Penguin Book, 2019, pp. 689-690.

121 Jung Taek Lim, «A Paradoxical American Foreign Policy: Pivot to Asia», *Yonsei Journal of International Studies*, 7, 1 (2015), p. 114.

equipped with sophisticated air defence systems to operate beyond land-based air cover, not to mention the submarine force. In short, while President Obama was publicly speaking about the importance of Sino-American collaboration, Congressional and Defence reports told another story. According to American analyses, the PRC was actively seeking to displace US primacy in East Asia and the Western Pacific by promoting a new regional security architecture led by China itself. As a matter of fact, the Chinese were promoting a new vision where the people in Asia were supposed to be in charge of Asia's affairs and security. In this way, US alliances and partnerships were doomed to be marginalised, leaving regional neighbours with the choice between appeasing Beijing or facing potential conflict. In order to build a dominant sphere of influence, the PRC needed a multifaceted peripheral diplomacy strategy relying on economic incentives and developmental initiatives, such as the Silk Road Economic Belt to integrate Central Asia to Europe, and its corollary, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, running through Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean[122].

The tension between the two Pacific superpowers was even more dramatic in the South China Sea, about which the Obama Administration raised its concerns over navigational freedom and multilateral negotiations over the disputes, including a possible "code of conduct" to be agreed upon China. Needless to say, the People's Republic took these remarks as "interference" attempts to foment disputes between Asian countries. Simply said, from the US point of view China's renewed territorial claims represented growing assertiveness and the willingness to use intimidations. On the contrary, China saw America's actions in the South China Sea as one more thread in a larger net seeking to contain Beijing's rise, thus claiming to be the victim in territorial disputes[123]. In other words, China had realised there was the continent in one direction and the sea in the other direction. Therefore, Chinese activities had the task to expand into waters farther away from the coast[124].

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122 *2014 Report to Congress of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, One Hundred Thirteenth Congress, Second Session, November 2014, on-line on site www.uscc.gov.

123 Chi Wang, *Obama's Challenge to China: The Pivot to Asia*, Abingdon and New York, NY, Routledge, 2015, pp. 174-176.

124 Anghao, Hau, «One Belt, One Road and Grand Border Defense», *CMSI Quartelry Review: Maritime Geo-politics of the Belt and Road Initiative*, 1, 1 (2025), p. 34, on-line on site digital-commons.usnwc.edu.

In order to show the paramount importance of China's naval policies to US interests, we may quote the document *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, issued by the US Department of Navy in March 2015. The report outlined a volatile modern security landscape defined by geopolitical shifts, one of which was China's naval growth. Beijing's naval expansion into the Indian and Pacific Oceans presented a major geopolitical challenge. Such a robust posture was said to foster regional tension and instability, raising the risk of miscalculation or military escalation. In addition, as the global economy was inextricably linked to the massive volume of trade crossing the Indian and Pacific Oceans, threats to maritime commerce, specifically the flow of energy, posed a severe risk. To address these challenges and ensure long-term stability, the maritime strategy emphasised deepening security cooperation and expanding multilateral mechanisms with regional allies and partners[125].In actual fact, the Indian Ocean had by then become another pivotal area of strategic concern. According to researchers of the PLA Naval Institute Research Institute, India was a real threat to the security of China's strategic sea lanes, as more than half of the petroleum and petroleum products entering China crossed the Indian Ocean and transited through the Strait of Malacca. With the expansion of its sea power, India already had the military power to cut off China's strategic sea lanes across the northern part of the Indian Ocean. Moreover, Delhi had developed a "Look East" strategy seeking to strengthen military bases and power in the East, having achieved the ability to control the Bay of Bengal and the Western entrance of the Strait of Malacca. Even more worrisome to the People's Republic, India's "Look East" strategy could intersect in the South China Sea with Japan's "Go South" strategy, therefore resulting in a de facto maritime encirclement of China[126].

By reading the available documentation, the Americans had an opposite interpretation, as we can also read in the 2015 Department of Defense report exploring China's use of low-intensity coercion to assert sovereignty in the South China Sea. Ultimately, these developments reflect Beijing's pursuit of great power status and its evolving role in the global security landscape. To assert sovereignty over disputed areas while avoiding direct military escalation, the PRC was said

125 *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, March 2015, on-line on site www.govinfo.gov.

126 Li Jian, «Chinese Sea Power Expansion and the State of Sea Power in the Indian Ocean», *CMSI Quartelry Review*, 1, 1 (2025), cit., pp. 83-84.

to utilise a low-intensity coercion strategy, placing civilian assets like the Coast Guard (CCG) and commercial fishing fleets at the forefront of disputes, while the PLA Navy played a deterrence role[127]. The change in US sea policy had become evident, for Washington recognised its own vital interests in preventing Chinese expansion and militarisation in the South China Sea. Essentially, Laura Southgate reminds that the Obama Administration recognised the Philippines and Vietnam as the region's frontline states[128]. Justin Logan's assessment is that the US military was planning a posture aimed at putting China's sea commerce at risk, thus positioning forces able to threaten the PRC's supply lines. This because a much more powerful China was suspected to try to exclude the US from engaging in trade with countries in the area, holding hostage sea lanes to extract concessions from other governments[129].To tell the truth, all this was also a good reason for the two superpowers to have top-level-summits, so that Obama and Xi met each other again in September 2015. As far as the Asia-Pacific Region was concerned, the two presidents underlined that they were holding in-depth discussions highlighting both shared interests and historical roles. In particular, Obama reminded that the United States had provided a stabilising platform in the post-World War II era, which had created the secure conditions allowing the Asia-Pacific to stabilise and China to grow rapidly. To prevent conflict, the two nations agreed to new communication channels to reduce the risk of miscalculations between their militaries. Nevertheless, while Obama expressed significant concerns regarding China's land reclamation, construction, and militarisation of disputed areas, Xi asserted that the islands in the South China Sea had been Chinese territory since ancient times and defended the PRC's right to uphold territorial sovereignty and legitimate maritime rights and interests[130].

In a few words, China's relations with Southeast Asian countries were complex and characterised by a dual track of aggressive territorial assertiveness alongside deep economic and diplomatic engagement. Such a posture had led

127 Annual Report to Congress, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2015*, on-line on site digital.library.unt.edu.

128 Laura Southgate, *ASEAN Resistance to Sovereignty Violation: Interests, Balancing and the Role of the Vanguard State*, Bristol, Bristol University Press, 2019, p. 164.

129 Justin Logan, «China, America, and the Pivot to Asia», *Cato Institute Policy Analysis*, 717, (2013), pp. 9-14, on-line on site www.cato.org.

130 *The President's News Conference with President Xi Jinping of China*, September 25, 2015, in PPPUS, on-line on site www.govinfo.gov.

to acute bilateral friction, particularly with the Philippines and Vietnam, even ending up in extensive cyber espionage targeting Southeast Asian governments, military and diplomatic entities. As a response, regional states were strengthening security ties with external powers like the United States and Japan, with the latter providing patrol vessels to both the Philippines and Vietnam. Finally, in order to defuse South China Sea tensions and build diplomatic goodwill, Beijing had pursued an economic charm offensive, anchored by the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and the launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), of which all ten ASEAN members were founding participants[131].

Conclusions

In 2015 both superpowers issued new military strategy documents. The US 2015 National Security Strategy outlined an overall framework for maintaining American global leadership through a combination of economic strength, military readiness, and diplomatic engagement[132]. In contrast, China's 2015 Military Strategy centred around the concept of Active Defence. In short, the PRC asserted that its national defence policy was defensive in nature opposing hegemonism and never seeking expansion. However, the document identified the US rebalancing strategy, as well as Japan's overhaul of its military and security policies, as negative security developments along its periphery[133]. As far as alliances were concerned, while the United States aimed at modernising key bilateral alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Philippines, and Thailand, viewing them as the cornerstone of international engagement and the primary means of sharing the burden of global security[134], China rejected formal military alliances, pursuing instead non-aligned, non-confrontational military relations not directed against any third party. What the PRC could not welcome was also Washington's support of

131 *2015 Report to Congress of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, One Hundred Thirteenth Congress, Second Session, November 2015, on-line on site www.uscc.gov.

132 *National Security Strategy*, February 2015, on-line on site history.defense.gov.

133 *China's Military Strategy*, The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, May 27, 2015, on-line on site english.www.gov.cn.

134 Singapore, although a non-claimant in the South China Sea, had become more extremely vocal, articulating that its critical national interests were at stake where freedom of navigation and over-flight were concerned. Euan Graham, «Southeast Asia in the US Rebalance: Perceptions from a Divided Region», *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 35, 3 (2013), p. 318.

India's role as a regional provider of security, which saw a strategic convergence with Delhi's Act East Policy. At the same time, the People's Republic expressed a desire to manage potential strategic friction with the United States, thus committing fostering a new model of military relationship by strengthening defence dialogues, exchanges and cooperation, besides improving confidence-building mechanisms (CBMs) for notifying each other of major military activities[135].

By assessing the two documents, while both nations recognised the Asia-Pacific as a shifting centre of global economic and strategic gravity, their approaches to security, alliances and regional order highlighted fundamentally competing assets. As far as the Pacific Ocean was concerned, Beijing's military strategy regarded the seas and oceans as vital to the country's enduring peace, lasting stability, and sustainable development. China's overarching ambition was to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power. In sum, according to David C. Gompert US strategy faced multiple quandaries in East Asia, such as: a) restraining the use of Chinese military power; b) reassuring regional friends; c) strengthening deterrence; d) countering China while calling on the PRC to partner with the United States in meeting global challenges[136]. As far as economic growth was concerned, in 2015 the PRC launched the so-called Made in China 2025 Strategy. As Joachim Klement reminds, China was at risk of falling into the "middle-income trap". In a few words, most emerging economies had not managed to achieve what Japan and South Korea had. In actual fact, these two countries had transformed their economies and increasingly specialised in high-tech manufacturing allowing them to raise their wealth beyond the levels of middle-income countries. To escape the middle-income trap, Beijing launched the afore mentioned strategy, billed as an economic project for the following ten years and a step closer to the country's ultimate goal of becoming a leading global economic superpower by 2049. Such a project defined ten industries, including robotics, information technology, energy equipment, and new energy vehicles, in order for the PRC to develop world leading businesses[137]. In particular, the Made in China 2025 document does not

135 *National Security Strategy*, February 2015, cit.; *China's Military Strategy*, May 27, 2015, cit.

136 Gompert, *Sea Power and American Interests*, cit., p. 87.

137 Klement, *Geo-Economics*, cit., pp. 146-147.

explicitly mention the United States; however, the text heavily discussed China's economic and technological relations with foreign countries in general, with the primary objective to reduce dependence on foreign manufactured goods and core technologies. In other words, the Chinese were pursuing independent development to master core technologies in fields critical to national security and the economy, at the same time attracting foreign investment and encouraging Chinese multinational companies in executing overseas mergers and acquisitions[138]. The MIC25 strategy was formalised through China's 13th Five-Year Plan setting ambitious targets, aiming for the afore mentioned industries to constitute fifteen per cent of the national GDP by the end of the period. Once again, even if the plan did not make any explicit reference to the United States, the document set several targets designed to challenge international market structures, carrying therefore strategic implications for global competitors like the United States. Needless to say, the plan relied heavily on the BRI to internationalise Beijing's emerging technology sectors and encourage leading Chinese firms to establish offshore cooperation parks[139].

During his last year in office, Obama had held his eighth bilateral meeting with President Xi Jinping in September 2016. To tell the truth, on this occasion maritime issues were not debated so much, while the President promoted the Trans-Pacific-Partnership as a high-standard trade agreement designed to lower tariffs and raise environmental and labour standards[140]. Two months later, the last Sino-American meeting of the Obama Administration took place, and on that circumstance the leader of the North Atlantic country stated that in the South China Sea the United States continued to urge all claimants to lower tensions and peacefully resolve disputes[141]. As a matter of fact, the Obama Administration's adoption of the pivot strategy confirmed what a lot of studies already regarded as a key component in American global strategy. Core US interests included: a) defending

138 *Notice of the State Council on the Publication of "Made in China 2025"*, May 8, 2015, on-line on site cset.georgetown.edu.

139 *Circular of the State Council on Issuing the National 13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Strategic Emerging Industries*, November 29, 2016, on-line on site cset.georgetown.edu.

140 *The President's News Conference in Hangzhou, China*, September 5, 2016, in PPPUS, on-line on site www.govinfo.gov.

141 *Remarks prior to a Meeting with President Xi Jinping of China in Lima*, November 19, 2016, in PPPUS, on-line on site www.govinfo.gov.

US homeland from emerging regional threats; b) preventing great power wars able to undermine Washington's strategic and economic viability; c) maintaining allied security; d) preventing or at least containing the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD); e) ensuring an open and liberal international trading system; f) advancing democracy or political liberalisation throughout the Asia-Pacific[142]. As an evidence of this, the latest Annual Report to Congress from the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission examined the People's Republic's strategic foreign policy in South Asia and its complex approach towards North Korea. Apart from that, China's military superiority along the disputed land border, coupled with its expanding naval presence and submarine deployments in the Indian Ocean, had caused India to grow deeply concerned about strategic encirclement, so that Delhi had by then shifted away from its traditional nonalignment posture towards proactive alliances under its Act East and Neighbourhood First policies[143]. Furthermore, the Chinese had begun attributing rising tensions to the US strategy, arguing the region had been calm before the Americans rebalanced and began emboldening regional claimants[144].

Once the Obama era was over, the two nations issued their own policies on the Asia-Pacific region, renamed Indo-Pacific by the Americans, as the area stretched from the West Coast of India to the Western shores of the United States. A comparison of China's White Paper on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation (January 2017) and the United States' National Security Strategy (December 2017) reveals two fundamentally different worldviews. In order to better understand such a question, while China's document promoted a security philosophy of peaceful

142 William T. Tow, «Pursuing U.S. Strategic Interests in the Asia-Pacific: Pivoting away from Disorder?», in John R. Deni (ed.), *Augmenting Our Influence: Alliance Revitalization and Partner Development*, Carlisle, PA, Strategic Studies Institute, April 2014, on-line on site press.armywarcollege.edu.

143 Chinese defence and foreign policies were also driven by the need of massive amounts of energy sources and raw materials. To give an idea about that, suffice is to remind that China's exports had increased from 184 billion dollars in 1998 to more than two trillion in 2012. As an outcome of that, Beijing's trade surplus had increased from 44 billion dollars in 1998 to 231 billion in the same span of time. Sigfrido Burgos Cáceres*, China's Strategic Interests in the South China Sea: Power and Resources*, London and New York, NY, Routledge, 2014, p. 25.

144 *2016 Report to Congress of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, One Hundred Thirteenth Congress, Second Session, November 2016, on-line on site www.uscc.gov.

development and mutually beneficial cooperation – though implicitly targeting Washington by criticising the build-up of military alliances directed at third parties – the US strategy was rooted in principled realism and an America First foreign policy, viewing the international landscape as a long-term geopolitical and economic competition for power. The new President, Donald J. Trump, was rejecting previous decades of US policy, asserting that the assumption that integrating rivals like China into the post-war order would liberalise them was fundamentally false. In a very few words, China was labelled as a revisionist power and a strategic challenger seeking to displace the US in the region by endangering the free flow of commerce and threatening the sovereignty of other nations[145].

While the Obama Administration also envisaged a softer policy handing over responsibility in some parts of the world to other regional states including China[146], the two afore mentioned records implied two deeply contrasting narratives. China's White Paper viewed relations with the NATO leader through the lens of managed bilateral cooperation alongside a critique of US-led alliances[147]. Conversely, the United States' National Security Strategy framed its relations through the lens of intense geopolitical competition and a renewed commitment to its regional allies, welcoming in particular the emergence of India as a major defence partner and seeking to expand quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia, and India[148]. On grounds of that, the PRC document argued that beefing up mili-

145 *China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation*, The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, January 2017, on-line on site english.www.gov.cn; *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, on-line on site trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov.

146 Mohammad Tehseen, «Sino-US Competition: Implications for South Asia and the Asia-Pacific», *Strategic Studies*, 37, 4 (2017), p. 6.

147 In January 2015, the Obama Administration had announced the Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean Region, which outlined deepening ties between the US and India. Within a span of time of five years, the goal was to invest robust trilateral consultations with third countries, deepen regional integration, and bolstering long-term peace and prosperity. *U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region*, January 25, 2015, on-line on site obamawhitehouse.archives.gov.

148 In 2013, Australia's White Paper outlined goals to expand its strategic maritime arc along the Asian coast. To assist in this expansive policy, Australia opened RAAF Base Darwin to American forces in 2015. Stephanie Hansen, «U.S. Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific: Australia and India», in *Task Force GReport 2016: Assessing the Obama Administration's Pivot to Asia: A Review of the Economic, Strategic and Diplomatic Policy Adjustments that Have Defined Contemporary U.S.-Asia Relations*, p. 230, on-line on site digital.lib.wash-

tary alliances targeted at a third party was not conducive to common security. As far as the South China Sea was concerned, Beijing insisted that maritime disputes should be resolved solely through direct negotiation and consultation among the directly involved sovereign states[149].

How concerned the Americans were about the Chinese challenge to their hegemony in the Pacific Ocean is certainly demonstrated by the massive number of congressional records issued every year. Sino-US trade relations were always on centre stage, but next to this the military modernisation of the People's Republic was constantly monitored. In order to respond to Beijing's assertiveness, Washington had set up a pearl of alliances around China. In actual fact, the military agreements reached during those years had set in motion a new policy of containment, which paradoxically allowed the Chinese to approach its Asian neighbours and take the lead in the area from a diplomatic, commercial and even military point of view, as the PRC rapidly built up its navy, created a huge stock of missiles, and turned artificial islands in the South China Sea into military bases. According to Robert Blackwill and Richard Fontaine, Washington had persistently underestimated the China challenge. Rather than bowing to US preferences, China had instead pursued its own course, so that the Trump Administration declared the People's Republic a strategic competitor. Finally, by declaring an Asia-first foreign policy, the Obama Administration had attempted a grand strategic shift in the absence of forcing events so dramatic or threatening as to become the driving factor in US policy[150]. After all, as Henry Kissinger says, the American approach to policy is pragmatic, while China's is conceptual. While the United States seeks solutions responding to immediate circumstances, China concentrates on evolutionary change, setting out general principles and analyse the way to take the lead. Whether such a difference would translate into rivalry or a new form of partnership is the issue that will shape the XXI-century world order[151].

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ington.edu.

149 *China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation*, January 2017, cit.; *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, cit.

150 Robert D. Blackwill and Richard Fontaine, *Lost Decade: The US Pivot to Asia and the Rise of Chinese Power*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2024, pp. 280-282.

151 Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*, London, Penguin Books, 2015, pp. 226-227.

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Naval Orbats

A comparative analysis of the major navies during the first phase of the Cold War

by Marco Sciarretta

Abstract. The global confrontation that went down in history as the Cold War was, primarily, a struggle between a great maritime alliance and a powerful continental bastion, the latter united by a common ideological basis. In this context, the naval competition developed, more than in oceans, above and below the mediterraneans: Barents Sea, Baltic, South China Sea, Yellow Sea, Japanese Sea and, obviously, the Mediterranean itself. In this context, the analysis deepens the evolution of Orders of battle in the first stages of the Cold War, of the main Navies of Free World as well the Soviet one, and the role of the Italian Navy in the global confrontation.
The essay originates from a research included in the volume *1945-1955. Dalla Regia Marina alla Marina Militare*, to be published in 2027 by USMM (Italian Navy Historical Department).

Keywords. Naval Orbats. Major Navies in the 1950s. Cold War

Prologue: Ends and Means

The evolution of the Italian Navy in the historical setting of the post-Second World War period cannot be considered in isolation from the international context, shaped by relations between the two (sole) victorious powers of the Second World War, amid profound uncertainty and the very real danger of another major conflict. Foreign scholarship—much of it American—and the extensive availability of sources made possible by the digitization of archives internationally now allow us to place in context the importance—both genuine and underestimated—of the Mediterranean and Italy in the balance of power during the early Cold War.

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At the end of hostilities against Japan, with no apparent threats to the new international order, the demands of industrial reconversion and intense social pressures inevitably impelled the Western nations towards the rapid demobilization of their armed forces. Scarce financial and human resources, together with enormous surplus arsenals, added to the need to assimilate the lessons of the recent war.

In the United States, the availability of the atomic bomb at last offered the opportunity, after decades of attempts, to establish an independent Air force separate from the Army. The conceptual basis of the new service (USAF) rested on the hardly novel premise that a total war could be won by annihilating the enemy through strategic bombing: a theory already tested in the air war against Germany, with inconclusive results achieved at enormous cost. The hoped-for vindication of the doctrines of the Italian Douhet and his American successor Mitchell would this time be secured through nuclear weapons and technological superiority over potential adversaries. The "Cult of the Offensive", intimately bound up with theories of Air Power, thus came to undermine the rational development of a doctrine that gave due weight to the actual strategic situation.[1]

The establishment of the Department of Defense, with a view to creating an integrated military establishment, provided a political opportunity to identify the USAF's ideological outlook as the ideal means of drastically reducing military expenditure: the doctrine of total war and atomic bombing thus became the foundation of American war plans against the Soviet Union. The U.S. Navy, and Secretary of Defense James Forrestal, however pointed to numerous weaknesses in these plans: without sufficient ground and naval forces, Western Europe and the Mediterranean would have to be abandoned, virtually without a fight, in the event of a Soviet attack. Confidence that the USSR could be defeated by nuclear strikes was, moreover, entirely speculative, given the limitations of the aircraft and weapons then available.[2]

The confrontation between the USAF and USN erupted in April 1949, following President Truman's dismissal of Forrestal: among the first directives issued by his successor, Louis Johnson, was an order to scrap the new aircraft carrier *United States* on the building ways, only days after construction had begun. This

1 Smith D. 1947, pp. 3–14; Carter 1998, pp. 19-31; Steele 2010, p. 49, 57.

2 Schnabel 1996, pp. 70-77; Steele 2010, p. 319.



23 September 1948, *Vice Admiral* Forrest P. Sherman, U.S. Navy, inspects the crew of the heavy cruiser USS *Albany*'s, transferring the flag of Com6th Task Fleet (Mediterranean) from his previous flagship, the light cruiser USS *Fargo* (U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command, 80-G-396949).

drastic decision had been approved "by majority vote" by the Army and Air Force Chiefs of Staff to finance construction of the new B-36 *Peacemaker* intercontinental bombers intended for the USAF's Strategic Air Command.

The enormous B-36, conceived to reach its targets from bases on the American continent, was inherently too large and too slow. As early as 1946, the then Army Air Forces (USAAF) had preferred the B-50 medium bomber, which was faster and far less vulnerable: if necessary, these aircraft could be redeployed to bases closer to their targets. The newly established USAF itself adopted this position in 1947, until its Air Staff, against the advice of its own Strategic Air Command, nevertheless decided to proceed with production of an initial batch of the extremely costly B-36.[3]

The four carriers cancelled to finance the *Peacemaker*s also caused concern within the USAF because they would, in essence, deprive the Air Force of its monopoly on strategic bombing—the very raison d'être of the new service.[4] The "United States" carriers had in fact been designed to embark an air group of nuclear-armed AJ *Savage* attack aircraft. In addition to offering better performance than the Air Force's giant aircraft, the *Savage* had an operating radius of 1,500 nautical miles, which would have made it possible to reach 100% of potential targets from the sea. The carriers would also have embarked substantial numbers of modern F2H *Banshee* jet fighters which, in addition to escorting the bombers, would have provided the flexibility to undertake every kind of conventional mission at the same time.[5]

Forrestal, a naval aviator during the Great War who, as Secretary of the Navy, had witnessed the landing on Iwo Jima under enemy fire,[6] tragically took his own life, overcome by stress and repeated personal attacks. The U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps were by then openly opposing the decisions of the new Secretary of Defense, which were expressly intended to eliminate the Navy and Marines as independent services. The institutional confrontation, remembered as the *Revolt of the Admirals*, prompted the United States Congress to hold a series of hearings in which senior officers and specialists of the U.S. Navy challenged, point by point,

3 Moody 1995, pp. 98, 104, 111, 180-181.

4 Barlow 2001, pp. 117-120; Steele 2010, pp. 279-280.

5 Ginter 1992, pp. 2-3, 60-61, 71, 77; Friedman 1983, pp. 239-253.

6 Forrestal, Millis 1951, pp. 29-30.

not only the soundness of the B-36 program but the Air Force's very doctrine. The USAF, however, through its careful management of institutional relations and a skillful media campaign, succeeded completely in defending its programs, with considerable gains in public standing.[7]

On that occasion, during a humiliating public hearing, General Omar Bradley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, described his Navy colleagues as «fancy dans who won't hit the line with all they have on every play unless they can call the signals».[8]

After the committee's proceedings had concluded, numerous Navy witnesses—in violation of assurances repeatedly given—were removed from their posts, investigated or forced to resign. Secretary Johnson went so far as to express his position at the time to the CINC, Atlantic Fleet, in these terms: «Admiral, the Navy is on its way out […] There's no reason for having a Navy or a Marine Corps. General Bradley tells me that amphibious operations are a thing of the past. We'll never have any more amphibious operations. That does away with the Marine Corps. And the Air Force can do anything the Navy can nowadays, so that does away with the Navy.»[9]

In 1950, at the USAF's urging, the number of aircraft carriers was reduced from 11 to 8. In planning for 1951, the Army proposed cutting the figure to 4, and the USAF proposed eliminating carriers altogether. In addition to halving the Navy's carrier air groups and those of the USMC, maritime patrol and antisubmarine aircraft were also cut. The withdrawal of the *Marines*' amphibious craft was ordered; they were handed over to the Army and laid up in storage. The USMC itself was, in effect, to be reduced to ceremonial duties and shore police services within naval bases.[10]

A few months later, on 25 June 1950, ten divisions of the North Korean Army invaded South Korea. President adviser John Foster Dulles, then in the country on a diplomatic mission, cabled Washington that «to sit by while Korea is overrun

7 Cosentino 2015, 55-66; Mc Farland 1980, pp. 53-63; Carter 1998, pp. 27-35; Steele 2010, pp. 277-279.

8 Mc Farland 1980, p. 60, at a hearing before the US House of Representatives, in the presence of the press which, naturally, gave these demeaning remarks extensive coverage.

9 House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, March 1, 1950, p. 6, in Heinl 1968, p. 6-7.

10 Heinl 1968, pp. 3-13; Steele 2010, pp. 277-279.

by unprovoked armed attack would start a disastrous chain of events leading most probably to world war».[11] The United States Army possessed only ten divisions worldwide, compared with the USSR's 141, its satellite countries' 87 and Communist China's 40.[12]

Once the decision had been taken to intervene—and as was entirely foreseeable, *not* to employ atomic weapons—President Truman ordered an immediate naval blockade of North Korea. The response from the Office of the Secretary of Defense consisted of a brief memorandum, signed by an assistant, reporting that this could not be done because «(a) we do not have sufficient forces available and (b) We wish to stay well clear of Russian and Manchurian waters».[13]

Within a month, the American troops sent to Korea were encircled, together with the remnants of the South Korean forces, within the defensive perimeter protecting the port of Pusan as a last resort. The units deployed by the United States Army had been brought up to strength by stripping every other formation of men and equipment available, with the exception of the 82nd Airborne Division—all that remained of the strategic reserve—and the 1st Infantry Division, retained in Germany because of well-founded fears of a Soviet attack in Europe.[14] The USAF, lacking bases and aircraft with the necessary range, operated as best it could from Japan after returning the Second World War-era F-51 piston-engined fighters to service, some of them recovered from scrapyards.[15]

In this desperate situation, naval gunfire support and the air cover provided by the (only) three carriers available in the Pacific saved the United Nations expeditionary force from destruction. On 15 September 1950, a masterly Marine amphibious operation at Inchon completely reversed the situation and put the North Koreans to flight.

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11 Telegram Extract, John Foster Dulles and John Allison to Dean Acheson and Dean Rusk, June 25, 1950, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum; Allison 1975, pp. 129-131; John Foster Dulles would become US Secretary of State in 1953.

12 Schnabel 1996, p. 71.

13 Truman Presidential Library, Archives: Office of the Secretary of Defense, Memorandum of Information for the Secretary - *Blockade of Korea*, 6 July 1950, https://web.archive.org/web/20070809213846/http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/korea/large/week2/kw_78_1.jpg (last retr. 2026-11-14).

14 Rottman 2008, pp. 11-12.

15 Thompson 1995, p.18.

The assault force had been assembled from scratch, by mobilizing reservists and conducting training aboard ships en route to the operational area. Eight weeks after leaving their homes, veterans of Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima stormed and captured the enemy fortifications. The Navy and USMC's capability for rapid response had, at the eleventh hour, prevented a *fait accompli* that might have proved fatal to the entire Western side.[16]

On 19 September, President Truman demanded Johnson's resignation. A few months later, construction began on the first of four supercarriers that, together with the *Marines*, would henceforth become the quintessential symbols of American military power. Derived from the *United States* design, the new class took its name from its lead ship: USS *Forrestal*.

As for the B-36, 383 aircraft were produced at an average cost of $3.776 million each,[17] for a total of $1,446 million—$20 billion in 2026 values—which would have purchased not four, but *six* "United States"-class carriers with their air groups. The B-36 had indeed been obsolete from the outset. The Air Force's bomber study committee had written as early as 1947 that any attempt to improve the aircraft «…it will only serve would serve to prove [the superbomber's] own fallacy and ensure its own oblivion».[18] With the assistance of a skillful public-relations campaign, the one mission it might still have been able to accomplish for the USAF was the elimination of the U.S. Navy's aircraft carriers.

Painstakingly brought into service between 1950 and 1954, every aircraft built was withdrawn and scrapped between 1956 and 1958.

The Great Game

The Cold War has been described, above all, as a confrontation between a great maritime alliance and a powerful continental bastion united by a common ideological foundation. Naval competition unfolded less on the oceans than on, and beneath, the mediterranean seas: the Barents, Baltic, South China, Yellow and Japan seas and, of course, the Mediterranean proper. The latter, fulcrum of the western

16 Krulak 1998, pp. 120-140; Tani 2001, pp. 133, 157-172; Rottman 2008, pp. 14-15; Lehman 2011, p. 41.

17 Jacobsen, Wagner 1980, p. 31.

18 Moody 1995, p. 175.

rimland, is also the natural outlet of Russia's inland-waterway system, whose canals link the Arctic Ocean, the Baltic, Moscow, the Caspian and the Black Sea via the Volga and Don. Soviet pressure towards the Mediterranean Sea, like Sino-Russian pressure towards the Korea and Formosa (Taiwan) straits, formed therefore part of the centuries-long global struggle for control of the land and sea routes of *Eurafrasia*, pitting maritime powers against continental powers.[19]

In the case of the Black Sea–Mediterranean system, Russian forces had already reached San Stefano on the Sea of Marmara—between the Bosporus and the Dardanelles—and Dedeağaç—on the Mediterranean coast—in 1878, at the end of the eleventh Russo-Turkish War. Only intense pressure from the other great powers prevented the fall of Constantinople, imposing a partial withdrawal.[20]

The Russian Revolution and the birth of the Soviet Union had seemingly quieted the traditional expansionist policies of the Tsars. In June 1945, however, the USSR presented Turkey an unilateral proposal to amend the Straits agreements. A month later, at Potsdam, the Soviet delegation requested permission to establish a base of its own on the Sea of Marmara, or at Dedeağaç in the Aegean. In August, at the London conference, having called for the award of the former Italian Dodecanese, it vigorously demanded that administration of Tripolitania be entrusted to the USSR. Pressure towards the Mediterranean, where control of the Albanian base at Valona had already been secured, was accompanied by pressure in the Far East: in a few weeks the Soviet Union gained control of the naval bases at Dairen and Port Arthur in China and occupied the Kuril Islands north of Japan. Shortly afterwards, Stalin laid down a new twenty-year program for the construction of major surface combatants and, above all, a substantial submarine force.

Soviet ambitions in the Mediterranean would soon be frustrated by the first American countermoves, beginning with the battleship *Missouri*'s mission to the Bosporus in April 1946 in support of Turkey.[21] In Asia, however, events would take a different course. After three years of civil war and the crushing victories of the People's Liberation Army, the People's Republic of China was proclaimed on

19 Fioravanzo 1943, pp. 10-21; Spykman 1944, pp. 24-25, 38, 41; Tani 2001, pp. 133-134; Ruschi 2005, pp. 422-423, 442-445, 461-462; Cardini 2009, par. IX; Ilari 2019, pp. 15-19.

20 Fairhall 1971, pp. 20-21; Kaya 2007, pp. 76-77.

21 Forrestal, Millis 1951, pp. 71, 103, 141, 144, 191-192; Gabriele 1980, pp. 9-18; Tani 2001, pp. 146.

1 October 1949. The US-backed Nationalist forces of the Kuomintang withdrew to Hainan, Taiwan, and other smaller offshore archipelagos. Until then, Soviet policy in the region had focused on consolidating its own positions, avoiding direct involvement in the ongoing communist insurgencies. The United States, for its own, declared on several occasions in the beginning of 1950 that it would intervene neither in defence of Taiwan nor in Korea, which had itself been embroiled for a year in a civil war between the communist North and nationalist South.

In an abrupt reversal, in January 1950 China and the USSR recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, then at war with the French colonial occupiers, as that country's legitimate government; in February the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Alliance was signed; in March, two Soviet air divisions redeployed to the Shanghai area; in April, Stalin agreed to provide the military support, long requested by communist Korea, to reunify the peninsula by force; and in May China seized Hainan in a bold amphibious operation. During the spring, in their first actu-

29 June 1946, the USS *Fargo* at Trieste, during the crisis between Italy and Yugoslavia over the ownership of the port (U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command, 80-G-702869).



al operations since the Second World War, aircraft of the Soviet Air Defence Forces and Naval Aviation ended the bombing of Shanghai and the Nationalist naval blockade. The People's Army also undertook an extensive reorganization to devote the necessary manpower and financial resources to the air and naval forces, essential for conquering Taiwan within a year. Meanwhile, three Chinese divisions made up of ethnic Koreans transferred to the North Korean Army, as did numerous volunteers, veterans of the war against the Kuomintang, amounting to 50,000–70,000 fully equipped soldiers. These trained and motivated forces would play a decisive part in the success of the offensive launched on the following 25 June.

Two days after the North Korean attack, the United States decided to intervene in Korea while simultaneously sending naval forces into the Formosa Strait to prevent a concurrent landing on Taiwan. The amphibious operation at Inchon, and the American decision (ill-advised?) to reunify Korea by invading the North, would force China to intervene directly in that conflict, committing for three years the troops prepared for the invasion of Taiwan and postponing that conquest to a more favorable time.[22]

In Europe, on the other hand, US *intelligence* assessments had made it clear from the outset that Soviet ground and air forces possessed the potential to overrun any defence, at least as far as the Pyrenees and Alps; in that event, the Red Army would very probably also aim to seize Middle Eastern oil resources. In February 1949, the Supreme Allied Commander, General Dwight Eisenhower, acknowledging NATO's inability to halt a possible Soviet offensive on the Rhine, had requested from the US Joint Chiefs of Staff the forces sufficient to retain control at least of the British Isles, access to the Mediterranean and the Middle East region. No funding was, however, provided in the plans for the defence of the Middle East: the USAF considered that control of the region «would serve no useful strategic purpose», despite strong opposition from the Navy, which regarded maintaining a presence there at any cost as essential.[23]

22 Weathersby 1993, pp. 5-6, 28-30; Chen 1994, pp. 83-90, 94-101, 108-111, 129-132, 211-213; Zhang 2002, pp. 32-33, 46-47, 51-52, 55-59, 67, 79-83; Westad 2003, pp. 297-301, 303-305, 320.

23 Moody 1995, pp. 136, 289: «Nonetheless […] the Air Force member of the Joint Strategic Planning Committee found that the Navy was still advocating a commitment to the region, budget or no budget».



5 April 1946, the battleship USS *Missouri* off Istanbul, Turkey. She had officially brought home, for burial, the deceased Turkish Ambassador to the U.S., a mission actually aimed at influencing Soviet Middle East policy. At right, the Turkish battle cruiser *Yavuz*, former Imperial German Navy *Goeben*, the oldest dreadnought-type in active service worldwide and the very same ship that played a crucial role, in 1914, in the fate of the Ottoman Empire (U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command, 80-G-702557).

One of the few accounts of Soviet strategic planning under General Secretary Joseph Stalin appears in the "clandestine" memoirs of his successor, Nikita Chruščëv, circulated in the West from the 1970s onwards. From the opening chapters there emerges the new Secretary's genuine—and candidly acknowledged—lack of interest in maritime and naval matters, with striking parallels to American military policy in 1948–1950. According to Chruščëv, Stalin was «greatly overrated as a strategist and theorist», particularly in view of—in Chruščëv's eyes, naturally, misguided—his preference for «the development of the Navy, and surface ships, rather than the Air Force», and his refusal to recognize that «the days when whoever controlled the seas controlled the world» were over. Chruščëv also criticized Stalin for habitually discussing such strategic matters directly with military specialists and involving the Party leadership only afterwards, often merely to announce decisions already made.

Two years after Stalin's death in March 1953, the new Party leadership imposed a decisive change of course, making the development of a powerful nuclear strike force its new priority and bringing an end to Stalin's ambitious naval programs, which had instead regarded the Navy as a political instrument in the protracted struggle against the West, to be employed in peace as well as in war. Chruščëv's decisions met with vehement opposition from the Minister of the Navy, Admiral Nikolay Kuznetsov. Already head of the Naval Forces during the Great Patriotic War, and renowned for his courage and habitual frankness towards Stalin, Kuznetsov had been tried and dismissed in 1947 before being reinstated by Stalin himself four years later. In 1955 he was removed for good, this time by Chruščëv, because "by openly opposing the new political line, he was implicitly rehabilitating Stalin's mistaken naval policies, which we had just repudiated". Chruščëv himself later acknowledged—a belated change of heart after the dangers of the Cuban Missile Crisis—that «Aircraft carriers, of course, are the second most effective weapon [after submarines] in a modern navy […] I'll admit I felt a nagging desire to have some in our own Navy, but we couldn't afford to build them».[24]

Aircraft Carriers vs Battleships

The aircraft carrier's rise to the status of *capital ship* in place of the battleship is now almost taken for granted but was in fact the product of carefully considered postwar assessments and of the fleets' new role as instruments for projecting power ashore.[25]

Table 1 – Battleships and Battlecruisers

Column **1938**,	ships in active service at the beginning of Second World War;
Columns **1939-1945**,	ships newly commissioned, lost, dismissed, and remaining in active service at the end of the war.
Columns **1946-1950**,	ships newly commissioned, dismissed, put in reserve, and remaining in active service between the end of WW2 and te outbreak of the Korean war.
Columns **1955,**	ships in reserve and in active service as of that date.

24 Chruščëv 1974, pp. 19-34; Turrini 2003, pp. 91-93.

25 FitzSimonds 2020, pp. 843-865.

	1938	1939-1945				1946-1950				1955	
United States	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
Costr. 1912-1917	**11**		-2		**9**		[-9]	/	/	/	/
Costr. 1920-1921	**5**				**5**			(5)	/	(5)	/
"North Carolina"		**2**			**2**			(2)	/	(2)	/
"South Dakota"		**4**			**4**			(4)	/	(4)	/
"Iowa"		**4**			**4**			(3)	**1**	/	**4**
"Alaska"		**2**			**2**			(2)	/	(2)	/
United Kingdom	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
Costr. 1914-16	**12**		-3	[-6]	**3**		[-3]	/	/	/	/
"Hood"	**1**		-1		/			/	/	/	/
"Nelson"	**2**				**2**		[-2]	/	/	/	/
"King George V"		**5**	-1		**4**			(4)	/	(4)	/
"Vanguard"						**1**		/	**1**	/	**1**
France	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
Costr. 1913-16	**5**		-2	[-2]	**1**			(1)	/	/	/
"Dunkerque"	**2**		-2		/			/	/	/	/
"Richelieu" (*)		**1**			**1**			/	**1**	(1)	**1**
Italy	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Cavour" rim.	**2**			[-1]	**1**		[-1]	/	/	/	/
"Duilio" rim.		**2**			**2**			/	**2**	/	**2**
"Vittorio Veneto"		**3**	-1		**2**		[-2]	/	/	/	/
Soviet Union	Serv.	(**)	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	(**)	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
Costr. 1914-16	**3**	**1**	-1		**3**	**1**	[-1]	/	**3**	/	**3**

(*) *Jean Bart* commissioned in 1955 in replacement of *Richelieu*, meanwhile downgraded to training duties.

(**) British *Royal Sovereign* on loan, replaced after the war by the former Italian *Giulio Cesare*.

	1938	1939-1945				1946-1950				1955	
Tot. Battleships	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
U.S. Navy	**16**	**12**	-2		**26**		[-9]	(16)	**1**	(13)	**4**
Royal Navy	**15**	**5**	-5	[-6]	**9**	**1**	[-5]	(4)	**1**	(4)	**1**
Marine Nationale	**7**	**1**	-4	[-2]	**2**			(1)	**1**	(1)	**1**
R. Marina / M.M.	**2**	**5**	-1	[-1]	**5**		[-3]	/	**2**	/	**2**
R.K.K.F. / V.M.F.	**3**	**1**	-1		**3**	**1**	[-1]	/	**3**	/	**3**

As regards battleships, Britain ended the war with four wartime-built "King George V" ships and six surviving prewar vessels, having already withdrawn the most obsolete battleships. After all the older units were struck, only the four "KGVs" were laid up in reserve, and in fact none was ever reactivated. The sole battleship remaining in service was therefore *Vanguard*, completed in 1946 and the last battleship ever built. In service until 1955, she carried four 381 mm turrets salvaged a quarter-century earlier from the battlecruisers of the Great War…[26]

In 1945 the U.S. Navy's battle line comprised 14 older battleships and 12 commissioned from 1941 onwards. At the end of the war the oldest ships were retired, while the five built in the 1920s, extensively modernized during the conflict, and eight wartime-built ships were placed in reserve; only the newest four "Iowa" class remained in commission.[27]

The postwar budget cuts nevertheless led to mothballing three of the four "Iowa" between 1948 and 1949. *Missouri*, the sole battleship still in commission, was immediately employed in Korea, soon followed by her sisters, reactivated until the mid-1950s. A recurring cycle in subsequent decades.

The French Navy emerged from the war with only *Richelieu*, recently modernized in American yards, while the obsolete Great War-era *Lorraine* was immediately placed in reserve. *Richelieu* was used as a training ship from 1950 and placed in reserve in 1956, while her sister *Jean Bart*, launched in 1940, was not completed until 1955 and was herself laid up only two years later.[28]

In 1945 the Soviet fleet possessed two old First World War battleships and a contemporary, equally worn-out battleship on loan from the Royal Navy. The latter was in turn replaced by the Italian *Giulio Cesare*, transferred as war reparations. All three ships were withdrawn from frontline service in 1955: *Cesare* was lost in a well-known tragic accident, while the other two were assigned training duties.[29]

In addition to the obsolete *Cesare* (already withdrawn from service in 1942), the Italian Navy had to surrender the two prestigious "Vittorio Venetos". Had they remained in service, they would have given Italy an unprecedented parity in

26 Jane's 1946, pp. 20-29; Jane's 1953, pp. 18-19; Garzke, Dulin 1980, pp. 281-289.
27 Stern 1980, pp. 10-14; Stern 1984, pp. 4-13; Adcock 2001 Part 2, pp. 36-42.
28 Jane's 1946, pp. 117-121; Garzke, Dulin 1980, pp. 94-121.
29 Jane's 1953, pp. 299-300.



1949, Malta, the battleship *Duilio* alongside a "Fiji"-class light cruiser of the Royal Navy—likely the *Mauritius*. The *Mauritius* had been involved, in October 1946, in the Corfu Channel incident, during which the destroyers HMS *Volage* and HMS *Saumarez* were severely damaged by mines—resulting in significant loss of life—while transiting through Albanian waters (Italian Navy Historical Archives, AUSMM).

this category of ships against the United States, France/Britain, and the USSR—a situation that would probably never have been tolerated. The two "Duilio", reconstructed in 1940 and sharing numerous systems with the "Venetos", remained in commission, officially classified as training ships.[30]

* * *

As for aircraft carriers, Britain ended the war with six fleet attack carriers and four light carriers, with another one assigned to auxiliary duties. In the immediate postwar period, one of the larger ships was stricken and another placed in reserve, together with a light carrier. Of the ships under construction, two were converted into auxiliaries, one laid up in reserve and the nine remaining earmarked for

30 Bagnasco, De Toro 2020, pp. 110-123, 210;

export. In 1950, British naval aviation comprised three attack carriers, one fleet carrier assigned to training duties and four light carriers of the "Colossus" type. None, however, could operate modern jet aircraft.

Following the outbreak of the Korean War, the sole light carrier still in reserve was reactivated, while completion finally proceeded on the fleet carriers left on the building ways at the end of the Second World War. With the wartime-built fleet carriers stricken, apart from one earmarked for extensive reconstruction, the seven "newly" built fleet carriers were still accompanied in 1955 by five small, worn-out "Colossus"-class light carriers, themselves nearing withdrawal.[31]

Table 2 – Fleet Aircraft carrier and Light Aircraft carrier

Aircraft carrier	**1938**	**1939-1945**				**1946-1950**				**1955**	
United States	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Lexington"	**2**		-1		**1**		[-1]	/	/	/	/
"Yorktown"	**2**	**1**	-2		**1**		[-1]	/	/	/	/
"Wasp"		**1**	-1		/			/	/	/	/
"Essex"		**17**			**17**	**7**		(19)	**5**	(2)	**22**
"Midway"						**3**		/	**3**	/	**3**
United Kingdom	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Courageous"	**3**		-2	[-1]	/			/	/	/	/
"Ark Royal"	**1**		-1		/			/	/	/	/
"Illustrious"		**4**			**4**		[-1]	/	**3**	(1)	**2**
"Implacable"		**2**			**2**			(1)	**1**	(1)	/
"Audacious" (*)								/	**/**	/	**2**
Tot. Fleet carrier	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
U.S. Navy	**4**	**19**	-4		**19**	**10**	[-2]	(19)	**8**	(2)	**25**
Royal Navy	**4**	**6**	-3	[-1]	**6**		[-1]	(1)	**4**	(2)	**4**

(*) *Eagle* e *Ark Royal* commissioned respectively in 1952 and 1955.

31 Beaver 1982, pp. 41-46, 54-61, 164-171.

Light carrier	**1938**	**1939-1945**				**1946-1950**				**1955**	
United States	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Ranger"	**1**				**1**		[-1]	/	/	/	/
"Independence"		**9**	-1		**8**		[-1]	(7)	/	(5)	/
"Saipan"					/	**2**		/	**2**	/	**2**
United Kingdom	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
Costr. 1918-24	**3**		-2	[-1]	/			/	/	/	/
"Unicorn" (**)		**1**			**1**		[-1]	/	/	/	/
"Colossus" (**)		**4**			**4**	**6**	[-5]	(1)	**4**	/	**5**
"Majestic" (**)						**3**	[-3]	/	/	/	/
"Centaur" (***)								/	/	/	**3**
Francia	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Trans.	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Béarn"	**1**			[-1]	/			/	/	/	/
"Colossus"						**1**		/	**1**	/	**1**
"Independence"								/	**/**	/	**2**
Tot. Light carrier	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
U.S. Navy	**1**	9	-1		**9**	**2**	[-2]	7	**2**	(5)	**2**
Royal Navy	**3**	5	-2	[-1]	**5**	**9**	[-9]	(1)	**4**	/	**8**
Mar. Nationale	**1**			[-1]	/	**1**		/	**1**	/	**3**

(**) *Unicorn* and two "Colossus" converted to auxiliary duties, the others for export.

(**) *Centaur*, *Albion* e *Bulwark* commissioned in 1953-54, *Hermes* in 1959.

Although Britain's contribution to the development of the aircraft carrier is beyond question, the U.S. Navy's pre-eminence in integrating naval air power is equally clear: for the Americans, the carriers, naval aircraft and naval aviators *were* the Navy.[32] At the close of the titanic struggle in the Pacific, the US Navy had 20 attack carriers and eight light carriers in commission.[33] Another 11 entered service in the immediate postwar period, including the three powerful "Midway" class, while one light carrier and the last prewar-built ships were stricken. From

32 Salvadori 2002, pp. 71-75.

33 Stern 1991, pp. 40-49; Smith M. 2002, pp. 42-49.

1947 onwards, budget cuts led to the placing in reserve of 19 "Essex"-class attack carriers, together with all seven wartime-built light carriers.[34]

At the time of the North Korean attack, only seven attack carriers and two light carriers remained in commission. Ships laid up in reserve were reactivated with the utmost urgency, their flight decks manned by reservists, many of them veterans of the Pacific War. By 1955, on the eve of the *Forrestals* entering service, the active fleet comprised no fewer than 25 attack carriers alongside the two more modern light carriers. Only two "Essex"-class ships remained in reserve (both severely damaged during the Second World War and rebuilt, but never recommissioned), along with the five surviving light carriers, these one in surplus and available for transfer abroad: two others had already been transferred to France, joining a former British similar one in Indochina.

34 Friedman 1983, pp. 133-135, 156, 223; Cosentino 2020, pp. 79-88.



Table 3 – Escort Aircraft carrier

Stati Uniti	**1938**	**1939-1945**				**1946-1950**				**1955**	
United States	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Long Island"		**1**			**1**		[-1]	/	/	/	/
"Charger"		**1**			**1**		[-1]	/	/	/	/
"Bogue"		**11**	-1		**10**			(10)	/	(10)	/
"Sangamon"		**4**			**4**			(4)	/	(4)	/
"Casablanca"		**50**	-5		**45**		[-11]	(34)	/	(29)	**5**
"Commencement B."		**10**			**10**	**9**		(15)	**4**	(7)	**12**
United Kingdom	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
Former merchant v.		**3**	-1		**2**		[-2]	/	/	/	/
"Nairana"		**3**			**3**		[-3]	/	/	/	/
"Long Island"		**1**			**1**		[-1]	/	/	/	/
"Charger"		**3**	-2	[-1]	/			/	/	/	/
"Bogue"		**33**	-1		**32**		[-32]	/	/	/	/
France	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Trans.	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Charger"						**1**	/	/	**1**	/	/
	1938	**1939-1945**				**1946-1950**				**1955**	
Tot. Escort carrier	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	B/T	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
U.S. Navy		**77**	-6		**71**	**9**	[-13]	(63)	**4**	(50)	**17**
Royal Navy		**43**	-4	[-1]	**38**		[-38]	/	/	/	/
Marine Nationale						**1**		/	**1**	/	/

On the opposite page

4 February 1949, the battle fleet carrier USS *Midway* (CVB-41) steams through a gale, east of Sicily. In the foreground, some F4U-4 *Corsair* on the flight deck of USS *Philippine Sea* (U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command, 80-G-706984).

* * *

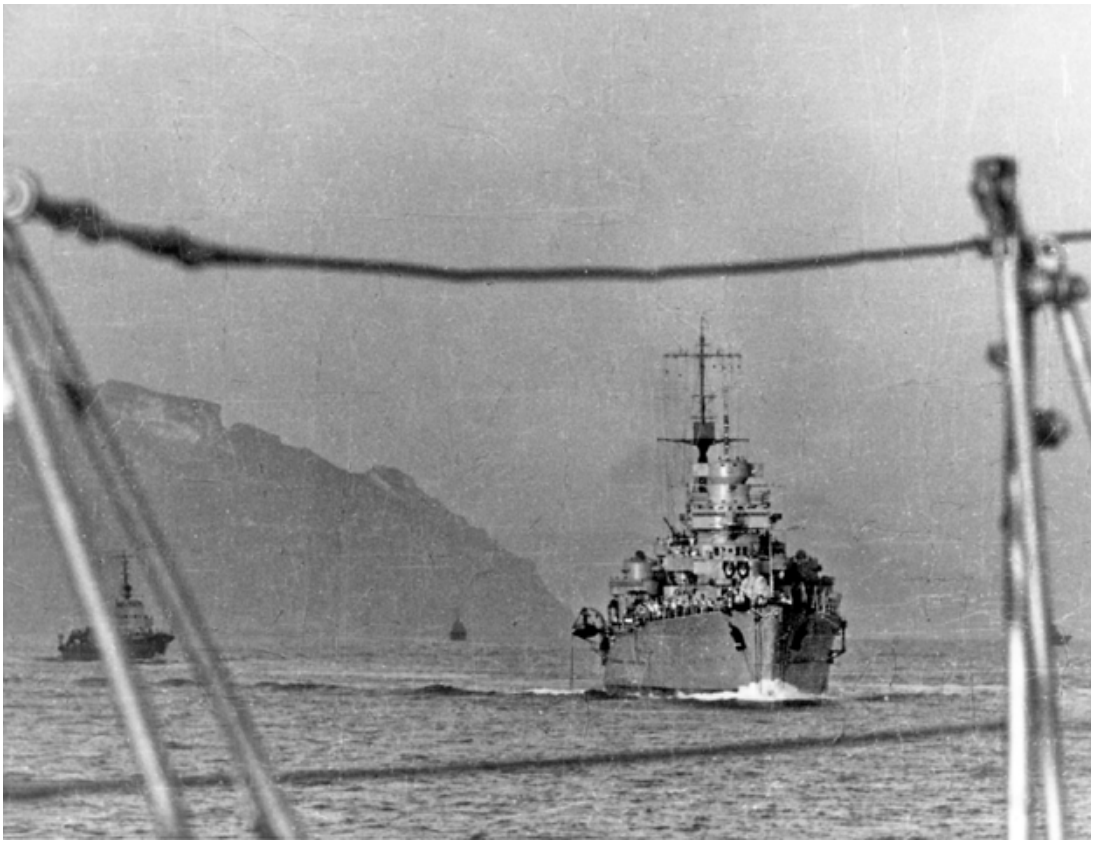
Escort carriers constitute a case in itself: developed for antisubmarine warfare, they were converted from merchant-type hulls. The construction of these ships, including the ones for the Royal Navy, was largely undertaken by American shipyards: of the 38 available to the RN at the war's end, two were transferred to the French and Dutch navies as emergency support for operations in Vietnam and East Indies, pending delivery of an equivalent number of light carriers. The remainder were converted back into merchantmen or scrapped.[35]

As regards the U.S. Navy, of the 61 escort carriers in commission in 1945, 13 were stricken and the remainder placed in reserve. The 19 "Commencement Bay"-class commissioned in 1945, however, had been designed from the outset as escort carriers and were comparable, in size and aircraft facilities, to contemporary light carriers: four remained in commission for antisubmarine duties, while the others were also placed in reserve. Eight of the latter were soon reactivated pending the Korean emergency, taking part in operations with embarked Marine Air Groups, providing tactical support to the front line.[36] By the mid-1950s, all had again been laid up, having been reclassified as antisubmarine helicopter carriers.

* * *

For a very long period, cruisers had been a showpiece of British imperial policy. At the end of the Second World War, the Royal Navy still possessed eight heavy cruisers, 12 obsolete light cruisers and 29 modern light cruisers. Six heavy cruisers were stricken, while the other two were laid up and never reactivated. The oldest light cruisers were also scrapped, five others transferred abroad and seven placed in reserve.[37]

35 Lenton, Colledge 1964, pp. 68-73, 255-256; Friedman 1983, pp. 159-174.
36 Silverstone 1965, pp. 50-60; Adcock 1996, pp. 40-47.
37 Lenton, Colledge 1964, pp. 25-52.



1948, the light cruiser *Duca degli Abruzzi*, sailing in the southern Tyrrhenian Sea alongside a group of torpedo boats, as seen from her sister ship *Garibaldi* (AUSMM).

In 1950, 14 light cruisers were still in commission, together with five smaller antiaircraft and minelaying cruisers. By 1955 the force had declined further to 12 light cruisers and three smaller ones; another five were held in reserve, one from each class. As with aircraft carriers and battleships, the last cruisers built in Britain—the three "Tigers" of the late 1950s—would be completed from older hulls laid down during the Second World War.[38]

38 Friedman 2010, pp. 410-421.

Table 4 – Heavy and Light Cruisers

	1938	1939-1945				1946-1950				1955	
United States	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Pensacola" (H)	**2**				**2**		[-2]	/	/	/	/
"Northampton" (H)	**6**		-3		**3**			(3)	/	(3)	/
"Portland" (H)	**2**		-1		**1**			(1)	/	(1)	/
"New Orleans" (H)	**7**		-3		**4**			(4)	/	(4)	/
"Brooklin" (L)	**9**		-1		**8**			(8)	/	(2)	/
"Wichita" (H)		**1**			**1**			(1)	/	(1)	/
"Cleveland" (L)		**25**			**25**	**2**		(26)	**1**	(26)	**1**
"Baltimore" (H)		**12**			**12**	**2**		(9)	**5**	(5)	**9**
"Fargo" (L)						**2**		(2)	/	(2)	/
"Oregon City" (H)						**3**		(1)	**2**	(1)	**2**
"Des Moines" (H)						**3**		/	**3**	/	**3**
"Worcester" (L)						**2**		/	**2**	/	**2**
United Kingdom	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Hawkins" (H)	**3**		-1	[-2]	/			/	/	/	/
"County" (H)	**10**		-2		**8**		[-6]	(2)	/	/	/
"York" (H)	**2**		-2		/			/	/	/	/
"Leander" (L)	**5**		-1		**4**		[-4]	/	/	/	/
"Arethusa" (L)	**4**		-2		**2**		[-2]	/	/	/	/
"Town" (L)	**10**		-4		**6**			(1)	**5**	(1)	**5**
"Fiji" (L)		**11**	-2		**9**		[-1]	(1)	**7**	(1)	**6**
"Minotaur" (L)		**1**			**1**	**1**		/	**2**	(1)	**1**
France	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Duguay-Trouin" (L)	**3**		-1	[-1]	**1**			/	**1**	/	/
"Duquesne" (H)	**2**				**2**			(2)	/	(2)	/
"Suffren" (H)	**4**		-3		**1**			(1)	/	(1)	/
"Algérie" (H)	**1**		-1		/			/	/	/	/
"Émile Bertin" (L)	**1**				**1**			(1)	/	/	/
"La Galissonière" (L)	**6**		-3		**3**			/	**3**	/	**3**

	1938	1939-1945				1946-1950				1955	
Other Navies (L)	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Fiji" (Canada)		**1**			**1**			/	**1**	/	**1**
"Minotaur" (Canada)						**1**		/	**1**	/	**1**
"Java" (NL)	**2**		-2		**/**			/	/	/	**/**
"De Ruyter" (NL)										/	**2**
Soviet Union	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	B/T	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Kirov" (L)	**1**	**5**			**6**			/	**6**	/	**6**
"Duca d'Aosta" (L)						**1**		/	**1**	/	**1**
"Chapayev" (L)						**5**		/	**5**	/	**5**
"Sverdlov" (L)										/	**14**
Italy	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Trento" (H)	**3**		-2	[-1]	/			/	/	/	/
"Zara" (H)	**4**		-3	[-1]	/			/	/	/	/
"Montecuccoli" (L)	**2**		-1		**1**			/	**1**	/	**1**
"Duca d'Aosta" (L)	**2**				**2**		[-2]	/	/	/	/
"D. degli Abruzzi" (L)	**2**				**2**			/	**2**	/	**2**
	1938	**1939-1945**				**1946-1950**				**1955**	
Tot. Cruiser	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
U.S. Navy	**26**	**38**	-8		**56**	**14**	[-2]	(55)	**13**	(45)	**17**
Royal Navy	**34**	**12**	-14	[-2]	**30**	**1**	[-13]	(4)	**14**	(3)	**12**
Marine Nationale	**17**		-8	[-1]	**8**			(4)	**4**	(3)	**3**
Other Navies	**2**	**1**	-2		**1**	**1**		/	**2**	/	**4**
R.K.K.F. / V.M.F.	**1**	**5**			**6**	**6**		/	**12**	/	**26**
Regia Marina / M.M.	**13**		-6	[-2]	**5**		[-2]	/	**3**	/	**3**

The U.S. Navy's cruiser force, developed along particularly consistent lines, comprised in 1945 42 light cruisers, nine of them obsolete, and 23 heavy cruisers (including 11 older "Washington" types), as well as six antiaircraft cruisers.[39] At the end of hostilities, the oldest ships were stricken and the 23 prewar-built cruisers placed in reserve, while eight new cruisers entered commission, each class refining the previous heavy, light and antiaircraft cruiser designs.

In subsequent years, despite the arrival of the further three "Des Moines" and two "Worcester"—the ultimate embodiments of the heavy and light cruiser—the force was decimated by budget cuts: 40 ships were placed in reserve, with another four scheduled for early retirement.

By 1950 the USN had been reduced to just 14 cruisers: ten heavy, three light and one antiaircraft.[40] During the Korean emergency, only four additional heavy cruisers were recommissioned, with a clear priority given to reactivating battleships: in 1955, 19 cruisers remained in commission and another 53 in reserve. In the following years, the USN's first guided-missile ships would be built by reconstructing 11 of these vessels, selected from the more modern wartime classes.[41]

Table 5 – Anti-Aircraft, Anti-Submarine, Minelayer and Scout Cruiser

	1939	1941-1945				1946-1950				1955	
United States	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
Costr. 1918-1924	**10**			[-1]	**9**		[-9]	/	/	/	/
"Atlanta" (AA)		**8**	-2		**6**			(6)	/	(6)	/
"Juneau" (AA)						**3**		(2)	**1**	(2)	**1**
"Norfolk" (AS)										/	**1**

39 Adcock 1999, pp. 20-28; Adcock 2001 Part 1, pp. 16-36.

40 Friedman 1984, pp. 447-482.

41 Galuppini 1982, pp. 238-243.

	1938	1939-1945				1946-1950				1955	
United Kingdom	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
Costr. 1917-1918	**21**		-7	[-8]	**6**		[-6]	/	/	/	/
"Emerald"	**1**			[-1]	/			/	/	/	/
"Adventure" (ML)	**1**			[-1]	/			/	/	/	/
"Dido" (AA)		**16**	-6		**10**		[-2]	(4)	**4**	(1)	**1**
"Abdiel" (ML)		**6**	-3		**3**			(2)	**1**	(1)	**2**

	1938	1939-1945				1946-1950				1955	
France	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Jeanne d'Arc" (trg)	**1**				**1**			(1)	/	(1)	/
"Capitani Romani"						**2**		/	**2**	/	**2**

	1938	1939-1945				1946-1950				1955	
Other Navies	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Tromp" (NL)	**1**	**1**			**2**				**2**	/	/

	1938	1939-1945				1946-1950				1955	
Soviet Union	Serv.	(*)	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
Costr. 1915-1928	**3**	**1**	-1		**3**		[-1]	(2)	/	(1)	/

Italy	1938	1939-1945				1946-1950				1955	
	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
Costr. 1911-1914	**3**		-1	[-2]	/			/	/	/	/
"Condottieri"	**6**		-5		**1**			/	**1**	/	/
"Capitani romani" (**)		**3**			**3**		[-2]	/	**1**	(2)	/

(*) American *Milwaukee* on loan, returned after the war

(**) Two ships, one of which salvaged, converted as destroyer leader starting in 1950

	1938	1939-1945				1946-1950				1955	
Tot. Light Cruiser	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
U.S. Navy	**10**	**8**	-2	[-1]	**15**	**3**	[-9]	(8)	**1**	(8)	**2**
Royal Navy	**23**	**22**	-16	[-10]	**19**		[-8]	(6)	**5**	(2)	**3**
Marine Nationale	**1**				**1**	**2**		(1)	**2**	(1)	**2**
Koninklijke Marine	**1**	**1**			**2**				**2**	/	/
R.K.K.F. / V.M.F.	**3**	**1**	-1		**3**		[-1]	(2)	**/**	(1)	**/**
Regia Marina / M.M.	**9**	**3**	-6	[-2]	**4**		[-2]	/	**2**	/	**2**

At the end of the Second World War, the French naval forces possessed nine cruisers, three of which immediately dispatched to Indochina. Many ships were nevertheless soon placed in reserve, leaving only the three newer "La Galissonnière" in commission, while a fourth, older cruiser stationed in Vietnam was stricken in 1951.[42] In the following years, a cruiser presence in Indochinese waters was maintained by rotating one of the "La Galissonnière" units: until the mid-1950s, therefore, only two remained available for French and NATO requirements.

For its part, the Soviet Navy possessed in 1945 three old light cruisers, one on loan from the U.S. Navy, and six "Kirov" units, derived from the Italian "Montecuccoli" design.

After the war, with the older ships relegated to training duties, the "Kirov" class were joined by the former Italian *Duca d'Aosta* and the five "Chapayev" of 1950. Expansion plans were to have continued with four "Stalingrad"-class battlecruisers and thirty "Sverdlov"-class cruisers; following the change of policy after Stalin's death, however, only 14 "Sverdlov" type were completed, all before 1955.[43]

At the war's end, the Regia Marina's order of battle included nine cruisers, among them the three small "Capitani Romani". As a result of the transfers under the Peace Treaty, when the Atlantic Pact was signed the Italian Navy's active force comprised *Montecuccoli* and two "Abruzzi", with *Pompeo Magno* and *Cadorna* in reserve.[44] The latter was withdrawn, while *Pompeo Magno* was officially stricken to keep within the Peace Treaty limits. In fact, she was sent for extensive reconstruction, together with a second "Capitani Romani", recently salvaged for the same purpose: the two ships were thus transformed into the new *San Giorgio* and *San Marco*.[45]

42 Whitley 1995, pp. 27-47.

43 Ibid., pp. 204-213; Rohwer 1997, pp. 51-61; Cosentino 2018, pp. 5-12.

44 Cosentino, De Toro 2023, pp. 86-87.

45 Bagnasco, Brescia, De Toro 2022, pp. 73-75.



Above: May 1945, the light cruiser *Giulio Germanico* during salvage operations at the Castellammare di Stabia shipyard. The vessel—which was still being fitted out at the time and was unable to move—had been scuttled in September 1943, following the temporary occupation of the shipyard by German forces.

Below: the destroyer leader *San Marco*, a powerful multi-role vessel equipped with modern, U.S.-supplied radar, sonar, and weaponry. The *San Marco* was built between 1953 and 1955 through the reconstruction of the *Giulio Germanico*, officially stricken from the naval register in 1947 in compliance with the Peace Treaty and temporarily redesignated as *floating hulk F.V. 2*, before being reclassified as a light cruiser—under the new name—effective March 1, 1951 (AUSMM).



From Cruisers to Destroyers…

At the end of the War, the Royal Navy's surviving prewar *destroyer*s numbered only 32: 27 were transferred, downgraded or stricken, and the five remainder placed in indefinite reserve. The wartime-built *destroyer*s all belonged to a single basic design, simplified for mass production: of the 90 in commission in 1945, 16 were retired and 40 laid up,[46] soon joined by 11 of the new "Battle" class, all casualties of the RN's severe personnel crisis in those years.

In 1950, 17 modern destroyers (NATO designation "DD") remained in commission, alongside 34 wartime-built ships, meanwhile downgraded to *escort first rate* ("DDE" in NATO terminology). These older ships were also scheduled for rebuild and conversion into antisubmarine frigates (NATO designation "F"). By 1955, following withdrawals and sales, the active force had declined to 18 destroyers, eight of them recently built, with another 15 laid up; the remaining *escort first rate* force comprised ten DDEs in commission and as many in reserve, all approaching retirement.[47] The first new-generation ships, originally envisaged as cruisers, would enter service in the late 1950s as "County"-class guided-missile destroyers.[48]

46 Lenton, Colledge 1964, pp. 95-126.

47 Marriot 1989, pp. 69-95.

48 Galuppini 1982, pp. 226-227.

Table 6 – Fleet Destroyers

	1938	1939-1945				1946-1950				1955	
United States	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Farragut"	**8**		-3		**5**		[-5]	/	/	/	/
"Porter"	**8**		-1		**7**		[-7]	/	/	/	/
"Mahan"	**18**		-6		**12**		[-12]	/	/	/	/
"Gridley"/"Bagley"	**22**		-5		**17**		[-17]	/	/	/	/
"Somers"	**5**		-1		**4**		[-4]	/	/	/	/
"Sims"	**12**		-5		**7**		[-7]	/	/	/	/
"Benson"/"Gleaves"		**96**	-16		**80**		[-5]	(63)	**12**	(64)	/
"Fletcher"		**175**	-25		**150**			(150)	/	(50)	**100**
"Sumner"		**58**	-5		**53**			(19)	**34**	/	**53**
"Gearing"		**46**			**46**	**52**		(1)	**97**	/	**98**
"Mitscher"										/	**4**
United Kingdom	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Amazon"	**2**				**2**		[-2]	/	/	/	/
"A"/"B"	**18**		-10	[-1]	**7**		[-7]	/	/	/	/
"C"/"D", "E"/"F"	**27**		-16	[-6]	**5**		[-5]	/	/	/	/
"G"/"H"/"I"	**27**		-20	[-3]	**4**		[-4]	/	/	/	/
"Tribal"	**16**		-12		**4**		[-4]	/	/	/	/
"J"/"K"/"N" (*)	**16**		-12		**4**		[-4]	(4)	/	/	/
"L"/"M"	**16**		-9	[-1]	**6**		[-1]	(5)	/	/	/
"O/Z, CA/CR"		**73**	-9		**64**	**26**	[-16]	(40)	**34**	(10)	**10**
"Battle"						**24**		(11)	**13**	(15)	**6**
"Weapon"						**4**		/	**4**	/	**4**
"Daring"										/	**8**
France	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Trans.	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Bourrasque"	**12**		-10		**2**		[-2]	/	/	/	/
"Chacal"	**6**		-5		**1**		[-1]	/	/	/	/
"L'Adroit"	**14**		-10		**4**		[-3]	(1)	/	/	/
"Guepard"	**6**		-6		/			/	/	/	/
"Aigle"	**6**		-5		**1**			(1)	/	(1)	/
"Vaquelin"	**6**		-6		/			/	/	/	/

“Le Fantasque”	**6**		-2		**4**			(2)	**2**	(3)	/
“Mogador”	**2**		-2		/			/	/	/	/
“Hardi”	**6**		-6		/			/	/	/	/
Former German						**4**		(1)	**3**	(2)	**1**
Former Italian						**4**		(4)	/	(1)	/
Canada	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
“A”/”B”	**2**		-2		/			/	/	/	/
“C”/”D”, “E”/”F”	**5**	**5**	-4		**6**		[-6]	/	/	/	/
“G”/”H”/”I”		**2**			**2**		[-2]	/	/	/	/
“Tribal”	**4**		-1		**3**	**4**		/	**7**	/	**7**
“O/Z, CA/CR”		**2**			**2**			(2)	/	/	**2**
	1938	**1939-1945**				**1946-1950**				**1955**	
Other Navies	Serv.	B/T	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Trans.	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
“ O / Z / C A / C R ” (Norv.)		**2**	-1		**1**	**4**		/	**5**	/	**5**
“Admiralen” (NL)	**8**		-8		/			/	/	/	/
“Callenburgh” (NL)		**1**	-1		/			/	/	/	/
“J”/”K”/”N” (NL)		**2**			**2**		[-1]	/	**1**	/	**1**
“O/Z, CA/CR” (NL)						**4**		/	**4**	/	**3**
“Holland” (NL)										/	**4**
“Douro” (Portugal)	**5**				**5**			/	**5**	/	**5**
Soviet Union	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	B/T	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
“Leningrad”	**6**		-2		**4**			/	**4**	/	**4**
“Tashkent”	**1**		-1		/			/	/	/	/
“Gnevny”	**17**	**12**	-9		**20**			/	**20**	/	**20**
“Opytny”		**1**		[-1]	/			/	/	/	/
“Storozhevoy”		**18**	-9		**9**			/	**9**	/	**9**
“Ognevoy”						**11**		/	**11**	/	**11**
Former German						**5**		(3)	**2**	(3)	**1**
Former Japanese						**2**		(1)	**1**	(1)	/
Former Italian						**2**		/	**2**	/	/
“Skory”						**26**		/	**26**	/	**70**
“Neustrashimy”											**1**

Italy	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Trans.	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Turbine"	**8**		-8		/			/	/	/	/
"Navigatori"	**12**		-9	[-2]	**1**			/	**1**	/	/
"Freccia"/"Folgore"	**8**		-7	[-1]	/			/	/	/	/
"Venti"	**4**		-2	[-1]	**1**			/	**1**	/	**1**
"Poeti"	**4**		-3		**1**		[-1]	/	/	/	/
"Soldati"	**12**	**5**	-9	[-1]	**7**		[-5]	/	**2**	/	**2**
"Benson"/"Gleaves"						**2**		/	**2**	/	**2**
(*) 8 "N" class on loan to other allied navies, 4 four of which were returned after the war and placed in storage.											
	1938	**1939-1945**				**1946-1950**				**1955**	
Tot. Destroyer	Serv.	Build	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	B/T	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
U.S. Navy	**73**	**375**	-67		**381**	**52**	[-57]	(233)	**143**	(114)	**255**
Royal Navy	**122**	**73**	-88	[-11]	**96**	**54**	[-43]	(60)	**51**	(25)	**28**
Marine Nationale	**64**		-52		**12**	**8**	[-6]	(9)	**5**	(7)	**1**
R. Canadian Navy	**11**	**9**	-7		**13**	**4**	[-8]	(2)	**7**	/	**9**
Other Navies	**13**	**5**	-10		**8**	**8**	[-1]	/	**15**	/	**18**
R.K.K.F. / V.M.F.	**24**	**31**	-21	[-1]	**33**	**46**		(4)	**75**	(4)	**116**
R.M. / Marina Militare	**48**	**5**	-38	[-5]	**10**	**2**	[-6]	/	**6**	/	**5**

The U.S. Navy in 1945 had 52 prewar-type *destroyer*s in commission, all soon stricken. The subsequent "Benson/Gleaves" class, built around the time of America's entry into the war, was comparable in size and displacement to contemporary British designs, but superior in firepower and in the lower vulnerability of machinery. Of the 80 survivors only 12, fitted as high-speed minesweepers, were retained in commission; another 63 were placed in reserve and remained available for transfer to allied navies. At the end of the conflict, however, the USN's strength lay in its 301 excellent wartime-built *destroyer*s, half of them belonging to the "Fletcher" class and the remainder to the still more advanced "Sumner" and "Gearing" classes. Before long, 131 "Gearings" and "Sumners" remained in commission as DDs, with another 20 in reserve alongside all the 150 "Fletcher". The "Fletcher" themselves, together with the earlier "Benson/Gleaves" ships, were reclassified by NATO as *escort first rate*/DDE.[49]

The Korean War would lead to recommissioning of every available "Sumner"

49 Silverstone 1965, pp. 100-101, 112-135.

and "Gearing", as well as 100 "Fletcher" DDEs.[50] Owing to personnel shortages, however, 50 of the latter remained laid up, as in other cases crews had to be provided by the U.S. Coast Guard.[51] By 1955 the 151 DDs in commission had been joined by the prototype *Norfolk* and the four new-generation "Mitscher" destroyers. *Norfolk*, initially designated CLK (antisubmarine light cruiser) and subsequently DL (destroyer leader), had been developed on the platform of the earlier "Juneau"-class cruisers to meet the demanding requirements of antisubmarine warfare.[52] Successful though the prototype was, it proved so expensive as to discourage series production.

By contrast, the position of the Marine Nationale is emblematic of France's real state at the war's end. In 1939 its destroyer force comprised 32 large *contre-torpilleurs* of the "Chacal" class and later classes, and 34 *torpilleurs*: all fast, heavily armed ships, often superior to their foreign counterparts. Of the 13 survivors, nine were soon downgraded or stricken, leaving only the four "Le Fantasque"-class destroyers modernised in American yards in 1943–45. In subsequent years France would receive four former German destroyers—transferred by the United States and Britain only after persistent requests—and four former Italian vessels, insistently demanded as war reparations but, despite everything, never commissioned.[53] In fact, after 1948 it would never prove possible to maintain more than four destroyers in commission at once, a figure reduced in 1955 to a single DDE, with another two in reserve alongside three DDs. A significant contribution in this respect would come from the availability of two former Italian "Capitani Romani"-class cruisers converted into *escorteurs d'escadre*.[54]

In the East, the prewar Soviet Navy had also built significant numbers of destroyers with Italian technical assistance. After 1945, the 33 destroyers in commission were joined by 11 newly built ships and nine of German, Japanese and Italian origin, all broadly equivalent to Western DDEs. In the early 1950s, after

50 Cosentino 2022, pp. 68-72.

51 Jane's 1953, pp. 400-411, 447.

52 Friedman 1982, pp. 4, 235-249; Martino, Nani 2002, pp. 174-176, 180-182.

53 [In French-language scholarship the "Chacals", the first of the contre-torpilleurs, are often referred to as the "Jaguar" class: *too little, too late*…]; Whitley 1983, pp. 252-255; Whitley 1988, pp. 35-55, 171; Jordan, Moulin 2015, pp. 279-282 which states, concerning Italy's strong resistance to concessions to France in the Peace Treaty: «The Navy Ministry, which had fought hard during negotiations with Italians to recover the maximum number of ships, was naturally unhappy with this outcome».

54 Bagnasco, Brescia, de Toro 2022, pp. 68-73.



July 1950, Malta, the destroyer *Grecale* during the first naval exercises of the Atlantic Alliance. The vessel still bears the traditional "GR" hull marking used during the Second World War—a marking that would soon be replaced by the NATO pennant D 552, and later, following its conversion into a fast antisubmarine frigate, by F 556 (AUSMM).

foreign-built ships had been relegated to training duties, no fewer than 70 destroyers of the new and more powerful "Skory" class entered service, followed in 1955 by the prototype of the future "Spokoiny" class (NATO reporting name "Kotlin").[55]

The Regia Marina's destroyer force numbered ten ships in 1945. Following the transfers required by the Peace Treaty, only four remained when the Atlantic Pact was signed: two "Soldati"-class destroyers, *Grecale* and *Da Recco*. The two destroyers transferred to the Soviets were promptly replaced by two, much more powerful, American "Benson/Gleaves", while the gap left by the ships transferred to France would be filled only by construction, begun in the first half of the 1950s, of two "Indomito" and two "San Giorgio" big destroyers.[56]

55 Jane's 1953, pp. 305-307; Whitley 1988, pp. 228-240; Fatutta 1999, pp. 146-159.
56 Cosentino 1996, pp. 31-37.

…and from Destroyers to Frigates

The British Navy, historically the service that attached the greatest priority to antisubmarine warfare, had developed for that purpose several classes of *sloop* and *minesweeping sloop* (ocean-going minesweeper) since the Great War. The latter ones, carried suitable antisubmarine equipment, were frequently employed on a permanent basis as escorts. Of the 205 ships in commission in 1945, only ten remained in service, with another 61 in reserve, by then useful only in their primary minesweeping role.[57]

The wartime corvettes, on their own, had been designed for series production in smaller shipyards and, at the war's end, 144 were in commission: 123 were stricken, transferred or downgraded, while the remainder, all newly built "Castle"-class ships, were placed in reserve and never reactivated.[58]

Table 7 – Sloop, Corvettes and Minesweeper sloops (Anti Submarine Warfare role)

	1938	**1939-1945**				**1946-1950**				**1955**	
United States	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Flower" (Corvette)		**25**			**25**		[-25]	/	/	/	/
"PCE" (Corv. type)		**42**			**42**	**2**	[-18]	(17)	**9**	(10)	**16**
	1938	**1939-1945**				**1946-1950**				**1955**	
United Kingdom	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
Cost.1915-19 (Sl.)	**6**		-1		**5**		[-5]	/	/	/	/
Cost.1928-32 (Sl.)	**22**		-3		**19**		[-19]	/	/	/	/
"Kingfisher" (Sl.)	**9**		-2		**7**		[-7]	/	/	/	/
"Flower" (Corvette)		**112**	-20		**92**		[-92]	/	/	/	/
"Castle" (Corvette)		**39**	-2		**37**		[-16]	(21)	/	(21)	/
"PCE" (Corvette)		**15**			**15**		[-15]	/	/	/	/
"Bangor" (M/S sloop)		**53**	-6		**47**		[-47]	/	/	/	/
"Bathurst" (M/S sl.)		**19**			**19**		[-19]	/	/	/	/
"Algerine" (M/S sl.)		**95**	-9		**86**	**3**	[-18]	Only minesweeping role			
"Auk" (M/S sloop)		**22**	-3		**19**		[-19]	/	/	/	/

57 Lenton, Colledge 1964, pp. 180-224.

58 Ibid., pp. 159-169, 241-242, 248-249.

	1938	1939-1945				1946-1950				1955	
France	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Trans.	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Flower"		**10**	-3		**7**		[-7]	/	/	/	/
	1938	**1939-1945**				**1946-1950**				**1955**	
Canada	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Flower" (Canada)	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
	1938	**1939-1945**				**1946-1950**				**1955**	
Other Navies	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Flower" (Norway)		**5**	-2		**3**		[-3]	/	/	/	/
"Castle" (Norway)		**1**	-1		/			/	/	/	/
"Krieger" (Denmark)						**6**		/	**6**	/	**6**
Albatros (Denmark)										/	**2**
"PCE" (Netherland)										/	**6**
"Arabis" (Portugal)	**1**				**1**			/	**1**	/	**1**
	1938	**1939-1945**				**1946-1950**				**1955**	
Soviet Union	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Uragan" (Sloop)	**18**		-3		**15**			(2)	**13**	(1)	**14**
"Kirov" (Sloop)	**2**				**2**			/	**2**	/	**2**
	1938	**1939-1945**				**1946-1950**				**1955**	
Italy	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Albatros" (Sloop)	**1**		-1		/			/	/	/	/
"Gabbiano" (Corv.)		**29**	-5	[-5]	**19**	**2**		(2)	**19**	/	**21**
"Algerine" (M/S sl.)						**1**		/	**1**	/	**1**
"Antilope" (M/S sl.)						**3**		/	**3**	/	**3**
"Albatros (Corv.)										/	**3**
	1938	**1939-1945**				**1946-1950**				**1955**	
Total ASW units	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
U.S. Navy		**67**			**67**	**2**	[-43]	(17)	**9**	(10)	**16**
Royal Navy	**37**	**355**	-46		**346**	**3**	[-257]	(21)	/	(21)	/
Marine Nationale		**10**	-3		**7**		[-7]	/	/	/	/
R. Canadian Navy		**111**	-10		**101**		[-101]	/	/	/	/
Other Navies	**1**	**6**	-3		**4**	**7**	[-3]	/	**8**	/	**15**
R.K.K.F. / V.M.F.	**20**		-3		**17**			(2)	**15**	(1)	**16**
R.M. / Marina Militare	**1**	**29**	-6	[-5]	**19**	**6**		(2)	**23**	/	**28**

To meet the need for more capable escorts, the plan had been to use surplus destroyers, dating from the Great War, with the necessary modifications in weapons and machinery. All 77 such ships still in commission in 1945 were stricken at the war's end.[59] Before the war, a new type of modern ocean-going *sloop* had also been developed, supplemented during the conflict by several former USCG *cutter*s. Of the 35 in commission in 1945, 13 were returned, sold or reclassified as auxiliaries.[60]

The *sloop*s also gave rise to *escort destroyer*s, in which speed was emphasized through more powerful machinery and finer hull forms, although at expenses of endurance.[61] The urgent request for escort vessels finally led to the development of another kind of ship, on this occasion designated as frigates of the "River Class". In 1945, 56 *escort destroyer*s, 122 frigates and 62 American-built DE-type destroyer escorts were in commission, the latter ones likewise classified by the RN as frigates. All the American-supplied ships were disposed of, while another 33 were withdrawn. The remaining 72 were placed in reserve and never reactivated.[62]

In the postwar period, once *sloop*s and *escort destroyer*s alike had been reclassified as frigates, only 30 ships remained in active service, with another 30 held in reserve. Following some recommissioning in response to Korean emergency, 42 older frigates were still in commission in 1955, with 50 more in reserve, all nearing withdrawal. To replace them, it was planned to convert wartime-built destroyers into antisubmarine frigates; since the plan proved uneconomic, only 25 actually entered service in the mid-1950s, while another eight, placed in reserve, remained laid up until stricken.[63]

59 Ibid., pp. 79-94.
60 Ibid., pp. 170-174, 240-241.
61 Ibid., pp. 126-132.
62 Ibid., pp. 160-161, 225-240, 242-248.
63 Critchley 1992, pp. 5-19, 22-35, 48-76; Marriot 1989, pp. 31-68.

Table 8 – Destoyer Escorts, Frigates and large Torpedo boats

	1938	1939-1945				1946-1950				1955	
United States	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Flush-deck" (WWI)	**108**		-18	[-49] *	**41**		[-41]	/	/	/	/
"Asheville"/"Erie"	**4**		-2		**2**		[-2]	/	/	/	/
"Treasury" (USCG)	**7**		-1		**6**			/	**6**	/	**6**
"Owasco" (USCG)		**6**			**6**	**7**		/	**13**	/	**13**
"River" (Frigate)		**2**			**2**		[-2]	/	/	/	/
"Tacoma" (Frigate)		**75**			**75**		[-75]	/	/	/	/
"Evarts" (DE)		**65**			**65**		[-65]	/	/	/	/
"Buckley" (DE)		**102**	-4	[-37] *	**61**		[-12]	(41)	**8**	(35)	**14**
"Rudderow" (DE)		**22**		[-1] *	**21**		[-4]	(17)	/	(14)	**3**
"Cannon" (DE)"		**66**		[-9]	**57**			(57)	/	(16)	/
"Edsall" (DE)		**85**	-4		**81**			(81)	/	(42)	**38**
"Butler" (DE)		**80**	-4		**76**	**3**		(76)	**3**	(37)	**42**
"Dealey"											**3**
United Kingdom	Serv.	B/T	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"R"/"S" (WWI)	**12**		-5		**7**		[-7]	/	/	/	/
"V"/"W" (WWI)	**54**		-14		**40**		[-40]	/	/	/	/
"Shakespeare" (WWI)	**3**		-1		**2**		[-2]	/	/	/	/
"Scott" (WWI)	**6**		-1		**5**		[-5]	/	/	/	/
"Flush-deck"		**40**	-7	[-10]	**23**		[-23]	/	/	/	/
"Bittern/Egret"(Sl.)	**6**		-3		**3**		[-1]	(2)	/	/	/
"Lake" (USCG cutter)		**10**	-3		**7**		[-7]	/	/	/	/
"Black Swan"(Sloop)		**28**	-6		**22**	**3**	[-5]	(6)	**14**	(2)	**18**
"Hunt"		**77**	-21		**56**		[-7]	(49)	/	(34)	/
"Evarts"		**32**	-7		**25**		[-25]	/	/	/	/
"Buckley"		**46**	-9		**37**		[-37]	/	/	/	/
"River" (Frigate)		**55**	-6		**49**		[-26]	(23)	/	/	/
"Tacoma"		**21**			**21**		[-21]	/	/	/	/
"Loch/Bay" (Frigate)		**38**			**38**	**14**	[-14]	(22)	**16**	(14)	**24**

(*) Converted as Fast Transport ship

France	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Trans.	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
“La Melpomène” (Tb)	**12**		-7		**5**		[-5]	/	/	/	/
“Cannon” (DE)”		**6**			**6**	**8**		/	**14**	/	**14**
“River” (freg.)		**6**			**6**			/	**6**	/	**6**
Form. Germans (Tb)						**5**	[-3]	/	**2**	/	**2**
Canada	Serv.	B/T	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
“Flush-deck”		**5**		[-4]	**1**		[-1]	/	/	/	/
“River”		**67**	-3		**64**		[-43]	(21)	/	(11)	**10**
Other Navies	Serv.	B/T	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	B/T	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
“Flush-deck” (Norv.)		**1**	-1		/			/	/	/	/
“Sleipner” (Norv.)	**4**		-1		**3**	**2**		/	**5**	/	**4**
“Hunt (Norv.)		**2**	-1		**1**	**3**		/	**4**	/	**4**
“River” (Denmark)						**2**		/	**2**	/	**2**
“Huitfeldt” (Denm.)						**2**		/	**2**	/	**2**
“Hunt” (Denmark)						**3**		/	**3**	/	**3**
“River” (NL)		**1**			**1**			/	**1**	/	**1**
“Van Speijk” (NL)						**1**		/	**1**	/	**1**
“G”/”H”/“I” (NL)						**1**		/	**1**	/	**1**
“Van der Zaan” (NL)	**1**				**1**			/	**1**	/	**1**
“Cannon” (NL)						**6**		/	**6**	/	**6**
“Tacoma” (Belgium)						**1**		/	**1**	/	**1**
“Bridgewater” (Por.)	**2**				**2**			/	**2**	/	**2**
“A. de Albuquerque”	**2**				**2**			/	**2**	/	**2**
“Pedro Nunes” (Por.)	**2**				**2**			/	**2**	/	**2**
“River” (Portugal)						**2**		/	**2**	/	**2**
Italy	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Trans.	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
“Mirabello”/“Sella”	**4**		-3		**1**		[-1]	/	/	/	/
Destroyers (WWI)	**24**		-16	[-3]	**5**			/	**5**	/	**4**
“Palestro” (Tb)	**8**		-7		**1**		[-1]	/	/	/	/
“Spica” (Tb)	**30**		-22	[-1]	**7**			/	**7**	/	**7**
“Orsa”	**4**			[-2]	**2**			/	**2**	/	**2**
“Pegaso”		**15**	-8	[-2]	**5**		[-5]	/	/	/	/
“Ariete”		**1**			**1**		[-1]	/	/	/	/
“Cannon”						**3**		/	**3**	/	**3**

	1938	1939-1945				1946-1950				1955	
Tot. DE and Frigates	Serv.	B/T	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	B/T	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
U.S. Navy	**119**	**503**	-33	[-96]	**493**	**10**	[-201]	(272)	**30**	(144)	**119**
Royal Navy	**81**	**347**	-83	[-10]	**335**	**17**	[-220]	(102)	**30**	(50)	**42**
Marine Nationale	**12**	**12**	-7		**17**	**13**	[-8]	/	**22**	/	**22**
R. Canadian Navy		**72**	-3	[-4]	**65**		[-44]	(21)	/	(11)	**10**
Other Navies	**11**	**4**	-3		**12**	**23**		/	**35**	/	**34**
R.K.K.F. / V.M.F.	**16**	**37**	-9		**44**	**28**	[-44]	/	**28**	/	**50**
R.M. / Marina Militare	**70**	**16**	-56	[-8]	**22**	**3**	[-8]	/	**17**	/	**16**

As British counterpart, the U.S. Navy initially intended to employ its numerous Great War-era destroyers as escorts. All 41 still being used in this role in 1945, having seen intensive service, were promptly stricken at the end of hostilities. In addition to destroyers, several large ocean-going patrol vessels had been built from the 1930s onwards, chiefly operated by the Coast Guard: after the older ships decommissioning, 19 *cutter*s remained in postwar service, all manned by the USCG.[64]

As an emergency measure, 25 British corvettes and two Canadian frigates had been acquired in 1942, all subsequently returned. They were followed by the "Tacoma" class, a variant of the British "River" frigate built to American *standard*s, and by a number of "827"-type PCE antisubmarine patrol escorts. The "Tacoma" frigates, judged markedly inferior to contemporary American ships, were assigned to the USCG for service in secondary theatres and were all stricken or transferred after 1945.[65] The excellent PCEs fared better: the last (and much larger) descendants of the numerous *submarine chasers*, comparable in dimensions and performance to contemporary Italian corvettes. Of the 42 employed as escorts, nine remained in active service after 1945, with another 17 in reserve. Following recommissioning prompted by the outbreak of the Korean War, the PCE force in 1955 numbered 16 ships.[66]

64 Silverstone 1965, pp. 100-112, 238, 363-376.
65 Ibid., pp. 243-254.
66 Friedman 1987, pp. 81-87, 197-199.

The backbone of the American wartime escort force was, however, the destroyer escort (DE). Of the 364 in commission in 1945, 81 were stricken (in practice, all the ones of the basic production series) or transferred to auxiliary duties: known in American use as *ocean escort*s, DEs were classified by NATO as *escort second rate*. Only 11 ships remained in active service, with another 272 held in reserve.

As a result of the 1950 emergency, 46 DEs were recommissioned, all belonging to the faster steam-turbine-powered classes. Among the less capable diesel-powered ships, 12 were manned by USCG personnel and 30 transferred to allied navies; another 40 returned to service converted into radar-picket ships. In 1955, 97 DEs were still in commission, with another 144 in reserve. To meet the requirement for more capable vessels it was necessary, nevertheless, to employ 100 "Fletcher"-class destroyers (reclassified DDEs) as *escort first rate*.[67] In time, the new-generation DDEs would acquire, also within the USN, the widely adopted designation of frigates (FF/FFG).

In 1945 the war-worn French Navy line consisted in five surviving torpedo boats and seven former British corvettes, all stricken that year, while two former German torpedo boats were restored and employed between 1949 and 1955. The core of the French escort force from 1945 to 1955 therefore consisted of 12 destroyer escorts and frigates supplied by Britain and America during the war, supplemented by another eight former American destroyer escorts in 1950–1952.[68]

As for the Soviet Navy, at the end of the war in Europe it possessed 16 Great War-era destroyers, including nine former American ships transferred by the Royal Navy, and 17 torpedo boats, among them two "Kirov" class built by Ansaldo in the 1930s.[69] In 1945 the United States delivered no fewer than 28 "Tacoma"-class frigates under the so-called *Project Hula*, which envisaged transferring 180 frigates, amphibious ships, patrol craft and landing craft as a contribution towards Soviet participation in the invasion of Japan.[70]

From 1947, after the oldest ships had been stricken, 28 foreign-built destroyer escorts, frigates and torpedo boats entered service, mostly former Japanese units

67 Ibid., pp. 153-175; Friedman 1982, pp. 137-163, 255-267, 293.
68 Whitley 1988, pp. 52-55; Jane's 1953, pp. 205-206.
69 Whitley 1988, pp. 231-235, 240-241.
70 Russell 1997, pp. 64-65.

but also some of Italian and German origin. The American ships were returned in 1949, and many others relegated to auxiliary roles in the first half of the 1950s.

By 1955, 16 ageing torpedo boats still in commission, alongside 14 newly built of the "Yastreb" and "Sokol" escorts types (the latter known as "Kola" in NATO code) had entered service, together with the first 36 "Gornostay"-class frigates—of 69 grand total built in the decade—also known in NATO code as the "Riga" class.[71]

In 1945, the Italian order of battle included, among its escorts, 15 recently built torpedo boats, ten older vessels and 19 corvettes. As a result of withdrawals and transfers, by 1949 the Italian Navy had, alongside the 19 modern "Gabbiano"-class antisubmarine corvettes, 17 torpedo boats, eight of them older ships excluded from the Peace Treaty tonnage limits because they were employed as ocean-going minesweepers. Six other ships, transferred to the USSR and Yugoslavia under Pece Treaty, were promptly replaced by American deliveries, in 1949–1950, of three "Cannon"-class destroyer escorts (DE) and three large former German minesweepers, captured as war prizes and, soon converted in Italy for antisubmarine duties. Another ocean-going minesweeper, former Royal Navy "Algerine" class, was rebuilt and also fitted out as a corvette, while three "Gabbiano"-class ships, left on the building ways, were completed and formally entered service as soon as the Peace Treaty restrictions formally ceased to apply.[72] Even the five "Pilo"-class torpedo boats, dating from the 1915-1918 War, underwent heavy maintenance and refitted with modern American-supplied antisubmarine weapons and systems.[73]

71 Jane's 1953, pp. 309-311; Fatutta 1999, pp. 178-185.

72 Bagnasco 2012, pp. 426-430; Cosentino, Brescia 2012, pp. 3-6; cf. nato Documents Series, North Atlantic Council Deputies, D-D/49, *Communication by the Italian Government on proposed increases in Combat Forces readily available by 1st July 1951*, 30th August 1950, https://archives.nato.int/communication-by-the-italian-government-on-proposed-increases-in-combat-forces-readily-available-by-1st-july-1951 (last retrieve 2026-11-14).

73 Navy Historical Archive [AUSMM], MARISTAT P.O. collection, box 325, file 1, *Programma di potenziamento minimo della Marina Militare*, Rome, August 1951.

The Dark Side

Rather than surface combatants, Soviet strength lay unquestionably in submarine forces, master asset in the struggle against Western Sea Power.

In 1945, 179 attack, minelaying and coastal submarines were in commission. In subsequent years, 26 newly built attack, six minelayers and 59 coastal boats of wartime designs entered service, along with 20 former German and Italian submarines. With the exception of seven withdrawn, and 60 transferred to training



duties, all the other were retained in frontline service.[74] From 1950, following the acquisition of advanced German technologies from Type "XXI", "XXIII" and "XXVI" U-boats, the existing fleet was soon joined by 271 Project "611", "613" and "615" boats, subsequently known by the NATO reporting names "Zulu", "Whiskey" and "Quebec" respectively.[75]

In 1955, 28 older minelaying submarines, 87 medium and 61 coastal boats were still in active service, together with about another 40 for training duties. The new-generation submarines, in addition to six Type "XXI" and "XXIII" U-boats, included the first seven coastal "Quebec" and no fewer than 159 ocean-going "Zulus" and "Whiskeys". Annual production had by then reached 68 "W", three "Z" and six "Q" boats, making it possible to field a force of 348 submarines. Construction rates, which were steadily increasing, were fully consistent with the objective of an operational force of 1,200 submarines within twenty years of the launch of Stalin's naval program.

From 1955 onwards, however, new political directives led to a drastic reduction in conventional submarine production. Construction of the small closed-cycle-propulsion "Qs" ceased after the first 31 boats, and "W"-type production ended after 215 units. Still more consequential was the decision to limit production of the "Zs" to 26 of the 40 planned and, above all, that of the new definitive Project "633" submarines (NATO reporting name "Romeo"), developed from the "W", to just 22 examples out of the 560 originally envisaged.[76]

74 Polmar, Noot 1991, pp. 136-144.
75 Fatutta 1999, pp. 107-133.
76 Turrini 2003, pp. 43-91, 98-110.

Table 9 – Soviet Submarine

	1938	1939-1945				1946-1950				1955	
Ocean & Minelayer	Serv.	B/T	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Leninets" (series II)	**6**		-3		**3**			/	**3**	/	**3**
"Pravda" (s. IV)	**3**		-1		**2**			/	**2**	/	/
"Leninets" (s. XI)	**6**		-1		**5**			/	**5**	/	**5**
"Leninets" (s. XIII)	**7**		-2		**5**			/	**5**	/	**5**
"Kreiser" (s. XIV)	**2**	**9**	-5		**6**	**6**		/	**12**	/	**11**
"Lembit" (f. Estonian)		**2**	-1		**1**			/	**1**	/	**1**
"Leninets" (s. XIIIB)		**6**	-3		**3**			/	**3**	/	**3**
Coastal	Serv.	Built	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	B/T	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"AG" (WWI)	**5**		-2		**3**		[-3]	/	/	/	/
"Malyy" (series VI)	**30**				**30**			(30)	/	(8)	/
"Malyy" (s. VIB)	**20**		-3	[-6]	**11**			(11)	/	(11)	/
"Malyutka" (s. XII)	**4**		-2		**2**			(2)	/	(2)	/
"Malyutka" (s. XIIB)		**44**	-23		**21**			(10)	**11**	(10)	**8**
"Malyutka" (s. XV)		**4**			**4**	**59**		/	**63**	/	**53**
"CB" (former Italians)						**5**		(5)	/	/	/
"II" (former Germans)						**2**		(2)	/	/	/
"XXIII" (f. Germans)						**2**		/	**2**	/	**2**
"Quebec"											**7**
Attack	Serv.	B/T	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	B/T	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
"Dekabrist" (series I)	**6**		-4		**2**			/	**2**	(2)	/
"Shchuka" (s. III)	**4**		-3		**1**			/	**1**	(1)	/
"Shchuka" (s. V)	**39**		-6		**33**			/	**33**	/	**26**
"Shchuka" (s. X)	**33**	**10**	-22		**21**	**15**		/	**36**	/	**35**
"Srednyy" (s. IX)	**3**		-2		**1**		[-1]	/	/	/	/
"Srednyy" (s. IXB)		**32**	-13		**19**	**11**		/	**30**	/	**26**
Former British		**4**	-1		**3**		[-3]	/	/	/	/
Former Romanian		**3**			**3**			/	**3**	/	/
Former Italian						**2**		/	**2**	(2)	/
"VII/IX" (f. Germans)						**5**		/	**5**	(5)	/
"XXI" (f. Germans)						**4**		/	**4**	/	**4**
"Whiskey"											**150**
"Zulu"											**9**

	1938	1939-1945				1946-1950				1955	
Tot. submarines	Serv.	B/T	Lost	Retir.	Serv.	B/T	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
Large and Minelayer	**24**	**17**	-16		**25**	**6**	/	/	**31**	/	**28**
Coastal	**59**	**48**	-30	[-6]	**71**	**68**	[-3]	(60)	**76**	41	**70**
Ocean	**85**	**49**	-51		**83**	**37**	[-4]	/	**116**	/	**250**



Two Soviet submarines in the Sea of Okhotsk, image taken in 1957 by U.S. Navy patrol aircraft. A "Leninets" Series XIII ("Lima-III" class) ocean minelayer submarine, wearing pennant number 69, in the foreground, and a brand-new Zulu ("Z" class) attack boat, pennant 99, in the background. Seven "Lima-III" were built between 1935 and 1939, assembled and based in Vladivostok: credited, during the WWII, with the sinking of a German anti-submarine vessel in the Arctic Ocean and, in August 1945, of a Japanese corvette and a merchant ship (U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 79643).

For comparison, the Royal Navy's vessels assigned to antisubmarine protection of merchant shipping (sloops, corvettes and ocean-going minesweepers) had risen from 37 at the outbreak of the Second World War to 373. At the outbreak of the Korean War, this force had literally fallen to zero, apart from 21 corvettes laid up in reserve. Escort destroyers and frigates had likewise increased from 81 to 347 between 1939 and 1945, only to fall to 30 ships at the start of the Cold War. The United States, having had 15 patrol craft in service in 1941 and added 67 corvettes and patrol craft during the war, was left after it with 19 ocean-going USCG vessels and nine Navy coastal craft, plus another 17 coastal craft in reserve. The principal reason of this painful cut was, simply, the inadequate performance of older designs against the new generation submarines.

Considering only the first line vessels, the USN had expanded from an initial force of 108 ageing destroyers to 479 ships, but by 1948 this grand total had fallen to only 11 in commission and another 265 in reserve. Compared with 1945, only 5% of these escorts remained in service, although another 29% had been mothballed: the destroyer escorts, hastily built to meet the German U-boat threat, and lacking significant scope for technological or performance improvements, possessed capabilities barely sufficient to counter the new-generation submarines. The large numbers held in mobilization reserve, instead, fostered a misplaced sense of security among political decision-makers.[77]

Table 10 – Escort vessels vs Submarines

	1945	1946-1950				1955	
Fleet Destroyer (*)	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
U.S. Navy	**99**	52		(20)	**131**	(13)	**155**
Royal Navy	/	28		(11)	**17**	(15)	**18**

Escort Destroyer (*)	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
U.S. Navy	**282**		[-57]	(213)	**12**	(114)	**100**
Royal Navy	**96**	30	[-43]	(49)	**34**	(10)	**10**
Marine Nationale	**12**	8	[-6]	(9)	**5**	(7)	**1**
R. Canadian Navy	**13**	4	[-8]	(2)	**7**	/	**9**
Other Navies	**8**	8	[-1]	/	**15**	/	**18**
Marina Militare	**10**	2	[-6]	/	**6**	/	**5**

77 Friedman 1982, pp. 158-163,

Frigate/DE (**)	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
U.S. Navy	**493**	10	[-201]	(272)	**30**	(144)	**119**
Royal Navy	**335**	17	[-220]	(102)	**30**	(50)	**42**
Marine Nationale	**17**	13	[-8]	/	**22**	/	**22**
R. Canadian Navy	**65**		[-44]	(21)	/	(11)	**10**
Other Navies	**12**	23		/	**35**	/	**34**
Marina Militare	**22**	3	[-8]	/	**17**	/	**16**

Corvette/PC	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
U.S. Navy	**67**	2	[-43]	(17)	**9**	(10)	**16**
Royal Navy	**346**	3	[-328]	(21)	/	(21)	/
Marine Nationale	**7**		[-7]	/	/	/	/
R. Canadian Navy	**101**		[-101]	/	/	/	/
Other Navies (***)	**4**	7	[-3]	/	**8**	/	**15**
Marina Militare	**19**	6		(2)	**23**	/	**28**

(*) Fleet destroyers classified within NATO as DD. The remaining wartime-built vessels, whose new primary missons had become that of escort and anti-submarine warfare, were reclassified within NATO as DDE, with the designation ***Escort first rate***.

(**) Destroyer Escort (DE) and Frigate classified as NATO ***ESCORT SECOND RATE***.

(***) OTHER EUROPEAN NATO NAVIES: NORWAY, DENMARK, NETHERLANDS, BELGIUM, PORTUGAL.

	1945	**1946-1950**			**1955**		
NATO Escort ships	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
U.S. Navy	**842**	12	[-301]	(502)	**51**	(268)	**235**
Royal Navy	**777**	50	[-591]	(172)	**64**	(81)	**52**
Marine Nationale	**36**	21	[-21]	(9)	**27**	(7)	**23**
R. Canadian Navy	**179**	4	[-153]	(23)	**7**	(11)	**19**
Other Navies	**24**	38	[-4]	/	**58**	/	**67**
Marina Militare	**51**	11	[-14]	(2)	**46**	/	**49**
Tot. DDE/DE/F/PC	**1909**	136	-1084	(708)	**253**	(367)	**445**

Soviet Submarines	Serv.	Built	Retir.	Res.	Serv.	Res.	Serv.
Ocean	**108**	43	[-4]	/	**147**	/	**278**
Coastal	**71**	68	[-3]	(60)	**76**	(41)	**70**
Tot. Submarines	**179**	111	[-7]	(60)	**223**	(41)	**348**

Indeed, a 1947 U.S. Navy study estimated that in wartime the Soviet fleet, even with the older boats then available, could maintain a continuous presence of 40 submarines in the Atlantic, 30 in the Pacific and 18 in the Mediterranean. By comparison, the German Navy had maintained an average of just six U-boats in the Atlantic during the first nine months of the Second World War, sinking yet two million tons of merchant shipping.[78] In the post-war estimate, the available antisubmarine forces could sink two attacking submarines for every merchant vessel lost; however, the same submarines, if upgraded with the latest German technology, would already be twelve times more effective. New-generation submarines presented a far more difficult threat, being designed to operate continuously underwater, with at least twice the speed, endurance and operating depth, using homing torpedoes and, above all, being much quieter than the ships intended to hunt them.[79]

The required characteristics of new antisubmarine vessels therefore included long endurance, high maximum speed in adverse sea conditions, and low propeller and machinery noise. To provide these performances while accommodating ample space for weapons, sensors and operations rooms, was selected the "*Atlanta*/*Juneau*"-class antiaircraft cruiser platform, basis of the prototype *Norfolk*, completed in 1953.[80] By comparison, *Juneau* mounted six twin 127 mm/38-calibre turrets and seven twin 76 mm/50-calibre mounts; *Norfolk*, despite carrying a comprehensive array of antisubmarine weapons, had only four twin 76 mm/50-calibre mounts for self-defense, making it necessary to entrust her own antiship and antiaircraft protection to additional escorts.[81]

* * *

Soviet offensive capabilities were naturally complemented by a powerful naval aviation arm. The already numerous Air regiments of the Voyenno-Morskoy Flot were reinforced in 1951–1953 by several Air Force units, transferred to

78 Vice Admiral Forrest Sherman, U.S. Navy, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Operations), *Presentation to the President*, 14 January 1947, in Palmer 1988, p. 96; Ibid., p. 33.

79 Friedman 1982, pp. 198-201.

80 Martino, Nani 2002, pp. 64-68.

81 Friedman 1982, pp. 256-258.

the Navy, and by substantial numbers of the latest generation jet aircraft. At the height of this expansion, the VMF had 16 regiments of Il-28T torpedo bombers, four of long-range Tu-14T torpedo bombers and four of Il-28R reconnaissance aircraft.[82] Excluding reconnaissance and operational training aircraft, this represented a force of approximately 100 torpedo bombers in the Baltic, 100 with the Northern Fleet, 200 in the Black Sea and 400 in the Pacific, armed with RAT-52 torpedoes.

This weapon, scarcely studied owing to the near-total absence of bibliographical or documentary references, was an air-dropped torpedo released at high speed from altitudes between 1,500 and 4,000 meters. Rocket-propelled and capable of 60–70 knots in the water, it could reach its target so rapidly as to preclude evasive manoeuvres, with a 17–23% probability of hitting.[83] Releasing a RAT-52 from an altitude of 1,500 meters enabled bombers to attack beyond the range of 20 mm anti-aircraft guns, while release from 4,000 meters allowed to stand-off the 40 mm weapons, standard antiaircraft armament of Western ships. Second World War USN statistics attributed 72% of enemy aircraft shot down to 20/40 mm weapons, compared with 28% to larger-caliber guns.[84]

The speed of jet aircraft, compared with their piston-engined predecessors, also halved exposure time to antiaircraft fire. The US Navy estimated that countering such aircraft required at least two pairs of 127 mm/58-calibre guns controlled by electronic fire-control systems and firing proximity-fuzed ammunition. This armament, standard on postwar U.S. destroyers, was strengthened aboard several ships by replacing quadruple 40 mm/60-calibre mounts with similar twin 76 mm/50-calibre mounts, which had greater range and, more importantly, could themselves fire radar proximity-fuzed projectiles. In any event, as early as 1946 the USN estimated that existing defenses would be no more than 20% effective against future antiship missiles.[85]

82 Holm 2019, under Navy/Aviation Regiments.

83 Gordon, Rigmant 2005, pp. 126-128; Gordon, Komissarov 2015, pp. 58-71; Friedman 1991, p. 701, states that «Material on earlier Soviet torpedoes is taken from a mix of Soviet official sources and declassified Western intelligence data» describing the RAT-52 as «the conceptual ancestor of the long-range antiship missiles of the AS series».

84 Campbell 2002, p. 106, referring to 387 Japanese aircraft shot down between October 1944 and January 1945.

85 Friedman 1982, pp. 204-208, 219-220.



A Tupolev Tu-4 bomber (code name: "Bull"), the soviet reverse-engineered copy of B-29 *Superfortress*, armed with two KS-1 Kometa (NATO code name: AS-1 "Kennel") anti-ship missile; the radome of *Kometa-M* guide radar is fully extended.

On 4 January 1951, off Crimea, a Soviet Tu-4 bomber carried out the first launch of a KS-1 *Kometa* missile. This weapon, mass-produced from 1952 and known by the NATO reporting designation AS-1 "Kennel", was a scaled-down version of the MiG-15 jet fighter, equipped with radar homing guidance. The carrier aircraft could launch two missiles from a range of 90 km, with a 60–80% probability of hitting: in the first trial with a live warhead, a single missile was able to sink the former cruiser *Krasny Kavkaz*, breaking her in two. Four Air Force strategic-bomber regiments were transferred to Naval Aviation for such missions. The first of 50 missile-carrying Tu-4Ks entered service in June 1953, too late to be employed—as appears to have been seriously contemplated—against American warships operating off Korea. Nevertheless, 25 bomber-version Tu-4s, already delivered to China for crew training, were employed under Soviet instructor-commanders on missions of «training flight with a live bomb release over the bombing range - the island of Taiwan».[86]

86 Moroz, Popsuevich 2001, pp. 10-17; Gordon, Rigmant 2002, pp. 36-39, 76-77; Gordon, 2005, pp. 71-82.



An Ilyushin Il-28T strike aircraft (NATO code name: "Beagle") of Soviet Navy's Naval air arm, displaying a rocket-powered RAT-52 stand-off torpedo.

Victors and Vanquished

The United States' difficult postwar position is readily understood in light of its troubled relations with its "allies", particularly France, after the end of hostilities.

In May 1945 French troops invaded Italian territory as far as Imperia and Cuneo and attempted to occupy the Aosta Valley, despite resistance from the forces of the Italian National Liberation Committee. When ordered to withdraw by the American IV Corps, the occupying forces refused to leave «territory occupied and administered by order of the French Republic», declaring that «any further insistence would be regarded as hostile and could have grave consequences». The crisis ended only after Truman's forceful intervention, which, «while this threat by the French Government [was] outstanding against American soldiers», suspended, among other things, deliveries of military equipment.[87] A year later,

87 Coles, Weinberg, 1964, pp. 568-571: «I have been ordered by the provisional government of the French Republic to occupy and administer this territory. This mission being incom-

amid the risk of a communist coup in France and with numerous sympathizers of that faction among officers of the *Armée*, consideration was given to defending US Army depots against possible assault. In 1948, at the height of the Berlin blockade, Secretary of State Marshall described the U.S. government as «greatly harassed by the fact that there is no responsible government in France», while in the words of Forrestal there were «some problems that almost seem insoluble: China, the Middle East and France».[88]

Almost equally worrying in those years was the British situation. In 1946 Mikhail Krunichev, Minister of the Aviation Industry, informed the Soviet political leadership that it would soon acquire state-of-the-art jet-engine technology through the purchase of the highly advanced turbines recently developed by Rolls-Royce. Stalin, in his characteristic fashion, sarcastically asked «what fool will sell us his secrets? » The answer arrived in 1947, by the delivery of 55 British *Nene* and *Derwent* engines, whose construction drawings allowed to close the Soviet technological gap with the United States in a remarkably short time.[89]

This British «lack of imagination»[90] would create further instability in the Mediterranean, alongside the disastrous administration of the Mandate for Palestine, which ultimately ended with the establishment of the State of Israel.[91] Britain was by then effectively bankrupt, as explicitly stated in a telegram of 26 July 1947 from Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin to US Under Secretary of State Robert

patible with the installation of an Allied Military agency in the same region, I find myself obliged to oppose it. Any insistence in this direction would assume a clearly unfriendly character, even a hostile character and could have grave consequences» (French *Army of the Alps* to the US IV Corps); «This constitutes a very blunt statement of the intention of the French Government […] in direct contravention of the principles which I accept, and I know you will agree, as representing the best interests of all allied governments in preserving a hard won peace, namely the avoidance of military action to accomplish political ends» «While this threat by the French Government is outstanding against American soldiers, I regret that I have no alternative but to issue instructions that no further issues of military equipment or munitions can be made to French troops. Rations will continue to be supplied» (President Truman to De Gaulle, ABC news agency, 6 June 1945); cf. Cucut 2022, pp. 4-17.

88 Forrestal, Millis 1951, pp. 157-158, 185; ibid., p. 485; ibid., p. 537.

89 Gordon, Rigmant 1993, pp. 7-9.

90 Thus in 541/328, *Politica mediterranea della Russia*, 4 April 1946, from Pietro Quaroni, Ambassador in Moscow, to Foreign Minister Alcide De Gasperi, AUSMM, Treaties Office collection, box 103.

91 Salvadori 2003, pp. 47-59.

Lovett. Lovett «was deeply concerned because he doubted if [the United States] would be willing to produce the sums necessary to maintain Britain's world position».[92] A week later a serious crisis arose from the withdrawal of British troops from Greece, in the midst of a civil war between the government and communist insurgents, and from southern Europe. After a heated exchange with his British counterpart, asking if this decision would be the indication of «a fundamental change in British policy», Secretary of State Marshall expressed to his colleagues his profound concern about the implications of this retreat and requested U.S. Navy support to increase the American presence in the Mediterranean and contain Soviet assertiveness.

In November 1948—once the financial crisis had been overcome thanks to massive American and Canadian support—a meeting of senior Anglo-American defence officials was arranged in London. In discussing the Mediterranean situation, the British minister and Chiefs of Staff, although acknowledging Italy's geographical importance, dismissed its military value as «not significant», believing that «the Italians should [not] be given much, if any, military equipment». Asked by Forrestal who would ensure the defence of the Mediterranean and Middle East, the British counterpart expressed the conviction that rapid action would be necessary in the early stages of a conflict, especially—according to the RAF Chief of the Air Staff—through the use of aircraft carriers. The British themselves admitted, moreover, that they were already fully committed in Asia in confronting the communist insurgency in Malaya.[93]

These disconcerting statements clearly took for granted that defence of an area of such «vital importance to the existence of Great Britain», whose loss «would virtually mean the end of England as a power»,[94] would fall to the Americans, in particular the U.S. Navy and its 2,000 carrier-based aircraft. The British Navy, in fact, then possessed only 144 frontline aircraft, all propeller-driven, with a strike component consisting of just 24 torpedo bombers…

At the same time, the US Navy was refining its plans and determining the

92 Forrestal, Millis 1951, p. 296 [By comparison, Italy's deficit in 1947 was 355 billion lire (5.1% of GDP), against a public debt of 25.4%, British public debt was 249.8%].

93 Ibid., pp. 301-303; Ibid., pp. 522-525.

94 Ibid., pp. 342: thus British Foreign Secretary Bevin to Loy Henderson of the US Department of State.

force structure needed to confront another war. It was judged that from 1954 the USSR would possess enough atomic weapons to nullify American deterrence: once nuclear parity had been reached, Stalin could invade Western Europe by exploiting overwhelming Soviet superiority in conventional forces.

The 1949 plans therefore envisaged four battle forces (two in the Mediterranean, one in the Atlantic and one in the Pacific), with an equal number of logistic support groups; an amphibious force for two Marine divisions; nine hunter-killer groups, fourteen convoy escort groups and ten patrol groups.[95] The minimum number of ships required would thus have entailed employing virtually all theoretically available forces, including the vast majority laid up in reserve and intended to be manned—if possible—by reservist crews. This made any support the allies could provide all the more valuable, particularly in the initial stages of a conflict and especially in a theatre such as the Mediterranean, where the Anglo-French contribution was in reality far more apparent than substantial.

Table 11 U.S. Navy requirements, DROPSHOT WAR PLAN (1949), EXPECTED STRENGTH ON DAY D+180

Naval Forces	CV	CVS	CVE	BB	CA	CL	CLK	DD	DDE	DE
Strike (Mediterr. 1)	4			1	4	3		24		
Strike (Mediterr. 2)	4			1	4	2		24		
Strike (Atlantic)	4			1	4	2		24		
Strike (Pacific)	4			1	4	2		24		
Support (Mediterr. 1)			2						8	
Support (Mediterr. 2)			2						8	
Support (Atlantic)			2						8	
Support (Pacific)			2						8	
Amphibious (Medit.)			7	2	3			18	5	
Amphibious (Atlantic)			7	2	3			18	5	
ASW (Mediterranean)			3				3		36	

95 Friedman 1986, pp. 10-14, 29-31 and 47-49; Beaver 1982, pp. 142-151.

ASW (North Atlantic)			**3**				**3**		**36**	
ASW (South Atlantic)			**1**				**1**		**12**	
ASW (Far East)			**2**				**2**		**24**	
Convoy escort (Atl.)		**6**							**24**	**24**
Convoy escort (Med.)		**4**							**8**	**8**
Convoy escort (Pac.)			**6**						**12**	**12**
Area Force (Pacific)					**3**			**12**		
Patrol (North Atlantic)										**125** (*)
Patrol (South Atlantic)										**25** (*)
Patrol (Pacific)										**25** (*)
Patrol (Far East)										**25** (*)

(*) 200 Destroyer Escort planned, as reported in the previous OPNAV, *Atlantic and Pacific Fleet*, 1947.

Tot. Ships	**CV**	**CVS/L**	**CVE**	**BB**	**CA/CL**	**CL (A)**	**CLK**	**DD**	**DDE**	**DE**
Planned D+180	**16**	**10**	**37**	**8**	**25**	**9**	**9**	**144**	**194**	**244**
In service (1950)	**8**	**2**	**4**	**1**	**13**	**1**	/	**131**	**12**	**30**
In reserve (1950)	(19)	(7)	(63)	(16)	(55)	(8)	/	20	213	272

Ships available, commissioned or in reserve (1949 requirements + additional/surplus)

CV, Strike carrier: 3 “Midway”, 13 refitted “Essex” (+2 more available in reserve)

CVS/L, Anti-submarine/Amphibious carrier: 7 “Essex”, 2 “Saipan”, 1 “Independence” (+6 more reserve/surplus)

CVE, Escort carrier: 19 “Commencement Bay”, 18 “Casablanca” (+30 more reserve/surplus)

BB, Battleships: 4 “Iowa”, 4 “South Dakota” (+9 more available in reserve)

CA/CL, Cruisers: 20 “Des Moines”/“Oregon City”/“Baltimore”, 5 “Worcester”/”Fargo”/Cleveland” (+37 more)

CL, Anti-aircraft light cruisers: 3 “Juneau”, 6 “Atlanta” (no surplus)

CLK, Anti-submarine light cruisers: none, 7 dd “Gearing” available (1 “Norfolk”, 5 dl “Mitscher” from 1953)

DD, Fleet Destroyers: 91 “Gearing”, 53 “Sumner” (no surplus)

DDE, Escort (anti-submarine) Destroyers: 150 “Fletcher”, 44 “Benson/Gleaves” (+20 more in surplus)

DE, Destroyer Escorts (Frigates): 244 “Butler”/Edsall”/Cannon”/”Rudderow”/”Buckley” (+39 more in surplus)

The Thin Blue Line

Cooperation and mutual respect between the American and Italian navies had begun in the first days of the German invasion in September 1943, even before the formal co-belligerency agreements between the Regia Marina and the United Nations. These activities, which often achieved high levels of integration, notably among special forces, continued without interruption in the postwar period.

In April 1947, at a meeting convened by Forrestal with senior military leaders to discuss ongoing global crises, *Chief of Naval Operations* Admiral Chester Nimitz described Italy as a country «of great importance to the United States» and said that «we should do everything to help in its rehabilitation and to extend all possible assistance in the restoration of Italian military forces».[96] On 4 October 1947, two weeks after the ratification of the Peace Treaty, Nimitz informed the Italian Navy that the United States was waiving the reparations due under the Treaty, stating that «this act had the full support of the American Navy, which had the opportunity, during operations against the common enemy, to witness at close hand the courage of the Italian Navy and its wholehearted contribution to the Allied war effort». On 12 February 1948, the American *National Security Council*, chaired by President Truman, decided to «expedite the shipment» to Italy of «all available and surplus arms».[97] Nimitz's proposals thus effectively anticipated the *European Recovery Program* (Marshall Plan), while the NSC decision in fact "violated" both the letter and the spirit of the Peace Treaty. Hardly surprising in light of the British "lack of imagination" and French policy, which, to alter the naval balance of power with Italy in its own favor, had advocated the punitive clauses included in the Peace Treaty at the USSR's insistence.[98]

96 Forrestal, Millis 1951, pp. 264-265.

97 AUSMM, Post-8 September 1943 collection, box 105, file 2.2, *La partecipazione della Marina alla Guerra di Liberazione*, 23 March 1955, «questo atto ha ricevuto il pieno appoggio della Marina americana che ha avuto l'opportunità di seguire da vicino, durante le operazioni contro il comune nemico, il coraggio della Marina italiana e il contributo da lei dato di tutto cuore allo sforzo di guerra alleato»; Forrestal, Millis 1951, pp. 370-371: «With respect to Italy, decision was reached to expedite the shipment of all available and surplus arms».

98 Gabriele 1980, pp. 13-14, citing the then PRO, Admiralty 205, 68 and 116, 5263: a meeting in December 1946 between Minister de Courten and British Admiral Cunningham, concerning the value to Italy's defence of retaining the battleship Vittorio Veneto in commission and the «unanswered question as to which country this defence was supposed to be directed against»; Tani 2001, p. 148.



mid-1950s, the light carrier USS *Saipan* underway, with an air group consisting, in the occasion, of propeller-driven AD *Skyraider* attack aircraft.
The relatively small dimensions of the flight deck generally limited the use of high-performance jet aircraft from light aircraft carriers; nevertheless, in May 1948, the *Saipan* had the distinction of being the first carrier to operate an embarked squadron of jet fighters—the FH-1 *Phantom*. The mighty *Skyraiders*, on their own, would remain in frontline service aboard U.S. Navy Aircraft carriers until the end of the 1960s, also being employed in operations over North Vietnam.
The U.S. Navy deployed usually the two available ships of this class in the Mediterranean, *Saipan* and *Wright*, beyond the fleet carrier already committed to NATO: in Italian official documents, meanwhile, the "Saipan"s were identified as potential candidates for transfer. Deemed surplus to national requirements, these U.S. vessels were, in fact, withdrawn from active service shortly thereafter (U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 97613).

In March 1949, Secretary Marshall presented President Truman with the reasons for Italy's immediate admission to NATO, specifying that «even under the limitations of the Peace Treaty, Italy has the third largest navy in Western Europe […] and one of the largest merchant navies in Europe, with a surplus of trained seamen. […] The US military authorities have estimated that […] in terms of sea warfare, there is no question as to her critical strategic potentiality with respect to

control of the Mediterranean».[99]

In April 1949, the Italian Navy completed an initial study of defence requirements, envisaging three light carriers and 180 aircraft. In July these requirements were shared with the U.S. Navy: given the country's actual economic circumstances, the rapid creation of such a force could realistically be achieved only with substantial US Navy support.[100] US Navy strategic planning, focused on containing the USSR, had in fact reversed the traditional priority given to the Pacific and turned instead towards the Mediterranean.[101]

In November, the Italian Navy published the *Study on the Expansion of the Italian Navy in Relation to the Atlantic Pact*. It envisaged the establishment of two ready-response naval task groups, each centered on an aircraft carrier. These forces were included in the planning requirements of NATO's Southern Europe and Western Mediterranean (EMMO) region, one of three areas—alongside the Western and Northern regions—into which European defence had been divided. The approved EMMO requirement for the defence of sea traffic under Italian responsibility included three aircraft carriers (one light and two escort carriers); two cruisers; 22 fleet destroyers (DD) and 12 antisubmarine destroyers (DDE); and 24 smaller escorts (DE-type destroyer escorts). In view of the Peace Treaty restrictions still in force, the three carriers and the 128 bombers («antisubmarine aircraft») envisaged were listed as resources «not yet allocated».[102] During Italian Chief of Naval Staff Emilio Ferreri's visit to the United States in May 1950, a list was accordingly drawn up of the first ships that might be transferred by the U.S. Navy, including one light carrier, ten fleet destroyers and four destroyer escorts.[103] Unfortunately, cooperation between the Italian and American navies had come to

99 Department of State, Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, Western Europe, Volume IV: Memorandum by the Secretary of State - *Arguments for Inclusion of Italy in the North Atlantic Pact*, March 2, 1949.

100 Cosentino 1996, pp. 42-43;

101 Swartz 2004, p. 120: «At the beginning of the Cold War […] the Mediterranean had been the most important forward theater for US naval planning and operations».

102 NATO Documents Series, Standing Group: S.G. 20/39, *Italian Naval forces requirements*, 31 October 1951, in the appended *Memorandum for the Military Committee* concerning planning in the EMMO area, https://archives.nato.int/italian-naval-force-requirements-2 (last retrieve 2026-11-14); S.G. 20/2, *North Atlantic Treaty Organization Medium Term Defense Plan (1 July 1954)*, 11 March 1950, https://archives.nato.int/medium-term-defence-plan-for-nato-01-july-1954 (last retrieve 2026-11-14).

103 De Leonardis 2013, pp. 86-94; De Leonardis 2016, pp. 61-63.

coincide with the climax of the American "Revolt of the Admirals".[104]

On 8 July 1950, General Omar Bradley, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, called an "informal meeting" in Washington with the senior representatives of NATO's so-called planning *Standing Group*, RAF Marshal Arthur Tedder and French Air General Charles Léchères. The meeting was intended to establish possible convergence in armaments policy. Bradley expressed reservations about supplying France with aircraft carriers, making such assistance conditional upon a prior increase in its ground and air forces. The French representative, in turn, raised the issue of forces theoretically earmarked for NATO but in practice deployed elsewhere, «as, for example, a request for a carrier for the Mediterranean, which would quite properly be used in Vietnam».[105] This marked a substantial change under the pressure of the Korean emergency: until then the United States had avoided giving military support to French colonial campaigns.[106] Above all, the meeting decided that, «in order to issue a directive as soon as possible», the *Standing Group* should draft the Alliance's collective requirements «without awaiting the views of the other national representatives» and, «to avoid possible differences of opinion», without involving the various Regional Planning Groups.[107]

The plan drawn up in March by the EMMO Regional Planning Group had divided maritime defence of the Mediterranean between a western sector (Anglo-American and French) and a Tyrrhenian/Adriatic sector—and therefore, by implication, the Ionian and central Mediterranean—under Italian responsibility. This draft was, however, amended within the *Standing Group* on the basis of the "informal meeting's" decisions, without prior consultation with Italy or the

104 Swartz 2004, p. 50: «The US Navy weighed in heavily, although ultimately unsuccessfully, to have the Italian Navy acquire a strong naval air arm, in the face of determined opposition by the Italian Air force backed by the US Air Force».

105 NATO Documents Series, Standing Group, S.G. Informal Meeting, *Record of Informal Meeting*, 8 July 1950, https://archives.nato.int/standing-group-meeting-on-saturday-08-july-1950-at-0930-hours (last retrieve 2026-11-14).

106 Concerning the absence of military assistance to France before 1950, see Swartz 2004, p. 34; Bickford Hooper, Allard, Fitzgerald 1976, pp 85-86, 160: «Aware of Roosevelt's desire to keep the French out of Indochina, Under Secretary of State Edward Stettinius advised the President on 2 November 1944 that a French military mission had arrived in Ceylon […] The American leader reacted sharply, and on 3 November directed Stettinius to "not give American approval to any French military mission […]».

107 *Record of Informal Meeting*, 8 July 1950, cit.

other allies. In the final document, the western Mediterranean was expanded into a single operational sector also embracing the Italian peninsula, now assigned exclusively to Anglo-American responsibility (for east–west routes) and French responsibility (for north–south routes). In this new, covertly altered planning arrangement, Italy's role was thus confined to the defence of its own coastal waters and the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Although determined informally, drawn up by only the three participants and amended before circulation,[108] the *Standing Group*'s plan inevitably became the basis of NATO's new collective force requirements, which each ally would be expected to meet as a matter of highest priority to ensure the common defence.

The first requirements, issued in July 1951, assumed a Soviet attack on "D-Day", 1 July 1954, and identified the minimum forces needed «to avert disaster» between D-Day and D+30. Two US attack groups (two battleships, eight aircraft carriers, eight cruisers and 48 destroyers) and 15 escort groups (seven light carriers, 11 cruisers, 62 destroyers, 64 frigates and 29 corvettes) were to be deployed in the Mediterranean. Reserve forces to be deployed by D+180 comprised another two light carriers, three cruisers, 18 destroyers and 39 frigates. No aircraft carriers were allocated to Italy, whereas three were assigned to France.[109]

Comparison with the forces actually available revealed a real shortfall in the Mediterranean of two light carriers and 14 destroyers. Italy's request for three carriers (to ensure that two would always be available) was therefore entirely consistent with the deficiencies identified by NATO itself. Moreover, as could readily have been foreseen, the French carriers remained in Indochina until 1955 rather than being available for NATO commitments. The 14 "missing" destroyers likewise corresponded both to Italian requests agreed with the U.S. Navy and to

108 NATO Documents Series, Standing Group, S.G. 38/1, *Collective balancing of NATO Forces*, 19 August 1950, p. 12 of the 8 July draft, amended on 18 August before being transmitted to the Regional Groups as document SGM-267-50: «Holders of S.G. 38/1 are requested to remove pages 3, 5, 8, 11 and 12, replace them with the enclosed pages 3, 5, 8, 11 and 12, and to destroy the substituted pages by burning», https://archives.nato.int/collectively-balanced-forces (retrieved 2026-11-14).

109 NATO Documents Series, Standing Group: SGM-1437-51, *SHAPE's Force Requirements for 1954*, 4 September 1951; S.G. 20/34, *Revised Medium Term Force Requirements and Recommended National Contributions*, 1 October 1951, https://archives.nato.int/revised-medium-term-force-requirements-and-recommended-national-contributions (retrieved 2026-11-14).

France's shortfalls against its obligations to the Alliance.

General Eisenhower had meanwhile described the defence of Italy as «of critical importance», since its loss would «plainly jeopardize the whole Mediterranean area and North Africa», and called a «rank absurdity in the U.S. urging Italy to make the greatest possible military effort while at the same time theoretically restricting her by a treaty signed with the nation against whom we are arming». It was, in any event, common knowledge that the Italian armed forces had never complied with the Peace Treaty restrictions and that the Navy in particular exceeded the Treaty's limits by 25%.[110]

In November 1951, assessment of the air and submarine threat prompted Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) to request the allocation of two additional carriers and ten destroyers in the Mediterranean as «additional requirements for escorting the East–West [route] through convoys in the Mediterranean». By a strange coincidence, SHAPE's request crossed on the same day with a *Standing Group* memorandum proposing, on the contrary, that Italy's request for a naval air task group comprising one carrier, four destroyers and 84 aircraft be rejected. Even a cursory analysis would have exposed the weakness of the arguments—presumably influenced by Anglo-French national interests—advanced by the *Standing Group* to exclude Italy from control of the sea lines of communication in the central Mediterranean. Whereas the detailed Italian Defence Staff paper identified the strategic, operational, tactical and even historical grounds for the request, the rejection rested on an abstract concept of the "western Mediterranean", disregarding the peninsula's universally recognized strategic centrality.[111]

Equally disconcerting, yet highly revealing, were the talks in Paris of the so-

110 Laguerre A., Optimist in Arms, in "Life", July 6, 1951, p. 122, cited in Ferrante 1988, pp. 11-19.

111 NATO Documents Series, Standing Group: S.G. 161/1, *Estimate of the relative strength and capabilities of NATO and Soviet bloc forces at present and in the immediate future*, 5 November 1951, https://archives.nato.int/estimate-of-the-relative-strength-and-capabilities-of-nato-and-soviet-bloc-forces-at-present-and-in-the-immediate-future (retrieved 2026-11-14); S.G. 20/41, *Revised Medium Term Force Requirements and Recommended National Contributions*, 7 November 1951, https://archives.nato.int/revised-medium-term-force-requirements-and-recommended-national-contributions-5 (retrieved 2026-11-14); S.G. 20/42, *Note by the Secretaries to the Standing Group on Italian Naval Forces Requirements*, 7 November 1951, https://archives.nato.int/italian-naval-force-requirements-4 (retrieved 2026-11-14).



September 1952, Cabaniss Field Naval Air Station, two Italian Navy pilots undergoing type conversion on SB2C *Helldiver.* The Italian Naval aviators, at the time, had previously completed the Advanced Training Syllabus in AD *Skyraider*, by then the U.S. Navy's first-line attack aircraft (AUSMM).

called *Temporary Council Committee*, intended to bring each Alliance member's military policies into line with a series of technical criteria. The meeting with the Italian delegation, led by Treasury Minister Giuseppe Pella, on 17 November 1951 was chaired by US Ambassador Averell Harriman, assisted by his two deputies Edwin Plowden (a senior British government official) and Jean Monnet (French delegate, with no qualifications specified). During the meeting, USAF General Joseph McNarney, head of the financial planning group, intervened during an entirely unrelated question about land infrastructure and pointed out «that the Navy budget was almost as large as the Air Force budget which, in the

circumstances, seemed peculiar since the Air Force was in process of expansion whereas the Navy had already reached a comparatively satisfacfory level» suggesting «that the general budget of the Navy should be reduced for the benefit of the Air Force budget». Monnet took the opportunity to ask «as a matter of principle, whether the Community would not benefit from the abolition, purely and simply of national fleets of the size of Italy's». The Italian representative replied by stressing «the importance of the Italian Navy's assignments» and pointing out that the naval forces were, on the contrary, «so depleted that they did not include a single aircraft carrier».[112]

The *Standing Group*'s proposals were effectively overturned by the NATO Military Committee, meeting in Rome on 20–21 November 1951, which appointed an *Ad Hoc Committee* to examine Italian naval aviation requirements. Having «examined the reasons which lead the Italian Naval Authorities to consider the inclusion of a Light fleet Carrier to be an essential part of their Fleet», the committee determined that «Apart from the matter of prestige there are other military reasons. These include the question of training and the efficiency and morale of the Italian Navy as a whole». Nevertheless, this had to be considered against the Alliance's general shortage of warships, so that, «while fully recognizing» the Italian reasons, «cannot at this time [to] recommend that Italy should contribute a light fleet carrier and attendant destroyers» until «when all the forces wich Italy is being asked to contribute towards the Medium Term Defense Plan in M.C. 26/1 have been provided ».[113]

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112 NATO Documents Series, North Atlantic Council, EB/CR.19 (Final), *Country Reviews – Italy*, 26th November 1951, https://archives.nato.int/country-reviews-italy-replies-to-tcc-d-5-6-3 (last retrieve 2026-11-14 [J. T. McNarney, formerly responsible for procurement of USAF B-36 bombers, left the service in 1952 becoming an executive of the same company producing the aircraft; J. Monnet, since 2012, has appeared on the list of the eleven so-called "founding fathers" of the European Union].

113 NATO Documents Series, Military Committee: M.C. 5th Session, *Record of Meeting of the North Atlantic Military Committee*, 22 November 1951, https://archives.nato.int/military-committee-meeting-in-chiefs-of-staff-session-at-the-foro-italico-rome-italy-on-tuesday-20-november-1951-at-1000-hours (last retrieved 2026-11-14); the *Report to the Military Committee by the ad hoc Committee* appointed to consider the Italian Naval Force requirements appears as Annex "D" to the earlier M.C. 37 (orig.), *Note by the Secretaries to the North Atlantic Military Committee on Italian Naval Forces Requirements*, 12 November 1951 https://archives.nato.int/italian-naval-force-requirements-6 (last retrieved 2026-11-14).

The Rome discussions were unfortunately overshadowed by the untimely death following an illness of Admiral Forrest Sherman, the American *Chief of Naval Operations*, who was in Italy at the time. Appointed to lead the U.S. Navy after the "Revolt of the Admirals", Sherman had been the architect, from 1946, of the new American naval strategy—which anticipated the much better-known "Theory of Containment" directed at the Soviet bloc—and in subsequent years had strongly supported the Italian Navy and the work of his counterpart Emilio Ferreri.

Sherman's strategic thinking rested on three premises: the deadly danger to the West posed by the Soviet submarine threat; the ability of aircraft carriers to operate even within range of enemy air forces, in order to strike hostile naval and air bases; and the recognition that European waters, especially those of the Mediterranean, would become the principal theatre of operations.[114]

The strategic *focus* on Western Europe and the almost miraculous powers attributed to air power, evident in certain positions adopted within NATO's *Standing Group* and *Temporary Council Committee*, appear essentially to have been the final manifestations of the ideological and maximalist drift in American military policy that preceded the outbreak of the Korean War. At the same time, for readily understandable reasons, key elements of American war plans against the Soviet Union had never been shared, notably the transfer of the *Pacific Fleet* to the Atlantic and the planned evacuation of American ground forces from continental Europe.[115]

On 13 April 1953, Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery, Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe at SHAPE, astonished the faculty and students of the American *National War College* during an important address in Washington. Speaking without prepared notes, Montgomery explained that in the event of a Soviet attack the enemy's first objective would be to sever transatlantic communications. Europe would then inevitably fall, having ammunition stocks sufficient

114 NSPS 3, *Study of Carrier Attack Force Offensive Capabilities*, 7 Mar 1947, box 497, Strategic Plans, in Palmer 1988, p. 35; Ibid., pp. 23, 27-39, 76. Ibid., *Presentation to the President*, 14 January 1947, pp. 95-103.

115 Ibid., pp. 31, 114: «[…] key elements of American plans for war with the Soviet Union, such as the "swing" strategy that would shift the bulk of the Pacific Fleet to the Atlantic and the planned evacuation of U.S. ground forces from continental Europe, were not openly discussed»; see also note 23 of this paper.

for only three days of fighting. It was therefore essential to prevent Soviet naval and air forces from moving westward because, according to Montgomery,

> «If you let them come further westward you would have a hell of a war at sea and I doubt if it could be handled. We could handle it, but while we were handling it, Europe might fall […] NATO's answer must therefore be to interdict the enemy's sea passages - you must cork the Baltic and you must prevent the development of the maximum submarine effort around the North Cape […] The Black Sea must be corked […]».[116]
>
> «what you would lose in the middle if this flood came at you […] you could win back again provided you held the flanks. But if you lose the flanks and Italy goes too, it would be jolly difficult to get this back again. I doubt whether you could do it. So the flanks are extremely important in this European strategy which is based on sea power and air power and ringing him around with a chain of air bases all around and then bombing him. Owing to the vast number of forward enemy bases, it was no good hoping that air effort or atomic bombs would miraculously win the war for the West, however» under "this European strategy which is based on sea power and air power", what had been lost on the central front could be recovered provided the flanks held. "But if you lose the flanks and Italy goes too, it would be jolly difficult to get this back again. I doubt whether you could do it", not least because it would be unwise to hope "that air effort or atomic bombs would miraculously win the war for the West".[117]

The operational approach outlined by the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe—although he did not explicitly mention the decisive role assigned to aircraft carriers and amphibious forces—followed point by point the naval strategy developed from 1946 by Sherman and the U.S. Navy's Strategic Plans Division (OP-30). Montgomery's assertions were also grounded in knowledge of the actual condition of the European front in the event of a Soviet attack: at the height of Stalin's power, Western *intelligence* believed that «the NATO forces actually available to fight the initial battles may not be sufficient to deter the Soviet from war; indeed, their very weakness may tempt the Soviet to embark on such aggression». An attack in 1953–1954 would therefore entail «significant territorial losses in all theatres» while «The naval forces which would be available to NATO by 1954 might not be able to counter adequately the Soviet naval and air threats to sea

116 Montgomery B.L., *Address to National War College*, 13.4.53, in Hamilton 1987, pp. 832-834.

117 *Ibidem*.

communications ».[118] Preliminary studies envisaged that in the northern theatre only certain key areas could be held, and then only with strong naval air support. In Western Europe, at best the front might be stabilized on the Rhine; shortages of ground and air forces might nevertheless force further withdrawals westward. The study stated, by contrast, that «in the Southern theatre the forces available»—to call these forces by their proper name, the Italian Army—would «be sufficient to establish a substantial defence on the general line of the Austrian and Yugoslav frontiers of Italy». It was further estimated that the Soviet bloc could launch an initial attack against Italy with 15–20 divisions supported by 800 aircraft, while the defenders could field 15 divisions and 650 aircraft. The optimum requirement was 19 divisions and 1,100 aircraft, including those of three carrier task forces. As at 31 December 1952, the Italian Army had six active divisions, a number that would quickly rise to 11 on mobilization of reservists, with the further forces required being completed in the ensuing months. At the same date, the Italian Air Force had 376 aircraft: although the documents did not specify it, the additional 274 aircraft available matched those of three of the four American carriers in the Mediterranean, while the 450 "missing" aircraft corresponded to the fully embarked air groups of other three, still unallocated, American, British and French carrier task forces.[119]

Although the USN genuinely intended to double its attack carriers deployed in the Mediterranean in wartime, the presence of British and French aircraft carriers remained a purely theoretical commitment. What the drafts described as a Soviet naval threat "of the utmost gravity" was toned down in the final documents to the less alarming description of a "real danger". The NATO Military Committee considered that the wording of the original document, if made public, might be construed as an admission of defeat in advance.[120]

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118 NATO Documents Series, Standing Group, S.G. 214/1, *An estimate of the military risk involved by the acceptance of the 1952 Annual review Force goals*, 15 November 1952, https://archives.nato.int/an-estimate-of-the-military-risk-involved-by-the-acceptance-of-the-1952-annual-review-force-goals (retrieved 2026-11-14).

119 As in the preceding note, draft S.G. 214, 11 November 1952; NATO Documents Series, Standing Group S.G. 191/4, *The assignment of Forces available to NATO, 1 January 1954*, 13 August 1953, https://archives.nato.int/the-assignment-of-forces-available-to-nato-01-january-1954 (retrieved 2026-11-14)

120 NATO Documents Series, Military Committee: M.C. 8th Session, *Record of Meeting of the North Atlantic Military Committee*, 19 April 1953: «[...] great care should be taken not to

With the climate at last favorable to the central role of the Mediterranean and Italy within the Atlantic Alliance, the Italian Naval Staff resubmitted its expansion plan to the Ministry of Defence, updated for 1953 and agreed with that Ministry.[121] For 1955 the overall shortfall between NATO requirements and already approved funding was assessed at 20 billion lire annually, 0.1% of GDP at the time, equivalent to €382 million in 2026 values. NATO's minimum force requirement comprised, in addition to the two battleships and three cruisers already in commission, one American "Wright"-type light fleet carrier; 12 fleet destroyers (DD) and 12 escort destroyers (DDE); 12 escort sloops (DE) and 31 corvettes; 124 minesweepers, comprising four ocean-going, 100 coastal and 20 inshore vessels; six submarines and 44 aircraft (128 including the carrier's requirements).

The fleet destroyers due to enter service shortly were two "San Giorgio" and two "Impetuoso": the additional eight "Impetuoso"-class ships sought would have cost 74.8 billion lire in total. The DDEs included four Italian and two American destroyers, all veterans of the Second World War, and the first two "Centauro"-class frigates, while the acquisition of four further frigates was costed at 20 billion lire. In fact, two more "Centauro" and four "Margottini" were acquired, making it possible to replace the two oldest destroyers as well. For the escort sloop force, in addition to two "Orsa" and three former American DEs, six antisubmarine frigates were to be purchased at a cost of 18 billion lire, while the torpedo boat *Procione*, also of the "Orsa" class, was to be reconstructed for 705 million lire. For corvettes, the existing ships would be joined by the new "Aquila" class, financed with NATO funds to replace the venerable former "Spica"-class torpedo boats, maintaining a force of 24 ships judged sufficient for requirements. The antisubmarine aircraft, like the carrier itself, were to be transferred by the United States.

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exaggerate in evaluating the military risk [...] paragraph 8 could be interpreted that the military leaders felt that the Battle of the Atlantic probably would be lost [...] military leaders should never accept defeat beforehand. Furthermore [...] the present wording might have an adverse effect on the Council with the result that the goals would not be attained», https://archives.nato.int/military-committee-meeting-on-19-april-1953-2 (retrieved 2026-11-14).

121 AUSMM, MARISTAT P.O. collection, box 325, file 3, *Programma di potenziamento minimo della Marina Militare*, Rome, January 1953; the plan was transmitted under letter 437/SRP of 26 March 1953 and submitted by the Italian Ministry of Defence to the NATO Military Committee on 18 April [minutes of the meeting cited in the preceding note].

Table 12 – NATO war planning 1951,
forces required, D-Day stated for 1st July, 1954

Source: Revised Medium Term Force Requirements, Standing Group documents 20/34 and 20/44, dated 1 October and 8 November 1951 respectively; US forces in non-NATO theatres (Pacific, Far East, South Atlantic) as shown in the DROPSHOT war plan (1949) and OPNAV Atlantic and Pacific Fleet planning (1947, DE units only).

NATO requirements tailored to the minimum forces considered necessary to ensure the defence of their respective areas. National contributions, if in line with D+180 requirements, aren't detailed further in the table; in case of specific shortfalls related to days D and D+180, the actual numbers has been provided within the table itself.

NATO designation legend: CV/CVL/CVE attack, light and escort aircraft carriers; BB, battleships; CA, heavy and light cruisers; CL anti-aircraft and mine-laying cruisers; DD/DDE, fleet destroyers and anti-submarine destroyers respectively; DE, escort destroyers and frigates. P, escort second rate, belonging to the sloop/corvette category,.

Area forces	**CV**	**CVL**	**CVE**	**BB**	**CA**	**CL**	**DD**	**DDE**	**DE**	**P**
(USA non-NATO)	**4**		**11**	**1**	**6**	**4**	**36**	**56**	**87**	(*)
USA/Canada region							**5**		**31**	(*)
France local forces								**2**	**4**	(*)
NL/Belgium required							3	3	7	6
NL/Belgium **available**							**5**		**5**	**6**
UK local forces required					2		10	10	50	36
UK available on D-Day					2		/	5	/	/
UK **available on D+180**					**2**		/	**5**	**23**	**21**

Nordic theatre	**CV**	**CVL**	**CVE**	**BB**	**CA**	**CL**	**DD**	**DDE**	**DE**	**P**
NATO Requirements					1		16	5	18	(*)
UK North Sea					**1**					
Norw./Danish **available**							**5**		**15**	**6**
Overall **deficiencies** (**)							-11	-2		

North Atlantic theatre	**CV**	**CVL**	**CVE**	**BB**	**CA**	**CL**	**DD**	**DDE**	**DE**	**P**
NATO Requirements		4	7		11	2	14	261	256	20
Canada required		1			2			20	28	
Canada avail. on D-Day		1			2			9	10	
Canada **avail. on D+180**		**1**			**2**			**9** **21**		
Netherlands required		1			2			6	6	
Netherlands **available**		**1**			**2**			**6**	**6**	
France required								4	16	
France avail. on D-Day								1	4	
France **avail. on D+180**								**4**	**4**	
Portugal required								1	7	(*)
Portugal **available**								**5**	**8**	
UK required		2			2	2	6	41	59	
UK available on D-Day		2			5	2	/	/	42	
UK **available on D+180**		**2**			**5**	**2**	**6**	**10**	**42**	
US required			7		2		8	130	137	6
US available on D-Day			7		2		8	60	54	13
US **available on D+180**			**7**		**2**		**8**	**134**	**133**	**20**
Overall **defic. on D-Day**								-312		
Overall **defic. on D+180**								-135		

Mobile Forces	**CV**	**CVL**	**CVE**	**BB**	**CA**	**CL**	**DD**	**DDE**	**DE**	**P**
NATO Requirements	16			4	16		120			
UK Atlantic required	4			1	4		30			
US Atlantic required	4			1	4		30			
US Mediterranean requir.	8			2	8		60			
UK available on D-Day	2			1	4		15			
UK **available on D+180**	**4**			**1**	**4**		**15**			
US available on D-Day	12			3	6		90			
US **available on D+180**	**12**			**3**	**12**		**90**			

Mediterranean	**CV**	**CVL**	**CVE**	**BB**	**CA**	**CL**	**DD**	**DDE**	**DE**	**P**
NATO Requirements		8	3		13	2	28	62	107	(*)
US required			3		4		6	8	12	
US **available** (***)			**3**		**4**		**6**	**8**	**12**	
UK required		3			3	2	12	10	27	
UK available on D-Day		3			3	1	3	5	/	
UK **available D+180** (***)		**3**			**3**	**1**	**12**	**5**	**27**	
France required		3		/	4		6	20	38	(*)
France available on D-Day		/		1	2		2	/	14	
France **avail. D+180** (***)		**3**		**1**	**4**		**2**	**4**	**14**	
Italy required				/	3		4	12	26	(*)
Italy **available** (****)				**2**	**3**		/	**5**	**16**	**21**
Overall defic. on D-Day		-5					-17	-109		
Overall **defic. D+180** (***`)		**-2**					-8	-78		

(*) NATO numerical requirement also includes smaller coastal patrol craft in the “PC” category, omitted in the table. The numbers shown in the “P” column therefore only refer to the escort second rate (sloop and corvettes), as well classified, together with the frigates, as NATO “F” ships.

(**) The shortage of 11 destroyers in the North Atlantic theatre was effectively offset by the availability of an equal number of US ships exceeding NATO and national requirements.

(***) The 3 French carriers were deployed in Indochina for national needs; the Royal Navy had 3 additional light carriers, without air groups, commissioned as troop transports and helicopter carriers; the US Navy, meanwhile, had 2 further light carriers, deployed in the Mediterranean beyond NATO assignments, mentioned in Italian documents as reference units for a possible transfer.

(****) The Italian Navy met NATO’s requirement of 10 patrol units deploying 6 littoral gunboats and 4 offshore patrol vessels. The 21 corvettes in service, classified as escort second-rate (type ‘F’ units), allowed therefore Italy to reach from the beginning, at least numerically, the 42 anti-submarine units as NATO requirement. In the initial, crucial, weeks following the hypothetical D-Day, NATO’s anti-submarine units would thus have been covered 50% by Italian ships, 25% by American and 25% by Franco-British..

The United States also had 13 ‘DDE’ units, among those in reserve, exceeding national and NATO requirements. The transfer of 10 of these to Italy, in addition to the 2 already delivered, was subject to direct agreements between the two navies, which didn’t materialize for other reasons. These surplus units, later left uncommissioned, could have immediately completed the strength of the Italian frontline units, making up for the Franco-British actual shortfall in the Mediterranean.



1952, Central Mediterranean, underway replenishment between the cruiser *Garibaldi* and the Destroyer *Carabiniere* (AUSMM).

Meanwhile, on 17 January 1953, the new NATO Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean (CINCMED) had been established, finally providing for a division between the western sector (under French responsibility) and the central sector, entrusted to Italy. The Italian-led Commander Central Mediterranean (COMEDCENT) was formally activated on 4 June 1954.[122]

The reasons why the Italian carrier battle force was not subsequently established—despite being inherent in the assumption of a geopolitical role so long sought and finally obtained—lie beyond the subject and chronological limits of the present study.

122 NATO Documents Series, Standing Group, SGM-402-53, *Command Organization for the Mediterranean*, 17 March 1953, https://archives.nato.int/command-organization-for-the-mediterranean-5 (last retrieved 2026-11-14); I.P.T. 119/10, *The establishment an activation of Allied Area Commands subordinate to the Commander-in Chief Allied Forces Mediterranean*, 4 June 1954, https://archives.nato.int/the-establishment-and-activation-of-allied-area-commands-subordinate-to-the-commander-in-chief-allied-forces-mediterranean (retrieved 2026-11-14).

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From Political Dialogue to Strategic Doctrine: The Three Wise Men and the Making of NATO's 1957 Strategic Concept

by Dino Sabovic

Abstract: This article examines the relationship between the Report of the Three Wise Men (1956) and the strategic reorientation embodied in NATO's 1957 Strategic Concept, demonstrating how the Report strengthened the Alliance's political dimension by emphasizing internal consultation, information coordination, and economic and cultural cooperation. Against the backdrop of the Suez Crisis and the Hungarian Uprising, the Report advocated measures to prevent unilateral action and institutionalize timely political consultation among member states. These principles helped lay the groundwork for the 1957 Strategic Concept, which reframed deterrence within a collective framework, incorporated considerations of economic and political stability, and acknowledged the significance of non-military threats and challenges originating beyond the Alliance's geographical area, thereby anticipating certain elements of the later doctrine of flexible response. The article situates these developments within contemporary debates on rearmament and hybrid security threats, arguing that NATO's effectiveness depends not only on its military capabilities but also on their integration with political consultation, strategic communication, and economic resilience.

Keywords: NATO – Security – Political Consultation

Introduction

As never before, today the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has once again come to occupy a prominent place in both academic and public debate, following Russia's aggression against Ukraine that began in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and further intensified with the full-scale invasion launched in February 2022. This development led the Atlantic Alliance to adopt, on 29 June 2022, a new Strategic Concept after more than a decade[1], and on 25 June 2025, following the The Hague Summit, to reaffirm

1 NATO 2020 Strategic Concept, 29.06.2022, in NATO Website, https://www.nato.int/cps/

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the mutual commitment, with the exception of Spain[2], to increase total defence spending to 5% of national GDP[3].

The direction taken, therefore, is that of moving toward the rearmament of all NATO Member States, justified (at least according to the recent Strategic Concept) by Russia's aggression against Ukraine and, indirectly, by the growing threat posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC). What emerges, however, is that alongside this increase in military expenditure there has been little reflection on the Alliance's political dimension. In fact, both the most recent Strategic Concept and the Hague Declaration reveal that the political dimension is given limited consideration, if not entirely overlooked, as in the case of the latter. In light of this, the paper seeks to illustrate how this political dimension, though seemingly absent today, was once given considerable attention within the debates of the North Atlantic Council (NAC), and the drafting of the 1956 "Three Wise Men" report, which had a significant impact on the formulation of subsequent Strategic Concepts.

The first Strategic Concept (1950)

Once the ratification process of the Washington Treaty was completed and the Treaty entered into force on 24 August 1949[4], the Alliance, having established its first institutional bodies[5], undertook the process of adopting an initial Strategic Concept aimed at ensuring the security of the entire North Atlantic area[6].

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en/natohq/index.htm, accessed 12.10.2025.

2 Press conference by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte following the meeting of NATO Ministers of Defence in Brussels, Bruxelles, 15.10.2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/index.htm, accessed 12.10.2025.

3 The Haugue Summit Decleration issued by the NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in The Hague 25 june 2025, Bruxelles, 25.06.2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/index.htm, accessed 12.10.2025.

4 The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation – Facts and Figures, Bruxelles, 1989, p. 33.

5 GregoryWick Pedlow (ed.), "NATO strategy documents 1949-1969", Bruxelles, 1997, p. XI.

6 This was deemed necessary in response to developments such as the Berlin Blockade (1948) and Soviet interventions in Hungary (1947) and Czechoslovakia (1948), which heightened concerns that similar developments might unfold in the newly admitted member states of the Alliance. Cfr. Doris M. Condit, "History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Volume 2. The Test of War, 1950-1953", Washington D.C., 1988, pp. 341-347; Alessandro Duce, Storia della politica internazionale (1917-1957). Dalla Rivoluzione

The first draft of a Strategic Concept was prepared by the Standing Group (the executive body of the Military Committee, composed of representatives from France, the United Kingdom, and the United States)[7]. Circulating under the code SG/1 among the various Chiefs of Staff, it was subsequently transmitted to the Military Committee as MC/3[8]. This document was submitted to numerous bodies within the Alliance: the NAC, the Defense Committee, and the five Regional Planning Groups[9]; showing how lengthy and complex the process was to adopt a strategic document capable of satisfying all Allies. For instance, British General William Morgan, a member of the Standing Group who was involved in drafting the first Strategic Concept, referred during the meeting of 17 October 1949 to the complexity of the preparatory work and emphasized the importance of providing the Alliance with a permanent structure capable of fulfilling NATO's objectives effectively. Morgan outlined an organizational framework in which subordinate committees were tasked with addressing specific issues identified by higher authorities, offering advice, and proposing optimal solutions. These committees, already active in fields such as security, the establishment of a Secretariat, communications, and intelligence, were expected to focus primarily on the formulation of broad strategic plans and concepts. While acknowledging the need for close cooperation among these groups, Morgan rejected the idea of creating an overarching "super staff," instead advocating for a flexible structure composed of a central Secretariat and specialized working teams assigned to specific projects[10].

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d'ottobre ai Trattati di Roma, Roma, 2013.

7 The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation – Facts and Figures, op. cit., p. 34.

8 Pedlow (ed.), op. cit., p. XI.

9 The functions of these groups were subsequently absorbed by the Allied Command Atlantic on 1 January 1952, although the Canada–United States group continued to oversee planning for the North American area. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation – Facts and Figures, op. cit., p. 34.

10 Record-sg-002-49, Standing Group meeting on monday, 17 october 1949 at 1530 hours, Washington D.C., 17.10.1949, fasc. S.G. Minutes, 2nd Mtg., 17 October 1949, Standing Group, Minutes of the second meeting held at 1530, Monday, 17 October 1949, in Room 2C924B, The Pentagon, in NATO Archives Online, p. 17, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 12.10.2025. "The subjects which will be examined by our subordinates will be subjects on which we require advice and guidance and on which they have to produce what they consider the best solution. Those subjects are going to vary widely. Already we have a security committee beginning to sit; we have one on how best to set up a Secretariat or a staff. We have others meeting on all sorts of things: communications, intelligence, et cetera, but on top' of that the bulk of the work will probably be broad strategic plans and concepts".

Despite these recommendations, the nature of the first Strategic Concept was predominantly military. During the meeting of the Military Committee held at the Pentagon on 21 October 1949, where the first draft of the Strategic Concept was discussed, Willis D. Crittenberger, the United States member of the Standing Group, observed that the document had a purely military character and that «since the concept must and will be submitted to the Defense Committee and the Council, it was apparent, therefore, that its military content would have to be expressed in rather general terms»[11]. What clearly emerges is that, as early as 1949, it was understood that the Alliance, while maintaining collective defense as its central pillar, was destined to become an organization with unique characteristics compared to past alliances, in which the military and political dimensions would intertwine and engage in constant dialogue with one another.

Although the dominant aspect remained the military one, there were also considerations suggesting the provisional nature of the document. In fact, Crittenberger, in his letter transmitting the MC/3 draft to the North Atlantic Council, stated, after presenting his observations, that:

> In view of the above considerations, your Standing Group concluded that the initial Strategic Concept, to fulfill the requirements set forth by the NAC and its Defense and Military Committees, should be a broad term paper clearly establishing the unity of thought which exists among us all, and thus become a firm foundation for our overall organization. With this in view, your Standing Group has reaffirmed in the Concept certain basic principles, some of which you will recognize as having been expressed not only in previous discussions of the purposes and objectives of the Atlantic Treaty, but also in such a proven organization as Western Union. The Standing Group has outlined, in addition to these basic undertakings, the cooperative measures which we feel must ultimately form an integral part of the success of our organization[12].

In essence, the Standing Group emphasized the need to broaden the scope of the Alliance beyond the purely military dimension. As for the Strategic Concept itself, which was adopted by the NAC on 6 January 1950, it can be observed that, despite the document's military character, the preamble also pays attention to the non-military dimension:

11 Record-sg-003-49, standing group meeting on friday, 21 October 1949 at 1415 hours, Wahington D.C., 21.10.1949, in NATO Archives Online, p. 3, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 12.10.2025.

12 Ibi, p. 4.

> The attainment of the objectives of the North Atlantic Treaty requires the integration by the parties to the Treaty of those political, economic, and psychological, as well as purely military, means which are essential to the defense of the North Atlantic Treaty area[13].

Also in point 2, the Concept made it clear that «for the purpose of, first, preventing war, and, second, insuring in the event of war the effective application of the military and industrial strength of the Treaty nations in a common defense, the military means available to the nations of the North Atlantic Treaty must be effectively coordinated»[14], and, in point 4, that «this concept is the initial step in the initiation of realistic, vital and productive defense planning aimed at securing peace and lessening the possibility of aggression»[15]. Therefore, the Concept remained closely tied to the events that had recently shaped Europe prior to its adoption, yet without any direct reference to the Soviet Union.

If attention is paid, it can be observed that the Allies aimed not only at military integration but also at incorporating essential political, economic, and psychological elements in the pursuit of their objectives. These were areas in which communism could exert significant influence, as had occurred in East Germany, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Consequently, such domains were recognized as strategic objectives to be monitored and strengthened (nowadays referred to as instruments of hybrid warfare) able to minimize the room for manoeuvre of communist propaganda originating from Moscow[16].

In essence, the preamble broadens the scope of action of the Member States with regard to Article 2. This suggests that interest in Article 2 was particularly high among the Allies, as demonstrated by the fact that, during a meeting of the NAC on 18 November 1949, the Canadian representative Hume Wrong requested the establishment of mechanisms necessary to give full effect to this article[17].

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13 Presented here is the final draft of the Strategic Concept prepared by the Military Committee, which was subsequently approved by the North Atlantic Council in January 1950. MC 0003, The Strategic Concept for Defense of the North Atlantic Area, Washington D.C., 16.01.1950, in NATO Archives Online, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 12.10.2025.

14 Ibi, p. 2.

15 Ibi, p. 3.

16 Indeed, Article 2 of the Washington Treaty underscores this by promoting stability, well-being, and economic cooperation among the Allies. Cfr. The North Atlantic Treaty, Washington D.C., 4.04.1949, in NATO Website, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm, accessed 16.10/2025.

17 C/2-R/1, North Atlantic Council – second session, Washington D.C., 18.11.1949, in NATO

This need was also reaffirmed in the first Strategic Concept, specifically in the section concerning the principles of defense, under point 5/c: «in developing their military strength consistent with overall strategic plans the participating nations should bear in mind that economic recovery and the attainment of economic stability constitute important elements of their security»[18]. To pursue this objective, in the final section of the document, point 8/i on the measures of cooperation to be adopted recognized that cooperation should be extended to psychological and other special operations[19].

This commitment proved to be particularly significant during the 1950s, when NATO was required to justify the expenses borne by its Member States for its maintenance, especially in countries such as France and Italy, where large segments of the population, led by local communist parties, denounced NATO as a threat to global peace[20]. In this regard, Carlo Sforza, Italy's Minister of Foreign Affairs, during the NAC meeting of 15 May 1950, emphasized the need for more effective coordination among the Member States of the Alliance in communicating with the public press, in order to prevent Soviet propaganda from prevailing over that of the West[21]. Shortly thereafter, this led to the establishment of the NATO Information Service (NATIS)[22], tasked with working in cooperation with national authorities and organizations at levels and in forms deemed appropriate by individual governments to ensure effective communication between NATO and the public[23].

It should be clarified that this Strategic Concept had been prepared and approved in anticipation of a potential Soviet attack, which was expected to occur as early as 1952. For this reason, by that date, the armed forces of the Alliance were to be reorganized and strengthened[24]. This explains why the document was primarily focused on the Alliance's tactical and operational requirements.

Archives Online, p. 1, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 12.10.2025.

18 MC 0003, The Strategic Concept for Defense of the North Atlantic Area, op. cit., p. 4.

19 Ibi, p. 7.

20 Cfr. Linda Risso, "Propaganda on wheels: The NATO travveling exhibitions in the 1950s and 1960s", Cold War History, vol. 11 (2011), n. 1.

21 C/4-R-4/1(V), 4th session – 1st meeting – verbatim, London, 15.05.1950, in NATO Archives Online, p. 4, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 16.10.2025.

22 Risso, op. cit., pp. 10-12.

23 The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation – Facts and Figures, op. cit., p. 208.

24 Pedlow (ed.), op. cit., p. 195.

The nature of the first Strategic Concept was therefore aimed at ensuring that the Alliance achieved military superiority over the Soviet Union. It should nevertheless be noted that in March 1950 the Military Committee reported to the Defense Committee that:

> The rulers of the Soviet Union have as their ultimate objective a communist world order under their own domination. The role of the Soviet Union in the attainment of this objective is to provide a secure base and powerful support for the international communist movement. Until such time as the Soviet regime considers that it possesses an adequate military capability (atomic as well as conventional) as compared with the Allies, it is improbable that the Soviets would deliberately venture any action which would involve them in an open war. If, however, the Soviet leaders decide to resort to war, it will be because they have assessed it would be to their advantage to initiate military action against the Allies[25].

In fact, the Alliance was aware that, in the early 1950s, the USSR could not match NATO's military and, above all, nuclear potential. At the beginning of that decade, the Soviets still lacked the technical capabilities necessary to carry out atomic bombardments, whereas NATO, under the protection of the U.S.' nuclear umbrella, could rely on such means. The main objective, however, as indicated in document D.C. 13 (which operationally translated the first Strategic Concept) was that the primary objectives of NATO's medium-term plan were to create a unified defense framework by integrating regional plans into a single strategic vision, to build and field forces capable of collective defense and of resisting a Soviet offensive until the European front could be stabilized, and to ensure close coordination of political, economic and military efforts among member states. The plan emphasized that military preparedness alone was insufficient: effective deterrence required harmonizing industrial output, fiscal capacity, and logistical support with operational force requirements. In essence, NATO sought an integrated approach in which strategy, force structure, and economic-industrial mobilization worked together to make aggression unattractive and to secure the collective survival of the Alliance[26].

It should be noted that the Standing Group, in a document transmitted to the

25 DC 013, The Medium Term Plan of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 28.03.1950, fasc. PART II, in NATO Archives Online, p. 17, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 17.10.2025.

26 Ibid.

Regional Planning Groups and designated as M.C. 14, recalled that NATO planning should not be guided by the mindset that had prevailed at the end of the Second World War, when the Allies possessed overwhelming military strength. Such forces could not be reconstituted rapidly, whereas the USSR had maintained, and even enhanced, its military, technical, and economic capabilities. Therefore, planning had to be based on realistic assumptions, ensuring that the forces required were proportionate to the probable threat and within the Alliance's means, while developing methods to compensate for numerical inferiority[27].

Hence, the Standing Group called for abandoning the traditional military vision that had characterized the last world conflict and for exploring new modes of engagement in the event of aggression. Indeed, when returning to the Strategic Concept, it can be observed that point 7/a states the need to «insure the ability to carry out strategic bombing promptly by all means possible with all types of weapons, without exception. This is primarily a U.S. responsibility assisted as practicable by other Nations»[28]. In addition to highlighting the possibility of using any type of weapon without exception, this point reveals that, in the event of aggression, the response would likely have involved the use of nuclear weapons, given the perceived numerical inferiority of NATO forces. It is noteworthy, however, that this point was modified during the drafting process: in its first version, M.C. 3, the text read to «insure the ability to deliver the atomic bomb promptly. This is primarily a U.S. responsibility assisted as practicable by other nations»[29].

An important observation is that, in this first Strategic Concept, the use of nuclear weapons was deliberately kept, at least in wording, within limited terms, even though in substance their employment was almost taken for granted. These modifications were likely introduced to reassure European countries that they would retain a degree of influence in deciding how nuclear weapons might be used in the event of aggression, even though Article 5 grants each Member State the freedom to determine autonomously the means by which to respond to an attack.

To conclude this part of the analysis, attention should be drawn to two addi-

27 MC 0014, Strategic Guidance for the North Atlantic Regional Planning, 28.03.1950, fasc. Enclosure, Directive by the Standing Group to the Regional Planing Groups on Strategic Guidance for North Atlantic Regional Planning, in NATO Archives Online, p. 4, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 17.10.2025.

28 MC 0003, The Strategic Concept for Defense of the North Atlantic Area, op. cit., p. 5.

29 Ibi, p. 6.

tional aspects of the document that are considered particularly relevant: point 6/a and point 7/b.

Provision 6/a, concerning the general objectives of the defense concept, stated the need «to coordinate, in time of peace, our military and economic strength with a view to creating a powerful deterrent to any Nation or group of Nations threatening the peace, independence and stability of the North Atlantic family of Nations»[30]. Thus, from its earliest years, NATO pursued a defensive strategy aimed at deterring other Nations, in this case the USSR[31], from threatening the Allied States. The use of specific terminology such as "the North Atlantic family of Nations" also carried a strong political message, both to the Allies themselves and in international forums, highlighting not only military unity but also shared values that characterized the Alliance. Indeed, deterrence was not entrusted solely to military means but also, as General Douglas MacArthur pointed out when referring to the Alliance and the Marshall Plan, to the implementation of Article 3:

> The implementation of Article 3 of Pact is viewed in many places on continent as of equal if not perhaps greater significance than Article 5. In Europe the hope that the Pact will be an effective deterrent to war rests not only on the intent of all parties to act together when and if war comes but also on their intent to rebuild military strength by mutual aid so that it is a tangible proof of a strong military posture in Europe and an ability as well as an intent to resist aggression[32].

Douglas's words confirm that the Alliance's effectiveness in fulfilling its deterrence objectives is directly proportional to the solidarity and mutual assistance among its Member States, as these demonstrate their collective will and capacity to act in unity. This guiding principle was clearly pursued by the U.S., also in its own interest as the world's leading economic power. As former Secretary of State George C. Marshall stated when addressing the global and European economic consequences in his Harvard speech:

30 Ibi, p. 5.

31 Of particular interest is the wording contained in MC 0014, Strategic Guidance for the North Atlantic Regional Planning, regarding the policy of deterrence toward the Soviets: "In peacetime the defense policy of the North Atlantic Treaty Nations is to convince the USSR that war doest not pay, […]"

32 Lewis W. Douglas [United States' Ambassador in London] to Dean Acheson [United States' Secretary of State], London, 5.06.1949, n. 840.20/6-549; Telegram, in David H. Stauffer et al (eds), Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, Western Europe, Vol. 4 [thereafter FRUS, Vol. 4], Washington D.C., 1974, p. 302.

> Aside from the demoralizing effect on the world at large and the possibilities of disturbances arising as a result of the desperation of the people concerned, the consequences to the economy of the United States should be apparent to all. It is logical that the United States should do whatever it is able to do to assist in the return of normal economic health in the world, without which there can be no political stability and no assured peace[33].

Europe was therefore of strategic importance for the prosperity and security of the U.S.. This statement should not come as a surprise, since the Standing Group's report M.C. 14/1 emphasized that, in the event of aggression, it was necessary «to place special emphasis on the defense of Europe, since its loss would be fatal to the defense of the North Atlantic territories as a whole»[34]. Connected to this is point 7/b, which assigns to Europe the role of:

> Arrest and counter as soon as practicable the enemy offensives against North Atlantic Treaty powers by all means avaible, including air, naval, land and psychological operations. Initially, the hard core of ground forces will come from the European nations. Other nations will give aid with the least possible delay in accordance with overall plans[35].

European States were therefore assigned the task of being the first to respond to aggression by activating all necessary operations to repel or slow down an attack[36]. From this provision emerges the concept of the "Shield and Sword." In practice, the European Allies were expected to act as a shield in the initial stages of an assault, slowing the enemy's advance, while the United States, together with the United Kingdom, would deliver the decisive blow, the sword, against the aggressor.

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33 The Marshall Plan speech by General George C. Marshall, Secretary of State of the United States, Harvard, 5.06.1947, in NATO Archives Online, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 17.10.2025.

34 Pedlow (ed.), op. cit., p. 202.

35 MC 0003, The Strategic Concept for Defense of the North Atlantic Area, op. cit., p. 5.

36 It should be noted that, following protests from certain Allies (such as Belgium and the Netherlands), paragraph 7(b) was revised, as the original wording suggested that, in the event of aggression, European forces would be assisted by North American Allies only at their discretion. Comparing the first draft with the final version of the initial strategic concept reveals the change: the original stated that "the hard core of ground power in being will come from the European nations aided by other nations as they can mobilize," whereas the revised version clarified, "Initially, the hard core of ground forces will come from the European nations. Other nations will give aid with the least possible delay in accordance with overall plans".

Questioning of massive retaliation as the sole defense strategy

The supreme strategy of NATO, as outlined in its first Strategic Concept, was therefore that of massive retaliation in the event of a Soviet invasion [37].

It is necessary here to contextualize the historical period in which this Strategic Concept was drafted and to understand why all the Allies, especially the European ones, accepted a strategy that, if implemented, would have devastated Europe first. Between 1950 and 1953, the Korean War took place and was interpreted in the West as confirmation that the Cold War had, in fact, turned into a real war[38]. The immediate reaction was to intensify efforts to reorganize Europe's military forces, further stimulated by Soviet nuclear developments in those years and by the fear that the U.S., given these advances, might disengage from the European continent to focus on Asia[39]. In response to these concerns, in 1950 the NAC decided to establish the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and to revise the defense plans that had been discussed up to that point[40]. The results were immediate: military spending increased significantly, and the first NATO Secretary General, General Hastings Lionel Ismay, noted that defense expenditures among the Allied States had risen by 120 percent because of the Soviet threat[41]. This increase also corresponded to the adoption of the Forward Defense strategy, which aimed to resist aggression as far east as possible in order to ensure the protection of all European members of the Alliance. In December 1952, a new Strategic Concept was adopted that largely followed the previous one, with the only difference being that it made the use of nuclear weapons even more decisive in the event of aggression[42].

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37 This was confirmed by document D.C. 13, which envisaged the phases that would follow in the event of hostilities and made clear how NATO should act in wartime: "the overall strategic aim of the North Atlantic Treaty Powers, should they be drawn into war, is, in collaboration with their Allies, to destroy by a strategic offensive in Western Eurasia the will and capabilities of the USSR and her satellites to wage war. In the Far East the strategic policy will be defensive". Cfr. MC 0003, The Strategic Concept for Defense of the North Atlantic Area, op. cit., fasc. PART I, p. 10.

38 Jussi M. Hanhimäki – Benedikt Schoenborn – Barbara Zanchetta, "Transatlantic Relations Since 1945. An Introduction", New York, 2012, p. 28.

39 Ibid.

40 The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation – Facts and Figures, op. cit., p. 36.

41 Verbatim of the Press Conference given by Lord Ismay, Paris, 2.04.1953, in NATO Archives Online, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 17.10.2025.

42 MC 0003/5-Final, The Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Area, Par-

Although it is true that the Korean War alarmed the Allies, from another perspective the conflict on the Asian peninsula had the merit of prompting reflection on the usefulness of a strategy based on massive retaliation. As Henry Kissinger would later note when discussing the war in Asia:

> In these circumstances a major or exclusive reliance on general war as a deterrent to Sino-Soviet aggression may come dangerously close to a Maginot mentality a belief in a strategy which may never be tested but which mean while prevents the consideration of any alternative. If we accept an all-or-nothing military policy we may well find ourselves paralyzed in the years ahead, when the increasing Soviet nuclear capability undermines our willingness to run the risk of a general war for anything less than to counter a direct attack on the United States[43].

Thus, by the mid-1950s, NATO began to reconsider its overall strategy, recognizing that it could not rely solely on the doctrine of massive retaliation. A more nuanced understanding of defense emerged: one that rejected a purely cynical conception subordinating all aspects to military necessity and instead emphasized the importance of strengthening NATO's political dimension as a means of distancing the prospect of war, especially nuclear war. This interpretative shift is further supported by the fact that, alongside the development of the military structure, there was also a significant expansion of NATO's political framework, marked by the establishment of the position of Secretary General (SG) and an independent office, as well as by the rapid growth of cooperation among the Permanent Representatives[44].

The Allies' fears, however, quickly subsided with the resolution of the Korean War, and what had initially been perceived as the shock that would push them toward greater rearmament soon lost much of its significance. In December 1953, the NAC therefore requested that the Military Committee conduct a study aimed at making NATO's conventional forces more efficient over the following

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is, 3.12. 1952, in NATO Archives Online, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 17.10.2025. Indeed, this new strategic concept did not overturn the previous one but rather elaborated upon it and rendered it operational, laying the foundations for an integrated NATO military structure and for detailed plans of deterrence and collective defense.

43 Henry A. Kissinger, "Military Policy and Defense of the "Grey Areas", Foreign Affairs, vol. 33 (1955), n. 3, p. 417.

44 Cfr. Alfred J. Hotz, "NATO: Myth of Reality", The American Academy of Political & Social Science, vol. 288 (1953), n. 1, pp. 126-133.

three-year period, beginning in January 1954[45]. Lord Ismay, in his recollections of the Alliance's early years, observed that «progress was slow at first, suddenly feverish, galvanised by the shock of the aggression in Korea, then steady and sustained. The point has now been reached at which much has been achieved, but a great deal still remains to be done»[46]. He also noted that Supreme Allied Commander Europe, Dwight D. Eisenhower, during the Lisbon Summit of 1952, acknowledged that the reaction to the Korean War had been excessively alarmist and that greater focus should instead be placed on the economic and political recovery of the European States[47]. Indeed, after the Korean War, Washington began to question the appropriateness of assuming the responsibility of carrying out an atomic bombing on the European continent in the event of war[48]. With Eisenhower's election as President in 1952, in contrast to the policies of the previous administration, the U.S. renewed its defense strategy through the formulation of the so-called New Look Policy and subsequently the Atoms for Peace initiative[49]. This did not imply, however, the withdrawal of the American nuclear umbrella from Europe. Rather, it became necessary to identify alternative solutions that would reduce NATO's degree of nuclear dependence, even though at the Lisbon Summit the atomic response had been reaffirmed as the Alliance's first line of action[50].

45 C-M(53)166-FINAL, Resolution on the 1954 Annual Review and Related Problems, Paris, 15 Dicembre 1953, in NATO Archives Online, p. 2, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 17.10.2025.

46 Hastings Lionel Ismay, "NATO-The first 5 years 1949-1954 (by Lord Ismay)", Bruxelles, 1954, p. 101.

47 Ibi, p. 103.

48 Wallace J. Thies, "Why NATO Endures", New York, p. 117.

49 The Atoms for Peace initiative, announced by Eisenhower at the United Nations on 8 December 1953, represented the diplomatic counterpart of the U.S. nuclear strategy. It sought to promote the peaceful use of atomic energy and to establish an international cooperation programme under UN auspices, foreshadowing the creation of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1957. Politically, the project aimed to portray the atom not merely as an instrument of deterrence, but also as a symbol of progress and international cooperation. Cfr. Pedlow (ed.), op. cit., p. XVII.

50 It is worth noting that this American "nuclear turn" was, to some extent, influenced by the British. They feared that the new U.S. administration intended to strengthen conventional forces at the expense of nuclear ones – a concern that grew after the Lisbon Summit. In contrast, the British argued that the perceived military shortcomings of the Atlantic Alliance could best be addressed by focusing on nuclear armament, which they considered more effective for the purposes of collective defense. Stephen Twigge – Alan Macmillan,

It is certain, however, that at least until 1955 NATO remained committed to the doctrine of massive retaliation. This is confirmed by the words of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who, addressing the NAC, declared that:

> In short, such weapons must now be treated as in fact having become "conventional". As I have said, these weapons are vital to the common defense of us all. Our main effort must be to see that our military capability is used to achieve the greatest deterrent effect. In order to achieve this, it should be our agreed policy, in case of (either general war or local) war, to use atomic weapons as conventional weapons against the military assets of the enemy whenever and wherever it would be of advantage to do so, taking account of all relevant factors[51].

It should be clarified, however, that the U.S. National Security Council document (NSC 162/2), on which both Eisenhower and Dulles based their approach, recommended keeping the door open to possible negotiations between the U.S. and the USSR. Dulles himself grew increasingly doubtful about relying on nuclear power[52] recognizing that, beyond the risk of projecting a negative image of the U.S., blind dependence on nuclear weapons could sadly undermine the very possibility of avoiding a total nuclear war[53]. In fact, the real dilemma surrounding nuclear armament was not whether to use such weapons in case of necessity, but rather how to exploit their deterrent potential to prevent their use altogether[54]. Eisenhower, for his part, did not deviate significantly from the direction set by the Truman administration: to maintain a military capability strong enough to deter potential aggression while avoiding defense expenditures that could negatively affect the national economy[55]. This orientation was reaffirmed by Dulles himself

"Britain, the United States, and the development of NATO strategy, 1950-1964", Journal of Strategic Studies, vol. 19 (1996), n. 2, p. 262.

51 Statement by the Secretary of State to the North Atlantic Council Closed Ministerial Session, Paris, April 23, 1954, Paris, 23.04.1954, n. 740.5/4-2542, in John A. Bernbaum – Lisle A. Rose – Charles S. Sampson (eds), "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, Estern European Security, Vol. V, Part 1" [thereafter FRUS, Vol. 4], Washington D.C., 1983, p. 512.

52 Robert A. Divine, "John Foster Dulles: What You See Is What You Get", Diplomatic History, vol. 15 (1991), n. 2, p. 279.

53 Ibid.

54 John Lewis Gaddis, "Strategies of containment. A critical appraisal of american national security policy during the cold war", New York, 2005, p. 147.

55 Donald J. Mrozek, "A New Look at "Balanced Forces": Defense Continuities from Truman to Eisenhower", Military Affairs, vol. 38 (1974), n. 4, p. 148.

in an article published in Foreign Affairs[56].

It is therefore clear that the Eisenhower administration fully exploited its nuclear potential as a political instrument. As SG Paul-Henri Spaak would later affirm: «for I am convinced that if today atomic armaments did not exist we would be much nearer to war»[57].

In 1954 the Military Committee was tasked by the NAC with producing a new study (MC 48) on the state of the Alliance's military potential. The report noted that:

> From its studies the Military Committee has concluded that the advent of atomic weapons systems will drastically change the conditions of modern war. The destructive power of these weapons, particularly the thermonuclear ones, and the difficulties of defense against them pose entirely new problems, not only of a military nature but political, economic and psychological as well[58].

Noted these developments, the Military Committee continued by stating that, in the event of a communist aggression: «our studies indicate that NATO would be unable to prevent the rapid overrunning of Europe unless NATO immediately employed these weapons both strategically and tactically»[59]. Thus, while it was clear that nuclear weapons were of primary importance in the case of a total conflict with the USSR, it was also essential to maintain sufficient conventional forces to operate during the so-called second phase. It remained undisputed that the prominent introduction of the nuclear component served above all to reassure the Europeans[60] that the U.S. would remain engaged on the continent in the event of a Soviet attack[61].

In light of these considerations, it becomes clear why the Alliance sought to bring Greece and Turkey into NATO in 1952 and, most importantly, the Federal

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56 John Foster Dulles, "Policy for Security and Peace", Foreign Affairs, Vol. 32 (1954), N. 3, p. 354.

57 The Atlantic Alliance and its Future. Text of a speech given by M. Paul-Henri Spaak at the closing session of the Conference on the North Atlantic Community, Bruges, 14.09-1957, in NATO Archives Online, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 17.10.2025.

58 Pedlow (ed.), op. cit., p. 232.

59 Ibi, p. 233.

60 Philip Edward Mosely, "Soviet Policy in the Two-World Conflict: Some Prospects", Journal of International Affairs, vol. 8 (1954), n. 1, pp. 107-113.

61 AC/52-D/264, "Occident-Western World" debate, Paris, 7.10.1957, in NATO Archives Online, p. 4, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 19.10.2025.

Republic of Germany in 1955. However, the accession of the latter prompted a direct Soviet response with the creation of the Warsaw Pact[62].

In the final pages of the study commissioned by the NAC, the Military Committee highlighted a third and particularly important aspect:

> In face of the threat of such a war, the primary aim of NATO, must more than ever before, be to prevent war. This aim can only be achieved if the Allied nations are so powerful in the vital elements of modern warfare that the enemy will conclude that he has little hope of winning a war involving NATO. This means that NATO must be able to withstand the initial Soviet onslaught, to deliver decisive atomic counter-attacks against the war-making capacity of the enemy, and to prevent the rapid overrunning of Europe[63].

The Military Committee's study was intended to supplement the existing Strategic Concept by carefully assessing the advisability of maintaining a doctrine based on massive retaliation, suggesting that its applicability should be evaluated according to specific scenarios. However, the events in Hungary, Algeria, and the Suez Canal soon made it evident that merely integrating the previous strategic document was insufficient. It needed instead to be replaced by a new one that reflected the conclusions drawn from the latest military study[64]: MC 48/1, whose preamble stated:

> The Military Committee has noted that the Soviets have announced their intention to make a significant reduction in the strength of their armed forces. Even if this announced reduction is made effective, Soviet forces, from mid-1957 onwards, will still be numerically superior over-all to NATO forces and it is expected that the Soviets will continue to improve the capability of their forces-in-being for atomic war. It is the conviction of the Military Committee that the strength of NATO, which has considerably increased since its foundation, has served as a major deterrent to USSR aims and has contributed significantly to the apparent change in tactics of Soviet foreign policy[65].

Recognizing the reduced aggressiveness of the USSR, the NAC deemed it appropriate to initiate an internal process aimed at producing a document that would go beyond purely military considerations[66]. This led to the drafting of doc-

62 Hajo Holborn, "Germany's Role in the Defense of Western Europe", Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science, vol. 26 (1955), n. 2, pp. 86-97.

63 Pedlow (ed.), op. cit., p. 246.

64 Ibi, p. XIX.

65 Ibi, p. 259.

66 C-M(56)138, Directive to the NATO Military Authorities from the North Atlantic Coun-

ument CM(56)138, which contained reflections on the Soviet Union's so-called "peaceful" expansion. The strongest pressure to include this issue came from the French government, which, following the events in the Middle East, emphasized the effects of Soviet foreign and economic policy beyond the NATO area and on the regional organization itself[67].

In fact, during a meeting of the NAC, Selwyn Lloyd, the British Foreign Secretary, observed that «the greatest danger, therefore, is not an immediate aggression by the Soviet army, but rather the steady long-term economic growth of its forces and their subversive penetration and infiltration from the outside»[68].

It was therefore understood that the Soviets would eventually close the economic gap with the "capitalist" world, relying on an even more powerful weapon: ideology. According to the British minister, it was essential for the Alliance to keep these trends under close observation to avoid a repetition of what had already occurred in Eastern Europe[69].

Following the aforementioned crises, a lively exchange of views took place between the Allies and the Soviets concerning both German reunification in 1955 and nuclear armaments. Although these discussions ended without any formal agreement, they demonstrated that dialogue with the communists was indeed possible[70]. Moreover, the years following the Korean War proved to be particularly positive for easing tensions between the two blocs, especially for the European Allies, who could only benefit from a thaw in relations between Washington and Moscow[71]. As a result, the arms race lost much of its predominance, and European governments became increasingly focused on revitalizing their economies to prevent domestic instability like what had occurred in Prague[72]. Even General Joseph L. Collins, when speaking about NATO, observed that:

> The threat that led to its creation still exists, both in the form of the Comint-

cil, Paris, 07.12.1956, in NATO Archives Online, p. 4, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 19.10.2025.

67 Pedlow (ed.), op. cit., p. XIX.

68 C-VR(56)69, Verbatim record of meeting, Paris, 11.12.1956, in NATO Archives Online, p. 16, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 20.10.2025.

69 Ibi, p. 20.

70 The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation – Facts and Figures, op. cit., p. 45.

71 This shift was facilitated by Stalin's death in March 1953.

72 Allan S. Nanes, "Nato's Strategic Dilemmas", Current History, vol. 39 (1960), n. 229, p. 133.

> ern, with its tentacles of Communist subversion in every NATO country, and in the threatening might of great Soviet military force subject only to the autocratic will of a handful of men in the Kremlin. At least until this threat is genuinely dissipated, NATO will remain, on sound political and military grounds, essential to the maintenance of peace. It goes without saying, of course, that the political, economic and cultural ties which link the nations of NATO should meanwhile be strengthened as intended by Article 2 of the NATO Charter[73].

Undoubtedly, fears of a possible Soviet military aggression in Western Europe persisted. However, as Collins pointed out, the real danger did not lie in Soviet weaponry but rather in its growing economic prosperity, which could be used as a tool to support communist forces within the Alliance. Furthermore, the nuclear superiority that the U.S. enjoyed at that time would sooner or later be matched by the USSR, making such weapons increasingly unusable except in the case of mutual total destruction[74].

The Report of the Committee of Three on "Non-Military Cooperation in NATO"

It was within this framework that the Report of the Three Wise Men emerged, drafted by the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Gaetano Martino, the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs Halvard Lange, and the Canadian Secretary of State for External Affairs Lester Pearson, and transmitted to the NAC on 26 November 1956[75].

On 5 May 1956, the NAC, meeting in Paris, began discussions on the objectives to be pursued by the Committee of Three on Non-Military Cooperation. In addition to reaffirming the need to remain vigilant toward the Soviet threat, the Allies were urged to engage in dialogue on the areas in which the Alliance should act jointly to mitigate internal tensions and divergences[76]. On that occasion, the

73 Joseph Lawton Collins, NATO: Still Vital for Peace, "Foreign Affairs", vol. 34 (1956), n. 3, pp. 371.

74 Alessandro Duce, "Storia della politica internazionale (1957-2017). Dalle conquiste spaziali al centenario della Rivoluzione d'Ottobre", Roma, 2019, p. 58.

75 C-M(56)127, Report of The Committee Of Three on non-Military Co-Operation in NATO, Paris, 16.11.1956, in NATO Archives Online, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 20.10.2025.

76 C-R(56)23, record of meeting, Paris, 05.05.1956, in NATO Archives Online, p. 4, https://

Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs, Spyrodin Theotoky, placed greater emphasis on the political rather than purely military dimensions of the Alliance. While acknowledging that «Stalinist principles were still honoured in Russia» and that the Soviet military threat remained significant, he considered the principal challenge to be political and internal to NATO. He stressed the need for a coherent Atlantic policy so that Moscow would realize that it was facing «not merely a transient figure, but an enduring concert of Nations». Even more significantly, he underlined the necessity of preserving unity within the Alliance by addressing «real or potential conflicts» among its Allies. To this end, he proposed the creation of a coordinating body capable of fostering harmony within NATO's ranks[77]. Furthermore, noting that some NATO members were relatively underdeveloped (and therefore potentially more vulnerable to Soviet interference) he argued that the Alliance should prioritize strengthening their economic and social stability.

The Canadian representative, Lester B. Pearson, in the same session, observed «that the Member Countries had not yet succeeded in making their own public opinion, let alone that of the neutral or uncommitted Nations, fully aware of the importance of the part played by NATO in preserving freedom»[78]. He therefore urged that NATO explore ways to achieve greater coordination or even partial centralization of information on matters of common concern. Pearson further emphasized that, although «the danger of military aggression had not yet disappeared», equal importance should be given to «interdependence of all NATO Nations», since «weakness within the smallest of these Nations was a weakness in the entire Alliance». Pearson concluded that closer contact between national information services and NATO institutions would enable the Alliance to do much more to promote unity, credibility, and public understanding of its mission[79].

After distributing a questionnaire to the various Member States and receiving their respective proposals[80], the Report was approved by the NAC on 13 December 1956[81]. In the introduction, the three members stated that:

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archives.nato.int/, accessed 20.10.2025.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibi, p. 5.

79 Ibid.

80 CT-D/1, Questionnaire, Paris, 25.06.1956, in NATO Archives Online, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 20.10.2025.

81 The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation – Facts and Figures, op. cit., p. 391.

> The Committee hopes that the report and recommendations which it now submits will make NATO's purely defensive and constructive purposes better understood in non-NATO Countries; thereby facilitating and encouraging steps to lessen international tension. The events of the last few months have increased this tension and reduced hopes, which had been raised since Stalin's death, of finding a secure and honourable basis for competitive and ultimately for cooperative coexistence with the Communist world[82].

In short, even though relations with the communist world appeared to have deteriorated, this did not mean that cooperation should be abandoned; rather, it should continue to be pursued, even if initially through a phase of competition. This perspective echoed the policy adopted by President Eisenhower toward relations with the East. In 1953, he publicly delivered his Atoms for Peace speech[83], offering Moscow the opportunity to choose whether or not to cooperate with the United States in reducing the risks of nuclear war and encouraging the Soviets to use nuclear energy for peaceful and civilian purposes[84].

Continuing with the introduction of the report, it is noted that:

> Subsequent events have reinforced the Committee's conviction that the Atlantic Community can develop greater unity only by working constantly to achieve common policies by full and timely consultation on issues of common concern. Unless this is done, the very framework of co-operation in NATO, which has contributed so greatly to the cause of freedom, and which is so vital to its advancement in the future, will be endangered[85].

Although there was a recognized need to identify suitable paths toward greater cooperation with the communist world, the Committee also emphasized the strained relations that had emerged in the preceding months, particularly as a result of the Algerian question and the Franco-British intervention in Egypt, events that had placed serious pressure on the internal cohesion[86]. For this reason, the

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82 C-M(56)127, Report of The Committee Of Three on non-Military Co-Operation in NATO, op. cit., p. 5.

83 Martin J. Medhurst, "Eisenhower's "atoms for peace" speech: A case study in the strategic use of language", Communication Monographs, vol. 54 (1987), n. 2, pp. 207-208.

84 Matthew Fuhrmann, "Spreading Temptation: Proliferation and Peaceful Nuclear Cooperation Agreements", International Security, Vol. 34 (2009), n. 1.

85 C-M(56)127, Report of The Committee Of Three on non-Military Co-Operation in NATO, op. cit., p. 5.

86 With regard to this latter event, it should be noted that the French and the British, seeking to secure their interests in Egypt, secretly colluded with the Israelis, abandoning transparent diplomacy and resorting to force. This, in turn, shattered Western unity for the first

report underscored the importance of «the strengthening of political consultation and economic co-operation, the development of resources, progress in education and public understanding» which were deemed as vital as «of a battleship or the equipping on an army»[87]. Furthermore, in pursuing these objectives, the Committee displayed notable foresight in warning the Alliance as «to avoid duplication and to do, through other existing international organizations, the things which can best be done in that way»[88].

Given the changes that had occurred in the preceding five years, the document recommended that the Alliance adopt a new type of approach in its relations with Moscow:

> An important aspect of the new Soviet policies of competitive coexistence is an attempt to respond to positive initiatives of the Western Nations aimed at improving, in an atmosphere of freedom, the lot of the economically less developed Countries, and at establishing a just and mutually beneficial trading system in which all Countries can prosper. The Soviet Union is now apparently veering towards policies designed to ensnare these Countries by economic means and by political subversion, and to fasten on them the same shackles of Communism from which certain members of the Soviet bloc are now striving to release themselves. The members of NATO must maintain their vigilance in dealing with this form of penetration[89].

In essence, the report acknowledged a shift in Soviet policy, recognizing that their strategy was no longer centered on direct aggression (whether through conventional or unconventional means) but rather on the use of alternative instruments such as financial support, political pressure, and other indirect methods. Since these forms of aggression were not immediately perceptible, the Committee recommended the establishment of a regular practice of mutual political consultation to detect and counter them, while discouraging unilateral actions. As stated in the report, «discussion of problems collectively, in the early stages of policy formation, and before national positions become fixed, this will result in

time, prompting the United States to support the Egyptian cause while simultaneously initiating further dialogue with Moscow. Cfr. Louise Richardson, "Avoiding and Incurring Losses: Decision-Making in the Suez Crisis", International Journal, vol. 47 (1992), n. 2, p. 376.

87 C-M(56)127, Report of The Committee Of Three on non-Military Co-Operation in NATO, op. cit., p. 7.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

collective decisions on matters of common interest effecting the Alliance. At the least, it will ensure that no action is taken by one Member without a knowledge of the views of the others»[90]. This passage was an implicit reference to the events in Egypt.

Accordingly, the report further urged that «a Member government should not, without adequate advance consultation, adopt firm policies or make major political pronouncements on matters which significantly affect the Alliance or any of its members, unless circumstances make such prior consultation obviously and demonstrably impossible»[91]. It also warned that «NATO should not forget that the influence and interests of its members are not confined to the area covered by the Treaty, and that common interests of the Atlantic Community can be seriously affected by developments outside the Treaty area»[92]. The report thus recognized the extra-regional interests of individual Member States but emphasized that such interests could only be safeguarded insofar as they did not damage the Western image. Particularly incisive (given the events at Suez) was the remark made by Secretary of State John F. Dulles in a communication to the U.S. presidency that same month: «we want to prevent immediate issuance by the United Nations of a harshly worded resolution that would put us in an acutely embarrassing position, either with France and Britain or with all the rest of the world»[93].

Although this unfortunate episode within the Alliance was ultimately resolved through the traditional diplomatic channels, it nevertheless revealed a fundamental problem: the system of internal consultation within the Alliance was still insufficiently developed. At the same time, however, it can also be said that a widespread sentiment arose within NATO rejecting unilateral actions that could damage the image of the newly established Alliance. This is confirmed within the report itself, which states that «an alliance in which the Members ignore each other's interests or engage in political or economic conflict, or harbour suspicions of each other, cannot be effective either for deterrence or defence. Precedent ex-

90 Ibi, p. 11.

91 Ibi, p. 13.

92 Ibi, p. 9.

93 Memo to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles from President Dwight D. Eisenhower Regarding Ceasefire during Suez Crisis, Washingtion D.C., 1.11.1956, fasc. Collection DDE-1037: John Foster Dulles Papers, Series: White House Memoranda Files-General 1956 (1), n. 594643, in National Archives Catalog of the United States, https://catalog.archives.gov.

perience makes this clearer than ever before»[94]. Consequently, the report recommended that member countries should inform the NAC of any event likely to have serious consequences for the Alliance, in order to enable effective political consultation on the course of action to be taken[95]. In this way, it sought to prevent future ventures such as that of Suez. As Lord Ismay commented in this regard:

> To keep referring to NATO in purely military terms has long been, and still is, standard Communist terminology ("military bloc"), for well-considered propaganda reasons. It helps Soviet purposes to use a terminology consistent with depicting NATO in purely military terms, as an aggressive military organization, based on the threat of armed force[96].

The Report also had the merit of highlighting the importance of cooperation among the Allies on multiple fronts: economic, cultural, and informational. Yet its greatest contribution lay in emphasizing the process of political consultation: it outlined a practice for political consultation, for the peaceful settlement of disputes among Members, and laid the foundations for the functioning of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

The Three Wise Men demonstrated that NATO was a unique organization, not limited to its military dimension but endowed with significant political potential as a forum for shared values and interests. They also emphasized that the principle of political consultation they promoted was not new, since it was already embedded in the Washington Treaty, particularly in its preamble and in Articles 2 and 4. This is reaffirmed in the report itself, which states that:

> The expression of this hope is found in the Preamble and Articles 2 and 4 of the Treaty. These two Articles, limited by their terms but with at least the promise of the grand design of the Atlantic Community, were included because of this insistent feeling that NATO must become more than a military alliance[97].

This demonstrates that, even in its early years, NATO was able to achieve an ever-greater degree of integration, despite the self-interests of some of its Members,

94 C-M(56)127, Report of The Committee Of Three on non-Military Co-Operation in NATO, op. cit., p. 6.

95 The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation – Facts and Figures, op. cit., p. 48.

96 C-M(56)25, Public Relations Aspects of Political Consultations in NATO, Paris, 08.03.1956, in NATO Archives Online, p. 3, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 20.10.2025.

97 C-M(56)127, Report of The Committee Of Three on non-Military Co-Operation in NATO, op. cit., p. 6.

while consistently adhering to and drawing inspiration from its founding treaty.

The New Strategic Concept (1957): a wise influence

With the issuance of these documents, the NAC, for the first time, adopted a new Strategic Concept that considered several points from a report made by "civilians"[98].

In May 1957, two new documents were adopted: MC 14/2, *Overall Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Area*, and MC 48/2, *Measures to Implement the Strategic Concept*.

MC 14/2, six times longer than its predecessors, opened by emphasizing that NATO's strategy must be based on the geographical, economic, industrial, and military capacities of its Member States. Its main objective was to prevent war through the maintenance of sufficient military strength to deter any aggression and, if war were unavoidable, to ensure the Alliance's ability to achieve a successful outcome[99].

From the very beginning, the new concept, while maintaining rearmament as a necessary means to guarantee NATO's security, adopted a less drastic tone (consistent with the observations of the Three Wise Men) and focused primarily on deterrence. Point 3 defined the strategy as «the foundation for the production of realistic, vital and constructive defense planning aimed at lessening the possibility of aggression and thereby securing peace»[100], using language less martial and more oriented toward building lasting peace. This was immediately followed by point 4, which clearly stated that «the objective is to prevent war by maintaining adequate military strength in being»[101].

A strong point of similarity with the Report appears in paragraph 5(a), which stated that «the main principle is common action through self-help and mutual aid in deterring war and in defense against armed attack should the deterrent fail. The immediate objective is the achievement of adequate, collective self-defense

98 Pedlow (ed.), op. cit., p. XIX.

99 MC 0014/2-REV, Overall Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Area, Paris, 23.03.1957, in NATO Archives Online, p. 3, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 20.10.2025.

100 Ibi, p. 4.

101 Ibid.

among the North Atlantic Treaty Nations»[102]. Deterrence was thus defined as collective self-defense rather than mere military superiority, its function being to preserve peace rather than to win war. Paragraph 5(c) further emphasized that «in developing their military strength consistent with the overall strategic concept the participating Nations should bear in mind that the maintenance of economic stability constitutes an important element of their security»[103], explicitly recognizing that security was also economic, not solely military. This was complemented by paragraph 5(f), which incorporated the principle of specialization articulated in the Report: «a basic principle of North Atlantic Treaty planning should be that each Nation should undertake the task, or tasks, for which it is best suited»[104]. Finally, paragraph 5(g) referred clearly to internal cohesion and public opinion as essential components of security, prescribing that «it is a responsibility of national authorities to develop plans and measures which will ensure the continuity of governmental control following a sudden outbreak of hostilities and will also ensure the maintenance of civilian morale»[105]. This marked an explicit acknowledgment that civilian morale and governmental continuity formed integral parts of NATO's defense strategy.

One of the passages considered to be directly influenced by the report is point 9:

> There is no doubt that the Soviet Leaders understand and fear the consequences of general nuclear war. It can be assumed, therefore, that they will not deliberately launch a general war so long as they know the West is prepared to retaliate with nuclear weapons in sufficient strength to devastate the USSR[106].

While still acknowledging the risk of a general conflict with the USSR, the concept linguistically distances itself from the idea of an imminent threat and reflects the changes that had occurred in East–West relations. This demonstrates that, after Stalin's death, it is no longer entirely appropriate to speak of a Cold War, but rather of a Difficult Peace, as argued by scholars such as Alessandro Duce[107], who argue that with Khrushchev's de-Stalinization process the two blocs

102 Ibid.
103 Ibi, p. 5.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
106 Ibi, p. 7.
107 Cfr. Duce, "Storia della politica internazionale (1917-1957)…", op. cit.

entered a phase of mutual acceptance and peaceful coexistence.

Furthermore, another influence can be identified in point 8, where the concept makes clear that, in order to counter communism, the Allies must undertake a joint commitment to ensure the security of Western Europe through the «development of Western Europe's material resources and high industrial potential for the purpose of strengthening its economy which, in itself, creates conditions favourable to the countering of Communism»[108].

Finally, it must be acknowledged that this Strategic Concept, unlike the previous ones, managed to move beyond the assumption that any future confrontation with the communist world would resemble that against the Axis powers. The document also introduced a forward-looking element: a section on alternative threats to NATO security. In points 18 to 22, it identified nontraditional risks to the Alliance's security. Point 18 warned that it was necessary to prevent the USSR from achieving not only a military victory but also a political one. Since Moscow was not considered materially capable of launching a direct attack, the Strategic Concept made clear that:

> The Soviets might therefore conclude that the only way in which they could profitably further their aim would be to initiate operations with limited objectives, such as infiltrations, incursions or hostile local actions in the NATO area, covertly or overtly supported by themselves, trusting that the Allies in their collective desire to prevent a general conflict would either limit their reactions accordingly or not react at all. Under these circumstances NATO must be prepared to deal immediately with such situations without necessarily having recourse to nuclear weapons[109].

Here it becomes even clearer that the Alliance had become aware of the existence of other types of threats beyond the military one. There is therefore a reference both to what today would be defined as hybrid warfare and to the notion of flexible response. Further evidence that this Strategic Concept was ahead of its time lies in the fact that, in points 21 and 22, it was recognized that the USSR could influence States outside NATO, in order to achieve its objectives «by psychological, political and economic offensives; by arms deliveries; and perhaps even by the setting up of bases»[110]. Consequently, in point 22, with forty

108 MC 0014/2-REV, Overall Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Area, op. cit., p. 6.

109 Ibi, p. 11.

110 Ibi, p. 12.

years of advance, it was acknowledged that the Allied Countries needed to remain highly alert to areas beyond NATO, foreseeing the possibility of employing certain NATO forces for operations outside the NATO area[111]. This provision is further reinforced in point 27, where the Alliance is urged to recognize that certain NATO forces must remain flexible in order to enable some Allies to intervene in areas outside NATO[112].

As we approach the conclusion, two final points deserve mention. The first establishes that the defense of the entire NATO area depends on the defense of Western Europe, and that to ensure this, it is essential to strengthen the stability and economies of the European Allies[113]. The second, point 27, contains a strong reference to Southeastern Europe as the main bastion for halting the expansion of communism in the Straits, the Middle East, and North Africa. These areas were meant to remain under NATO influence, as they offered excellent strategic positions to counter the Soviets (the same applied to the Balkans, particularly Yugoslavia, and to Turkey)[114].

Another difference between the first and second Strategic Concepts lies in the approach to nuclear weapons: while the first viewed them as the absolute means of responding to Soviet threats, the second, though maintaining their deterrent value, placed greater emphasis on non-military measures to prevent war. This did not imply that the Alliance intended to resort to nuclear weapons in every scenario, as Article 5 left Member States considerable discretion in deciding how to act in the event of aggression. Moreover, points 21 and 22 acknowledged that disturbances outside the NATO area could affect NATO's security and that various forms of Soviet intervention, military or otherwise, could destabilize those regions, making it appropriate for some Allies to intervene using the means they deemed most suitable.

Thus, already by the mid-1950s, paths were opened toward exploring a strategy based on a Flexible Response. This is significant because, for a long time, it was maintained (due to the documentary secrecy of that period) that Flexible Response was the result of the changes introduced by the Kennedy administra-

111 Ibi, p. 12.
112 Ibi, p. 14.
113 Ibi, p.16.
114 Ibi, p. 22.

tion[115]. In reality, as demonstrated here, it had much deeper roots: well before 1967, NATO strategy was no longer based solely on the doctrine of massive retaliation[116].

As for the second document, MC 48/2, its purpose was to outline the measures to be implemented to achieve the newly agreed strategic objectives[117]. This document highlighted the various means available to Moscow to pursue its goals and guided the Alliance in developing corresponding countermeasures, not necessarily of a military nature, to oppose the USSR.

Concluding this analysis of this second Strategic Concept by highlighting some of the concerns raised by the Member States in point 19 of MC 14/2, which reads:

> In this latter respect, the Military Committee considers that, if the Soviets were involved in a local hostile action and sought to broaden the scope of such an incident or to prolong it, the situation would call for the utilization of all weapons and forces at NATO's disposal, since in no case is there a NATO concept of limited war with the Soviets[118].

It goes without saying that this passage proved highly controversial, to the point that the Dutch delegation pointed out that the language, particularly in its final part, was excessively categorical. It was argued that the passage «had gone too far, and was too rigid, in fact absolute»[119], and that it also altered what had been agreed upon in the political directives. Lord Ismay, speaking shortly thereafter, reassured the Dutch delegate by stating that, in any case, the use of any weapon would be subject to the Alliance's political approval. Washington likewise intervened, confirming that political authorities would in all cases review any proposal put forward by the military command[120].

115 Francis J. Gavin, "The Myth of Flexible Response: United States Strategy in Europe during the 1960s", The International History Review, vol. 23 (2001), n. 4.

116 John S. Duffield, "The Evolution of NATO's Strategy of Flexible Response: A Reinterpretation", Security Studies, vol. 1 (1991), n. 1.

117 MC 48/2 (Final Decision), Measures to Implement the Strategic Concept, Paris, 23.05.1957, in NATO Archives Online, p. 1, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 21.10.2025.

118 MC 0014/2-REV, Overall Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Area, op. cit., p. 11.

119 C-R(57)30, Rrecord of meeting, Paris, 11.05.1957, in NATO Archives Online, pp. 3-5, https://archives.nato.int/, accessed 21.10.2025.

120 Ibi, pp. 5-6.

Conclusions

The Report of the Three Wise Men anticipated by decades what NATO would become: an alliance whose effectiveness rests on continuous political consultation, coordinated information policy, and economic cooperation alongside military power.

This insight shaped the Alliance's evolution and is reflected in the 1957 Strategic Concept (MC 14/2) and its implementing guidance (MC 48/2), which redefined deterrence as a collective, politically grounded posture, stressed economic stability and specialization, and recognized limited, non-military, and extra-regional challenges.

It is clear that the Report was a document that anticipated by decades what NATO would later become: an international forum uniting its Members under a uniquely structured organization. This is demonstrated by two undeniable facts: today NATO stands as the longest-lasting alliance in modern history, and it now counts thirty-two Allies. The Report hence shaped the Alliance and its strategic posture for decades, an influence later reaffirmed by the adoption of the 1967 Harmel Report, which further expanded NATO's political dimension and placed at its core the importance of consultation and East–West dialogue[121].

This study shows that from its earliest years NATO understood that strength could not be purely military. Articles 2 and 4, the consolidation of political, and the establishment of information and parliamentary instruments gave substance to a distinct NATO method. The political dimension (encompassing cultural and economic cooperation) had already been identified in the 1950s as an essential area for collective effort.

Looking at the present day, the lessons of the Three Wise Men remain deeply relevant, perhaps even more so than in the past. NATO would benefit from re-

121 The 1967 Harmel Report redefined NATO's role amid doubts about its future. Proposed by Belgian Foreign Minister Pierre Harmel, it reaffirmed the Alliance's political and military purposes, recognising the changing international context since 1949. The Report introduced a dual-track policy of deterrence and détente, maintaining strong defence while promoting political dialogue, thus combining military preparedness with efforts toward East-West reconciliation. It also called for balanced force reductions and highlighted strategic regions such as the Mediterranean. Building on the Three Wise Men Report (1956), it shaped NATO's long-term strategic thinking and paved the way for the more cooperative security approach that would emerge after the Cold War.

discovering these principles to better guide Allied efforts in an increasingly complex strategic environment. As the Alliance has expanded to include new Member States (which, while sharing the founding values, come from diverse historical and cultural backgrounds) it is more necessary than ever to reinforce NATO's consultative role to develop common strategies and maintain internal cohesion. Strengthening the mechanisms of timely and substantive consultation within the NAC would not only enhance unity among Allies but also prevent unilateral initiatives that could undermine the collective credibility of the Alliance.

Today's security environment again features simultaneous military and non-military pressures, which MC 14/2 already anticipated in its treatment of limited operations, political warfare, and effects beyond the Treaty area. Western values themselves are being questioned both within the West and by Great Powers such as Russia and China, which seek to present their own systems as more capable of ensuring national unity and prosperity in a globalized world. Although the West still holds economic primacy, it is uncertain whether this alone can sustain the moral and cultural appeal of the Western model; a concern already recognized by the Three Wise Men.

In this respect, NATO must not limit itself to internal solidarity but should also serve as an effective instrument for dialogue between the West and the wider world. Reaffirming the principles of political consultation, partnership, and openness that would allow the Alliance to enhance stability and credibility. In this context, the lessons of the Three Wise Men remain directly relevant: only by integrating political consultation, public communication, and economic resilience with credible defense can NATO preserve peace and sustain the cohesion that underpins deterrence. Weapons alone do not guarantee security; the Alliance's comparative advantage lies in its ability to align power with policy and to keep Allies engaged in timely, substantive consultation.

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When Great Powers Redefine Strategy: Security Dilemmas of Small States in the Western Balkans after U.S. Strategy 2025

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Abstract: The release of the U.S. National Security Strategy in 2025 represents more than a routine revision of strategic priorities; it signals a broader recalibration of how power, commitments, and risk are managed within an increasingly fragmented international order. While major powers retain the strategic flexibility to adjust to such shifts, small states remain structurally more exposed to changes in alliance dynamics and fluctuations in great-power attention. This article examines the security dilemmas confronting small states following the release of the U.S. National Security Strategy 2025, using the Western Balkans as a focused regional case. Drawing on the classical concept of the security dilemma and contemporary scholarship on alliance politics, the study adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach to assess how strategic ambiguity, the evolving role of NATO, and adjustments in deterrence frameworks shape small-state strategic calculations. The analysis shows that the Western Balkans constitutes a particularly sensitive strategic environment, marked by historical insecurity, limited national capabilities, and persistent reliance on external security guarantees. States in the region face a dual and enduring dilemma: on the one hand, the need to strengthen domestic security capacities; on the other, continued dependence on alliances and external guarantees whose credibility is increasingly conditioned by global great-power priorities. The article argues that the reconfiguration of great-power strategies produces direct and tangible consequences for the strategic behavior of small states. In the Western Balkans, navigating this evolving environment requires the development of a more coherent strategic culture—one that aligns alliance dependence with realistic national planning, rather than treating external guarantees as a substitute for domestic strategic capacity.

Keywords: security dilemma; small states; U.S. National Security Strategy 2025; alliance politics; NATO and collective security; strategic ambiguity; Western Balkans.

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1. *Introduction*

The strategies of great powers have historically played a decisive role in shaping the global security architecture and the evolution of international order (Freedman, 2013; Gray, 2010; Kennedy, 1987). Rather than functioning merely as programmatic documents or political declarations, they serve as instruments of strategic orientation that signal priorities, limits of commitment, and preferred modes of power projection within an increasingly complex international environment. In a system marked by significant asymmetries of capability and influence, strategic decisions taken by dominant actors generate effects that extend beyond their national interests, reshaping security perceptions and strategic calculations among smaller states (Waltz, 1979).

The security dilemmas currently discussed in relation to the U.S. National Security Strategy 2025 should also be understood within the longer trajectory of Euro-Atlantic security development. Since the end of the Cold War, successive rounds of NATO enlargement—from Central Europe in 1999 to the Western Balkans in the 2000s, have gradually incorporated small states into a collective security framework aimed at stabilizing regions historically affected by geopolitical competition. Within this broader context, contemporary debates on burden-sharing and strategic prioritization represent an evolution of longstanding alliance dynamics rather than a fundamental rupture.

Within this broader context, U.S. strategic documents occupy a distinctive position due to the nation's role as the primary military actor in the international system and the central pillar of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. The release of the U.S. National Security Strategy 2025represents a significant moment of strategic recalibration, reflecting a security environment defined by renewed great-power rivalry, structural uncertainty, and a more selective distribution of global commitments (The White House, 2025). This strategy signals a more flexible and differentiated approach to engagement, in which global priorities are increasingly shaped by strategic competition and long-term risk management (p. 12).

Against this backdrop, Europe and NATO emerge simultaneously as spaces of strategic continuity and as arenas in which greater responsibilities are expected from regional actors. While the 2025 National Security Strategy reaffirms the importance of alliances (The White House, 2025), it also underscores the need for enhanced self-defense capacities among European allies. This shift introduces

a degree of strategic ambiguity with direct implications for smaller states, a phenomenon widely analyzed in recent strategic literature (Freedman, 2023; NATO, 2022).

Unlike great powers, which possess strategic depth, operational flexibility, and the resources required to absorb changes in the international environment, small states face structural constraints that render them particularly sensitive to strategic revisions by dominant actors. Limited military capabilities, reliance on alliances, and the absence of full strategic autonomy place the security of small states in a close relationship with the credibility of great-power commitments (Long, 2022; Walt, 1987). For these actors, shifts in priorities or ambiguous strategic signals are rarely perceived as abstract developments; rather, they are often experienced as potential sources of existential insecurity.

Within this analytical framework, the concept of the security dilemma offers a useful lens for interpreting the strategic behavior of small states. Classical scholarship shows that measures intended to enhance security may unintentionally generate insecurity or reduce strategic flexibility (Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978). For small states, this dilemma is particularly pronounced: strengthening national capabilities rarely guarantees security without external support, while deeper alliance dependence may further constrain strategic autonomy (Snyder, 1984). The Western Balkans illustrate these dynamics clearly. Historically exposed to geopolitical rivalry and external intervention, the region continues to display limited national security capacities, while the security of most states remains closely linked to the Euro-Atlantic framework (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

The contemporary security landscape of the Western Balkans is closely tied to the transformations that followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995 created an internationally supervised framework for stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999 marked a decisive extension of Euro-Atlantic security structures into the region. In the following years, stability was supported through international military deployments, EU crisis-management missions, and the gradual NATO integration of several Western Balkan states.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how the redefinition of U.S. National Security Strategy 2025 affects the security dilemmas of small states in the Western Balkans. Rather than focusing on individual national cases, the article

adopts a broader regional perspective to highlight differentiated security trajectories among small states exposed to shifting great-power strategies. The analysis is guided by the following research question: How does the redefinition of the U.S. National Security Strategy in 2025 shape the security dilemmas of small states in the Western Balkans?

2. *Theoretical Framework: The Security Dilemma and Small States*

This section establishes the theoretical framework of the study by outlining the core concepts and analytical lenses used throughout the analysis. It focuses on the security dilemma and the position of small states within the international system as foundational elements for understanding the dynamics examined in subsequent sections.

2.1. The Security Dilemma: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives

The concept of the security dilemma represents a central pillar of realist theory in international relations and an important analytical tool for understanding state behavior in an anarchic system. John Herz argued that, in the absence of a central authority capable of guaranteeing security, efforts by states to increase their own security may unintentionally generate insecurity for others (Herz, 1950). Measures adopted for defensive purposes can therefore be interpreted as threatening, producing cycles of mistrust and strategic competition.

Jervis emphasizes that the security dilemma emerges not necessarily from aggressive intentions but from uncertainty about the intentions of other actors (Jervis, 1978). From this perspective, even states seeking to preserve the status quo may inadvertently contribute to instability if their actions are perceived as preparations for potential aggression. Analytical attention thus shifts from intentions alone to processes of perception, interpretation, and strategic interaction.

More recent scholarships have broadened the concept beyond a strict military dimension. Booth and Wheeler (2007) describe the security dilemma as a dynamic process shaped not only by material capabilities but also by political, psychological, and institutional factors. Within this framework, the intensity of the dilemma can be mitigated or intensified depending on levels of transparency, strategic communication, and confidence-building mechanisms. These dynamics

are particularly relevant in regions such as the Western Balkans, where security arrangements rely heavily on alliances and external guarantees, and where periods of strategic ambiguity or shifts in great-power priorities may amplify perceptions of insecurity.

The Western Balkans provides a clear illustration of these dynamics. Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, regional stability has largely depended on externally mediated security arrangements and the gradual extension of Euro-Atlantic institutions. The post-conflict environment of the 1990s reflects this logic particularly well. Measures intended to strengthen stability—such as NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999 and the subsequent international security presence—reassured some actors while simultaneously reinforcing threat perceptions among others, thereby reproducing elements of the security dilemma within the regional environment.

In the decades that followed, stability has been sustained through a combination of international military deployments, European Union crisis-management mechanisms, and the gradual integration of several Western Balkan states into NATO. This trajectory demonstrates how regional security perceptions remain closely connected to broader transformations in international security architecture.

2.2. Small States in International Relations Theory

The position of small states within international relations theory has often been secondary, as scholarly attention has traditionally focused on great powers and their strategic rivalries. Nevertheless, classical realist perspectives emphasize that the structure of the international system exerts a particularly strong influence on states with limited capabilities. As Waltz (1979) argues, the structure of the international system constrains the behavior of states regardless of their internal characteristics.

Institutionalist approaches offer a complementary perspective. Robert Keohane suggests that small states may partly offset their material limitations through participation in international institutions and multilateral cooperation (Keohane, 1984). By embedding themselves within rule-based frameworks, smaller actors can increase predictability and amplify their diplomatic influence. However, this strategy depends heavily on the continued effectiveness of international institutions and the commitment of major powers to uphold shared norms. In periods

marked by intensified strategic competition and weakening multilateral cooperation, the room for such maneuvering tends to narrow.

More recent scholarship highlights structural vulnerability as a defining feature of the small-state security environment. David Long (2022) argues that the security strategies of small states are shaped by a persistent tension between reliance on alliances and the effort to maintain a degree of strategic autonomy. This dynamic reflects the dual concern of abandonment by allies or, conversely, excessive dependence on them. Within this context, small states should not be viewed as passive actors but as constrained agents operating within narrow structural limits. Their strategic choices are frequently reactive and shaped by external dynamics, making them particularly sensitive to shifts in great-power strategies. This pattern is especially evident in regions such as the Western Balkans.

2.3. Alliances, Dependence, and the Limits of Strategic Autonomy

Alliances constitute the primary mechanism through which small states seek to manage their security dilemmas. Glenn Snyder (1984) conceptualizes alliance politics as a delicate balance between two fundamental fears: abandonment and entrapment. For small states, this dilemma is particularly acute, as their strategic survival depends disproportionately on the credibility of allied commitments. Alliance structures such as NATO should therefore not be understood as independent strategic actors, but rather as institutional frameworks through which member states coordinate their security policies and collective responses to perceived threats.

Stephen Walt's (1987) balance-of-threat theory further refines this logic by emphasizing that states respond not simply to power, but to perceived threats shaped by intentions, proximity, and capability. For small states, threat perceptions are often influenced by strategic signals from major powers and by the degree of their engagement within a given region. Consequently, shifts in allied strategies can rapidly transform the security environment even in the absence of direct changes to local military balances. David Lake (2009) adds that security relationships frequently take the form of "soft hierarchies," in which smaller actors accept constraints on autonomy in exchange for protection. While such arrangements may function effectively during periods of stability, they become problematic during phases of strategic transition, when guarantees appear less

certain and the costs of dependence become more visible.

Within this framework, strategic autonomy should not be understood as full independence, but as the ability to preserve limited decision-making space within an alliance system. The central challenge lies in balancing deep integration into collective security architectures with the maintenance of minimal national capabilities that allow flexible responses to strategic uncertainty. For alliance-dependent regions such as the Western Balkans, this tension between protection and autonomy becomes particularly pronounced during periods of great-power strategic reorientation. These theoretical insights provide the analytical foundation for examining how recent strategic shifts—particularly those reflected in the U.S. National Security Strategy 2025—affect alliance-dependent small states.

3. *The U.S. National Security Strategy 2025: Strategic features and meanings*

This section outlines the key features of the U.S. National Security Strategy 2025 and clarifies its broader strategic meaning within the evolving international security environment. Rather than offering a descriptive summary, the focus is on those elements of the Strategy that have direct relevance for alliance dynamics and small-state security

3.1. Strategic Priorities and key shifts

The U.S. National Security Strategy of 2025 should be interpreted not simply as a policy statement, but as an expression of a transforming international environment. In contrast to earlier strategies that emphasized the expansion of the liberal international order and broad global engagement, the 2025 document advances a more selective approach to the use of power and the distribution of strategic resources (White House, 2025). This shift reflects the realities of a more fragmented international system in which renewed great-power competition and long-term strategic risk management occupy a central role.

A key feature of the Strategy is the reaffirmation of strategic competition as a defining axis of U.S. security policy. National security is presented as a continuous process of adaptation to an environment characterized by intensifying geopolitical rivalries and growing uncertainty. This perspective introduces a stronger

emphasis on prioritization, marking a departure from the logic of universal engagement that shaped earlier periods of American strategy.

At the same time, the Strategy reflects a more cautious assessment of the limits of American power. Although the United States remains the leading global military actor, the document recognizes that resources and capabilities are finite and must be aligned with core strategic interests. This produces a clearer hierarchy of priorities across regions and policy domains, generating a degree of uncertainty for smaller allies regarding the long-term scope of U.S. engagement. Another important element is the emphasis on greater responsibility among allies. The Strategy encourages partners to strengthen their own defense capacities and political commitments, suggesting a recalibration of the U.S. role within alliances rather than a withdrawal from them.

3.2. Europe and NATO in the U.S. Strategy 2025

Regarding Europe and NATO, the U.S. National Security Strategy 2025 reflects a combination of continuity and adjustment. On the one hand, it reaffirms NATO's role as the central pillar of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture (NATO, 2022). On the other hand, it signals growing expectations for European allies to assume a greater share of responsibility for the continent's security. Recent analyses of NATO and European defense cooperation highlight that the evolution of the Alliance reflects a recalibration of burden-sharing and strategic responsibilities within the transatlantic framework (Marrone, 2018; Tocci, 2017).

This evolving perspective is closely connected to the United States' broader need to balance global commitments. Although the Euro-Atlantic space remains strategically important, the Strategy indicates that the United States cannot indefinitely carry the primary burden of European security. Such reasoning aligns with wider debates on burden-sharing and the long-term sustainability of extensive military engagement (Freedman, 2023).

At the same time, NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept emphasizes the necessity of adapting to an increasingly complex security environment that includes conventional, hybrid, and cyber threats. The U.S. Strategy reinforces this orientation while encouraging greater coordination and operational capacity among European allies.

For small European states, this transformation generates a more ambivalent

strategic environment. NATO remains the primary institutional framework for collective security, yet rising expectations for national contributions raise questions about capacity and adaptation. As a result, smaller allies become increasingly sensitive to strategic signals originating from Washington and to shifts in the broader Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

3.3. Strategic Ambiguity as an Instrument of Power

One of the most consequential features of the U.S. National Security Strategy 2025 is the deliberate use of strategic ambiguity as a political and military instrument. Unlike earlier strategies that sought to maximize clarity and predictability, the 2025 document preserves interpretative flexibility by avoiding rigid or unconditional commitments. Such an approach allows the United States to maintain freedom of action within a security environment marked by uncertainty and rapid change (Jervis, 1978).

From the perspective of major powers, strategic ambiguity may strengthen deterrence by leaving potential adversaries uncertain about the limits of U.S. responses. As Thomas Schelling (1966) argues, deliberate uncertainty can increase the costs of miscalculation for rival actors and thereby reinforce deterrence. However, what appears as strategic flexibility for great powers may generate heightened insecurity for smaller states. When the scope and conditions of engagement remain ambiguous, perceptions of the credibility of security guarantees may weaken, complicating long-term security planning for actors that rely heavily on alliances.

Within the Euro-Atlantic framework, strategic ambiguity therefore assumes a dual character.

On the one hand, it aims to deter potential adversaries by maintaining uncertainty regarding the scale and form of collective responses. On the other, it places greater expectations on allies, requiring them to operate under conditions of reduced predictability. For small states, this implies the growing necessity of maintaining minimal national capabilities—not as alternatives to alliances, but as instruments for managing phases of strategic uncertainty.

In this context, the U.S. National Security Strategy 2025 should not be interpreted as a retreat from international commitments, but rather as a recalibration of how strategic power is exercised. Nevertheless, such recalibration has clear

implications for smaller actors, which must adjust their security strategies to an environment in which strategic clarity cannot always be assumed.

At the same time, debates about burden-sharing within NATO are not unprecedented. Similar discussions emerged during the Cold War, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, when the United States encouraged European allies to assume greater responsibility for conventional defense. In this sense, the emphasis on burden-sharing in the 2025 Strategy reflects a degree of historical continuity in alliance politics rather than a fundamentally new strategic paradigm.

4. *Security Dilemmas for Small States after the U.S. Strategy 2025*

This section builds on the preceding theoretical discussion by examining how the redefinition of U.S. security strategy translates into concrete dilemmas for small states. It focuses on the key mechanisms through which strategic change shapes perceptions, choices, and vulnerabilities in alliance-dependent contexts.

4.1. Strategic Uncertainty and Threat Perception

The redefinition of U.S. security strategy in 2025 has intensified an element already present in the international environment: strategic uncertainty. For small states, uncertainty does not merely denote a lack of information regarding the intentions of other actors, but rather a structural condition that directly shapes threat perception and the orientation of security policies. Shifts in great-power priorities complicate the distinction between short-term risks and longer-term threats and increase uncertainty in the strategic environment (Buzan, 1991; Jervis, 1978). At the same time, debates over burden-sharing within NATO are not new. Similar discussions emerged during the Cold War, when the United States repeatedly encouraged European allies to assume greater responsibility for conventional defence. In this sense, contemporary expectations regarding allied contributions reflect a historical continuity in alliance politics rather than an entirely new strategic dynamic.

Within this context, small states tend to interpret strategic shifts as potentially threatening even when they are not explicitly directed at their security. This sensitivity stems from limited national capabilities, which leave little margin for strategic miscalculation. An inaccurate assessment of the security environment

may have disproportionate consequences for political and territorial stability. As a result, threat perception is informed not only by concrete military developments, but also by political and discursive signals emanating from great-power strategies (Walt, 1987).

By emphasizing prioritization and the selective distribution of commitments, the U.S. National Security Strategy 2025 contributes to a strategic environment in which threats appear more fluid and less clearly defined. For small states, this translates into a persistent sense of insecurity that directly affects defense planning and the setting of strategic priorities. Rather than operating based on relatively stable scenarios, these states are compelled to function under conditions of heightened uncertainty, where flexibility becomes both a necessity and a source of strategic anxiety.

4.2. National Capabilities versus Alliance Dependence

One of the most profound security dilemmas confronting small states after the 2025 Strategy concerns the relationship between national capability-building and reliance on alliances. On the one hand, U.S. strategic guidance underscores the need for allies to assume greater responsibility for their own security. On the other, the structural realities of small states significantly constrain their ability to develop comprehensive and autonomous defense capacities (Waltz, 1979).

Efforts to strengthen national capabilities often encounter financial and institutional limitations. As a result, even where political will exists, small states rarely achieve sufficient capacity to ensure security without allied support. Within this framework, alliances continue to represent the primary mechanism for ensuring strategic survival. However, the U.S. National Security Strategy 2025 implicitly reshapes the relationship between allies and the principal security guarantor. By stressing burden-sharing and shared responsibility, the Strategy raises expectations toward small allies without necessarily providing full clarity regarding the scope and conditions of U.S. commitments. This generates a persistent structural tension between the need for deep alliance integration and the risk of excessive dependence.

The literature on alliance politics identifies this tension as a durable feature of small-state behavior. Glenn Snyder (1984) argues that fear of abandonment often outweighs fear of entrapment, particularly for actors lacking credible security

alternatives. After 2025, this concern is further intensified, as strategic signals increasingly suggest that commitments are no longer unconditional and that global priorities may shift with relative speed.

4.3. Deterrence, reassurance, and alliance credibility

A further important dimension of small-state security dilemmas concerns the balance between deterrence and reassurance within alliance structures. Deterrence, understood as the prevention of aggression through the threat of unacceptable costs, relies fundamentally on the credibility of commitments made by stronger allies (Schelling, 1966). For small states, the credibility of collective deterrence therefore constitutes a central pillar of strategic stability and a key source of confidence in the broader security environment.

By preserving a degree of strategic ambiguity, the U.S. National Security Strategy 2025 aims to reinforce deterrence toward potential adversaries. However, this approach produces differentiated effects for smaller allies. While potential adversaries face uncertainty regarding the scope of U.S. responses, small states may find it more difficult to assess the level of protection they can realistically expect in times of crisis. This asymmetry weakens the reassurance function of alliances, which remains as important as deterrence for sustaining regional stability (Booth & Wheeler, 2008). In situations where reassurance becomes less explicit, small states may adopt more cautious strategic behavior. They may avoid initiatives that could be interpreted as provocative or potentially destabilizing, even when such actions align with their long-term interests. Under these conditions, security becomes increasingly shaped by perceptions of strategic trust rather than by material capabilities alone.

In the evolving post-2025 context, alliance credibility also depends more strongly on the ability of smaller allies to demonstrate meaningful contributions to collective security. Deterrence thus becomes a reciprocal process rather than a purely one-directional guarantee. Yet this evolving model presupposes institutional and military capacities that not all small states possess equally. Consequently, security dilemmas emerge not from a single threat but from the interaction of strategic uncertainty, structural dependence, and evolving alliance expectations. The Western Balkans provide a particularly illustrative case for observing how these dynamics unfold in practice.

5. *The Western Balkans as an Analytical Case*

This section situates the Western Balkans within the broader analytical framework of the study, linking regional dynamics to the security dilemmas generated by shifting great-power strategies. From a historical perspective, the contemporary security architecture of the Western Balkans reflects the gradual transition from post-conflict stabilization in the 1990s to institutional integration within the Euro-Atlantic security order. This process began with the international stabilization framework established after the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, which created the institutional foundations for post-war governance and international security supervision in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

5.1. The Western Balkans as a Strategically Sensitive Space

The Western Balkans has long represented a strategically sensitive space within the European security architecture, historically shaped by great-power rivalry and external intervention (Bechev, 2019; Ronzitti, 2021; Rynning, 2019). The region does not constitute an autonomous source of major security threats; rather, it functions as a space where uncertainties generated at the global level tend to materialize more quickly and often with higher costs for local actors (Marrone, 2018; Ronzitti, 2021).

According to the literature on regional security complexes, the Western Balkans is characterized by a high degree of security interdependence, meaning that instability affecting one actor is rapidly reflected across the broader regional environment (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). This interconnectedness makes the region particularly sensitive to shifts in the wider international security landscape. Doctrinal analyses often describe the Western Balkans as a peripheral but strategically relevant security space in which stability relies more heavily on the broader international security architecture than on internal balances of power (Greco & Pirozzi, 2020). Since the conflicts of the 1990s, regional stability has been largely supported through the engagement of NATO, the European Union, and the wider Euro-Atlantic framework.

In practical terms, stabilization has been reinforced through long-standing international missions. NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR), deployed in 1999 after the Kosovo conflict, continues to play a key role in maintaining security and pre-

venting escalation. Likewise, the European Union's EUFOR Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, active since 2004, contributes to preserving the military provisions of the Dayton framework. Together, these missions demonstrate that regional stability has depended not only on diplomatic arrangements but also on sustained multinational security engagement.

While this architecture has produced a significant degree of stability, it has also generated patterns of strategic dependence and uneven development of domestic security capacities (Bechev, 2019; Bieber, 2018). Consequently, the Western Balkans remains particularly sensitive to shifts in the strategic priorities of major powers and to broader transformations in the Euro-Atlantic security environment.

At the same time, alliance dependence is not unique to this region. Several NATO members—including the Baltic states, Belgium, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic—also rely heavily on collective security arrangements while maintaining relatively limited national military capabilities. What distinguishes the Western Balkans is therefore not the presence of small states alone, but the legacy of post-conflict stabilization, the continued presence of international missions, and the still incomplete consolidation of regional security institutions.

5.2. Albania and Kosovo: Security through Alliance Dependence

Albania and Kosovo represent cases in which national security has been constructed primarily through alliance structures and sustained international presence. For Albania, NATO membership in 2009 marked a fundamental transformation of its strategic orientation, shifting the focus from traditional territorial defense toward integration within the Euro-Atlantic collective security architecture. Albania's accession formed part of the broader post–Cold War enlargement of the Alliance, a process that significantly reshaped the strategic landscape of Southeastern Europe. Albania is frequently cited as an example of a small state that has compensated for limited material capabilities through political commitment and institutional engagement within the Alliance (De Luca, 2020; Marrone, 2018).

The evolving strategic environment—reflected in the U.S. National Security Strategy 2025—introduces new dilemmas for this model. Increased emphasis on burden-sharing and national responsibility requires a realistic reassessment of the contributions that smaller allies can provide within NATO's collective framework, encouraging a gradual transition from predominantly security-consuming

positions toward more selective and functional participation in alliance activities.

Kosovo represents an even more sensitive case. Its security—and indeed the broader stability of the territory—remains closely connected to the presence of international forces, particularly the NATO-led KFOR mission. While this arrangement has been effective in preventing large-scale conflict and maintaining a basic level of deterrence, it has also limited the development of fully autonomous security structures. Under conditions of increasing strategic ambiguity and shifting global priorities, Kosovo faces a persistent challenge: balancing reliance on external security guarantees with the gradual development of domestic defense and institutional capacities.

5.3. Serbia and Strategic Ambiguity

In contrast to Albania and Kosovo, Serbia has pursued a more ambiguous strategic approach, avoiding formal integration into NATO while cultivating parallel relationships with multiple international actors. This strategy has afforded a degree of diplomatic flexibility, yet it has also positioned the country in a structurally uncertain relationship with the Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

Serbia is frequently characterized as an actor seeking to balance between Western and Eastern partners, leveraging great-power rivalries to expand its strategic room for maneuver (Bechev, 2019). However, the intensification of strategic polarization after 2025—driven by shifting global alliances—constrains this space, making the maintenance of functional neutrality increasingly difficult. From the perspective of the security dilemma, this approach generates dual insecurity: the absence of full integration heightens exposure to external pressures, while strategic ambiguity contributes to regional uncertainty by shaping threat perceptions among neighboring actors (Caforio, 2021).

5.4. North Macedonia and Montenegro: Alliance Integration as a Stabilizing Mechanism

North Macedonia and Montenegro represent cases in which NATO integration has been employed primarily as a mechanism of strategic stabilization. For these small states, alliance membership has served to reduce structural insecurity and anchor their strategic orientation within a broader security framework (Cappel-

luti, 2022; Bellandi, 2023). In the case of North Macedonia, NATO membership in 2020 contributed to reducing strategic isolation and regional uncertainty, yet it did not eliminate reliance on external security guarantees.

Similarly, Montenegro, a NATO member since 2017, remains dependent on alliance cohesion due to limited military and institutional capacities (Caforio, 2021). In both cases, formal integration does not automatically translate into consolidated security, highlighting the limits of alliance-based models in the absence of minimal functional national capabilities. This "integration gap" underscores the necessity for smaller allies to balance political alignment with the pragmatic development of niche military specializations.

5.5. Bosnia and Herzegovina: Fragmented Security and Structural Dependence

Bosnia and Herzegovina represents the most complex security case in the region, where security dilemmas are generated not only by the external environment but also by internal institutional fragmentation. The country's security remains highly internationalized, with a sustained dependence on the presence and mediation of external actors (Ronzitti, 2021).

The continued presence of EUFOR Althea demonstrates the degree to which Bosnia and Herzegovina relies on international mechanisms to guarantee the military aspects of the Dayton settlement. While this model has effectively prevented a return to open conflict, it has not yet produced a fully autonomous national security architecture. Doctrinal analyses indicate that externally supported stability remains particularly vulnerable to shifts in great-power strategic priorities. This renders Bosnia and Herzegovina one of the most exposed cases to strategic ambiguity in the post-2025 environment, where internal political vetoes often paralyze the consolidation of a unified defense policy (Cappelluti, 2022).

5.6. Comparative Perspective and Analytical Implications

A comparative analysis of the cases examined indicates that Western Balkan small states have adopted distinct security models in response to the evolving Euro-Atlantic strategic environment. Albania and Kosovo represent cases where security is anchored in profound alliance dependence, with NATO integration and the continued presence of international military forces functioning as the

primary stabilizing mechanisms.

North Macedonia and Montenegro illustrate a model of security through alliance consolidation: NATO membership has mitigated strategic isolation but has not eliminated reliance on collective guarantees, given their limited national capabilities. In contrast, Serbia pursues a strategy of calibrated ambiguity, seeking to preserve strategic flexibility through balanced relations with multiple external actors. While this approach offers diplomatic maneuverability, it introduces significant structural uncertainty within the regional security environment.

Finally, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains the most structurally dependent case, where security is highly internationalized and sustained through external institutional mechanisms.

These differentiated trajectories demonstrate that shifts in great-power strategy do not affect the region uniformly. Instead, security dilemmas manifest through varying combinations of alliance integration, strategic ambiguity, and externally supported stability. Furthermore, these dynamics are not entirely unique to the Western Balkans. Small states across the Euro-Atlantic space, notably the Baltic states face comparable tensions between reliance on collective guarantees and the imperative to maintain national capabilities. Consequently, the Western Balkans provide a visible illustration of the broader structural dilemmas affecting small states within alliance-based systems. Taken together, these trajectories suggest that the region remains a revealing laboratory for observing how small states adapt to the shifting priorities of global powers.

6. *Strategic implications and lessons for small states*

The redefinition of great-power strategies, as reflected in the U.S. National Security Strategy 2025, does not generate uniform consequences across the international system. While major powers possess the capacity to absorb uncertainty and recalibrate their commitments, small states confront more direct and acute strategic implications. For these actors, shifts in the strategic orientation of dominant powers do not merely represent policy adjustments, but structural factors that directly affect threat perception, defense planning, and long-term security stability.

6.1. The Need for Long-Term Strategic Thinking

One of the central lessons emerging from the preceding analysis is the urgent need for the development of long-term strategic thinking in small states. Under conditions of heightened uncertainty and strategic ambiguity, ad hoc responses and reactive policies are insufficient to ensure sustainable security or strategic coherence. As Lawrence Freedman observes, strategy is not merely about responding to isolated crises, but about constructing a coherent narrative that links means, objectives, and the security environment over time (Freedman, 2013).

For small states, long-term strategic thinking requires the identification of vital interests and the prioritization of limited resources, supported by institutions capable of rigorous strategic analysis. In the absence of a consolidated strategic culture, small states risk becoming overly dependent on external signals and frequent shifts in great-power policies. In the Western Balkans, this need is particularly pronounced, as security has historically been treated as a function of external intervention rather than a process of domestic institutional development. The U.S. National Security Strategy 2025 underscores that allied support cannot fully substitute for national responsibility in strategic planning and preparedness.

6.2. Alliances as a necessity, not a substitute for strategy

A second key implication concerns the role of alliances. While alliances remain the primary instrument for ensuring security, the U.S. National Security Strategy 2025 signals that they should be understood as frameworks within which national strategies must be developed—not as substitutes for them. The literature on alliance politics consistently highlights that excessive dependence on external guarantors increases the risk of abandonment and constrains strategic autonomy (Snyder, 1984; Walt, 1987).

Accordingly, alliance integration must be accompanied by the development of "niche" national capabilities oriented towards credible contributions. These capabilities are not intended to achieve full strategic autonomy, but to enhance the state's credibility and strengthen collective deterrence. Contemporary doctrinal reflections emphasize that effective alliances require not only the credibility of the principal guarantor, but also strategic coherence among smaller actors (Bellandi, 2023; Caforio, 2021).

6.3. Security as a process, not a static condition

Finally, security must be conceptualized as a dynamic process rather than a fixed condition. The U.S. National Security Strategy 2025 reflects an environment in which uncertainty and adaptation are structural features. As Barry Buzan argues, security is an ongoing process of risk management, requiring continuous adaptation to the external environment (Buzan, 1991).

For Western Balkan states, this necessitates a proactive approach where defense policy, diplomacy, and institutional development are interconnected. Security cannot be reduced to the presence of international forces but must be grounded in the state's capacity to interpret and manage strategic uncertainty. In conclusion, the challenge for small states in transforming international order lies in reassessing how security itself is conceived, managed, and sustained.

7. *Conclusions*

This study has examined the implications of the redefinition of U.S. security strategy in 2025 for the security dilemmas faced by small states, focusing on the Western Balkans as an analytically relevant case. The central argument advanced is that changes in great-power strategies do not remain confined to declaratory policy but produce tangible consequences for actors with limited capabilities. Such shifts reshape threat perceptions, influence strategic calculations, and modify patterns of alliance dependence.

The theoretical analysis confirms that the concept of the security dilemma remains central to understanding the behavior of small states in an international system characterized by uncertainty and strategic competition (Jervis, 1978). Under the conditions reflected in the U.S. National Security Strategy 2025, this dilemma is reinforced by three interrelated dynamics: the selective prioritization of strategic commitments, increasing expectations for allied burden-sharing, and the deliberate use of strategic ambiguity as a tool of statecraft. Measures designed to preserve flexibility for great powers may, therefore, translate into heightened insecurity for smaller allies.

The empirical analysis of the Western Balkans illustrates these dynamics in different forms. Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro broadly

reflect an alliance-centered model of security in which stability depends largely on the credibility of collective guarantees. Serbia follows a more ambiguous strategic approach that seeks to maintain flexibility through diversified external relations, though this strategy generates additional uncertainty during periods of systemic change. Bosnia and Herzegovina represents a case of particularly strong external dependence, where security remains closely linked to international institutional arrangements. Despite these differences, all cases demonstrate the structural sensitivity of small states to shifts in great-power engagement.

A key conclusion of this study is that alliances remain indispensable but cannot substitute for national strategic capacity. The U.S. National Security Strategy 2025 implicitly highlights the importance for smaller allies of maintaining credible national capabilities and strategic cultures capable of managing long-term uncertainty (Freedman, 2013). In this sense, security should be understood not as a condition permanently guaranteed by external actors, but as an adaptive process shaped by evolving strategic environments.

At the theoretical level, this study contributes to debates on great-power–small-state relations by demonstrating that the security dilemma represents a structural feature of international politics, particularly during periods of strategic transition. At the practical level, the findings suggest that Western Balkan states—and small states more broadly—must balance alliance integration with realistic national planning and selective investment in domestic security capacities.

In a broader perspective, the Western Balkans illustrate more general structural dilemmas that characterize the security environment of small states within alliance-based international orders. The region provides a revealing context for understanding how shifts in great-power strategy reshape the security environment of alliance-dependent actors. Adapting to this evolving environment requires a pragmatic reassessment of national security strategies within an international system where the strategic choices of major powers continue to define the boundaries of action.

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"A gap between promise and reality" The Italian guarantee of Maltese neutrality (1980-87)

by Lorenzo Bernardini

Abstract: In September 1980, Italy and Malta signed a Treaty that entrusted the former as guarantor of latter's neutrality. The Treaty also committed Italy to grant Maltese security against any external violations of sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, de facto transforming the insular state into an Italian protectorate. The decision to undertake such a commitment was upheld insofar as twofold advantageous: it tightened strategic control on Italy's southern quadrant, and enhanced Italian standing afore its regional partners. The Maltese Neutrality therefore paved the way for the renewed politico-military protagonism displayed by Italy throughout the 1980s. However, beyond the appearances, the reality was rather disappointing: ultimately, Italy lacked both the political resolve and the military capabilities to thwart a direct attack against Malta. Building on a broad cluster of Italian, British and U.S. archival records, the paper demonstrates how the strategic consequences of the Treaty were never fully taken into account by the political decision-makers.

Keywords: Italy, Malta, Mediterranean, neutrality, Libya

1. Introduction

In September 1980, through a bilateral agreement, Italy assumed the responsibility of granting the independence, neutrality and non-alignment of Malta. The Accord stands out as a milestone of Italian strategic history: for the first time since 1945, Italy acknowledge the use of military power as a foreign policy tool, beyond any multilateral aegis. Furthermore, inasmuch as guarantors of Maltese security, the *Marina Militare* (Italian Navy) and the *Aviazione* (Italian Airforce) saw their area of competence significantly extended, up to covering the whole Central Mediterranean. It was nothing but a quantum leap (both in qualitative and quantitative terms) for the Italian Armed Forces, harbinger of the ensuing phase of intense military activism that characterised the 1980s.

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This essay examines the strategic relations between Italy and Malta, revolved around the 1980 Accord, following a tripartite periodisation: the 1970s, during which the issue of Maltese neutrality and non-alignment reached the top of Italian and European strategic agenda; 1980, when Italy took the revolutionary decision to proceed towards the guarantee of Maltese security beyond the boundaries of European and transatlantic consultation perimeters; finally, the rest of the decade, during which the most intractable aspects of Italian-Maltese relations cyclically resurfaced, alongside the central role that the insular state played in Italy's national security planning. Although the foremost diplomatic and military dynamics that eventually led to the Accord signature in 1980 coagulated in the late 1970s – and most of the asperities seemed having been levelled between January and September 1980 – it was in the mid-1980s that Malta unmistakeably became one of Italy's main strategic priorities. The essay finally concludes the analysis with some considerations – drawn from the consulted archival documentation – on the hiatus existing between the strategic issues that the Accord was meant to address, and the means effectively employed to implement its provisions. Guaranteeing Maltese neutrality aimed at securing the control of the crucial southern quadrant; notwithstanding, the available sources depict a disconcerting scenario: in the face of the eventuality to directly deploy military forces to defend Malta, Italy would have probably failed to honours its commitments.

This overview of almost a decade of Italian and Mediterranean strategic history has been made possible only by significantly expanding the breadth of consulted archival records: both public (*Archivi Centrali dello Stato, Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Archivio Storico della Presidenza della Repubblica*), private (*Archivio Giulio Andreotti, Archivi della Fondazione Bettino Craxi, Archivi del Partito Comunista Italiano*) and foreign (U.S. and British). As often lamented by scholars of Italian military history, the inaccessibility of the Armed Forces' *Uffici Storici* archives appears as an insurmountable obstacle to overcome, and the "official" historiography produced by these very *Uffici Storici* has not hitherto provided meaningful solutions to this impasse. On the other hand, the tenets of strategic history – as outlined by Colin Gray[1] – are decisive in this regard: inasmuch as strategic history focuses on the instrumentality of military power – ergo, it delves into the use of military force to accomplish polit-

1 Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations. An Introduction to Strategic History* (London: Routledge, 2007)

ically-determined goals – the use of diplomatic sources (besides of any civilian institution even loosely connected with security policy) provides for a solid archival bedrock on which building the research.

This essay has therefore a twofold aim: on the one hand, shed some light over a remarkable juncture of Italian strategic history, about which scholarly production is rarefied at best; on the other, it is an attempt to demonstrate that strategic historiography remains an attainable goal, as long as scholars keep pursuing archival research with creativity and determination. Difficulties obviously remain, be they logistic, economic and bureaucratic; and resources available to scholars are seldom adequate. Thus, this essay is also an auspice to the sharing of new primary sources, innovative methodologies and unexplored research lines, so that strategic history could eventually carve for itself a larger – yet well-deserved – space within the broader field of the history of international relations.

2. Malta in the 1970s: from independence to neutrality

The archipelago of Malta is placed at the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, in the Channel of Sicily. Malta is less than 100km south of Italy, and around 300km east of Tunisia and north of Libya. Due to its position, it is the natural link between the eastern and the western quadrants of the Mediterranean basin. Thus, despite its limited extension, the archipelago has an apparent geostrategic value. Besides, its ports can host high-tonnage naval units, including warships. As a result, Malta's relevance to the strategic history of the Mediterranean has always been inversely proportional to its dimension. Under British control since early-XIX century, Malta became independent on 21 September 1964. Commenting on the decoupling of Malta from the British Empire, Ronald Hyam has reported how the archipelago "was among the most difficult of colonial problems, because […] 'the Maltese aspire[d] to political independence and to financial dependence', without advice or control from the British provider"[2].

However, Malta did not immediately leave the Commonwealth, and the Queen of the United Kingdom remained Head of State until 1974, when the Maltese Labour Party (MLP) – which had won the election in 1971, installing Dominic (Dom) Mintoff as Prime Minister – declared the republic. The republican *pro-*

2 Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation, 1918-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), EPUB, ch. 3

nunciamiento was the acme of a progressive severance with the old metropolis, started with Mintoff's announcement in 1972 that the recurring seven-year defence treaty with Great Britain would expire without renewal. The treaty had so far granted to the British the use of a military base on the major island, which had been until 1967 the seat of the NATO Allied Force Mediterranean. The decision of Qadhafi in 1970 to expel British and American military personnel from the El Adem and Wheelus Field bases in Libya perhaps had inspired the Maltese leader, who shared Qadhafi's commitment to non-alignment and anti-imperialism. As a consequence of Mintoff's decision, the British military base would close indefinitely on 31 March 1979, once the 7-years treaty would finally expire.

British control of Maltese military facilities was a valuable asset for Western naval dominance in the Mediterranean region. On the other hand, the fast modernisation of warfare in the second half of the XX century had significantly reduced the archipelago's military value. Compared to the strategic significance during WWII – when the control of Malta had been decisive in the North African theatre – the enhanced range of ballistic weaponry and aircraft made the control of the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) somewhat less crucial. In the nuclear warfare era, control and protection of land-based airfields and launch sites turned out strategically more relevant. In sum, the nuclear age eventually confirmed the thesis of MacKinder over Mahan: control of the coasts was more important than control of the seas[3]. Against this backdrop, Malta still retained a "negative" geostrategic value. That is, the strategic significance of the archipelago was ancillary to that one of Sicily. Ergo, Malta would acquire a military value only in case a foreign power hostile to Italy would take control of the islands' facilities[4]. All considered, the closure of the British base alarmed the Western governments. Since the late 1960s, the Soviet Union was reinforcing the V Eskadra – its naval squadron in the Mediterranean – and the Maltese military facilities could be a useful addendum to the logistic network built by the Soviets in the region.

On his part, Dom Mintoff was perfectly aware of both blocs' interests in Malta.

3 Ciro Elliot Zoppo, "American Foreign Policy, NATO in the Mediterranean and defense of the Gulf", in Giacomo Luciani (ed), *The Mediterranean Region. Economic Interdependence and the Future of Society* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1983), pp. 292-324 (303)

4 Matteo Paesano, "Malta: l'accordo di assistenza politico-militare", in Matteo Pizzigallo and Paolo Alberini (eds), *Missioni Militari Italiane all'Estero in tempo di pace (1946-1989)* (Roma: Agenzie Industrie Difesa, n.d.), pp. 267-274

When he announced the closure of the base in 1972, he had perhaps overestimated the income that tourism and a latecomer industrial policy could bring to the island's economy. Indeed, the contribution of the base revenue to the national budget still appeared unreplaceable in the mid-1970s. Naturally penchant to brinkmanship, Mintoff realised that he could use the island facilities as a bargaining chip to replace – or even increase – the lost revenues. Accordingly, in early-1976 the Prime Minister announced that, once the British base would close in 1979, Malta would become neutral and non-aligned. In accordance with the new diplomatic status of the island, the Maltese ports would be closed to any military units, whatsoever their membership, alignment or sympathy. In exchange for Malta's neutrality, he requested the Western countries to entirely replace the base revenues.

In response to Mintoff's announcement, in December 1976 the European Community (EC) assigned mandate to Italy and France to conduct negotiations on behalf of the Nine with Maltese authorities. Because of the flamboyant – to use a euphemism – personality of Mintoff, however, relations between the European and Maltese delegations did not enjoy a promising start. The Prime Minister's diplomatic attitude was staunchly uncompromising and provocative. The French officials in particular resented the extenuating negotiation style of the Maltese. Nevertheless – and perhaps thanks to the patient mediation of the Italians – on 19 May 1978 the parties eventually drafted an interim agreement, regarding the juridic nature of the neutrality and the acknowledgement of such status by the European countries.

The counterparts, however, had still not levelled the two main sources of friction: the entity of the economic aid attached to the neutrality declaration, and the guarantors of the new status. Regarding the former, Mintoff wanted to completely recover the lost revenues – quantified by the Maltese as $75 million per annum for five years – that the British base granted to the national budget. The Europeans regarded the request as completely irrational, as the neutrality status would deny the use of military facilities to the Western forces alike. Moreover, Mintoff refused to accept neutrality to be guaranteed only by Western powers. Concerning the latter issue, Mintoff exacted the inclusion of two countries of the southern shore of the Mediterranean – namely, Algeria and Libya – as equal guarantors in the upcoming declaration. Other than preventing an apparent association with the Western bloc, demanding the inclusion of Libya and Algeria was a clever expedient to ease the reception of his economic requests by spreading

the sought aid among more countries. For its part, France refused to include the Arabs in the agreement and threatened to leave the negotiations[5]. Italy, facing the unravelling of a two-year-long diplomatic thread, in the summer of 1978 unexpectedly declared that it would continue discussions with the Maltese even unilaterally, whatsoever the French delegation (thus the EC) would decide[6]. For a country such as Italy – which did assign (and still does) extreme importance to multilateralism in foreign policy – it was a decisive turnabout, symptomatic of the significance that Maltese neutrality had for the Italians.

Eventually, the 1978 interim agreement turned out nothing but an ephemeral success. As early as 1979, negotiations entered a blind alley. Alongside the entity of the budgetary aid and the inclusion of the Arabs in the neutrality guarantee, another issue surfaced: Mintoff exacted that the monetary aid ought to be quantified *before* any binding declaration of neutrality. The EC-Nine staunchly refused: the move was correctly perceived as a sneak attempt to give a price to the Maltese neutrality. Furthermore, the informal agreement reached in 1978 provided for the inverse process: the exact quantification of the economic support was to be left to future consultations, *following* the declaration of neutrality scheduled for March 1979. Facing of the umpteenth turnabout of Mintoff, the French delegation refused to discuss further and deserted the talks. In response, on 29 March 1979 Mintoff expelled the Italian military mission stationed on the island since 1973. Two days later, on 31 March, the British base closed definitely, and the last British soldiers left Malta. The day would also become a national festivity, known as "Freedom Day". In a meeting between the head of the Italian military mission in Malta and the Maltese Minister of Public Works, the latter passed the buck to the Libyans, who had allegedly stressed the utter "inappropriateness" ("*inappropriatezza*") of "other Western forces" remaining in Malta after the departure of the British units. The Italian Ambassador in Malta rather believed that the decision was a diplomatic move to exert further pressure on the Italians, in order to obtain their assent on the budgetary requests of Mintoff[7].

5 Fiammetta Atzei, "La neutralità di Malta e l'Italia: Cronistoria dei rapporti italo-maltesi 1976-1985", *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali*, 52:3 (1985), pp. 409-440 (412-413)

6 "Il Ministro degli Esteri on. Forlani al Senato della Repubblica – 20 luglio", in Ministero degli Affari Esteri – Servizio Storico e Documentazione (MAE-SSD), *1978 – Testi e Documenti della Politica Estera Italiana* (*TDPEI*), p. 133

7 Telegram number (telno) 65, *riservatissimo,* "Malta post '79", La Marte (ITALDIPL Valletta) to MAE, 10 March 1979, busta (b.) 12, Serie Ufficio del Consigliere Diplomatico –

Hitherto, the Libyans had indeed demonstrated a seemingly constructive approach to the neutrality issue, claiming as early as 1976 to prefer a joint Euro-Arab guarantee of Maltese neutrality. Doubts remained about the real intentions of Qadhafi, who was suspected of exploiting the European-Maltese-Libyan liaison as a Trojan horse to probe the European attitude with his regime. Notwithstanding, the notorious antipathy of the Colonel for both superpowers somewhat reassured the EC partners: a politico-military role for Libya could be instrumental in curbing Maltese leaning towards the Eastern bloc[8]. Yet, the rupture between Malta and the Europeans in 1979 opened a chink in the door to a stronger Libyan presence in Malta politics. Qadhafi could leverage on a make-up narrative that merged Malta and Libya into the "great Arab nation". As the two countries were thus bound to a "common destiny of liberty and union", the Colonel could present himself as the legitimate protector of Maltese interests[9]. This would pave the way for an inclusion of Malta into his developing sphere of influence. The hegemonic plan of Qadhafi was indeed running since the mid-1970s, aiming at turning Libya into the arbiter of regional dynamics. A *tout azimouth* offensive (from the support to the Fronte Polisario in Western Sahara, to the southbound military intervention in Chad, the eastward border clashes with Egypt and the Libyan-led commando raids in Tunisia towards north) sought to cut down to size Libya's recalcitrant neighbours, who stubbornly rebuffed Libyan ambitions. Against this backdrop, an exclusive patronage over Malta would crown Qadhafi's "dreams of empire", as the Americans termed the Libyan activism[10].

On his part, Mintoff was clever enough to understand that the Libyan embrace was not dangerless. Thus, the Maltese leader never completely closed the door to

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II Versamento (UCD-IIV), Fondo Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (FPCM), Archivi Centrali dello Stato, Roma, Italia (ACS)

8 Telex 053/202, *riservato*, "Esame del problema di Malta post '79 nell'ambito della Cooperazione Politica a Nove", MAE (DGAP-Uff. III) to PCM *et alia*, 20 marzo 1979, b. 12, UCD-IIV, FPCM, ACS

9 Telno 87, *riservatissimo,* "Malta. Celebrazioni festa nazionale. Aspetti di politica internazionale ed interna", Battaglini (ITALDIPL La Valletta) to MAE, 2 April 1980, b. 133, Fondo Ufficio del Consigliere Diplomatico (UCD), Archivio Storico della Presidenza della Repubblica, Roma, Italia (ASPR)

10 Massimiliano Cricco, "Libya, the United States and the Soviet Union. From the rise of Qadhafi to Ronald Reagan's policy of pressure", in Bruna Bagnato and Massimiliano Guderzo (eds), *The Globalization of the Cold War: diplomacy and local confrontation* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 55-70 (63)

the Italians, who – quite alone among the European countries – remained firmly committed to securing a position of neutrality for the insular state.

3. Malta Neutrality Agreement (1980-1981)

According to Mariele Merlati – so far, the sole scholar who has addressed Italian-Maltese negotiations around the Neutrality Agreement – a deal was eventually achieved on 15 September 1980 chiefly because of Mintoff's sudden turnabout in the summer, when the Maltese leader dropped his uncompromising stance and trimmed his budgetary requests. Oddly enough, the sword that cut the Gordian knot had been wielded by Qadhafi himself. In fact, Maltese-Libyan relations were plummeting since early-1980s: initially, Qadhafi refused to renew the agreement that granted Malta access to Libyan under-priced oil. The Colonel's decision was clearly coercive, since oil prices had grown uncontrollably at the turn of 1980 because of the Iranian Revolution and the following "second oil shock". Furthermore, Mintoff was scared by the provocative behaviour of the Libyan Armed Forces – deployed on the island as military advisors – which undermined his leadership and authority. Finally, Maltese-Libyan relations reached their nadir on 21 August 1980, when a Libyan submarine harassed the ENI-owned drill barge SAIPEM II while it was conducting oil explorations in the Medina Bank, a contested maritime zone between Malta and Libya. The Italian ship was operating upon mandate of Maltese government, which sought to undertake the exploitation of oilfields that were located in the area. Clashes between the two countries about the sovereignty over the Medina Bank dated back to the mid-1970s, and the issue had been already brought to the International Court of Justice. However, the warmongering attitude of the Libyans was unprecedented. Fearing that Qadhafi may raise up the ante and directly occupy Malta before formal security guarantees would be in place, Mintoff resolved to cut relations with Tripoli and urging in turn Rome to sign a rushed Neutrality Agreement in just a couple of weeks. Facing the dread prospect of being overthrown by Qadhafi and replaced with a more conciliant leader, Mintoff accepted the significantly lower Italian offer of budgetary aid and signed an agreement that would, in turn, protect Malta against any further Libyan hostile act[11].

11 Mariele Merlati, "«*Condemned to a Mediterranean destiny*». L'Italia e l'accordo per la neutralità di Malta dell'estate del 1980", *Ventunesimo Secolo*, 41:1 (2017), pp. 91-109

Merlati's interpretation is sound and well-grounded, and alternative archival sources corroborate her thesis. In fact, it was Mintoff who approached the Italian government first-hand. Already in February 1980, during a meeting with PCI General Secretary Enrico Berlinguer, Maltese Foreign Minister Alex Sceberras Trigona demanded the Communists to use their contacts at the *Farnesina* (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs seat) to urge the Italian government to overcome the impasse. During the talks, Trigona restated once again that the Maltese government explicitly linked its independence to the sought neutrality: Malta would have escaped at any cost "being absorbed into one bloc or the other, or falling under the exclusive protection of Libya"[12]. Two months later, responding to the Maltese overture, the Italian government led by Francesco Cossiga made public its offer of budgetary aid to the Maltese government (consisting of circa $10 million per annum for five years) during a meeting of the EC-Nine Mediterranean Working Group. The Italian offer, however, had been delivered through bilateral channels, and it was parallel to similar offers of development aid made by the EC. The announcement irked the European partners: the Italian "volte face" undermined European unity afore a crucial issue such as Mediterranean security, and seemed endorsing – if not encouraging – the blackmailing negotiation style of Mintoff[13].

All considered, it is reasonable to concur that it was a Maltese acceleration that broke the impasse. This, in turn, allowed Rome and La Valletta to formalise the entente via an exchange of notes between the two capitals. The result was a Neutrality Agreement – signed on 15 September 1980, and then ratified on 15 April 1981 – composed by two declarations that bound both parties: Malta affirmed being "a neutral state actively pursuing peace, security and social progress by adhering to a policy of non-alignment and refusing to participate in any military alliance". Accordingly, "no foreign base [would] be permitted on Maltese territory", and "no military facilities in Malta will be allowed to be used

12 Minute, "Trigona – Colloquio con Berlinguer (19/2/1980) – Da parte di Dom Mintoff", Rubbi to Pajetta (Sezione Esteri PCI), 12 February 1980, fascicolo (fasc.) 216, b. 607, Archivi del Partito Comunista Italiano (APCI), Fondazione Antonio Gramsci, Roma, Italia (FG) [orig. Italian: "*di essere risucchiata da un blocco o dall'altro o di cadere sotto l'esclusiva protezione della Libia*"]

13 Letter, *confidential*, "Malta", Daunt (SED-FCO) to Fergusson (FCO), 14 May 1980, § 4, folio (f.) 5, Records of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) 9/2992, The National Archives, Richmond, Great Britain (TNA)

by any foreign forces except at the request of the Government of Malta". In turn, Rome undertook to "respect the sovereignty, independence, neutrality, unity and territorial integrity of the Republic of Malta", whereas La Valletta could request support to Italy "whenever there exist a threat or violation" against its territory. Of greater significance was, however, the Italian commitment (stated at Article 5.2 of the declaration) to "adopt any other measure, *not excluding military assistance*, [when] it will consider necessary to meet the situation"[14].

Nonetheless, such an interpretation tilts the focus excessively on the Maltese side, while depriving Italy of any meaningful agency. As a result, the Italians appear simply standing in a "wait-and-see" posture that – despite in the long run – brought the Maltese on a more reasonable approach to the negotiations and kept the island out of Libyan and Soviet influence. Rather, Italian role in the acceleration and the eventual achievement of Maltese neutrality declaration seems less passive. Additional primary sources depict a different scenario: the combination of critical developments in the international, regional and national contexts urged Italy to break the stalemate and reaching an agreed solution to the neutrality issue with Mintoff. The Italian policymakers themselves – namely, Foreign Minister Emilio Colombo and Defence Minister Lelio Lagorio – were acutely conscious of the relevance that the issue had for the national security and foreign policies. The Neutrality Agreement was indeed a turning point in Italian politics, which broke the traditional posture of abstention from military responsibilities that characterised Italy since 1945. Although it would be exaggerated to assume that Italy's international status was particularly enhanced by the Agreement, its strategic significance was apparent[15].

First and foremost, it enlarged the area of competence of Italian Navy, i.e., the Force mainly involved in the execution of Article 5.2. Despite just in theory, it was a litmus test to evaluate the results of the Naval Law released in 1975[16].

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14 Vol. 1237 of *Treaty Series – Treaties and international agreements Registered or filed and recorded with the Secretariat of the United Nations* (New York: United Nations, 1996), pp. 3-13, available online at: https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201237/v1237.pdf. Italics added.

15 Lelio Lagorio, *L'ora di Austerlitz. 1980: la svolta che cambiò l'Italia* (Firenze: Polistampa, 2005), pp. 104-105

16 Further information about the so-called Naval Law can be found in: Francesco Zampieri, *1975: la Marina rinasce. La legge navale del 1975* (Vicenza: In Edibus, 2014)

As a result, it granted greater control of the Sicilian Channel, the chokepoint that connected the two quadrants of the Mediterranean. Control of the Channel was obviously not undisputed, given that Libya claimed sovereignty over a large part of the Maltese waters. However, control of Maltese facilities gave Italy the upper hand in case of a naval dispute in the area. Finally, Malta was deemed crucial to remedy the fundamental shortcoming of Italy's national security system: the early-warning detection of hostile forces coming southwards[17]. The issue was of major concern, given that unidentified aircraft and submarines were constantly able to penetrate Italian national maritime and airspaces without difficulties.

The exchange of notes sparked an intense parliamentary debate, especially in regards to the controversial Article 5.2. The provisions for a military intervention in defence of Malta were judged not sufficiently clear, leaving an excessive wiggle room to the executive. Repeated references to the multilateral nature of the Agreement – which obliged Italy to consult with "neighbouring Mediterranean States making a like Declaration" before taking any steps – were mocked by the opposition, given that Italy was for (the time being) the sole Mediterranean country having signed such an agreement. According to the Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano*, PCI), the Agreement assigned to the Italian Government absolute discretionary power regarding the opportunity to use or not military force, transmogrifying Malta into a *de facto* Italian protectorate[18]. Furthermore, it allowed the use of Maltese facilities to a NATO country, while denying at the same time access to the Soviets. As a result, the guarantee of Maltese neutrality could be subtly exploited to make its non-alignment a mere façade[19].

In response to the allegation of pursuing a covert hegemonic policy, the Government repeatedly stressed the discretionary nature of Article 5.2. Any comparison with NATO *casus foederis* were simply far-fetched, as the Agreement assigned exclusively to Italy the decision whether militarily intervene (or not) in defence of Malta. According to Foreign Minister Colombo,

17 Report, *NATO secret*, "Malta", UKMILREP-NATO to MODUK, 11 September 1981, f. 30, FCO 9/3210, TNA

18 Meeting 296, VIII *legislatura*, 11 March 1981, Atti Parlamentari - Camera dei Deputati (AP-CDep), p. 26640

19 Letter, Ledda (CeSPI) to Pajetta (Sezione Esteri PCI), 31 October 1980, fasc. 216, b. 607, APCI, FG.

> the adoption of any military assistance measures is therefore envisaged only as a measure of last resort and solely on the assumption that such measures were deemed necessary by the Italian side. It follows that the nature and scope of such measures would likewise be determined on the basis of the Italian assessment of their appropriateness and suitability to the circumstances prevailing at the time, in order to address the situation[20].

The Government was clearly reticent in admitting that Italy's military role in the Mediterranean had been aggrandised by the Neutrality Agreement. The traditional Italian policy of "*buon vicinato*" – aimed at maintaining cordial relations with all the Mediterranean countries – could be questioned. Therefore, the short-term goal was to reassure all neighbouring countries about the strictly-defensive nature of the Agreement. In this regard, Italy repeatedly stressed that the Agreement encouraged the admission of other countries in the guarantee of Malta's neutrality. Especially in the first months following the signature, Rome devoted much diplomatic efforts to build a multilateral framework for the defence of Maltese neutrality. The policy – eventually unsuccessful – sought to find further signatories of joint declarations, designed along the Italian-Maltese blueprint. According to the British Ambassador in Rome, Italy had even proposed Mintoff (who had refused, though) to add a provision to the Agreement stating that Italian military guarantee would come into force only once *another* Mediterranean country would formally join the treaty[21].

Multilateralism certainly was certainly a keyword of Italy's international policy, yet also a sore point at the turn of the 1980s. As insightfully argued by Luciano Tosi, the "crisis of multilateralism" – which did not spare any of the major multilateral organisations in that decade – was one of the leading factors in driving Rome towards a more assertive use of its military power. So far, the national leadership (namely, in the figures of Giorgio La Pira and Aldo Moro) had heralded an "irenistic" approach towards international relations. This attitude translated into

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20 Meeting 296, VIII *legislatura*, 11 March 1981, AP-CDep, p. 26647 [orig. Italian: "*l'adozione di eventuali misure di assistenza militare è quindi prevista solo come estrema ratio e unicamente nell'ipotesi che esse venissero giudicate necessarie da parte italiana. Ne consegue che anche la natura e le dimensioni di tali misure sarebbero determinate in base all'apprezzamento che sarebbe fatto da parte italiana circa la loro congruità e rispondenza alle circostanze di fatto per far fronte alla situazione*"]

21 Telno 483, *confidential*, "Italian relations with Malta", Arculus (UKEMB Rome) to FCO, 11 September 1980, §2, f. 28, FCO 9/2992, TNA

a firm anchorage of national security policy to collective organisations such as NATO and the United Nations. Such a paradigm granted an effective ideological cover to the Armed Forces – whose reputation had been irremediably damaged by their conduct during WWII – but restricted their deployment only as part of interventions carried under a multilateral aegis. Both for the post-fascist political culture (as internationalism and pacifism permeated the whole political spectrum) and prosaic economic reasons (as this approach allowed to keep military expenditure at minimum), unilateral military initiatives were out of the picture[22]. The paradigm, however, was no longer sustainable in the mid-1970s. The acute crisis that multilateral organizations were suffering at the global level was even worse in the Mediterranean context. Neither of the supranational and international organizations to which Italy belonged (be it the UN, NATO or the EC) could claim real governance over the region. At the same time, military tensions became an endemic – if not structural – factor of the Mediterranean strategic landscape. Against this backdrop, Italy could not keep up with the same approach without putting at serious risk national security. As a result, the "crisis of multilateralism" forced Italy to join military interventions (both uni- and bi-lateral) never seen since 1945[23]. At first sight, the Maltese issue fits perfectly in this interpretative pattern: facing the impossibility to set up a functioning multilateral framework, Italy resolved to proceed unilaterally in defending Maltese neutrality. Nevertheless, the "crisis of multilateralism" must be regarded as a contextual factor – perhaps not even hierarchically more significant. In fact, Italy was also moved by a cluster of motives, spanning from international concerns to regional ambitions and domestic politics.

At the international level, it would be impossible to read the Maltese issue without wearing bipolar lenses. In the Cold War era, it is a truism that bipolarism permeated all domains of international relations. The Maltese affair was not an exception: ergo, fears about the spread of Soviet influence over Malta were the main reason to push Italy towards a quick resolution of the neutrality issue[24]. The timing of the decision is indeed revealing. Negotiations between the Italians

22 Angelo Panebianco, "Il paese disarmato", Il Mulino, 5 (1993), pp. 898-904

23 Luciano Tosi, "Italy, the UNO and the International Crises", in Massimo De Leonardis (ed), *Italy's Foreign and Security Policy after the Second World War* (Madrid: UNISCI, 2011), pp. 77-123

24 Lagorio, *L'ora di Austerlitz*, p. 115

and the Maltese hastened from February onwards, following the announcement by U.S. President Jimmy Carter – on 23 January 1980 – that the United States would shift the pillar of its global military deployment towards the Persian Gulf. These "shifting priorities[25]" deeply alarmed the Italian strategic planners, as the unexpected and hasty reduction of the U.S. VI Fleet undermined the defence framework that had granted Italian security so far. Parallelly, the Soviets were constantly looking for bases in the Mediterranean. In response to the American strategic shift, the V Eskadra could easily seize the Maltese opening and opportunistically replace the United States as the major naval power in the region, directly threatening Italy's southern front.

Besides the militaries, also the diplomatic personnel agreed that the Soviet interest in Malta must be curbed without further delays. In the aftermath of the British base closure's first anniversary (31 March 1980), Italian Ambassador Maurizio Battaglini wrote an alarmed report regarding the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) conference held in La Valletta during the first anniversary of the closure of the British base. The AAPSO meeting central theme was – not casually – the "fight against imperialist bases", which clearly paid lip service to the supposed non-alignment of the island. According to Battaglini, the rhetoric employed by Sceberras Trigona (who skilfully attended the meeting as a representative of the MLP, rather than in his official capacity as Minister of Foreign Affairs) was a "clear demonstration of Maltese slipping towards positions typical of the most pro-Soviet among the non-aligned countries". Mintoff was scrupulous in dividing the policy of the Government from his Party's activity. In this way, he could use the MLP diplomatic channels with the Warsaw Pact while escaping from any allegation of siding with the USSR. Battaglini thus argued that the conference was paving the way for a formalisation of Soviet-Maltese relations[26]. Elaborating further on the matter, the Ambassador conjectured about a new "corollary" to be added to the infamous Brezhnev Doctrine, for which "the shift of any country from the Western camp to the non-aligned group should be

25 Olav Njølstad, "Shifting Priorities: The Persian Gulf in US Strategic Planning in the Carter Years", *Cold War History*, 4:3 (2004), pp. 21-55

26 Telno 86, *riservatissimo,* "Malta. Conferenza Organizzazione per solidarietà popoli afro-asiatici (AAPSO)", Battaglini (ITALDIPL La Valletta) to MAE, 2 April 1980, §4, b. 133, UCD, ASPR [orig. Italian: "*una chiara dimostrazione di scivolamento maltese verso posizioni che contraddistinguono i più filo-sovietici dei paesi non-allineati*"]

regarded by Moscow as irreversible", thus foreclosing any chance of a pro-Western turn in the Maltese future[27]. As a further confirmation of the value of Cold War considerations, an officer of the British Embassy in La Valletta reported to the FCO that the intensification of Soviet-Maltese relations in July 1980 – following an agreement that allowed Soviet ships to use the Maltese drydocks – had been "the main reason to hurry and scurry" on the Italian side[28].

The controversial issue of Soviet-Maltese strategic liaison resurfaced in January 1981, when Malta signed an agreement with the USSR that allowed Soviet merchant ships to use the fuel storages – built in the past by the British for NATO purposes – in Malta. As a result, Soviet military units could refuel in international waters. Due to the Maltese permission, the autonomy of the V Eskadra resulted greatly enhanced, easing the need for naval facilities of the Soviet military ships[29]. The Soviet-Maltese agreement alarmed the Western chancelleries. NATO allies thus turned to Italy, which was in charge of guaranteeing not just the neutrality, but also the non-alignment of Malta. In a meeting between the British Ambassador in Italy and Italian Chief of Naval Staff Mario Bini, the latter affirmed that the agreement was

> helpful to the Russians but it [would] not transform the operational capability of their fleet in the Mediterranean. […] The main advantage [was] rather that it [would] give them a toe-hold in Malta from which they [could] hope to develop a greater physical presence[30].

As such, the flirting between La Valletta and Moscow posed several problems to Italy. On the one hand, the Farnesina was forced to keep Italian-Maltese relations as warm as possible, lest wasting years of patient diplomatic efforts. Accusing Mintoff of violating the Neutrality Agreement (perhaps not the letter, but surely its spirit) might easily put in jeopardy the entire accomplishment. On

27 Telno 87, *riservatissimo,* "Malta. Celebrazioni festa nazionale. Aspetti di politica internazionale ed interna", Battaglini (ITALDIPL La Valletta) to MAE, 2 April 1980, §5, b. 133, UCD, ASPR [orig. Italian: "*una chiara dimostrazione di scivolamento maltese verso posizioni che contraddistinguono i più filo-sovietici dei paesi non-allineati", parallelo al "crescente interesse russo in questa isola*"]

28 Letter, *confidential*, Aiers (UKEMB La Valletta) to Daunt (SED-FCO), 6 August 1980, §2, f. 20, FCO 9/2992, TNA

29 Atzei, "La neutralità di Malta e l'Italia", p. 427

30 Telno 52, *confidential*, "Malta/USSR", Arculus (UKEMB Rome) to FCO, 25 February 1981, §2, f. 11, FCO 9/3210, TNA

the other hand, the Western partners looked at the Soviet-Maltese entente with growing concern, not sparing any chance to complain with Italy about the issue. In the second half of 1980, Italy repeatedly tried to downplay the strategic relevance of the Soviet-Maltese agreements of July 1980 and January 1981. Since the ratification of the Italian-Maltese Treaty was imminent, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that such a step would grant Italy a firm *locus standi* to protest more effectively in the future[31].

The Soviet-Maltese agreements stirred up the waters also on the other shore of the Atlantic. So far, Maltese neutrality had been essentially a European issue, especially because of the new emphasis accorded by the United States to strategic developments in South-West Asia. However, the new Republican Administration led by Ronald Reagan – who was sworn into office on 21 January 1981 – ceased the non-interference posture adopted hitherto by Jimmy Carter and delivered a concerned *aide memoire* to the Italian government already on 28 March. U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission in Rome Robert Paganelli reported "the grave concern with which Washington had viewed the recent Soviet-Maltese agreements, which contributed significantly to increasing the threat posed by the Soviet fleet in the area"[32]. Paganelli stressed how "that this was not merely a matter of American concern, but rather constituted a substantial threat to Western interests and to stability in the Mediterranean"[33], and concluded by expressing the hope that Italy,

> drawing upon its special relations with Malta and the substantial financial contribution extended to the Maltese Government, [would] take all appropriate action to underscore that the island's neutral status [was] fundamentally incompatible with the situation that had come to prevail[34].

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31 Letter, *confidential*, "Malta/USSR", Culshaw (UKEMB Rome) to Martin (SED-FCO), 20 February 1981, §3, f. 10, FCO 9/3210, TNA

32 Note, *segreto*, Malfatti (SG-MAE) to Colombo, 28 March 1981, b. 13, UCD-IIV, FPCM, ACS [orig. Italian: "*la viva preoccupazione con cui Washington [aveva] registrato le recenti intese sovietico-maltesi, le quali contribuivano in misura sensibile ad aumentare la pericolosità della flotta sovietica nella zona*"]

33 Ibid. [orig. Italian: "*non ci si trova[sse] del resto soltanto di fronte ad una preoccupazione americana, ma ad una sostanziale minaccia per gli interessi dell'occidente e per la stabilità del Mediterraneo*"]

34 Ibid. [orig. Italian: "*avvalendosi dei suoi speciali rapporti Malta e dell'importante contributo finanziario concesso a Governo maltese*, [volesse] *compiere ogni opportuna azione per sottolineare come lo status di neutralità dell'isola [fosse] sostanzialmente incompatibile con lo stato di cose venutosi a determinare*"]

The issue was taken up also during NATO and WEU meetings in early-1981, where the Americans hinted at their intention to relieve the Italians from the Maltese dossier, to then adopt a Western collective management of the entire question. The Italian reaction was – understandably – outraged: neither the United States nor the European partners had displayed the bare intention to join Italy in the guarantee of Maltese neutrality in the previous year[35]. The U.S. suggestion reified once again Italy's self-perception of inferiority afore the informal "directorate" within the Atlantic Alliance (composed by the four major NATO members: the United States, Great Britain, France and FRG) that Rome had often lamented in the previous years. As a result, the Government felt the urgency to keep the Cold War at bay from the Maltese affair. Failing this, the other Western countries would have been justified to relieve Italy from its duty as guarantor of Maltese neutrality. Such a turn would reconfirm Italy's role as junior partner in the Atlantic Alliance, delivering a fatal blow to the country's prestige and credibility.

As things stood, even if Cold War concerns actually played a significant role, Italian diplomacy preferred to keep them in the background. To offset the repeated overtures of Mintoff to the Soviet Union – publicly justified by the Prime Minister as "to complement and counterbalance the Neutrality Agreement" – the Italian Government adopted a narrative that framed the Italian-Maltese Agreement into a "purely Mediterranean context", as Defence Minister Lagorio stated in September 1981[36]. "Mediterranean" and "stability" became a leitmotiv in the Government strategic narrative, up to becoming the keywords of the whole regional policy of Italy. Stability, however, was not construed as a mere preservation of the *status quo* (i.e., passively), but rather actively: as an ongoing effort to set up a mechanism of mutual security amongst the Mediterranean countries, aiming to defuse regional tensions. The Maltese Neutrality Agreement fitted perfectly in such a policy design.

The fact that the Italian Government prioritised regional concerns over bipolar commitments was apparent in its public communication. In the aftermath of the Agreement signature, Italy's Prime Minister Arnaldo Forlani declared that

> Our objective will be to consolidate the stability of the Mediterranean re-

35 Ibid.

36 Letter, "Malta/Italy", Reith (UKEMB La Valletta) to Culver (SED-FCO), 7 September 1981, §8, f. 28, FCO 9/3210, TNA

> gion, with a particular focus on deepening bilateral cooperation aimed at encouraging the progress and economic and social growth of its peoples. This objective is also supported by the initiative that Italy formalized with Malta[37].

In 1981, Italy's Foreign Minister Emilio Colombo returned on the matter during the parliamentary debate on the forthcoming Agreement ratification. In the Chamber of Deputies, the Minister affirmed that

> Italy contributes to the formation of a situation – namely, Malta's neutrality – aimed at ensuring peace, cooperation, and the gradual alignment of neighbouring countries in recognising this neutrality, with the goal of consolidating and enhancing Mediterranean stability. Our country's foreign policy is particularly sensitive to Mediterranean issues, which is why we pay close attention to developments in the region, to the conflicts that still trouble it, and to initiatives aimed at restoring peace. This sensitivity and attention are explained by the fact that, more than any other country, Italy, due to its geographical position, traditions, and both political and economic influence, is firmly convinced of the importance of Mediterranean stability for the broader goal of maintaining peace[38].

The communicative strategy to shield the Mediterranean region from Cold War contaminations was functional to achieve stability in the area, and Rome built a "regionalist" narrative in accordance.

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37 "Dichiarazioni programmatiche alla Camera dei Deputati del Presidente del Consiglio on. Forlani – 22 Ottobre", in MAE-SSD, *1980 – TDPEI*, p. 210. [orig. Italian: "*Il nostro obiettivo sarà quello di consolidare la stabilità della regione mediterranea, approfondendo in particolare i rapporti bilaterali di collaborazione volti ad incoraggiare il progresso e la crescita economica e sociale dei popoli che ne fanno parte. Al conseguimento di questo obiettivo è rivolta anche l'iniziativa che l'Italia ha formalizzato con Malta il 15 settembre scorso*".]

38 "Il ministro degli Esteri on. Colombo alla Camera dei Deputati – 10 Marzo", in MAE-SSD, *1981 – TDPEI*, p. 65. [orig. Italian.: "*L'Italia contribuisce alla formazione di una situazione – quella, appunto, della neutralità di Malta – che è diretta ad assicurare la pace, la collaborazione ed il conseguimento di aggregazioni successive nel riconoscimento della neutralità, in particolare da parte di altri paesi vicini, al fine di consolidare ed accrescere la stabilità del Mediterraneo. La politica estera del nostro paese è particolarmente sensibile ai problemi del Mediterraneo e per questo prestiamo ogni necessaria attenzione agli sviluppi di quell'area, alle situazioni conflittuali che ancora la travaglino, come alle iniziative di collaborazione rivolte a ristabilire la pace. Questa nostra sensibilità e questa nostra attenzione si spiegano alla luce del fatto che più di ogni altro paese l'Italia, per la sua posizione geografica, per le sue tradizioni, per il suo peso sia politico che economico, è fermamente convinta dell'importanza che, sul piano generale del mantenimento della pace, riveste la stabilità dell'area mediterranea*".]

Besides bipolar concerns and regional ambitions, Italy's domestic politics also played a role in the finalisation of the Agreement. Since the "volte face" in the spring of 1980, the *Quai d'Orsay* was particularly angered with the *Farnesina*, which was accused of undermining European unity and endorsing Mintoff's unjustified *grandeur*. In particular, French diplomacy accused the Italian Socialist Party (*Partito Socialista Italiano*, PSI) of having mastered the Italian overture to Dom Mintoff, in spite of his provocative negotiation style and the decision to expel the Italian military mission in the previous year[39]. In support of the French insinuations, timing is again revealing. On 4 April (only a few days before the Italian offer of $10 million per annum), Prime Minister Francesco Cossiga had formed his second government, which now included the PSI in the majority. The Socialists joined the cabinet after an exile from the governmental area since 1974. Cossiga's choice to include the PSI aimed to give a clear cut to the "national solidarity" season, during which the two major parties of Italy's political spectrum (communists and Christian-democrats) had narrowed their differences at unprecedented levels. The PSI had relentlessly opposed the convergence between *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC) and PCI, fearing that the political space of the minor forces would result nullified. In the new three-party coalition (DC, PSI and PRI), the PSI gained several key ministers and, for the first time since Italian unification in 1861, a Socialist – Lelio Lagorio – entered *Palazzo Baracchini*, the seat of the Ministry of Defence[40].

The Socialists did not want to be treated as junior partners of the new majority. Then led by a young and ambitious secretary – Bettino Craxi – the PSI wanted to leave a mark on the foreign policy decision-making, and acquire enough international credibility to be regarded by the allies of Italy – namely, the United States and the European partners – as a credible alternative to the DC as the leading force of the Italian political panorama. The PSI had already been decisive in the previous year, during the parliamentary vote that had approved the deployment of the Euromissiles[41]. The Maltese neutrality was another issue where to prove the centrality of the PSI in the majority. Craxi thought that the personal connections

39 Merlati, "«*Condemned to a Mediterranean Destiny*»", pp. 96-97

40 Lelio Lagorio, *L'ultima sfida. Gli euromissili* (Firenze: Loggia dei Lanzi, 1998), pp. 20-25

41 Leopoldo Nuti, "Italy and the Battle of the Euromissiles: The Deployment of the US BGM-109 G 'Gryphon', 1979-83", in Olav Njølstad (ed), *The last decade of the Cold War. From Conflict Escalation to Conflict Transformation* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), pp. 277-300

of party personnel with MLP members – given that both forces were affiliated to the Socialist International – could be capitalised to reinforce the PSI international stature, eventually, to add a further trophy to the party's showcase.

In the following months, it became apparent that the Socialist Party was conducting a parallel – and more effective – diplomacy with the MLP. On several occasions, MFA personnel were outflanked by members of the PSI Foreign Department. The official diplomats were subjected to the tantrums of Mintoff, while PSI envoys enjoyed the sympathy of MLP delegates. To add worse, the Italian Socialists had private communication channels with the Maltese government top echelons, whereas the representatives of the Italian Embassy were usually allowed to meet only low-level officials. The disparity of treatment became acute in October 1980, after the resignation of Cossiga as Prime Minister. The event inevitably delayed the ratification of the Agreement – which was subjected to parliamentary approbation – and Mintoff vehemently protested with the Italian MFA, threatening to shred the entire deal. Notwithstanding, as reported by the British Embassy in Rome, "Mintoff's friends in Rome would tell him not to make a fuss", clearly referring to the Socialist Party[42]. Then, as predicted, Mintoff eventually dropped his remonstrations.

Within the PSI, the Minister of Defence was believed the architect of the Party's policy towards Malta, as well as the real designer of the Agreement. According to the PCI Foreign Department, the Italian Foreign Ministry was "hesitant and divided over this type of treaty, and the strongest pressure came from the Ministry of Defence"[43]. Lagorio's success in winning Colombo's misgivings was even more remarkable in the face of the two parties' international affiliations: whereas PSI and MLP were member of the Socialist International, DC and the Maltese Nationalist Paty (MNP) were both affiliated to the Christian Democrat International. Relations between Malta's two main political parties were extremely strained, with repeated mutual accusations of undermining democracy on the island. For Colombo, having contributed to a decisive electoral victory for the Labour Party at the expense of the Nationalists meant weakening a political and

42 Letter, *confidential*, "Italy/Malta", Goodison (UKEMB Rome) to Daunt (SED-FCO), 30 September 1980, § 2, f. 32, FCO 9/2992, TNA

43 Letter, Ledda (CeSPI) to Pajetta (Sezione Esteri PCI), 31 October 1980, fasc. 216, b. 607, APCI, FG [orig. Italian: "*era titubante e divisa su questo tipo di trattato, e la sollecitazione più forte [era] venuta dal Ministero della Difesa*"]

ideological ally of his own party.

A year later, the Italian Ambassador in Malta still lamented that the PSI – and Lagorio in particular – regarded the Italian-Maltese relations as a "private domain". Party channels were used to arrange meetings, excluding the MFA. Moreover, Maltese authorities often referred directly to the PSI offices in Rome, intentionally keeping the Embassy and the Ministry in the dark about the nature of the communications[44]. All considered, the close friendship between Lagorio and Mintoff largely eased the whole negotiation process and, in retrospect, turned out being perhaps the decisive factor in closing the Italian-Maltese deal[45].

4. The Neutrality Agreement renewal (1981-1987)

Despite Italy's alleged *locus standi*, Soviet-Maltese relations continued to deepen. Between 8 and 10 October 1981, Malta and the Soviet Union exchanged a series of diplomatic notes and signed a further trade agreement. Of particular significance was the Soviet recognition of Malta's neutrality, whereby the USSR declared itself ready, in the event of a threat to or breach of international peace and security, to enter into consultations with the Maltese Government to coordinate their respective positions with a view to removing the threat or restoring peace[46]. A month later, Mintoff met in Rome the new Prime Minister Giovanni Spadolini (in office since 29 June 1981), who had reassigned Lagorio to the Defence Ministry and Colombo to the *Farnesina*. As per routine, in the aftermath of the meeting the Italian MFA released ssued a customary statement reaffirming "the importance of the commitment undertaken by the Italian Government to guarantee Malta's neutral status", noting that this was "in line with the course of action consistently upheld by Italy in the Mediterranean, aimed at greater stability and the preservation of the principles of peace and coexistence throughout the region"[47].

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44 Letter, *confidential*, "Malta/Italy", Reith (UKEMB La Valletta) to Culver (SED-FCO), 7 September 1981, §§ 3-4, f. 28, FCO 9/3210, TNA

45 Letizia Argentieri, *Lelio Lagorio: un socialista* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2020), pp. 126-128

46 Atzei, "La neutralità di Malta e l'Italia", p. 431

47 "Visita del Primo Ministro Dom Mintoff (Roma, 11-13 novembre)", in MAE-SSD, *1981-TDPEI*, p. 330-331 [orig. Italian: "*l'importanza dell'impegno assunto dal Governo italiano di garanzia dello status neutrale di Malta* […] *la linea d'azione sempre perseguita*

The apparent specularity between the Soviet and Italian communqué did not pass unnoticed, as confirmed by the minutes of the private meetings between Mintoff and his Italian counterparts. Both Spadolini and Colombo raised several perplexities about the recent *aide memoire*, stressing the incompatibility between the non-aligned status of Malta (an essential element of its neutrality status) and the expressed will to "coordinate" its policy with the USSR[48]. Commenting on the matter, a few months later the British delegation at the Anglo-Italian Politico-Military Talks – despite being still "happy to defer to the Italian lead of Malta" – was forced to warn that "any further development (such as making available air or maritime facilities) would be significant cause for concern"; in response, the Italians could do nothing but reassure once again that "it was unlikely that [Mintoff] would sell Malta to the Soviet Union"[49] – a déjà-vu indeed.

As the time went by, the financial protocol signed in September 1980 with Malta – attached to the Neutrality Agreement – expired on 31 December 1983. The protocol was surely the most effective tool to curb Maltese provocative wandering at the fringes of the non-alignment camp; therefore, the Italian government had much interested in renegotiate its terms, possibly with stricter provisions. Alike, the Maltese Government sought to renew it forthwith, in order to obtain additional economic aid for the years to come. By leveraging on the objective significance of Malta for Italy's national security, in 1980 Dom Mintoff had been able to grant a substantial aid programme[50].

In 1984, he thought he could win another hand by playing the same cards, perhaps for even higher stakes. The new American Administration appeared indeed to offer further opportunities to capitalise on Malta's strategic role, as demonstrated by the repeated U.S. protests against agreements between the Sovi-

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dall'Italia nel Mediterraneo, per una maggiore stabilizzazione e per la salvaguardia delle regole di pace e di convivenza nell'intera regione"]

48 Note, "Malta neutrale", MAE (unsigned) to Colombo, [undated but] January 1982, promemoria 1, sottofascicolo (sottofasc.) 1, fasc. 18, sotto-serie (ss.) 2, serie (s.) 5, sezione (sez.) 1, fondo 1, Archivi della Fondazione Bettino Craxi, Roma, Italia (AFBC). Interestingly, Lagorio apparently did not join the choir of condemnation.

49 Minute, *confidential*, "Anglo/Italian Politico/Military Talks: London, 15 February 1982", § 18, f. 1, FCO 33/5770, TNA

50 Minute, "Rapporti italo-maltesi", MAE (unsigned) to Andreotti, 13 October 1983, §§ 1- 3, annex 6B, folder "Visita dell'On. Presidente del Consiglio negli Stati Uniti (18-22 ottobre 1983)", b. 630, Archivio Giulio Andreotti (AGA), Istituto Luigi Sturzo, Roma, Italia (ILS)

et Union and Malta. As a matter of fact, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union was, of course, willing to accept the other making appreciable inroads into Maltese facilities. Notwithstanding, neither superpower turned out particularly eager to meet the Prime Minister's unreasonable aid demands[51]. By the same token, however, Mintoff petty tactic to sell Maltese neutrality to the highest bidder was widely renowned and, ultimately, the Maltese leader "had nothing to sell but his geography". Eventually, after several years of hedging his bets, Mintoff could not claim any significant economic commitment from any major country[52]. In retrospect, Mintoff's attempt to secure economic support from the superpowers by overstating the strategic importance of Malta's port facilities proved to be an emblematic case of wishful thinking.

Italy was the exception that proved the rule. The Maltese Prime Minister had way more success in playing Italy's political forces against each other to extract the maximum advantage. This strategy had already paid dividends, especially by exploiting the internecine struggle for supremacy between the DC establishment and the PSI newcomers[53]. The tried-and-tested MLP-PSI relations were ready at hand, and in 1983 Mintoff thought that he could not hope for better conditions in the eve of the incoming negotiations: for the first time in the Italian Republic history, a socialist – PSI Secretary Bettino Craxi – had been nominated Prime Minister.

The two met for the first time on 13 January 1984 in Rome. In the briefing papers prepared for the Prime Minister by Diplomatic Adviser Antonio Badini, particular emphasis was placed on the deep-seated distrust harboured by the incumbent Maltese government towards Giulio Andreotti, who had succeeded Colombo as Foreign Minister in the new government. Andreotti was a DC member, and his party was accused by the MLP of interfering in Malta's domestic affairs by providing economic, ideological, and political support to the Nationalist Party. On the other hand, the PSI and the MLP belonged to the Socialist International.

51 Report, *confidential*, "NATO Summit in Bonn: 9-10 June - Southern Flank Issues", Hunt (SED-FCO) to Pearce (DEF-FCO), 26 May 1982, §§ 12-13, f. 6, FCO 9/3354, TNA

52 Letter, *confidential*, "Malta: informal discussions with European colleagues", Wilson (SED-FCO) to Reith (UKEMB La Valletta), 10 September 1982, § 5, f. 3, FCO 33/5753, TNA

53 Telno 343, *confidential*, "EC/Malta", Bridges (UKEMB Rome) to FCO, 19 July 1983, § 3, f. 4, FCO 33/6676, TNA

It was hence expected that Mintoff would emphasize the principle of "party solidarity" with the Prime Minister to counterweight the (alleged) hostility of the Foreign Minister[54].

Badini also warned that, unprecedently, the Maltese Foreign Ministry had unexpectedly declared that the financial protocol and the neutrality declaration constituted a *unicum*. Construed as two pillars of a single treaty, the expiring of the protocol implied the expiring of the neutrality status, which would be reaffirmed only following the signature of a new financial protocol. The Italian Government, on the opposite, regarded Malta's declaration of neutrality (and the related Italian military guarantees) as an irreversible element in the Mediterranean strategic landscape, completely detached from any other facets of the Italian-Maltese bilateral relationship[55]. An attached minute produced by the *Farnesina* reported about an appreciable thaw between Mintoff and Qadhafi. Seemingly, La Valletta sought to relaunch the relationship with Tripoli, with the aim of securing an unspecified Libyan "backing" of Malta independence and non-alignment. In this regard, Italy was not opposed in principle to a closer dialogue between the two countries, yet – due to the timings – "a possible attempt at political exploitation was nevertheless discernible". Probably in response to Italy's failure to condemn Libya in the dispute between Tripoli and Valletta over the delimitation of their respective continental shelves, the rapprochement with Gaddafi sought to put Italy on the defensive ahead of the first meeting between Craxi and Mintoff[56].

The meeting between Craxi and Mintoff on 13 January 1984 went reasonably well: the former was able to convince the latter that Andreotti's tenure of the Foreign Ministry would not affect the relationship between Italy and Malta. Furthermore, Craxi gave assurances that negotiations for a renewed protocol would start forthwith. On the other hand, the Italian Prime Minister regarded now Malta as a minor issue, not worth of particular efforts. Common membership to the Social-

54 Note, *riservatissimo*, "Incontro del Presidente del Consiglio con il Primo Ministro di Malta Dom Mintoff (Palazzo Chigi, Venerdì 13, ore 12)", Badini (CD-PCM) to Craxi, [undated] January 1984, § 1, f. 1, fasc. 20, sotto-sotto-serie (sss.) 1, ss. 3, s. 2, sez. 2, fondo 1, AFBC

55 Ivi, §2

56 Note, "Rapporti italo-maltesi", MAE [unsigned] to Badini (CD-PCM), [undated] January 1984, §3, f. 2, fasc. 20, sss. 1, ss. 3, s. 2, sez. 2, fondo 1, AFBC [orig. Italian: "*tuttavia riconoscibile un possibile intento di strumentalizzazione*"]

ist International did not grant Mintoff any special status in the eyes of Craxi, to Maltese disappointment. Notwithstanding, the discussion was described as "more relaxed that any previous discussion between Maltese and Italian ministers"[57].

At first sight, things seemed starting on a good pace between Mintoff and the new Italian government, but the erratic nature of Maltese politics quickly prevailed. Already on 1 March 1984, Maltese Foreign Minister Trigona delivered a spiteful letter to Andreotti, accusing him of both fraud and stonewalling. Apparently, during the Craxi-Mintoff meeting on 13 January, it had been agreed that Italy would directly transfer to the Central Bank of Malta the unspent fundings provided by the 1980 financial protocol (amounting at $14 million)[58]. The aid was originally reserved to finance development projects (and not as direct contribution to the Maltese budget) but, due to absence of proposals by the Maltese, it had remained unused. During a meeting on 22 February with between Trigona and Andreotti, the latter objected that a direct transfer was not permitted under the development aid law, and there was consequently need for a whole new law to be approved by the Parliament. Accordingly, Andreotti demanded patience to put in motion the process. In response, Trigona contested that such a "dilatory tactic" was either aimed

> at best, to help the Maltese leader of opposition by sabotaging the Italo-Maltese Neutrality Agreement or at worst, to undermine the authority of [Andreotti's] own Prime Minster and bring about a crisis in Italo-Maltese relations comparable in size to the one we faced when you were at the helm[59].

In other words – in line with the blackmailing negotiation style of Mintoff's clique – Trigona declared Malta's readiness to shred the Neutrality Agreement in case Italy did not comply with Maltese aid requests. The tough approach paid (literally) dividends, as the Italian government swiftly transferred (in early May

57 Letter, *confidential*, "Visit by Maltese Prime Minister to Rome", Northern (UKEMB Rome) to Harrison (SED-FCO), 23 January 1984, § 4, f. 5, FCO 9/4705, TNA

58 It was an annoying Maltese habit to claim that something in support of their own case had been agreed during private meetings with *other* figures of the Italian government. For another instance of such a petty negotiation tactic, see: minute, "Rapporti italo-maltesi", MAE (unsigned) to Andreotti, 13 October 1983, § 2, annex 6B, "Visita dell'On. Presidente del Consiglio negli Stati Uniti (18-22 ottobre 1983)", b. 630, AGA, ILS

59 Letter, Trigona to Andreotti, 1 March 1984, fasc. 211, b. 816, APCI, FG. Trigona referred to March 1979, when Andreotti held the Prime Ministry and Malta expelled the Italian military mission.

1984) $14 million to the Maltese Central Bank without waiting for the due Parliamentary approval[60]. Not surprisingly, the success galvanised the Maltese and, in the following months, La Valletta repeatedly raised up the ante with Rome.

On its part, the Italian government might not simply drop the dealings with the Maltese: security on Italy's southern borders revolved around the presence of a friendly, neutral and non-aligned government in Malta. The (largely symbolic) presence of two military missions on the island (MICTM and DIATM[61]) – established after the 1980 Neutrality Agreement – ensured that strategic liaison worked effectively. Differently from the financial protocol, the Treaty of Military Cooperation that allowed the Italian militaries to operate in Malta was to expire on 31 December 1984. To renegotiate their permanence for the following years, Defence Minister Spadolini reached Malta on 1 September 1984. During the talks, his counterpart forwarded a list of military equipment to be delivered to the Maltese Armed Forces by the Italian Chief of Staff. As Spadolini later reported to Craxi, the list was simply unreasonable: it contained either materiel unavailable to the Italian Armed Forces (such as Swiss-made anti-aircraft systems) or untransferable for economic and operative reasons (like a coastal patrol boats *Sparviero*, whose value was £60 billion per unit). Nevertheless, Italian commitment towards a "credible defence of Maltese neutrality" advised against rejecting *in toto* Malta request of military aid. Accordingly, Spadolini suggested to supply ammunitions and machinery (for a total value of £1853 million) that partially met Maltese demands. Moreover, "as a further demonstration of Italian will of cooperation", the Ministry of Defence was ready to cede 60 additional military vehicles, for £200 millions of further expense[62]. Craxi agreed, and on 15 November wrote to Mintoff reporting the Italian offer of military materiel. The Prime Minister underlined how the gesture of good will was intended to pave the way for a new round of negotiations, towards the definition of a comprehensive agree-

60 Note verbale no. 0049/282, MAE to Embassy of the Republic of Malta (Rome), 4 May 1984, fasc. Malta, b. 252, Fondo Gabinetto del Ministro (FGM), Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome, Italy (ASMAE)

61 Respectively, *Missione Italiana di Cooperazione Tecnica a Malta* (tasked with civil engineering duties) and *Delegazione Italiana di Assistenza Tecnico Militare* (tasked training the Maltese Armed Forces).

62 Letter, prot. 3/45444/12.16.102(84), Spadolini to Craxi, 8 October 1984, f. 8, fasc. 20, sss. 1, ss. 3, s. 2, sez. 2, fondo 1, AFBC

ment over the Italian-Maltese diplomatic, economic and strategic relations[63].

Apparently, Craxi's overture was not sufficient. An omen of the crumbling relationship between Malta and Italy occurred in the night of 16 November 1984, when a bomb detonated at the Italian Embassy in La Valletta (fortunately, without causing victims)[64]. Concurrently, the rapprochement between Malta and Libya intensified. Three days later (19 November), a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation was signed by Qadhafi and Mintoff, covering in particular the field of military cooperation: the released communiqué reported that Libya would support Malta in building and reinforcing its Armed Forces – a task so far assigned to the Italian mission DIATM. The unexpected acceleration of the negotiations – as Maltese-Libyan talks had been dragging along for months without significant advancements – was, according to the Italian Ambassador, mainly due to the Maltese side. Malta's domestic security was deteriorating at fast pace (besides the Italian, also the British and Vatican embassies had been bombed in November 1984) and the Government faced wide-spread social unrest because of the depressing performance of the economy. Therefore, Mintoff was seemingly trying to secure his grip on power by involving the Libyans in the management of internal security. Against this backdrop, the outlooks of Maltese neutrality were not encouraging[65].

The Maltese-Libyan Treaty was swiftly ratified on 29 November and, presumably due to Libyan pressures, already on 5 December 1984 Mintoff announced that the Neutrality Agreement signed with Italy was decayed[66]. The first consequence of the rupture was the confinement of the Italian militaries into their barracks, in sight of their prompt expulsion from the island (exactly as it had happened in March 1979, during Andreotti's Prime Ministry). Oddly enough, the Maltese government did not officially notify the decision to the Italian Embassy: rather, it resorted again to its informal contacts in Rome to blackmail that the crisis might be resolved if the Prime or Foreign Minister accepted to visit La Valletta for

63 Letter, Craxi to Mintoff, 15 November 1984, fasc. Malta, b. 252, FGM, ASMAE

64 Report 125/62RR, *riservatissimo*, "Missione di sicurezza a Malta, 18-20 novembre 1984", MAE – Organo Centrale Sicurezza, 26 November 1984, fasc. Malta, b. 252, FGM, ASMAE

65 Telno 640, *riservato*, "Visita Gheddafi a Malta", Negrotto (ITALDIPL La Valletta) to MAE, 20 November 1984, b. 133, UCD, ASPR

66 Atzei, "La neutralità di Malta", p. 436

urgent talks no later than 10 December[67]. Italian reaction to the Maltese announcement was mixed, and did not immediately display the due unity. Defence Minister Spadolini was furious and, on 6 December, released a press communiqué that accused the Maltese of "unwarranted provocations" and threatened the immediate withdrawal of the two military missions[68]. Conversely – and despite his proverbial "decisionist" political style – Craxi seemed inclined to yield to Mintoff's deadline and "meet his fellow-socialist without imposing prior conditions". Alarmed, the *Farnesina* forebode the "triumphal Maltese propaganda that might result" if Craxi complied, and strongly advocated to reject the umpteenth Mintoff's extortion – a diplomatic line shared also by the Prime Minister's staff[69]. Eventually, Craxi chose to follow the advice and did not pay an official visit to Malta.

Notwithstanding, Italian diplomacy was not particularly worried about Libyan-Maltese entente. *Farnesina* personnel observed that the erratic and flamboyant personalities of Mintoff and Qadhafi were incompatible. The relationship had never produced any meaningful diplomatic result, let alone in the military field. Not even the recent Treaty awarded Qadhafi any *droit de regard* over Malta: on the contrary, any Libyan intervention must follow an "an explicit request of support, in terms and to an extent yet to be specified, while preserving a certain degree of freedom of manoeuvre for the government in Valletta". More perplexity accompanied instead Malta's commitment to "to supply Libya on a continuous basis with all information directly or indirectly relating to Libya's security", since such a formula "did not appear, *prima facie*, to be consistent with Malta's repeatedly reaffirmed neutrality"[70].

Differently from Italy, the United States observed with rising concern developments in the archipelago. In the aftermath of the Treaty ratification, the Nation-

67 Telno 239, "Italy's Neutrality Agreement with Malta", Booth (UKEMB La Valletta) to FCO, 7 December 1984, f. 14, FCO 9/4703, TNA

68 "L'Italia minaccia il ritiro della sua missione militare", *L'Unità* (7 December 1984)

69 Telno 831, *confidential*, "Italy/Malta", UKMEB Rome to FCO, 10 December 1984, f. 15, FCO 9/4703, TNA

70 Note, "Malta: ultimi sviluppi (novembre-dicembre 1984)", MAE [unsigned], [undated] January 1985, fasc. Malta, b. 252, FGM, ASMAE [orig. Italian: "*richiesta esplicita nei modi e nelle misure che verranno indicati, salvaguardando una certa libertà di manovra al governo di La Valletta* […] *fornire in via continuata alla Libia tutte le informazioni che direttamente o indirettamente attenessero alla sicurezza della Libia* […] *non sembra in prima facie in armonia con la pur ribadita neutralità maltese*"]

al Security Council (NSC) released a National Security Study Directive (NSSD), commissioning an interagency review to examine the present situation and the presumed outlooks. The NSSD noted in particular the enhanced ties between Malta and the USSR, underlining how "five years of Soviet efforts to acquire influence in the Mediterranean [had] produced tangible results"[71]. A interagency report between the CIA and the Department of State was then released in July 1985, but it generally downplayed NSC concerns. Primarily, Malta was not a top strategic priority for the United States, because of (as abovementioned) the development of modern long-ranged weapons. In accordance with its "negative" geostrategic value, it was sufficient to impede the Soviets to make appreciable inroads. In this regard, the report registered how Soviet efforts had experienced only limited success hitherto. On the opposite, U.S.-Maltese relations were deemed "sound, insofar as Malta remained non-aligned and did not give military access to [U.S.] potential adversaries". Slightly more upsetting was Maltese-Libyan relationship. Qadhafi was "more active" than the Soviets, and "more likely to cause some trouble". In strategic terms, Malta had only marginal value as military base; rather, it was "primarily useful as a political symbol of Libyan influence". Moreover, it was strongly suspected that Malta had "a *de facto* arrangement with Libya and the PLO, [that] assured no terrorist actions in return for unobstructed transit of Libyan and PLO operatives". U.S. intelligence had certified that – at least on one occasion – Malta had been used as "staging area for state-sponsored terrorist activities" (the attempted assassination of former Libyan Prime Minister Bakkoush in Cairo). However, Libyan terror squads "had already had use of nearby Libya, and the addition of Malta might offer little advantage". In sum, U.S. main interests were to prevent further Libyan and Soviet encroachment into Malta, but the overall assessment was that – due to Maltese economic dependence on the West and wide-spread "dislike" for the Libyans – neither Tripoli nor Moscow represented a threat in the short- and medium-term[72].

The report conclusions were then integrally reported in the National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 213 of February 1986, which outlined three main

71 NSSD-8-84, "U.S. Policy Towards Malta", McFarlane to Reagan, 10 December 1984, *FAS*, available online at: https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nssd/nssd-8-84.pdf

72 Report, "U.S. Policy Toward Malta", Platt (Interagency Group no. 51), 23 July 1985, *CIA Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room*, available online at: https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP87R00529R000100030061-4.pdf

goals of U.S. diplomacy concerning Malta: to deny USSR and Libyan use of the island facilities for military purposes; to prevent Malta from serving as sanctuary for international terrorism; to maintain Malta's traditional pro-Western orientation. To achieve these, the White House devised a threefold policy: enhancing political support to the Nationalist Party against the Labours; reinforcing intelligence monitoring over Libyan-Maltese cooperation; increasing contacts with People's Republic of China ("which [had] a substantial presence in Malta"), the Holy See and NATO allies (especially Italy, Great Britain and West Germany, "whose interests are most directly concerned"), as they were better placed than the United States to influence events in Malta[73].

An encouraging development – at least, for anyone who had dealt with Malta in the past – was the turnover occurring in late-1984 in the Maltese cabinet: on 22 December, Dom Mintoff resigned as Prime Minister after ten years in office. His post was inherited by Mifsud Bonnici, former Deputy PM. Bonnici and Mintoff – being both age-old MLP militants – shared the same political vision for Malta's future; hence, no appreciable changes regarding Maltese foreign policy should be expected anytime soon. Rather, it might be possible to leverage on the different personalities of the two leaders: whereas Mintoff had proved being almost "irrational" in his negotiation style, Bonnici was regarded generally more willing to strike deals and achieve compromises[74].

Unfortunately for Italy, Bonnici's Prime Ministry did not bear the sough fruits. Throughout 1985, Italy-Malta relationship entered into a phase of doldrum. The two Italian military missions exemplified the status: despite confined into their barracks since mid-December 1984, they never left the island. As the Treaty of Military Cooperation had expired on 1 January 1985, Italian militaries remained in Malta in a legislative limbo, short of any bilaterally-agreed permission and yet continuing to operate their tasks. They were then cyclically forced from time to time to suspend their activities, following the occasional outburst of the Maltese government against Italy (for instance, in September 1985)[75].

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73 NSDD-213, *secret*, "U.S. Policy Toward Malta", 12 February 1986, *FAS*, available online at: https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-213.pdf

74 Letter, *confidential*, "Malta: call by the Italian counsellor", Neilson (SED-FCO) to Farr (SED-FCO), 8 January 1985, f. 1, FCO 9/5108, TNA

75 Teleletter 020/10, *confidential*, "Italy/Malta", Northern (UKEM Rome) to FCO, 24 September 1985, f. 6, FCO 33/8041, TNA

A breakthrough was accomplished only in February 1986, when an informal blueprint for the sought politico-economic agreement between Italy and Malya was finally agreed between the parties. The thaw had been preceded in December 1985 by a series of bombing and terrorist attacks against Libyan targets in the island. The Italian intelligence hypothesised that it was a "protest – staged by an extremist faction – against the Government's pro-Libyan policy"[76]. Similarly to what had happened in 1984 (when Western targets had been attacked in La Valletta), it seemed that subversive activities in Malta were a sort of barometer of incoming changes in Maltese government's foreign policy. In fact, it took just a few weeks in early-1986 to Bonnici and his cabinet to abandon the bulk of their long-awaited demands and coming into terms with Italy. Notwithstanding, another ten months of lengthy negotiations elapsed before the agreement could be officially signed between the parties on 20 November 1986[77].

The new financial protocol would run for a four-years period (1987-1990), providing for a total aid of £180 billion, equally divided between grants and credits. The Maltese had tried an eleventh-hour attempt to apply a linkage between the protocol and the neutrality, by requesting to back-date the agreement to January 1985 in recognition of Malta's neutrality throughout the past two years. On their part,

> the Italians had been adamant that there was no question of Italy 'buying' Maltese neutrality […] since Malta neutrality had been recognised by Italy in 1980 and that [it] would continue to regard Malta as neutral until any action by Malta caused that view to be altered[78].

5. Conclusion

Six years after the signature of the Maltese Neutrality Agreement – and almost three after it had expired – Italy reconfirmed its commitment to guarantee the sov-

76 Report 8622/0602/B, *riservato*, "Malta – Attentato terroristico", SISMI, 20 December 1985, fasc. Malta, b. 284, FGM, ASMAE [orig. Italian: "*una protesta – ad opera di una frangia estremista – rivolta contro la politica filo-libica del Governo*"]

77 Curiously, just ten days before (10 November) Malta and Libya had finally signed a treaty of delimitation of national waters. The delimitation treaty followed the pronunciation of the International Court of Justice of 3 June 1985, decisive in resolving a decade-long harsh dispute between the two countries. For further information, see: Fabio Caffio, *Glossario di Diritto del Mare. Diritto e geopolitica del Mediterraneo Allargato* (Roma: Rivista Marittima, 2020), p. 122

78 Letter, *restricted*, "Malta: Italy/Malta financial protocol", Williams (UKEMB Rome) to Lawrence (SED-FCO), 4 December 1986, f. 11, FCO 9/5426, TNA

ereignty, independence, neutrality, unity and territorial integrity of the Republic of Malta. Nevertheless, the available sources, however, point to a clear mismatch between the strategic outlook and the diplomatic outcomes; the importance Italy attached to guaranteeing Malta's neutrality – substantiated by a decade-long diplomatic effort – was *not* tantamount to an adequate military commitment.

Already in 1986, General Luigi Caligaris explicitly denounced a "trend of not measuring the military effort (and related risks) associated with a political agreement", highlighting Malta as an emblem of such. As an exemplary case of conventional strategic protection, this arrangement required Italy to meet three minimum conditions: to possess a joint operational capability capable of assembling a task force that could be deployed rapidly and effectively (a *Forza di Intervento Rapido*, FIR); to liaise with "national units" (i.e. Maltese forces) adequately equipped and trained, and capable at least of holding out until the forces of "the guaranteeing state" (i.e. Italy) arrived; and, finally, to have local logistical infrastructure in place to facilitate such an intervention. Yet, neither conditions could be deemed as achieved in the mid-1980s: the FIR existed only as a statement of intent, while military cooperation with the Maltese forces was highly unsatisfactory, owing to the island government's paradoxical whims. According to Caligaris, this reflected an Italian habitus of undertaking strategic commitments already known to be unfillable, thereby creating the conditions for a demonstration of unreliability in strategic affairs, with negative repercussions at the political level, both internationally and domestically[79].

Italian diplomatic sources substantiate such a pitiless scenario. In 1984, Italian Ambassador Andrea Negrotto Cambiaso told to his British peer in La Valletta that the military missions MICTM and DIATM were "little but useless", as they "did absolutely nothing of any importance [there] except to give some minor military training. They were only important because they were [there] at all". Confirming once again the mere "negative" geostrategic significance of Malta, the Ambassador conceded that "if [the Italian militaries] left, they would leave a vacuum, which could be dangerously filled by some other state"[80]. Remarkably,

79 Luigi Caligaris, Carlo Maria Santoro, *Obiettivo difesa: strategia, direzione politica, comando operativo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986), pp. 244-245. The inaccessibility of Italy's military archives makes it impossible to establish the extent to which the concerned Chiefs of Service shared Caligaris's assessment.

80 Letter, *restricted*, "Conversation with the Italian Ambassador", Booth (UKEMB La Vallet-

the *Farnesina* officer in charge of the Maltese dossier "did not [even] regard the continued presence of Italian military training team in Malta as essential", fatalistically affirming that "it would *not* be a 'disaster' if they were forced to leave". Differently from the Ambassador, the MFA "did not believe that the experienced Mintoff would fall into the hands of the Libyans or the Russians"[81] – a formula periodically reiterated since the signature of the first Agreement in 1980.

Italy seemed quite overconfident in Maltese capacity to escape foreign interferences. Rather, it appeared that, ultimately, the Italians *hoped* that Malta would remain independent, non-aligned and neutral by its own forces because "the guarantee of neutrality might not, in practice, work as smoothly as it sounded on paper". According to the Foreign Ministry, the main obstacle was that "Italian military interventions outside the area of its strict NATO commitments was a highly sensitive domestic political issue". Internecine opposition to any display of national military capabilities – namely referring to the recent minehunting mission in the Red Sea, which sparked a spiteful debate in the Parliament – was expected to pose several "political difficulties […] if Malta were ever to call on the Italian guarantee", severely limiting "the extent to which the Italians would, or could, act in response"[82]. In conclusion, military ineffectiveness and political reluctance made an Italian intervention in defence of Maltese neutrality rather implausible. To Rome, it was more a matter of international prestige, rather than a compelling national security issue. Against this dismaying backdrop, Italian strategy of "Mediterranean stability" was based on the fragile assumption that all involved actors would choose diplomacy rather than military confrontation. In conclusion, Italian guarantee of Maltese neutrality was a politico-military commitment that would hopefully never been put to the test; as laconically resumed by the British Embassy in Rome, "a clear gap between promise and reality"[83].

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ta) to FCO, 24 October 1984, f. 9, FCO 9/4703, TNA

81 Telno 831, *confidential*, "Italy/Malta", UKEMB Rome to FCO, 10 December 1984, f. 15, FCO 9/4703, TNA

82 Teleletter, *confidential*, "Italy/Malta", Lamport (UKEMB Rome) to FCO, 7 May 1985, § 6, f. 3, FCO 33/8041, TNA

83 Ibid.

1976-1985", *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali*, 52:3 (1985), pp. 409-440

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The Dehumanization of War: The Use of Drones and Legal Issues Under International Humanitarian Law

by Carla Rampino

Abstract: Technological evolution has always represented one of the main factors driving the transformation of warfare, requiring international law to adapt its mechanisms of protection. Over the past two decades, the increasing deployment of armed drones (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles – UAVs) and, more recently, weapon systems equipped with artificial intelligence-based decision-making capabilities, has raised new legal and ethical questions concerning the conduct of hostilities and the protection of human beings under contemporary international humanitarian law. Drones have assumed a central role in contemporary military operations, profoundly altering the relationship between political decision-making, the use of force, and legal responsibility. The ability to employ lethal force remotely eliminates the traditional reciprocity of risk among combatants and introduces a new form of warfare characterized by the progressive separation of the operator from the battlefield. This transformation has fueled debate over the so-called dehumanization of warfare, understood not only as a consequence of technological automation, but above all as the progressive detachment of human beings from decisions regarding the use of force and from the consequences arising thereof. From a regulatory perspective, international humanitarian law maintains a technologically neutral approach: drones, like any other weapons system, must be employed in accordance with the principles of distinction, proportionality, military necessity, and precaution, as established by the Hague Conventions, the 1949 Geneva Conventions, the 1977 Additional Protocols, and customary international law. However, the deployment of increasingly autonomous systems raises the question of whether these principles remain sufficient to ensure effective protection of human life or whether they require reinterpretation in light of emerging technologies. This contribution aims to assess whether the current international legal framework is capable of adequately regulating the use of armed drones and autonomous weapon systems, or whether technological developments have created regulatory gaps that undermine the effectiveness of the safeguards provided by international humanitarian law. The argument advanced is that the risk of dehumanization does not derive from the use of drones as technological platforms themselves, but rather from the progressive erosion of human control over lethal decision-making processes.

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From this perspective, the true legal challenge lies in preserving the centrality of human judgment and individual responsibility, which are essential conditions for ensuring that the principle of humanity continues to represent the foundation of the law of armed conflict. The analysis will be conducted through an examination of the main sources of international law, the case law of international courts, and the most authoritative legal scholarship, with the aim of determining whether the current regulatory system remains capable of effectively addressing the challenges posed by emerging military technologies.

Keywords: International Humanitarian Law; Armed Drones (Uavs); Autonomous Weapon Systems (Aws); Artificial Intelligence; Armed Conflicts; Dehumanization Of Warfare; Meaningful Human Control; International Responsibility; Principle Of Distinction; Principle Of Proportionality.

1. The Technological Transformation of Armed Conflict and the Progressive Dehumanisation of Warfare

The relationship between technological progress and the law of armed conflict has been a constant feature throughout the history of international law[1]. The evolution of weapons has always represented one of the main factors driving changes in the rules governing the conduct of hostilities, requiring legal systems to undertake the difficult task of adapting established principles to increasingly sophisticated methods of warfare. Historical experience demonstrates that each technological innovation has initially provided a military advantage capable of altering existing strategic balances, with regulatory intervention aimed at limiting its most destructive effects occurring only at a later stage. This was the case with chemical weapons following the First World War, biological weapons, nuclear devices and, more recently, anti-personnel mines and cluster munitions. In all these cases, international law has responded ex post[2],

1 On the relationship between technological development and the evolution of the law of armed conflict, see Y. Dinstein, *The Conduct of Hostilities under the Law of International Armed Conflict*, 4th ed., Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 1–25; M.N. Schmitt, ed., *Tallinn Manual 2.0 on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Operations*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, Introduction; M. Sassòli, *International Humanitarian Law: Rules, Controversies and Solutions to Problems Arising in Warfare*, 2nd ed., Edward Elgar, 2024, pp. 53–68.

2 On the predominantly reactive nature of the development of international humanitarian law in response to technological innovation, see H.W. Boothby, Weapons and the Law of Armed Conflict, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 17–38; K. Frits and L. Zegveld, Constraints on the Waging of War, 5th ed., Cambridge University Press, 2023.

seeking to bring technological innovation within a regulatory framework inspired by the protection of human beings.

The use of armed drones fits into this evolutionary dynamic[3], yet presents characteristics that distinguish it significantly from previous technological innovations. Whereas the new weapons of the past primarily altered the destructive capabilities of armed forces, remotely piloted systems directly affect the decision-making process leading to the use of lethal force. The change concerns not merely the nature of the instrument itself, but also the relationship between the person deciding to launch an attack, the location in which it is carried out, and the very perception of the act of killing. Contemporary warfare is thus increasingly assuming a dimension mediated by technology, in which combat takes place through digital interfaces, satellite networks, data-processing systems and algorithms capable of supporting – and potentially replacing – human judgement.

From a strictly legal perspective, this development raises questions that go beyond the mere lawfulness of the means employed. International Humanitarian Law does not regulate weapons according to their greater or lesser degree of technical sophistication, but rather on the basis of their compatibility with the fundamental principles governing the conduct of hostilities. Technology, in itself, remains legally neutral[4]. What matters is the manner in which it is used and its ability to comply with the obligations imposed by international law. This approach is clearly reflected in Article 36 of Additional Protocol I to the 1977 Geneva Conventions[5], which requires States to determine, prior to the introduc-

3 On the development of armed drones and their strategic impact, see P.W. Singer, *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*, Penguin Press, 2009, pp. 39–74, 181–215; P.L. Bergen and D. Rothenberg, eds., *Drone Wars: Transforming Conflict, Law and Policy*, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 1–18.

4 The principle of technological neutrality constitutes one of the cornerstones of international humanitarian law: its rules govern the effects produced by means and methods of warfare rather than their technological nature. In this regard, see Y. Dinstein, *The Conduct of Hostilities under the Law of International Armed Conflict*, 4th ed., Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 83–98; H.W. Boothby, *Weapons and the Law of Armed Conflict*, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 24–39.

5 On the procedure for reviewing the legality of new weapons provided for under Article 36 of Additional Protocol I of 1977, see International Committee of the Red Cross, *A Guide to the Legal Review of New Weapons, Means and Methods of Warfare*, ICRC, 2006; H.B. Boothby, *Weapons and the Law of Armed Conflict*, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 341–366.

tion of new weapons or methods of warfare, whether their employment would be prohibited by international law applicable to that State. This provision represents a significant expression of the principle of technological neutrality: the law does not prohibit innovation, but requires it to be subject to a prior legal review.

The growing proliferation of drones has nevertheless demonstrated that such reviews have become increasingly complex. Unlike traditional weapons, a drone constitutes an extremely versatile technological platform, combining intelligence-gathering, surveillance, target identification and the use of force. The remote operator no longer acts on the basis of direct perception of the battlefield, but rather through images, data and information processed by high-precision sensors. The decision to strike therefore results from a cognitive process that differs substantially from that characterising traditional combat, as it is mediated by technological systems that select, organise and represent operational reality.

This technological mediation has given rise to extensive academic debate surrounding the concept of distance warfare[6], an expression used to describe a particular method of conducting hostilities in which the physical distance between the operator and the target becomes a structural feature of military action. Remote warfare is certainly not an entirely new phenomenon. Artillery and aviation had already progressively reduced direct contact between opposing forces. However, the use of drones introduces a qualitatively different form of distance, since the operator maintains continuous control over the entire operation, observing the target before, during and after the attack, without being exposed to any personal risk. Warfare is no longer conducted within a shared physical space, but rather through an almost complete geographical separation between those who exercise force and those who are subjected to it.

The legal implications of this transformation have been the subject of intense debate within international legal scholarship. One interpretative approach, represented primarily by Michael N. Schmitt and William H. Boothby[7], maintains

6 On the concept of distance warfare and its legal, political and ethical implications, see G. Chamayou, *Théorie du drone*, La Fabrique, 2013, pp. 25–60; English translation of *Teoria del drone*, DeriveApprodi, 2014, pp. 31–67; N.C. Crawford, ed., *Accountability for Killing: Moral Responsibility for Collateral Damage in America's Post-9/11 Wars*, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 1–33.

7 For the argument that drones represent merely a means of warfare to which the ordinary rules of international humanitarian law apply, see M.N. Schmitt, "Drone Attacks under the

that a drone constitutes merely a means of warfare and that the operator's physical distance from the battlefield is legally irrelevant. According to this approach, International Humanitarian Law regulates the effects of an attack rather than the location from which it is conducted. Consequently, provided that the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution are respected, the use of drones does not raise legal issues that differ from those associated with any other weapons system.

A different approach, supported by scholars including Mary Ellen O'Connell and Grégoire Chamayou[8], argues instead that remote warfare produces indirect effects on the very interpretation of international legal rules. The substantial reduction in risk to the attacking State's military personnel significantly lowers the political cost of using force, thereby making armed operations more frequent and contributing to the normalisation of violence as an instrument of international policy. Technology would therefore affect not only the operational methods of an attack, but also the political decision to resort to force, altering the balance between costs and benefits that has traditionally represented one of the principal factors restraining warfare.

From this perspective, the concept of "dehumanisation" acquires an eminently legal meaning. It does not coincide with a generic loss of moral sensitivity, but rather describes the risk that the progressive automation of military decision-making may undermine the centrality of the human person as the recipient of the protections afforded by International Humanitarian Law. Modern warfare tends to transform the target into a collection of data, geographical coordinates, thermal images and behavioural profiles processed by sophisticated computer systems[9]. The physical individual progressively disappears behind a digital

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Jus ad Bellum and Jus in Bello: Clearing the Fog of Law," *Yearbook of International Humanitarian Law*, vol. 13, 2010, pp. 311–326; W.H. Boothby, *Conflict Law: The Influence of New Weapons Technology, Human Rights and Emerging Actors*, T.M.C. Asser Press, 2014.

8 For a critical perspective on the normalisation of the use of force through drones, see M.E. O'Connell, "Killing without Borders: Drones, Airstrikes and the Law of Armed Conflict," *Ethics & International Affairs*, 2013; G. Chamayou, *Teoria del drone*, DeriveApprodi, 2014, pp. 29–74.

9 On the phenomenon of target digitalisation and the processes of dehumanisation in contemporary warfare, see G. Chamayou, *Teoria del drone*, DeriveApprodi, 2014; G. Derek, "From a View to a Kill: Drones and Late Modern War," *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 28,

representation, making it increasingly difficult to preserve an awareness of the adversary's humanity, which constitutes the underlying cultural premise of the limitations imposed by the law of armed conflict.

This phenomenon is further intensified by the integration of artificial intelligence into military decision-support systems[10]. Although, at present, most armed drones continue to require human authorisation before force can be employed, technological developments are moving towards increasingly higher levels of autonomy. Algorithms are now capable of processing enormous quantities of information, recognising behavioural patterns, classifying targets and generating operational recommendations with a speed and accuracy that are difficult for human beings to achieve. The legal issue does not concern so much the technical reliability of these systems as the progressive replacement of human judgement with opaque decision-making processes, which are often not fully comprehensible even to the programmers who developed them.

This gives rise to one of the most significant challenges facing contemporary international law: the crisis of the traditional model of attribution of responsibility[11]. The rules of International Humanitarian Law and International Criminal Law presuppose that every decision concerning the use of force can be traced back to an identifiable human actor, capable of assessing the specific circumstances, anticipating the consequences of their actions and being held legally accountable for any resulting violations. The introduction of systems characterised by high levels of autonomy, however, risks fragmenting the decision-making process among programmers, manufacturers, commanders, operators and algorithms, making it increasingly difficult to identify the appropriate locus of responsibility.

It is precisely in this progressive dissolution of individual responsibility that the most insidious form of the dehumanisation of warfare becomes apparent. The

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2011, pp. 188–215.

10 For an analysis of the use of artificial intelligence in weapons systems and its related legal implications, see International Committee of the Red Cross, *Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning in Armed Conflict*, ICRC, 2019, pp. 7–19; H. Nasu and R. McLaughlin, eds., *New Technologies and the Law of Armed Conflict*, T.M.C. Asser Press, 2014, pp. 1–20.

11 On the problem of attributing responsibility for the use of autonomous systems, see R. Sparrow, "Killer Robots," *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 24, 2007, pp. 62–77; R. Crootof, "The Killer Robots Are Here: Legal and Policy Implications," *Cardozo Law Review*, vol. 36, 2015, pp. 1837–1915.

human element is not eliminated solely from the battlefield, but also tends to disappear from the legal sphere, as the attribution of responsibility for the consequences of military action becomes increasingly complex. Rather than serving as a mere instrument in human hands, technology risks becoming a factor contributing to the evasion of responsibility, incompatible with one of the fundamental principles of the international legal order: no violation of International Humanitarian Law can remain without an identifiable subject being held accountable for it[12].

This observation constitutes the starting point for the analysis that follows. Before addressing the issue of international responsibility and the implications arising from the use of autonomous systems, it is necessary to examine the legal framework within which drones operate, assessing whether the traditional principles of International Humanitarian Law are still capable of effectively regulating technological warfare or whether they require further interpretative development. The following chapter will therefore be devoted to an examination of international legal sources and the principles of distinction, proportionality, military necessity and precaution, which form the legal foundations of the law of armed conflict and constitute the principal criteria for assessing the lawfulness of the use of drones in contemporary military operations.

2. The International Legal Framework Applicable to the Use of Drones in Armed Conflicts

The use of armed drones has brought a fundamental question to the forefront of international legal debate: whether the legal instruments developed throughout the twentieth century are still adequate to regulate a form of warfare in which the technological dimension plays an increasingly decisive role. This question does not necessarily imply the existence of a regulatory gap. On the contrary, a significant body of international legal scholarship maintains that the existing legal framework is sufficiently broad to encompass new military technologies, owing to the general and flexible nature of the principles of International Humanitarian

12 On the principle of individual criminal responsibility under international criminal law and international humanitarian law, see A. Cassese, *International Criminal Law*, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 245–310; C. Stahn, *A Critical Introduction to International Criminal Law*, Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 231–270.

Law (IHL)[13]. The central issue, therefore, is not so much the absence of applicable rules as the ability of traditional legal concepts to adapt to methods of warfare that profoundly transform the relationship between human beings, technology and the use of force.

International Humanitarian Law, also known as the Law of Armed Conflict, emerged from the need to limit the effects of war through a system of rules designed to reconcile two seemingly opposing requirements: on the one hand, the recognition of military necessity as an unavoidable element of the conduct of hostilities; on the other, the protection of persons who do not directly participate in hostilities and the limitation of unnecessary suffering. This dual function finds its synthesis in the so-called principle of humanity, which constitutes the theoretical foundation of the entire legal framework and provides the interpretative criterion against which even the most advanced military technologies must be assessed[14].

The treaty law applicable to the use of drones finds its primary legal basis in the four Geneva Conventions of 1949[15] and their Additional Protocols of 1977. Although the Conventions were adopted in a historical context characterised predominantly by conventional forms of warfare, they contain principles of sufficient generality to be applied to contemporary armed conflicts. In particular, Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions[16] establishes a set of minimum guarantees applicable to non-international armed conflicts, prohibiting, inter alia,

13 On the debate concerning the adequacy of international humanitarian law in addressing new military technologies, see M. Sassòli, *International Humanitarian Law: Rules, Controversies and Solutions to Problems Arising in Warfare*, 2nd ed., Edward Elgar, 2024, pp. 53–72; Y. Dinstein, *The Conduct of Hostilities under the Law of International Armed Conflict*, 4th ed., Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 83–98.

14 On the principle of humanity as a foundation of international humanitarian law, see T. Meron, *The Humanization of International Law*, Martinus Nijhoff, 2006; J. Pictet, *Development and Principles of International Humanitarian Law*, Martinus Nijhoff, 1985, pp. 59–75.

15 Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 for the Protection of War Victims, 75 UNTS 31 et seq.; Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, adopted on 8 June 1977, 1125 UNTS 3.

16 On the significance of Common Article 3 as a "mini-convention" applicable to non-international armed conflicts, see International Court of Justice, *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. United States of America)*, Judgment, 27 June 1986, para. 218; J.M. Henckaerts and L. Doswald-Beck, *Customary International Humanitarian Law*, vol. I, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 299–305.

violence to life and person against individuals who do not directly participate in hostilities. This provision has acquired increasing significance in relation to operations conducted by means of drones against non-state armed groups, since many drone campaigns have taken place outside traditional theatres of declared war.

Additional Protocol I of 1977 nevertheless represents the principal point of reference for the legal analysis of drones, as it regulates in detail the conduct of hostilities in international armed conflicts. Although it makes no specific reference to remotely piloted technologies, it contains principles that apply regardless of the means employed. This characteristic reflects the principle of technological neutrality in International Humanitarian Law[17]: the lawfulness of a weapon does not depend on its modernity or technical complexity, but rather on whether it can be used in practice in compliance with the fundamental rules governing armed conflict.

Among these rules, the principle of distinction is of particular importance, as it is recognised as a fundamental customary rule of International Humanitarian Law[18]. It requires parties to an armed conflict to distinguish at all times between civilians and combatants, as well as between civilian objects and military objectives. Attacks may only be directed against legitimate military objectives and must never be directed primarily against the civilian population.

In the context of armed drones, the principle of distinction presents particular challenges in terms of its practical application. On the one hand, proponents of the use of such systems[19] emphasise that their technological surveillance and precision capabilities could even enhance compliance with humanitarian law by reducing errors resulting from the inability to obtain accurate information on the ground. Drones can, in fact, provide high-resolution imagery, monitor a target over extended periods of time and allow for a more detailed assessment of the

17 On the principle of technological neutrality in international humanitarian law, see W.H. Boothby, *Weapons and the Law of Armed Conflict*, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 24–39; Y. Dinstein, *The Conduct of Hostilities under the Law of International Armed Conflict*, 4th ed., Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 83–98.

18 The principle of distinction is codified in Articles 48, 51 and 52 of Additional Protocol I of 1977 and is now considered a rule of customary international law. See International Committee of the Red Cross, *Customary International Humanitarian Law*, Rule 1.

19 In support of the argument that drones may contribute to greater precision in attacks, see M.N. Schmitt, "Drone Attacks under the Jus ad Bellum and Jus in Bello," *Yearbook of International Humanitarian Law*, vol. 13, 2010, pp. 311–326.

operational situation prior to an attack.

On the other hand, numerous scholars have pointed out that technological superiority does not automatically guarantee greater legal compliance[20]. The main difficulty does not necessarily lie in a drone's ability to strike a specific geographical location with precision, but rather in determining with certainty whether the identified individual actually constitutes a legitimate military target. The distinction between combatants and civilians, particularly in contemporary conflicts involving irregular armed groups whose members do not wear uniforms, requires contextual assessments and complex interpretations that can hardly be reduced to an exclusively technical process.

This problem becomes particularly evident in operations against terrorist organisations or irregular armed groups, in which target identification is often based on intelligence information, behavioural analysis and probabilistic assessments. In such circumstances, the risk lies in replacing the degree of certainty legally required for the use of lethal force with an assessment based on probability. The shift from the concept of "combatant identification" to that of "profiling a potential target" represents one of the most controversial issues surrounding the use of drones[21].

Alongside the principle of distinction, the principle of proportionality plays a central role[22]. According to this principle, attacks are prohibited when they may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians or damage to civilian objects that would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated. Proportionality constitutes one of the most complex elements of International Humanitarian Law, as it requires an ex ante assessment based on balancing competing interests.

The use of drones makes this assessment even more delicate. The availability

20 For a critical perspective, see M.E. O'Connell, *Unlawful Killing with Combat Drones*, Notre Dame Law School Legal Studies Research Paper No. 09-43, 2010, pp. 3–18; G. Chamayou, *Théorie du drone*, La Fabrique, 2013; Italian translation, *Teoria del drone*, Derive-Approdi, 2014, pp. 145–177.

21 On the problem of so-called signature strikes and the probabilistic identification of targets, see N. Melzer, *Targeted Killing in International Law*, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 279–315.

22 On the principle of proportionality in attacks, see Articles 51(5)(b) and 57 of Additional Protocol I of 1977; Y. Dinstein, *The Conduct of Hostilities under the Law of International Armed Conflict*, 4th ed., Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 145–188.

of technological tools capable of collecting vast amounts of information could, in theory, allow for a more accurate evaluation of the potential consequences of an attack. However, the availability of large quantities of data does not necessarily eliminate the problem of human interpretation. Proportionality is not a mathematical calculation, but rather a legal and operational assessment that requires a judgement based on the specific circumstances of each case[23].

In this respect, a fundamental distinction emerges between technical capability and legal responsibility. A technologically advanced system may improve the ability to observe the battlefield, but it cannot automatically replace the normative judgement required by international law. Decisions concerning the proportionality of an attack necessarily involve an assessment of values and interests that cannot be entirely delegated to an automated system without calling into question the very structure of International Humanitarian Law.

Another fundamental principle is the obligation to take all feasible precautions in attack, as provided for under Article 57 of Additional Protocol I[24]. This obligation requires States to adopt all reasonable measures to verify that targets are indeed military objectives, to choose means and methods of attack capable of minimising civilian harm, and to suspend an operation whenever it becomes apparent that it may result in violations of International Humanitarian Law.

From this perspective, drones display an ambivalent characteristic. Their capacity for prolonged surveillance can facilitate compliance with precautionary obligations by enabling operators to gather more comprehensive information before an attack. However, the same technology may also generate excessive confidence in the precision of the weapon system, leading to the assumption that human error can be eliminated simply by enhancing technical capabilities. The history of recent conflicts demonstrates, however, that even highly sophisticated systems can cause civilian casualties, particularly when deployed in contexts

23 On the qualitative nature of proportionality assessments, see M. Sassòli, *International Humanitarian Law: Rules, Controversies and Solutions to Problems Arising in Warfare*, 2nd ed., Edward Elgar, 2024, pp. 413–425; W.H. Boothby, *The Law of Targeting*, Oxford University Press, 2012.

24 Article 57 of Additional Protocol I of 1977; International Committee of the Red Cross, *Commentary on the Additional Protocols of 8 June 1977 to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949*, ICRC, 1987, commentary on Articles 57–58.

characterised by significant political and social complexity[25].

A particularly relevant aspect also concerns Article 36 of Additional Protocol I[26], which addresses the review of new weapons. This provision establishes that each State Party must determine whether the employment of a new weapon or method of warfare would, in some or all circumstances, be prohibited under the applicable rules of international law. This provision is of crucial importance in contemporary debates concerning drones and autonomous systems, as it imposes on States a preventive obligation to assess the legality of military technology before its operational deployment.

Nevertheless, international practice reveals considerable inconsistency in the implementation of this obligation[27]. Not all States have public and transparent procedures for the legal assessment of new military technologies, and information concerning review processes often remains classified on national security grounds. This lack of transparency is one of the factors that most significantly fuels the debate over the need for more specific international regulation.

The problem becomes even more evident with regard to Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS)[28], in which the role of human beings no longer consists merely of remotely controlling a platform, but rather of establishing general parameters within which the machine can select and engage targets. From this perspective, drones represent an intermediate stage between traditional warfare

25 On the relationship between technological precision and collateral damage, see Human Rights Watch, *Losing Humanity: The Case against Killer Robots*, Human Rights Watch, 2012, pp. 30–42; Amnesty International, *Will I Be Next? US Drone Strikes in Pakistan*, Amnesty International, 2013, pp. 20–45.

26 On the procedure for reviewing new weapons under Article 36, see International Committee of the Red Cross, *A Guide to the Legal Review of New Weapons, Means and Methods of Warfare*, ICRC, 2006; H. Boothby, *Weapons and the Law of Armed Conflict*, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 341–366.

27 For a comparative overview of national weapons review procedures, see Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *Review of New Weapons under Article 36 of Additional Protocol I*, SIPRI, 2020.

28 On the concept of LAWS (Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems) and the ongoing international debate, see Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, *Report of the Group of Governmental Experts on Emerging Technologies in the Area of Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems*, United Nations, 2019–2024, pp. 17–31; International Committee of the Red Cross, *Autonomous Weapon Systems: Technical, Military, Legal and Humanitarian Aspects*, ICRC, 2021, pp. 7–25.

and a possible future form of warfare characterised by algorithmic autonomy[29].

The analysis of the legal framework therefore demonstrates that International Humanitarian Law is not devoid of instruments applicable to drones. Existing principles remain fully valid and continue to constitute the primary standard for assessing the legality of military operations conducted through remotely operated systems. However, technological developments reveal a number of profound tensions: the distance between operator and target, the growing reliance on data, the difficulty of attributing responsibility and the prospect of autonomous decision-making all pose challenges that require not only the rigorous application of existing rules, but also a reconsideration of the ways in which law can preserve the central role of human beings in decisions concerning the use of force[30].

3. Armed Drones, Targeted Killings and the Right to Life: The Tension Between International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights

The use of armed drones has assumed particular significance in international legal debate, especially in relation to the practice of so-called *targeted killings*[31], namely military or security operations aimed at the targeted elimination of specific individuals identified as threats to State security. This practice, which developed primarily in the context of counterterrorism operations following the attacks of 11 September 2001, constitutes one of the most controversial areas of interaction between international humanitarian law and international human rights law[32].

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29 On the concept of meaningful human control, see H. Nasu and R. McLaughlin, eds., *New Technologies and the Law of Armed Conflict*, T.M.C. Asser Press, 2014; R. Crootof, "The Killer Robots Are Here: Legal and Policy Implications," *Cardozo Law Review*, vol. 36, 2015, pp. 1837–1915.

30 On the role of human control as an essential requirement for compliance with international humanitarian law, see International Committee of the Red Cross, *Ethics and Autonomous Weapon Systems: An Ethical Basis for Human Control?*, ICRC, 2021; United Nations Secretary-General, *Agenda for Disarmament: Securing Our Common Future*, United Nations, 2018, pp. 45–47.

31 On the concept of targeted killing and its evolution under international law, see N. Melzer, *Targeted Killing in International Law*, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 3–30, 101–145; C. Heyns, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions*, UN Doc. A/HRC/23/47, 9 April 2013, pp. 33–45.

32 On the relationship between international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL), see L. Doswald-Beck, *Human Rights in Times of Conflict and*

The fundamental question concerns whether the deliberate killing of an individual through the use of an armed drone can be classified as a legitimate act of warfare or, alternatively, as a form of arbitrary deprivation of life prohibited under international law. This question cannot be answered through an abstract assessment, since the answer depends on the nature of the context in which the operation is conducted, the legal status of the individual targeted, the legal classification of the conflict and the specific circumstances surrounding the attack.

The first element to be considered concerns the relationship between two legal frameworks that are apparently distinct but deeply interconnected: International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL). The former applies primarily during armed conflicts and regulates the conduct of hostilities, establishing which persons may lawfully be targeted and which limitations must be observed in the use of force. The latter, by contrast, also applies in peacetime and protects the fundamental rights of individuals, including the right to life, enshrined in Article 6[33] of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

For a considerable period, part of legal scholarship and State practice maintained a strict separation between these two legal frameworks, arguing that, during armed conflicts, international humanitarian law constituted the *lex specialis*[34] and therefore prevailed over human rights law. According to this approach, where an individual could be classified as a combatant or a member of an organised armed group, their killing during an armed conflict would not constitute a violation of the right to life, provided that the fundamental rules of international humanitarian law were respected.

This position has, however, been the subject of considerable criticism, particularly from international human rights protection bodies. The issue was addressed

Terrorism, Oxford University Press, 2011; M. Sassòli, *International Humanitarian Law: Rules, Controversies and Solutions to Problems Arising in Warfare*, 2nd ed., Edward Elgar, 2024, pp. 421–451.

33 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, adopted on 16 December 1966, Article 6; Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Convention on Human Rights), Rome, 4 November 1950, Article 2.

34 On the principle of lex specialis in the relationship between IHL and IHRL, see International Court of Justice, *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons*, Advisory Opinion, 8 July 1996, para. 25; M. Milanović, *Extraterritorial Application of Human Rights Treaties*, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 227–248.

by the International Court of Justice in its 2004 Advisory Opinion[35] on the Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, in which the Court affirmed that international human rights law continues to apply during armed conflicts, although it must be interpreted in light of the specific rules of international humanitarian law. The Court had previously adopted a similar position in its 1996 Advisory Opinion[36] on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons, affirming that the right to life does not automatically cease to apply in situations of armed conflict.

This approach has significant implications for the legal assessment of drone strikes. Where an operation takes place within the context of an established armed conflict, the primary legal framework for assessing its lawfulness will be international humanitarian law. In this context, a lawful combatant may be attacked at any time, subject to specific protections arising from their status or conduct. Conversely, where an attack takes place outside a situation that can legally be classified as an armed conflict[37], the use of lethal force must be assessed primarily in light of the right to life and the principle that deprivation of life is permissible only when strictly necessary to protect human life against an imminent threat.

It is precisely this distinction that has generated one of the main interpretative controversies surrounding the use of drones by the United States in operations against alleged members of terrorist organisations in territories such as Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia[38]. In numerous cases, these operations have been conducted against individuals located outside traditional theatres of war, raising questions about their compatibility with international law.

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35 International Court of Justice, *Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory*, Advisory Opinion, 9 July 2004, pp. 106–113.

36 International Court of Justice, *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons*, cit., pp. 24–25, in which the Court affirmed that the right to life continues to apply during armed conflicts and must be interpreted in light of international humanitarian law.

37 On the different legal framework governing the use of lethal force in peacetime, see *Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials*, adopted by the Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, Havana, 1990, pp. 4–9.

38 For an analysis of United States practice, see P. Alston, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions*, UN Doc. A/HRC/14/24/Add.6, 28 May 2010, pp. 39–60; Human Rights Watch, *Between a Drone and Al-Qaeda: The Civilian Cost of US Targeted Killings in Yemen*, Human Rights Watch, 2013, pp. 20–45.

States that have resorted to these technologies have generally argued that such operations fell within the scope of a global armed conflict against transnational terrorist organisations and that the individuals targeted were members of armed groups participating in hostilities. From this perspective, the use of drones would simply constitute a technologically advanced method of conducting warfare, subject to the same rules applicable to other military means.

A significant proportion of international legal scholarship has nevertheless challenged this interpretation, highlighting the risk of progressively extending the concept of armed conflict[39] beyond the limits traditionally recognised under international law. According to this criticism, classifying any operation against terrorist groups as part of a permanent armed conflict could transform international humanitarian law from an exceptional legal framework applicable in wartime into an ordinary instrument for managing international security.

This issue highlights one of the deepest tensions generated by drone technology: the technical ability to strike individuals anywhere in the world tends to challenge the traditional relationship between territory, State sovereignty and the use of force[40]. Drones make it possible to extend the battlefield beyond the geographical boundaries of the original conflict, creating a situation in which the distinction between military operations and domestic security operations becomes increasingly difficult to maintain.

From a legal perspective, the central issue concerns the concept of the imminence[41] of a threat. Under international human rights law, the use of lethal force by the State is generally permissible only when it constitutes the sole necessary means of protecting human life against a serious and immediate danger. However, in the practice of targeted killings, certain States have advocated a broader interpretation of the concept of an imminent threat, encompassing situations in

39 For a critical perspective, see M.E. O'Connell, "The Choice of Law against Terrorism," *Journal of National Security Law & Policy*, vol. 4, 2010, pp. 343–368; N. Melzer, *Targeted Killing in International Law*, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 223–245.

40 On the relationship between drone operations, territorial sovereignty and Article 2(4) of the Charter of the United Nations, see T. Ruys, *Armed Attack and Article 51 of the UN Charter*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 47–92.

41 On the concept of imminence in the use of force, see D. Bethlehem, "Self-Defense against an Imminent or Actual Armed Attack," *American Journal of International Law*, vol. 106, 2012, pp. 770–777.

which an individual may not be preparing an immediate attack but is considered part of an organisational structure responsible for future violent operations.

This interpretation raises significant questions concerning the principle of necessity[42]. If the right to life is regarded as the fundamental human right upon which all other rights depend, the preventive elimination of an individual on the basis of a probabilistic assessment of their future conduct risks replacing the principle of individual responsibility with a logic of pre-emptive threat neutralisation.

Drone technology exacerbates this problem because it enables the continuous and prolonged surveillance of individuals. Through data collection systems, satellite imagery and behavioural analysis, operators can develop risk profiles based on information that is often not immediately verifiable. This has given rise to the phenomenon described in legal literature as a *signature strike*[43], namely an attack based not necessarily on the certain identification of a specific individual, but on the observation of particular behaviours considered consistent with hostile activity.

From the perspective of international law, this practice raises considerable concerns. The principle of distinction[44] requires the target to be identifiable as a person who may lawfully be attacked, whereas mere conformity with a behavioural pattern considered suspicious risks replacing individual assessment with a presumption of guilt. Such a transformation is particularly problematic in light of the principle of precaution and the obligation to minimise harm to the civilian population.

The issue becomes even more significant when considering civilian casualties. States employing armed drones have frequently emphasised the technological precision of these systems compared with conventional air strikes. Never-

42 On the principle of necessity governing the use of lethal force under international human rights law, see European Court of Human Rights, *McCann and Others v. United Kingdom*, 27 September 1995, pp. 146–150.

43 On the concept of signature strikes and their related legal concerns, see N. Melzer, *Targeted Killing in International Law*, Oxford University Press, 2008; G. Chamayou, *Teoria del drone*, DeriveApprodi, 2014, pp. 69–86.

44 The principle of distinction is enshrined in Articles 48 and 51 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions of 1977 and is considered a rule of customary international law. See International Committee of the Red Cross, *Customary International Humanitarian Law*, Rule 1.

theless, numerous international organisations and United Nations[45] reports have highlighted the fact that the technical precision of a weapon system does not necessarily correspond to the accuracy of the legal decision concerning the identification of the target[46].

This distinction is essential. A guided missile may reach its programmed coordinates with considerable accuracy, but this technical capability does not automatically resolve the question of whether the target was lawfully selected. The fundamental issue remains the human assessment preceding the attack: who the target is, what their legal status is, what foreseeable consequences the operation may produce, and whether the anticipated military advantage justifies the risk to civilians.

In this respect, the issue of dehumanisation emerges once again. Drone technology tends to present the target as an abstract entity identified through data and images, whereas international law requires precisely the opposite: a concrete assessment of the human circumstances in which force is exercised. Technological distance must not become legal distance[47].

The issue of targeted killings carried out through drones therefore demonstrates that the principal challenge posed by remote warfare lies not merely in the lawfulness of the weapon itself, but in the transformation of the decision-making paradigm. International humanitarian law is founded on the idea that war, although an extreme phenomenon, remains a human activity governed by rules and responsibilities. The progressive automation of identification and targeting processes, by contrast, risks introducing a logic in which the decision to kill is perceived as the inevitable outcome of a technical process.

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45 See B. Emmerson, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights while Countering Terrorism*, UN Doc. A/68/389, 18 September 2013; Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions*, UN Doc. A/HRC/26/36, 1 April 2014.

46 On the relationship between technological precision and legal decision-making, see W.H. Boothby, *Weapons and the Law of Armed Conflict*, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 62–76; Y. Dinstein, *The Conduct of Hostilities under the Law of International Armed Conflict*, 4th ed., Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 145–188; G. Chamayou, *Teoria del drone*, DeriveApprodi, 2014, pp. 91–117.

47 In similar terms, G. Chamayou observes that the physical distance introduced by drones risks translating into a moral and legal distance from the consequences of the use of force. See G. Chamayou, *Teoria del drone*, cit., pp. 91–117.

The protection of human dignity therefore requires that, even in the age of drones, decisions concerning the use of lethal force remain subject to effective and accountable human control[48]. Technology may assist military decision-makers, improve intelligence gathering and reduce the risk of errors; it cannot, however, replace the legal and moral judgement that constitutes the foundation of individual responsibility.

4. International and Criminal Responsibility in the Age of Drones: Attribution, Command and Algorithmic Autonomy

The technological evolution of contemporary warfare raises one of the most complex questions for international law: how to identify precisely the individual or entity responsible for the consequences arising from the use of force[49]. Under the traditional model of armed conflict, legal responsibility was based on a relatively clear relationship between decision, action and outcome. A commander issued an order, a service member carried out an operation and, where such conduct violated the applicable rules, it was possible to identify an individual to whom criminal or international responsibility could be attributed.

Warfare conducted through remotely piloted systems fundamentally alters this structure. A drone strike is no longer necessarily the result of the immediate action of a combatant physically present on the battlefield. Rather, it represents the outcome of a complex decision-making sequence involving different levels: political authorities authorising the deployment of military assets; senior military officials establishing operational rules; intelligence analysts selecting and interpreting information; remote operators exercising direct control over the system; engineers and software developers designing the technology; and, in more advanced sys-

48 On the principle of meaningful human control as an emerging requirement in the international debate on autonomous weapon systems, see International Committee of the Red Cross, *Autonomous Weapon Systems: Technical, Military, Legal and Humanitarian Aspects*, ICRC, 2021, pp. 13–25; Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, *Report of the Group of Governmental Experts on Emerging Technologies in the Area of Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems*, Geneva, 2019–2024, pp. 18–30.

49 On the relationship between technological innovation and responsibility under international law, see M. Sassòli, *International Humanitarian Law: Rules, Controversies and Solutions to Problems Arising in Warfare*, 2nd ed., Edward Elgar, 2024, pp. 557–575; Y. Dinstein, *The Conduct of Hostilities under the Law of International Armed Conflict*, 4th ed., Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 359–381.

tems, algorithms independently processing certain operational assessments[50].

This fragmentation of the decision-making chain represents one of the main challenges posed by drones to the system of international responsibility. International criminal law, in fact, presupposes that a violation of a legal rule can be attributed to a specific human act characterised by both a material element (*actus reus*) and a mental element (*mens rea*)[51]. Increasing technological intermediation, however, risks creating situations in which each person involved possesses only a limited part of the information and expertise necessary to fully understand the consequences of the operation.

This problem is particularly significant in the context of international crimes. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court establishes individual criminal responsibility for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, providing that hierarchical position or official capacity does not automatically exclude personal responsibility. In particular, Article 28 of the Statute regulates the responsibility of military commanders and other superiors, imposing upon them a duty to exercise control over their subordinates and establishing their responsibility where they fail to prevent or repress crimes committed by forces under their authority[52].

The doctrine of command responsibility assumes considerable importance in the context of drone operations. A commander who authorises a strike cannot simply claim that they did not participate physically in the operation. International law imposes duties of knowledge, assessment and supervision. The availability of advanced technologies does not reduce the level of responsibility borne by military decision-makers; on the contrary, it may strengthen it, since more sophisticated systems generate greater amounts of information that must be properly

50 On distributed decision-making processes in technologically advanced weapons systems, see H. Nasu and R. McLaughlin, eds., *New Technologies and the Law of Armed Conflict*, T.M.C. Asser Press, 2014, pp. 251–286.

51 On the prerequisites for international criminal responsibility, see A. Cassese, *International Criminal Law*, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 167–205; G. Werle and F. Jeßberger, *Principles of International Criminal Law*, 4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2020.

52 On the principle of command responsibility, see International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, *Prosecutor v. Delalić et al. (Čelebići)*, Trial Chamber Judgment, 16 November 1998, paras. 333–400; A. Cassese, *International Criminal Law*, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 238–260.

assessed before force is employed.

One particularly controversial issue concerns the position of the drone operator. Unlike a traditional soldier, a remote operator may be physically separated from the conflict, often operating from a military base located within their own country's territory and performing their duties through computer-based systems similar to those used for other technological activities. This separation has fuelled debate concerning the relationship between physical distance and moral and legal responsibility[53].

From a legal standpoint, however, such distance does not result in any reduction of responsibility. An operator controlling an armed drone remains a human being who makes operational decisions and must comply with the obligations established under international humanitarian law. The fact that they are not directly exposed to enemy fire does not alter the nature of their military function. Legal responsibility arises from conscious participation in the decision-making process, not from personal exposure to risk.

The issue becomes more complex when drone operations incorporate artificial intelligence systems capable of performing functions previously reserved for human beings. In this scenario, the problem of so-called Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) emerges, namely systems capable of selecting and engaging targets without direct human intervention at the final stage of the decision-making process[54].

The international debate surrounding LAWS has highlighted a fundamental tension between technological development and legal principles. On the one hand, some States argue that artificial intelligence may increase the precision of attacks and reduce civilian casualties, owing to the ability of computer systems to process quantities of data exceeding human capabilities[55]. On the other hand, numerous scholars, international organisations and civil society organisations

53 On the subject of remote warfare and its ethical and legal implications, see G. Chamayou, *Teoria del drone*, DeriveApprodi, 2014, pp. 91–132; P.W. Singer, *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*, Penguin Press, 2009.

54 For a definition of LAWS and an overview of the related international debate, see Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), *Report of the Group of Governmental Experts on Emerging Technologies in the Area of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems*, Geneva, sessions 2019–2024, pp. 11–18.

55 In this regard, see U.S. Department of Defense, *Directive 3000.09 – Autonomy in Weapon Systems*, updated version, Washington, D.C., 2023.

have expressed concern about the prospect of a machine making a decision that directly results in the death of a human being.

The fundamental legal issue concerns the concept of *meaningful human control*[56]. Although no universally accepted definition of this principle currently exists under international law, it refers to the requirement that human beings retain an effective and substantive role in decisions concerning the use of lethal force. Merely formal supervision would not be sufficient, particularly where human intervention takes place only at an abstract programming stage, without any genuine ability to understand or modify the operational decision.

The concept of meaningful human control performs an essential function because it represents the link between technology and responsibility. International law does not necessarily require every stage of a military operation to be carried out manually by a human being; the use of technology is an integral part of modern warfare. Nevertheless, it requires that the decision to deprive an individual of their life remain attributable to a human actor capable of assessing the specific circumstances, applying legal rules and accepting responsibility for the consequences.

Algorithmic autonomy, by contrast, raises a radically new question: can a machine be held responsible for a violation of international law? The prevailing view in legal scholarship is negative[57]. Algorithms do not possess legal personality, moral intentionality or awareness of the consequences of their actions. An autonomous system may produce a technically erroneous or legally unlawful outcome, but responsibility must be traced back to the human beings and organisations that designed, developed, authorised or deployed that system.

This conclusion nevertheless leads to a practical difficulty: identifying the responsible individual may become extremely complex. If an autonomous system mistakenly selects a civilian target, who should be held accountable? The

56 On the concept of meaningful human control, see N. Sharkey, "Towards a Principle for the Human Supervisory Control of Robot Weapons," *Politica & Società*, 2014; International Committee of the Red Cross, *Autonomous Weapon Systems: Technical, Military, Legal and Humanitarian Aspects*, ICRC, 2021, pp. 5–12.

57 On the denial of legal personality to machines for the purposes of international responsibility, see R. Crootof, "The Killer Robots Are Here: Legal and Policy Implications," *Cardozo Law Review*, vol. 36, 2015, pp. 1837–1915; R. Sparrow, "Killer Robots," *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 24, 2007, pp. 62–77.

programmer who developed the algorithm? The company that manufactured the system? The commander who authorised its deployment? The operator who supervised it? Or the political authority that decided to introduce this technology into the military apparatus?

This problem is often described as the risk of an *accountability gap*[58]. Such a gap does not arise from the absence of general rules governing responsibility, but rather from the difficulty of applying traditional legal categories to decision-making processes distributed among numerous actors and mediated by complex technological systems.

One possible solution consists in strengthening the obligations of anticipation, control and prior verification. States developing or acquiring autonomous systems should ensure the implementation of rigorous legal review procedures, in accordance with Article 36 of Additional Protocol I. These procedures should include not only a technical assessment of the system's reliability, but also an evaluation of whether responsibility can effectively be attributed in the event of a violation.

From this perspective, transparency assumes a fundamental role[59]. The secrecy that frequently surrounds advanced military technologies makes it difficult to verify compliance with international law and prevents effective scrutiny by democratic institutions. Although national security considerations may justify certain restrictions on the disclosure of operational information, such considerations cannot be transformed into a complete exclusion of legal oversight.

Responsibility, in fact, represents the principal element through which warfare retains its human dimension. International humanitarian law does not merely establish what may or may not be done during an armed conflict; it also attaches legal significance to human decisions and provides that those who exercise the power to use force must be held accountable for their choices. The progressive automation of warfare risks undermining this balance if technology is used as a means of dissolving responsibility rather than improving compliance with legal

58 On the relationship between human control and legal responsibility, see R. Crootof, "The Killer Robots Are Here," *Cardozo Law Review*, vol. 36, 2015, pp. 1837–1915; M. Andreas, "The Responsibility Gap," *Ethics and Information Technology*, vol. 6, 2004, pp. 175–183.

59 On the relationship between transparency, democratic oversight and new military technologies, see United Nations Secretary-General, *Agenda for Disarmament: Securing Our Common Future*, New York, 2018, pp. 45–49.

rules.

The phenomenon of the dehumanisation of warfare therefore finds its critical point in the question of responsibility. The physical distance introduced by drones constitutes only the first level of transformation; the real challenge emerges when this distance becomes a decision-making distance, namely when the process leading to the death of an individual becomes progressively detached from immediate human judgement. The central question for the future of international law will therefore not be whether technology may be used in warfare, but how to ensure that technological progress does not eliminate the fundamental principle according to which every decision concerning the use of lethal force must remain attributable to an identifiable human being who bears responsibility for it[60].

5. *Autonomous Weapon Systems and the Crisis of the Principle of Humanity: Towards a New International Regulatory Framework*

The evolution of remotely piloted military systems raises an issue that is even more fundamental than that posed by traditional drones: the possibility that the decision to employ lethal force may increasingly be entrusted to technological systems endowed with autonomous capabilities[61]. While armed drones currently used in military operations are, in most cases, directly controlled by human operators, autonomous weapon systems envisage a scenario in which certain key functions of the decision-making cycle could be performed by algorithms capable of analysing information, identifying targets and independently determining when to deploy a weapon.

This prospect does not merely concern the introduction of a more sophisticated weapon of war; rather, it affects the very relationship between technology, mil-

60 The Guiding Principles adopted within the framework of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) express a similar position, providing that responsibility for decisions concerning the use of weapons systems must remain with human beings, in accordance with applicable international law. See Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, *Guiding Principles affirmed by the Group of Governmental Experts on Emerging Technologies in the Area of Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems*, Geneva, 2019.

61 On the transition from remotely controlled weapons systems to systems characterised by increasing decision-making autonomy, see H. Nasu and R. McLaughlin, eds., *New Technologies and the Law of Armed Conflict*, T.M.C. Asser Press, 2014, pp. 251–286; W.H. Boothby, *Weapons and the Law of Armed Conflict*, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 367–392.

itary decision-making and responsibility. The central issue is not simply whether a machine can strike a target more accurately than a human being, but whether it is legally and morally acceptable to assign a system devoid of consciousness, intentionality and the capacity for judgment the function of deciding over a person's life or death[62].

The international debate on Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) is situated within this tension. On the one hand, some States regard the application of artificial intelligence to defence as a natural development in military technology, potentially capable of reducing human error, increasing the precision of attacks and limiting the exposure of combatants to danger. On the other hand, scholars and international organisations have emphasised that autonomous decision-making introduces a fundamental departure from traditional forms of warfare, calling into question some of the basic assumptions underpinning international humanitarian law[63].

The principle of humanity[64] lies at the heart of this debate. Indeed, the entire system of the law of armed conflict is founded on the idea that, even in situations of extreme violence, human beings must remain the ultimate beneficiaries of legal protection. Entrusting a machine with decisions concerning the use of lethal force therefore raises the question of whether this principle can be fully respected when the entity selecting the target is no longer an individual capable of assessing specific circumstances, but rather a computer system operating on the basis of data and mathematical models.

One of the most widely debated aspects concerns the ability of algorithms to

62 On the ethical and legal debate concerning the decision-making autonomy of machines in the use of lethal force, see R. Sparrow, "Killer Robots," *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 24, 2007, pp. 62–77; N. Sharkey, "The Evitability of Autonomous Robot Warfare," *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 94, 2012, pp. 787–799.

63 On the relationship between autonomous systems and the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law, see M. Sassòli, *International Humanitarian Law: Rules, Controversies and Solutions to Problems Arising in Warfare*, 2nd ed., Edward Elgar, 2024, pp. 563–575.

64 On the principle of humanity as an interpretative foundation of international humanitarian law, see T. Meron, *The Humanization of International Law*, Martinus Nijhoff, 2006; J. Pictet, *Development and Principles of International Humanitarian Law*, Martinus Nijhoff, 1985.

correctly apply the principle of distinction[65]. International humanitarian law requires a complex assessment: it does not merely require visual identification, but rather an assessment of whether an individual possesses a status that makes them a lawful target, taking into account the operational context, observed behaviour and the specific circumstances of the conflict.A human being can integrate such information through experience, knowledge of the cultural context and interpretative abilities. An algorithm, by contrast, processes data according to the parameters for which it has been designed. Even highly sophisticated systems may encounter difficulties in distinguishing between behaviours that appear similar but are legally different. In contemporary conflicts, where combatants and civilians often operate within the same physical space, distinction is not merely a matter of recognition, but also requires a normative and contextual assessment.

Similar concerns arise with regard to the principle of proportionality. As already observed in relation to human-operated drones, proportionality is not a purely quantitative calculation, but rather a legal assessment based on balancing the anticipated military advantage against the potential harm to civilians. Entrusting such an assessment to an autonomous system means questioning whether a machine can exercise judgment involving value considerations, interpretation of circumstances and evaluation of consequences.

The difficulty stems from the fact that international humanitarian law requires not merely a technical capacity for prediction, but a form of decision-making responsibility. When a commander assesses whether to authorise an attack, they do not simply perform a mathematical calculation; rather, they exercise professional and legal judgment within a concrete human context. Replacing such judgment with an algorithmic process risks transforming a normative decision into an automated procedure[66].

For these reasons, a significant part of legal scholarship argues that the problem of autonomous systems cannot be resolved solely through technological

65 The principle of distinction is enshrined in Articles 48, 51 and 52 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions of 1977 and is now recognised as a rule of customary international law. See J.M. Henckaerts and L. Doswald-Beck, *Customary International Humanitarian Law*, vol. I, Cambridge University Press, 2005, Rule 1.

66 In this regard, see G. Chamayou, *Teoria del drone*, DeriveApprodi, Rome, 2014, pp. 131–155, who highlights how algorithmic mediation risks transforming decisions concerning the use of force into an essentially technical process.

improvements. Even the most advanced system can produce errors, since such errors do not arise exclusively from insufficient data, but also from the inherent complexity of the human reality in which warfare takes place.

This consideration has led to the development of the principle of *meaningful human control*[67]. Although this concept has not yet been formally codified in a binding international treaty, it has become one of the central elements of the diplomatic and academic debate surrounding autonomous systems. It implies that human beings must retain effective control over decisions concerning the use of lethal force, rather than being limited to theoretical or subsequent supervision.

Meaningful human control requires at least three fundamental conditions. First, operators or commanders must possess sufficient knowledge of how the system operates, including an understanding of its capabilities, limitations and potential margins of error. Second, they must be able to intervene effectively in the decision-making process, modifying or interrupting the system's actions whenever circumstances arise that are incompatible with the applicable law. Finally, it must always be possible to attribute legal responsibility for the decisions taken.

These requirements demonstrate how the issue of technological autonomy is closely connected to the problem of accountability. A fully autonomous system could create a situation in which responsibility becomes progressively dispersed among different actors, without any individual being identifiable as the actual author of the decision. Such an outcome would be incompatible with the structure of international criminal law, which is founded on the principle that every crime must be attributable to a conscious human act.

The debate on LAWS has developed particularly within the framework of the United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW)[68], under which a Group of Governmental Experts has been operating since 2014 to examine the implications of autonomous technologies. United Nations discussions have revealed substantial convergence on certain general principles, including

67 On the concept of meaningful human control, see F. Santoni de Sio and J. van den Hoven, "Meaningful Human Control over Autonomous Systems," *Frontiers in Robotics and AI*, vol. 5, 2018, pp. 1–14; International Committee of the Red Cross, *Position on Autonomous Weapon Systems*, ICRC, 2021, pp. 4–10.

68 *Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects* (CCW), Geneva, 10 October 1980.

the need to respect international humanitarian law, maintain human control and ensure the accountability of both States and individuals.

Nevertheless, significant disagreements remain regarding the need to adopt a new legally binding instrument. Some States and organisations support the adoption of an international treaty prohibiting or severely restricting autonomous weapon systems that lack adequate human control. Other States, however, consider the application of existing rules sufficient, arguing that a general prohibition could hinder the development of military technologies that may also prove useful in reducing civilian casualties.

This debate reflects a broader tension between two different conceptions of the relationship between law and technology. According to the first approach, international law should anticipate technological change through preventive rules capable of avoiding irreversible risks. According to the second, the law should maintain a flexible approach, progressively adapting to technological developments without introducing premature restrictions.

The decision to employ lethal force cannot be reduced to a merely technical function: it represents a legal and political choice that entails both individual and collective responsibility. The problem of the progressive automation of warfare therefore emerges when technology no longer merely assists the decision-making process, but risks replacing it, thereby weakening the link between the use of force, human judgment and responsibility.

The issue, therefore, does not concern technology as such. Technological tools can contribute to the protection of civilians, the precision of attacks and the reduction of human suffering. The decisive question is to establish the limits within which they may be employed without transferring to machines functions that require legal assessments and human responsibility.

The future of international regulation will therefore depend on the ability of States to strike a balance between technological innovation and the protection of humanity. International law cannot prevent every development in military technology, but it can establish clear limits to ensure that technological progress does not result in a regression of the fundamental principles that have guided, at least in theory, the development of the law of armed conflict[69].

69 On the relationship between technological innovation and the protection of humanity un-

6. *Towards a New Regulatory Framework: Transparency, Human Control and Accountability in Technological Warfare*

The use of armed drones and autonomous weapon systems demonstrates that the main challenge posed by new military technologies does not lie exclusively in their destructive capabilities, but rather in the transformation of the relationship between human decision-making, the use of force and legal responsibility. Contemporary international law must therefore reconcile the need not to hinder technological innovation with the need to preserve the principles that subject warfare to legal constraints.

The central issue is therefore the need to identify a balance between innovation and regulation[70]. An exclusively prohibitive approach could prove difficult to implement in a context characterised by the rapid development of autonomous technologies and the growing interest of States in such systems. Conversely, leaving regulation entirely to the self-regulation of States and the defence industry would risk entrusting the protection of humanitarian principles to actors directly involved in the development and deployment of technological capabilities.

The first essential element of an effective regulatory framework is therefore transparency. The increasing complexity of military systems creates an information imbalance between the States that develop and deploy them and the external bodies responsible for assessing their compliance with the law. In the case of drone strikes and autonomous systems, access to information concerning target-selection procedures and decision-making processes is an essential condition for assessing the legality of military operations.

Transparency does not necessarily require the disclosure of sensitive operational information. It can instead be ensured through parliamentary oversight, judicial review, independent assessment procedures and the publication of general criteria governing the use of military technologies. The objective is to ensure that the use of force remains verifiable and subject to effective legal and democratic

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der the law of armed conflict, see T. Meron, *The Humanization of International Law*, Martinus Nijhoff, 2006; M. Sassòli, *International Humanitarian Law: Rules, Controversies and Solutions to Problems Arising in Warfare*, 2nd ed., Edward Elgar, 2024, pp. 571–575.

70 On the relationship between military innovation and international regulation, see H. Nasu and R. McLaughlin, eds., *New Technologies and the Law of Armed Conflict*, T.M.C. Asser Press, 2014, pp. 15–39.

scrutiny.

This must be accompanied by the strengthening of meaningful human control. Human control cannot be reduced to a mere initial authorisation to programme or activate the system. If, once operational, the system were able to select and strike targets without any genuine possibility of human intervention, human supervision would be merely formal.

The concept of meaningful human control[71] instead implies a dynamic relationship between technology and the human decision-maker. Human beings must retain the ability to understand how the system operates, assess the information it generates, intervene in the decision-making process and assume responsibility for the consequences. In other words, technology may enhance human operational capabilities, but it must not eliminate the role of human beings as the actors responsible for decisions involving lethal force.

This requirement is particularly important in light of the growing complexity of the algorithms used in military systems. Artificial intelligence tools based on machine learning[72] may produce results that are difficult to interpret, even for their own developers. The phenomenon known as the algorithmic "black box problem"[73] highlights the risk that decision-making processes may become opaque, making it difficult to understand why a system has classified a particular individual as a target.

From a legal perspective, the possibility of reconstructing the decision-making process is essential to verifying compliance with the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution. For this reason, a future regulatory framework should include specific obligations concerning the verifiability and explainability of algorithms employed in the military field. The principle of Explainable Artifi-

71 On the concept of meaningful human control, see F. Santoni de Sio and J. van den Hoven, "Meaningful Human Control over Autonomous Systems," *Frontiers in Robotics and AI*, 2018; International Committee of the Red Cross, *Autonomous Weapon Systems*, Geneva, 2021.

72 On the legal implications of machine learning in military systems, see S. Russell, *Human Compatible: Artificial Intelligence and the Problem of Control*, Viking, 2019, pp. 1–25, 205–245; International Committee of the Red Cross, *Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning in Armed Conflict*, ICRC, 2019, pp. 7–18.

73 On the problem of algorithmic opacity (the black box problem) and its implications for legal responsibility, see F. Pasquale, *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information*, Harvard University Press, 2015, pp. 1–20, 141–170.

cial Intelligence (XAI)[74] therefore acquires not merely a technical dimension, but a genuinely legal one: a system used to make decisions concerning human lives must be capable of being assessed and scrutinised.

A further area of intervention concerns the review procedures provided for under Article 36 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions. This provision constitutes one of the most important instruments for ensuring the compatibility of new military technologies with international law. However, the development of autonomous systems requires such procedures to take into account not only the technical characteristics of the weapon, but also the decision-making process within which it is integrated[75].

In the case of autonomous systems, the review should therefore also assess whether effective human control can be maintained, whether the individuals responsible can be identified and whether the processes through which the system reaches a decision to employ force can be reconstructed. Preventive review should thus become an instrument capable of assessing the entire technological and operational system, rather than merely the individual device.

Responsibility must also be considered throughout the entire technological chain. Contemporary warfare involves user States, armed forces, manufacturing industries, software developers and data providers. The plurality of actors must not result in such a fragmentation of responsibility that it becomes impossible to identify the party responsible for a violation.

This does not mean automatically attributing criminal liability to every actor involved in technological development. A programmer cannot be considered responsible for every unlawful use of a system they have helped create. However, where the design, production or deployment of a military technology involves characteristics that make certain risks of international law violations foreseeable, legal mechanisms must exist to assess such conduct.

This requirement leads to the issue of State responsibility[76]. Even in the con-

74 On the principle of Explainable Artificial Intelligence (XAI), see D. Gunning, *Explainable Artificial Intelligence (XAI)*, Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), 2017, pp. 1–12; European Commission, *Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI*, European Commission, 2019, pp. 17–26.

75 On the review of new weapons provided for under Article 36, see W.H. Boothby, *Weapons and the Law of Armed Conflict*, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 393–397.

76 On the international responsibility of States, see International Law Commission, *Articles*

text of technological warfare, the principle remains central whereby a State using armed force must ensure that such use complies with its international obligations. Technological innovation cannot constitute grounds for excluding international responsibility. On the contrary, the greater a State's technological capabilities, the higher the level of due diligence that should be required when assessing the legality of its operations.

At the same time, the role of international organisations must also be considered[77]. The United Nations represents the principal forum for addressing the regulation of autonomous systems, but the negotiating process has so far encountered significant difficulties. Disagreements between States that are more favourable to technological development and those calling for stricter restrictions make the adoption of a binding instrument particularly challenging[78].

Nevertheless, the absence of a specific treaty does not prevent the progressive development of international law. In other fields, such as chemical weapons and anti-personnel mines, the emergence of shared principles has often been preceded by a period of consolidation of State practice, legal scholarship and the normative expectations of the international community[79].

The challenge posed by drones and autonomous systems therefore concerns the role that human beings should continue to play in the exercise of organised violence. International humanitarian law originated precisely from the recognition that warfare, although it cannot be entirely eliminated, must be constrained through the protection of human dignity[80]. The task of future regulation will be

on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, with Commentaries, 2001, *Yearbook of the International Law Commission*, 2001, vol. II, Part Two.

77 On the debate within the United Nations concerning autonomous weapons systems, see Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, *Reports of the Group of Governmental Experts on Emerging Technologies in the Area of Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems*, 2017–2024.

78 For the different positions adopted by States in the international negotiations on LAWS, see United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, *Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons – LAWS Documentation*; Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, *Country Positions*.

79 On the progressive development of international law concerning arms limitation, see L. Doswald-Beck, *International Humanitarian Law*, Routledge, 2019, pp. 287–310.

80 On the principle of humanity as a foundation of the law of armed conflict, see J. Pictet, *Development and Principles of International Humanitarian Law*, Martinus Nijhoff, 1985, pp. 59–78; T. Meron, *The Humanization of International Law*, Martinus Nijhoff, 2006, pp. 45–78.

to ensure that innovation enhances operational capabilities without becoming an instrument for evading responsibility.

7. *The Use of Drones in Contemporary Conflicts: The United States, Israel and Ukraine between Military Practice and Legal Challenges*

A theoretical analysis of armed drones cannot disregard an examination of their practical application in the main conflict scenarios of recent decades. The technological transformation of warfare is not an abstract process, but rather a phenomenon that has already become firmly embedded in contemporary military practice. The experiences of the United States in counterterrorism operations, Israel's use of remotely piloted systems in Middle Eastern conflicts and the role assumed by drones in the war in Ukraine demonstrate how this technology has progressively transformed the ways in which force is exercised, raising different legal issues depending on the operational context.

A comparative analysis of these experiences reveals a common feature: the drone is not merely a new weapon, but a complex system integrating surveillance, intelligence gathering, offensive capabilities and management of the operational environment. Its strategic significance derives precisely from the possibility of combining these functions within a single platform, thereby fundamentally transforming the relationship between intelligence and military operations[81].

This characteristic has led to the progressive spread of drones, initially among technologically advanced armed forces and subsequently among State and non-State actors with more limited military resources. Their relative affordability compared with traditional aircraft systems, combined with their operational effectiveness, has contributed to making drones one of the defining instruments of contemporary warfare[82].

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81 On the role of drones as integrated systems combining surveillance, intelligence gathering and offensive capabilities, see M.N. Schmitt, "Drone Attacks under the Jus ad Bellum and Jus in Bello: A Response to Legal Challenges," *Harvard National Security Journal*, 2010; M. Sassòli, *International Humanitarian Law: Rules, Controversies and Solutions to Problems Arising in Warfare*, 2nd ed., Edward Elgar, 2024, pp. 563–575.

82 On the global proliferation of remotely piloted systems and the transformation of contemporary warfare, see G. Chamayou, *Teoria del drone*, DeriveApprodi, 2014, pp. 31–60; P.W. Singer, *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*, Penguin, 2009, pp. 183–215.

7.1 The United States and the Global War on Terror: The Targeted Killings Paradigm[83]

The United States represents the main point of reference in the legal study of armed drones, as it was the first State to use such systems systematically in counterterrorism operations following the attacks of 11 September 2001.

The American strategy developed primarily through the deployment of armed drones belonging to the Predator and Reaper series, initially used in Afghanistan and subsequently in territories outside traditional theatres of war, including Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia[84]. The innovative aspect of these operations lay in the possibility of targeting individuals considered members of or affiliated with terrorist organisations, even when they were located outside a conventional battlefield.

From a political and military perspective, drones offered numerous advantages. They enabled prolonged surveillance of targets, reduced risks to military personnel and allowed rapid operations against individuals who would have been difficult to reach using traditional means. However, these very characteristics generated the main legal controversies.

The fundamental issue concerned the legal classification of such operations. The United States argued that the fight against transnational[85] terrorist organisations constituted an armed conflict in which the rules of international humanitarian law were applicable. According to this approach, members of organised armed groups involved in hostilities could lawfully be targeted, regardless of their location.

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83 On the role of the United States in the development of the practice of targeted killings using drones, see A.C. Arend, "The United States and Targeted Killings: The Legal Framework," *Journal of National Security Law & Policy*, 2014, pp. 1–25; M.N. Schmitt, "The Interpretive Guidance on the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities: A Critical Analysis," *Harvard National Security Journal*, 2010, pp. 5–32.

84 On US operations against transnational terrorist groups, see United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions*, UN Doc. A/68/382, 2013, pp. 50–70; C. Heyns, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions*, United Nations General Assembly, 2013, pp. 35–50.

85 On the theory of "global armed conflict" developed by the United States, see H.H. Koh, "The Obama Administration and International Law," Annual Meeting of the American Society of International Law, Washington, D.C., 25 March 2010, pp. 3–15.

However, part of international legal scholarship has challenged this interpretation, arguing that the geographical and temporal expansion of the conflict against terrorism risks transforming humanitarian law into a permanent instrument authorising the use of force. According to this position, not every operation against an individual considered dangerous can automatically be classified as a military action; rather, the actual existence of an armed conflict and the effective connection between the targeted individual and the hostilities must be established.

Particular controversy has surrounded attacks based on so-called *signature intelligence*, in which the identification of a target did not necessarily derive from knowledge of the individual identity of the person being targeted, but rather from the analysis of certain behaviours considered consistent with terrorist activities[86].

From a legal perspective, this practice raises fundamental questions. International humanitarian law permits attacks against combatants and members of organised armed groups participating in hostilities, but requires a concrete assessment of the individual's status. Replacing individual identification with a probabilistic assessment based on behavioural patterns risks introducing a form of presumption that is incompatible with the principle of distinction.

The problem concerns not merely the possibility of technical error, but the very nature of the decision-making process. An individual may be perceived as a target on the basis of seemingly consistent data, yet such data may lack the context necessary for a proper legal assessment. Technology increases the amount of available information, but does not eliminate the need to interpret it[87].

The American case has also highlighted the problem of transparency. For a long time, much of the information concerning drone strikes remained classified, making it difficult to conduct a public assessment of compliance with international law. The lack of comprehensive data on decision-making procedures, target-selection criteria and methods for assessing civilian casualties fuelled extensive

86 On signature strikes and the issues surrounding target identification, see C. Kreß, "The International Law Framework for Targeted Killing," in C. Kreß and S. Barriga, eds., *The Crime of Aggression: A Commentary*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 343–365; Human Rights Watch, *Losing Humanity: The Case against Killer Robots*, Human Rights Watch, 2012, pp. 45–55.

87 On the relationship between technological intelligence and the legal assessment of targets, see M.N. Schmitt, "Autonomous Weapon Systems and International Humanitarian Law: A Reply to the Critics," *Harvard National Security Journal Features*, 2013, pp. 1–24.

debate about the need for stronger forms of democratic oversight.

Over the years, the United States has progressively released certain information concerning its drone policy, seeking to balance national security considerations with transparency obligations. Nevertheless, the international debate has demonstrated that the legitimacy of the contemporary use of force increasingly depends on the ability of States to demonstrate not only the military effectiveness of their operations, but also their compatibility with fundamental legal principles.

7.2 Israel and the Integration of Drones into Military Operations

A second particularly significant case is that of Israel, which has developed one of the most advanced military industries in the field of remotely piloted systems and has systematically integrated drones into its military operations.

Israel's use of drones has taken place predominantly in the context of conflicts and military operations in the Palestinian territories, particularly in the Gaza Strip[88]. In this setting, drones have been employed both for surveillance and intelligence-gathering activities and for offensive operations against members of armed groups.

From an operational perspective, the main advantage of drones lies in their ability to maintain continuous surveillance over a geographical area, acquire real-time information and enable rapid responses to identified threats. In a context characterised by high population density and the presence of non-uniformed armed actors, this capability assumes considerable strategic importance.

However, it is precisely the complexity of the urban environment that highlights the difficulties involved in applying international humanitarian law. Military operations in densely populated areas raise particularly sensitive issues concerning the principles of distinction and proportionality.

The central issue concerns the ability to distinguish between legitimate military targets and the civilian population when armed actors operate within civilian

88 On the use of drones in the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts and the issues arising under international humanitarian law, see United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Gaza Conflict*, UN Doc. A/HRC/12/48, 2009, pp. 900–930; Human Rights Watch, *Precisely Wrong: Gaza Civilians Killed by Israeli Drone-Launched Missiles*, Human Rights Watch, 2009, pp. 20–40.

environments. In such circumstances, even a technologically precise system may be insufficient to prevent civilian casualties if the initial decision concerning the target is incorrect or if the foreseeable consequences of the attack are disproportionate.

The Israeli experience therefore demonstrates a point that has already emerged from the broader analysis of drones: the precision of a weapon does not automatically correspond to the legality of an operation. An attack may be technically precise in terms of a missile's trajectory and yet remain legally problematic if the choice of target or the assessment of the surrounding circumstances is incorrect.

This aspect is particularly important because it highlights the distinction between technological error and legal error. The former concerns the material functioning of the system, whereas the latter concerns the human decision that precedes the use of technology. International humanitarian law focuses primarily on the second element, since responsibility arises from the decision to use force under specific circumstances.

7.3 The War in Ukraine: The Transformation of the Drone from a Specialised Tool into a Central Element of the Conflict

The war in Ukraine has marked a new phase in the development of drone warfare, demonstrating an unprecedented spread of remotely piloted systems, both among regular armed forces and through commercial devices adapted for military purposes[89].

Unlike counterterrorism campaigns, which have predominantly involved targeted operations against specific individuals, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has demonstrated the use of drones on a conventional scale, integrating them into reconnaissance, target acquisition, artillery fire direction and direct attack operations[90].

89 See the articles published in the journal of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, *Военная мысль* (*Military Thought*), 2023, No. 5, p. 164, concerning the use of unmanned aerial vehicles in military operations in Ukraine.

90 On the use of drones in the war in Ukraine, see International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance 2024, Routledge, 2024; Royal United Services Institute, The Russian Way of War in Ukraine: A Military Approach Nine Months into the War, 2023. See also issues of Армейский сборник (Army Collection) published between 2022 and 2024, concerning the use of UAVs for tactical reconnaissance, artillery fire adjustment and the

This development is particularly significant because it has changed the traditional perception of drones. Whereas in previous experiences they were primarily associated with highly technological operations conducted by major military powers, in the Ukrainian conflict drones have become widespread and relatively accessible tools, capable of influencing everyday tactical dynamics[91].

The war in Ukraine has also highlighted the growing convergence between civilian and military technology. Numerous systems originally designed for commercial purposes have been adapted for reconnaissance or operational support activities, demonstrating how the distinction between the civilian and military sectors in the technological field has become increasingly complex[92].

From a legal perspective, this phenomenon poses new challenges. The widespread availability of relatively inexpensive systems increases the number of actors capable of conducting aerial operations, making the control of technological proliferation and the attribution of responsibility in cases of violations more difficult.

At the same time, the Ukrainian conflict has accelerated the development of systems equipped with autonomous decision-support capabilities. Although most operations continue to require human control, the integration of algorithms for target identification, navigation and information management demonstrates a trend towards the increasing automation of the battlefield[93].

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coordination of ground operations; Военная мысль (Military Thought), No. 5, Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, Moscow, 2023.

91 See Руслан Пухов (Ruslan Pukhov), Уроки специальной военной операции [Lessons from the Special Military Operation], Центр анализа стратегий и технологий (CAST), Moscow, vol. 22, no. 2, 2024, pp. 21–36, which highlights how the mass production of drones and the proliferation of FPV systems have transformed the conduct of tactical operations.

92 On the phenomenon of dual-use technology and the proliferation of commercial systems adapted for military purposes, see H. Nasu and R. McLaughlin, eds., New Technologies and the Law of Armed Conflict, T.M.C. Asser Press, 2014, pp. 89–112; Центр анализа стратегий и технологий [Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies], Анализ применения беспилотных летательных аппаратов в современных вооруженных конфликтах [Analysis of the Use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in Contemporary Armed Conflicts], CAST, Moscow.

93 On the integration of artificial intelligence into contemporary military systems, see P. Scharre, Army of None: Autonomous Weapons and the Future of War, W.W. Norton, 2018. See also the publications of the Фонд перспективных исследований (ФПИ) [Foundation for Advanced Research], addressing the development of autonomous navigation systems,

This transformation confirms the need for preventive legal reflection. The problem no longer concerns merely the use of a specific weapon, but rather the overall evolution of the military environment towards a system in which data collection, analysis and action may become progressively automated.

7.4 Comparative Considerations: Towards a New Dimension of Warfare

An analysis of the American, Israeli and Ukrainian cases highlights how drones have assumed different functions depending on the respective strategic contexts, while generating recurring legal challenges.

The first common element concerns the difficulty of maintaining a clear distinction between warfare and security. Operations against terrorist groups have expanded the traditional concept of armed conflict, while conventional conflicts have demonstrated how technologies originally developed for limited operations can become fundamental instruments of warfare between States.

The second element concerns the centrality of information. The drone is not merely an offensive tool, but above all a system for collecting, processing and transforming data into operational decisions. Contemporary warfare is therefore increasingly becoming information warfare, in which control over data assumes an importance comparable to control over physical territory[94].

The third element concerns responsibility. In all the contexts analysed, the need to maintain a clear relationship between technology and human decision-making emerges. The sophistication of a system does not eliminate the responsibility of those who decide to use it; on the contrary, it makes ensuring adequate oversight procedures even more important[95].

The practical experience of contemporary conflicts therefore demonstrates that the problem of drones cannot be resolved through a simple assessment of

target recognition capabilities and cooperation between robotic platforms.

94 On the data-driven nature of contemporary warfare, see E.C. Gartzke, "The Myth of Cyber War: Bringing War in Cyberspace Back Down to Earth," International Security, 2013, pp. 41–73; P. Scharre, Four Battlegrounds: Power in the Age of Artificial Intelligence, W.W. Norton, 2023, pp. 90–125.

95 On the relationship between military technology, responsibility and human control, see International Committee of the Red Cross, Position on Autonomous Weapon Systems, Geneva, 2021, pp. 8–14; F. Santoni de Sio and J. van den Hoven, "Meaningful Human Control over Autonomous Systems," Frontiers in Robotics and AI, 2018, pp. 1–14.

their military effectiveness. The fundamental question concerns the model of warfare that the international community intends to accept in the future: a form of warfare in which technology strengthens human control, or one in which technology progressively replaces human judgment.

The answer to this question will determine not only the future of military strategy, but also that of international humanitarian law[96].

8. The Role of the United Nations and the International Criminal Court in Regulating Technological Warfare

The technological transformation of armed conflict has confronted the international system with a particularly complex institutional challenge: identifying instruments capable of governing the evolution of military technologies without compromising either the security of States or the fundamental principles protecting human beings[97]. The issue of armed drones and autonomous systems does not, in fact, concern solely the conduct of military operations, but also involves the entire system through which the use of force is developed, disseminated and controlled within the international context.

The United Nations represents the principal institutional forum in which this issue is addressed, since the Organization plays a central role in maintaining international peace and security, as well as in the progressive development of international law[98]. However, the experience of recent years demonstrates that the process of regulating new military technologies faces significant obstacles, primarily due to the difficulty of reconciling divergent strategic interests among States.

The United Nations system was established in a historical context in which

96 On the future of international humanitarian law in light of the technological transformations of warfare, see T. Meron, The Humanization of International Law, Martinus Nijhoff, 2006, pp. 90–120; L. Doswald-Beck, International Humanitarian Law, Routledge, 2019, pp. 1–25.

97 On the relationship between military technological development and the continued relevance of the principles of international humanitarian law, see M. Sassòli, International Humanitarian Law: Rules, Controversies and Solutions to Problems Arising in Warfare, 2nd ed., Edward Elgar, 2024, pp. 563–575.

98 On the role of the United Nations in the development of international law and the regulation of the use of force, see A. Cassese, International Law, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 343–367; J. Crawford, Brownlie's Principles of Public International Law, 9th ed., Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 746–780.

warfare was conceived primarily as a confrontation between States equipped with conventional armed forces. The 1945 Charter of the United Nations establishes its normative framework around the principle prohibiting the use of force in international relations, while allowing for limited exceptions, such as the inherent right of individual and collective self-defence under Article 51 and the coercive measures adopted by the Security Council pursuant to Chapter VII[99].

The advent of remote and autonomous technologies, however, makes the application of traditional legal categories more complex. An attack carried out using a drone can take place without any significant military presence on the territory of the State being targeted, through a combination of intelligence, digital infrastructure and operational platforms located at considerable geographical distances. This raises questions concerning the notion of an armed attack, territorial sovereignty and the limits of the right of self-defence[100].

This issue is particularly significant in operations conducted against non-State armed groups. Contemporary international law does not provide a fully agreed answer as to whether a State may use military force within the territory of another State without the latter's consent when the territorial State is unable or unwilling to neutralise a threat originating from its territory[101].

The so-called *unable or unwilling doctrine*, invoked by certain States to justify cross-border operations against terrorist organisations, remains the subject of intense academic debate. Its supporters argue that, in the presence of a serious and persistent threat, a State may take action when the territorial State is either unwilling or unable to intervene effectively. Critics, on the other hand, maintain that this interpretation risks excessively broadening the exceptions to the prohibition

99 On the interpretation of Article 2(4), see T. Ruys, Armed Attack and Article 51 of the UN Charter: Evolutions in Customary Law and Practice, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 47–92.

100 On the relationship between remote operations, territorial sovereignty and the transnational use of force, see C. Gray, International Law and the Use of Force, 4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 143–171.

101 On the unable or unwilling doctrine and its controversial status under contemporary international law, see C. Kreß, "The International Law Framework Governing Transnational Armed Conflicts," Journal of Conflict and Security Law, 2010, pp. 267–295; T.D. Gill, "The Temporal and Spatial Scope of Self-Defence," in M. Weller, ed., The Oxford Handbook of the Use of Force in International Law, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 651–676.

on the use of force, thereby undermining the principle of territorial sovereignty.

The use of drones makes this problem particularly evident because it reduces the political and military costs of intervention. The possibility of conducting operations without deploying troops on the ground makes resorting to force easier, increasing the risk that an exception may gradually become an ordinary practice[102].

In this context, the role of the United Nations does not consist solely in developing new technical rules governing autonomous systems, but also in preserving the fundamental balance established by the Charter: the use of force must remain an exception subject to legally verifiable conditions.

8.1 The Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and the International Debate on Autonomous Systems

One of the principal instruments through which the international community has addressed the issue of new military technologies is the 1980 United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW).

The CCW provides a legal framework aimed at limiting or prohibiting specific categories of weapons considered particularly problematic from a humanitarian perspective. Its approach is based on the understanding that certain military technologies may be restricted not because they lack strategic utility, but because they produce consequences that are incompatible with the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law.

Since 2014, a Group of Governmental Experts has been established within the framework of the CCW to examine issues relating to lethal autonomous weapon systems[103]. The debate has involved States, technical experts, international organisations and representatives of civil society, focusing primarily on three fundamental issues: the definition of autonomous systems, the preservation of human

102 On the risk that new military technologies may lead to an expansion of the exceptions to the prohibition on the use of force, see M.N. Schmitt, "Drone Attacks under the Jus ad Bellum and Jus in Bello," Harvard National Security Journal, 2010.

103 On the work of the Group of Governmental Experts on lethal autonomous weapons systems, see United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons – Group of Governmental Experts on Emerging Technologies in the Area of Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems, Reports, 2017–2024.

control and the need for a new international legal instrument.

One of the main difficulties arises precisely from the absence of a universally accepted definition of an autonomous weapon. The distinction between automated and autonomous systems is not merely technical, but also legal[104]. An automated system performs tasks according to parameters predetermined by humans; an autonomous system, by contrast, possesses a greater capacity to adapt and select targets on the basis of the processing of the information it receives.

The absence of a common definition also makes the development of binding regulations more difficult. Before determining which systems should be prohibited or regulated, the international community must first clearly identify the subject matter of such regulation.

Despite these difficulties, the debate has produced several generally recognised principles. Among these is the principle that international humanitarian law continues to apply fully to new military technologies. No technological innovation can create a legal vacuum[105].

A second element of consensus concerns the preservation of human responsibility. Even States in favour of developing autonomous technologies generally acknowledge that responsibility for the use of force must remain attributable to human beings and cannot be transferred to a machine[106].

The challenge, however, lies in translating this general principle into concrete obligations. Merely recognising the importance of human control is insufficient unless operational criteria are established regarding the minimum level of supervision required.

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104 On the definition of autonomous systems and the conceptual difficulties involved in distinguishing between automation and autonomy, see P. Scharre, Army of None: Autonomous Weapons and the Future of War, W.W. Norton, 2018, pp. 45–78.

105 On the principle that international humanitarian law also applies to new military technologies, see Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions of 1977, Article 36; International Committee of the Red Cross, A Guide to the Legal Review of New Weapons, Means and Methods of Warfare, Geneva, 2006.

106 On the principle of human responsibility in the use of autonomous systems, see International Committee of the Red Cross, Position on Autonomous Weapon Systems, Geneva, 2021, pp. 4–12; F. Santoni de Sio and J. van den Hoven, "Meaningful Human Control over Autonomous Systems," Frontiers in Robotics and AI, vol. 5, 2018, pp. 1–14.

8.2 The International Criminal Court and the Problem of Establishing Responsibility

Alongside the political institutions of the United Nations, the International Criminal Court (ICC) may play a fundamental role in the legal governance of technological warfare[107].

Established under the 1998 Rome Statute, the International Criminal Court has jurisdiction over the most serious crimes of concern to the international community as a whole: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression.

In the context of drones and autonomous systems, the Court's role is particularly significant with regard to the attribution of individual criminal responsibility. As previously highlighted, the main difficulty associated with technological warfare lies in the potential fragmentation of the decision-making chain[108]. The use of an advanced system may involve numerous actors, making it more difficult to identify who actually made the decisive decision.

Nevertheless, the fundamental principle of international criminal law remains that of individual criminal responsibility. Technology cannot become a means of creating an area of legal immunity. If an attack carried out using a drone fulfils the constituent elements of an international crime, it must be possible to identify the individuals responsible.

Responsibility may arise at different levels. A military commander may be held accountable if they ordered an unlawful attack or failed to prevent violations committed by their subordinates[109]. A political authority may be held responsible where it has established a systematic policy of unlawful attacks. An operator may

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107 On the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court and the principle of individual criminal responsibility, see Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998, Articles 5–8; W.A. Schabas, An Introduction to the International Criminal Court, 6th ed., Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 101–145.

108 On the problem of the accountability gap in complex technological systems, see M. Andreas, "The Responsibility Gap," Ethics and Information Technology, vol. 6, 2004, pp. 175–183; R. Crootof, "The Killer Robots Are Here: Legal and Policy Implications," Cardozo Law Review, vol. 36, 2015, pp. 1837–1915.

109 On command responsibility under international criminal law, see Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article 28; W.A. Schabas, The International Criminal Court: A Commentary on the Rome Statute, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 460–490.

also incur responsibility if they knowingly carried out a manifestly unlawful order.

The issue concerning technological developers is considerably more complex. As a general rule, mere involvement in the development of a military technology does not automatically give rise to criminal responsibility for its subsequent unlawful use. However, if it were established that a system had been designed with deliberate disregard for foreseeable risks of violations of international law, this could give rise to debate concerning the responsibility of individuals who do not belong directly to the military structure.

This aspect highlights an important transformation in the traditional concept of responsibility in warfare. Technological warfare increasingly involves private actors, including defence companies, IT companies, data providers and artificial intelligence developers[110]. International law will necessarily have to address this new industrial dimension of warfare.

8.3 The Structural Limitations of International Institutions: Sovereignty, Security and the Lack of Consensus

Despite the existence of legal and institutional instruments, the international regulation of new military technologies faces a fundamental limitation: the international system remains based on State sovereignty[111].

States consider advanced military capabilities essential elements of their national security and strategic balance. For this reason, many governments are reluctant to accept restrictions that could limit the development of technologies regarded as decisive in geopolitical competition.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the field of military artificial intelligence[112]. The major technological powers view these tools not merely as means

110 On the role of private actors in technological warfare and the transformation of military responsibility, see R. Crootof, "War Torts: Accountability for Autonomous Weapons," University of Pennsylvania Law Review, vol. 164, 2016, pp. 1347–1402.

111 On the relationship between State sovereignty and the limitations of international arms regulation, see H. Nasu and R. McLaughlin, eds., New Technologies and the Law of Armed Conflict, T.M.C. Asser Press, 2014, pp. 15–39.

112 On the international regulation of weapons of mass destruction and controversial conventional weapons, see J. Borrie, Humanitarian Reframing of Nuclear Weapons, UNIDIR, 2014, pp. 15–35; L. Doswald-Beck, International Humanitarian Law, Routledge, 2019, pp. 140–165.

of warfare, but as fundamental components of future international competition.

The risk, therefore, is that of a progressive technological arms race in which States develop increasingly autonomous systems in order to avoid finding themselves at a strategic disadvantage. This dynamic presents clear similarities with other historical phases of military proliferation, during which the perception of mutual threats made it difficult to adopt commonly agreed restrictions.

Nevertheless, the history of international law also demonstrates that limitation agreements can be achieved when the international community recognises the existence of a common risk. The regulation of chemical and biological weapons, as well as certain categories of conventional weapons, demonstrates that collective security can prevail over strategic competition when shared principles are identified.

8.4 Towards International Governance of Algorithmic Warfare

The future regulation of technological warfare will probably require a multilevel approach. A single comprehensive treaty may not be sufficient to regulate a field characterised by rapid technological developments. Instead, different instruments will need to be integrated, including binding rules, interpretative principles, technical procedures and monitoring mechanisms[113].

A possible model could be based on four pillars.

The first pillar should be the preservation of meaningful human control[114]. No system should be able to make decisions autonomously concerning human life without effective human supervision.

The second pillar should concern transparency and verifiability. States should ensure the existence of procedures capable of demonstrating the compliance of new technologies with international law.

The third pillar should consist of accountability. Every advanced military sys-

113 On the multilevel governance model for emerging military technologies, see M.N. Schmitt, "Autonomous Weapon Systems and International Humanitarian Law: A Reply to the Critics," Harvard National Security Journal Features, 2013, pp. 1–24.

114 On meaningful human control as a possible regulatory criterion for autonomous systems, see International Committee of the Red Cross, Autonomous Weapon Systems, Geneva, 2021, pp. 25–35; N. Sharkey, "Towards a Principle for the Human Supervisory Control of Robot Weapons," Politica & Società, 2014, pp. 15–35.

tem should be designed in such a way as to make it possible to identify the individuals responsible for the decisions taken.

The fourth pillar should concern international cooperation. The regulation of technological warfare cannot be entrusted exclusively to individual military powers, since the effects of technological proliferation concern the entire international community.

The future challenge will therefore be to build a system in which military innovation does not result in a reduction of legal safeguards, but rather in their development. Technology changes the instruments of warfare, but it must not alter the principle that the use of force remains subject to the rule of law[115].

9. Conclusions: The Protection of the Human Element as a Legal Limitation on the Technological Transformation of Warfare

The analysis conducted has demonstrated how the use of armed drones and, more generally, the development of military systems with increasingly higher levels of autonomy are profoundly transforming the ways in which force is exercised in contemporary conflicts. The technological transformation of warfare, however, does not merely consist in the introduction of more sophisticated or increasingly precise instruments: it affects the relationship between decision-making, responsibility and the protection of the individual, raising questions for international law that are becoming increasingly central.

The particular ability of armed drones to operate remotely does not, in itself, remove the use of force from the rules of international humanitarian law. The principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution continue to apply regardless of the technology employed. The distinctive feature of remotely piloted systems lies instead in the distance they create between the individual who makes the decision and the person who suffers the consequences of the attack. This distance may affect the perception of the target and the reconstruction of responsibility, making the existence of appropriate procedures to ensure operational control and verifiability even more important.

115 On the role of international humanitarian law as an instrument for limiting technologically advanced forms of violence, see T. Meron, The Humanization of International Law, Martinus Nijhoff, 2006; M. Sassòli, International Humanitarian Law: Rules, Controversies and Solutions to Problems Arising in Warfare, 2nd ed., Edward Elgar, 2024, pp. 571–575.

The issue takes on an additional dimension with the transition from systems directly controlled by human beings to autonomous weapon systems. In this case, the problem no longer concerns merely the way in which humans use technology, but rather the possibility that certain decisions relating to the use of force may be entrusted directly to algorithmic systems. It is precisely at this stage that the main critical issue examined in this study emerges: the difficulty of reconciling technological autonomy with a legal system founded on the existence of individuals who are responsible for their decisions and the consequences of their conduct.

The application of international humanitarian law to particularly complex autonomous systems presents difficulties that cannot be attributed exclusively to the level of technological accuracy. Identifying a legitimate target and assessing proportionality require considerations relating to the specific circumstances of an operation and the potential consequences of an attack. These assessments cannot be reduced to a simple quantitative process and therefore make it necessary to question the extent to which decisions of this nature may be delegated to an automated system.

This is where the central importance of *meaningful human control* emerges, understood as the need to maintain effective human control over decisions concerning the use of lethal force. This principle is relevant not only from an operational perspective, but above all as a means of preserving the link between decision-making and responsibility. However, human involvement in the decision-making process should not be reduced to merely formal supervision. For control to be considered effective, the decision-maker must be able to understand the limitations of the system, intervene whenever necessary and assume responsibility for the consequences arising from its use.

Within this framework, accountability represents the principal link between technological innovation and legal protection. The high level of complexity of autonomous systems and the plurality of actors involved in their design and use must not lead to such a fragmentation of responsibility as to make it impossible to identify those accountable. Technology cannot become a space in which responsibility is avoided and errors are attributed vaguely to the algorithm or to the complexity of the system.

Future international regulation must therefore take into consideration not only the characteristics of individual weapons, but also the entire process through

which they are designed, assessed, deployed and monitored. From this perspective, transparency, the traceability of decision-making processes, the prior legal review of new technologies, operator training and the existence of effective accountability mechanisms become particularly important. Article 36 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions may represent an existing legal foundation upon which to develop assessment procedures suited to the growing complexity of autonomous systems.

The current international debate nevertheless demonstrates that no definitive consensus has yet emerged regarding the form that future regulation of autonomous weapon systems should take. The discussion between applying existing rules and adopting new binding legal instruments reflects the difficulty of regulating a constantly evolving technology without hindering scientific development or States' security requirements. For this very reason, regulatory developments must be sufficiently flexible to adapt to technological progress, while remaining clear enough to guarantee effective legal limitations.

Ultimately, the issue raised by technological warfare does not consist in setting technology against the protection of human beings. New technologies may contribute to the precision of military operations, intelligence gathering and, under certain circumstances, the reduction of risks to civilian populations. The problem arises when innovation no longer merely supports human decision-making, but progressively reduces its central role, to the point where it becomes uncertain who actually made the decision to use force.

The principal legal limitation on the technological transformation of warfare must therefore be identified in the preservation of the relationship between decision-making power and responsibility. Technology may change the instruments through which force is exercised, but it should not lead to the disappearance of the human subject who must answer for decisions that have consequences for the lives and dignity of individuals.

The challenge for international law is therefore to govern innovation without abandoning the principles upon which the protection of individuals in armed conflicts is founded. In a context in which the autonomy of military systems is destined to increase, the protection of the human element does not represent an obstacle to technological progress, but rather the criterion through which the limits within which such progress may be considered compatible with international

humanitarian law must be established. The fundamental question for the future will therefore not simply be how autonomous military systems may become, but rather to what extent autonomy can develop without compromising the human responsibility that must remain at the centre of the exercise of force.

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Inside the Alliance, Outside the War: How Decision Arenas Shaped Türkiye's Iraq Policy in 2003

by Mahir Mammadzada

Abstract. Within eight weeks in 2003, Türkiye requested NATO defensive assistance, authorised preparatory US work at its bases, refused passage to US ground forces, authorised restricted coalition overflight and supplied non-lethal logistics. Existing research explains why the 1 March parliamentary motion failed, but not why the same state, under successive governments of one party, produced such different choices in one crisis. Process tracing of six decision episodes, including a structured comparison of the failed 1 March and adopted 20 March motions, shows that authority to decide moved between executive, parliamentary and implementation arenas as requests changed. Each arena brought different decision-makers, rules and political costs; the observed choices became more restrictive as authorisation friction rose. NATO's separation of collective defence from the invasion kept the costs of refusal bilateral. The authoritative decision unit need not be fixed for the duration of a crisis, and foreign-policy responses can form portfolios of differently authorised decisions.

Keywords: decision units; authorisation friction; parliamentary war powers; selective alliance cooperation; Türkiye; Iraq War; NATO

1. Introduction

On 10 February 2003 Türkiye[1] invoked Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty and asked its allies for defensive assistance against the coming war in Iraq (NATO 2003b). On 1 March the Turkish Grand National

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1 In June 2022 the United Nations accepted the Republic's request to use "Türkiye" as the country's name in English. This article uses Türkiye throughout, including for events in

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Assembly (TBMM) declined to authorise the stationing of up to 62,000 US personnel, 255 aircraft and 65 helicopters for an offensive northern front (TBMM 2003a, 115–117; Congressional Research Service 2003). On 20 March the same assembly authorised foreign aircraft to use Turkish airspace under rules set by Turkish authorities (TBMM 2003b, 302–305). Within six weeks, the same state had requested, refused and conditioned cooperation with the same allies over the same war.

This is fundamentally a foreign-policy decision-making problem. Treating Türkiye's policy as a single outcome, "support" or "opposition", hides the variation that needs explaining. The dependent variable is variation in Türkiye's cooperation across nine dimensions: Article 4 consultation, acceptance of NATO defensive assistance, US site and port preparation, US ground-force transit, coalition overflight, use of Turkish bases, non-lethal logistical support, direct military participation, and Turkish deployment to northern Iraq. These dimensions were settled in six decision episodes between 6 February and 2 April 2003; some dimensions, such as base access, were decided within a larger package, and one, direct participation, was never formally proposed. The episodes took place under two governments of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), led successively by Abdullah Gül and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, resting on the same parliamentary majority.

The article asks why Türkiye adopted different forms of military and security cooperation with NATO and the United States during the same crisis. It also asks how variation in decision arenas, authorisation requirements, domestic actors, mission characteristics and institutional channels produced those outcomes, and why Türkiye could refuse Washington's most consequential request without losing NATO protection.

The argument is that authority over Turkish cooperation was not fixed for the duration of the crisis. As the content and channel of allied requests changed, the authority to decide moved between an executive–alliance arena, a parliamentary authorisation arena and an executive implementation arena. Each arena brought a different authoritative decision unit, a different formal rule and different domestic actors, legitimacy concerns and assessments of national security. Requests that

2003. "Turkey" is retained only in direct quotations and in the titles of cited works and documents; the adjective "Turkish" is unchanged.

could be handled executively, framed defensively, grounded in treaty commitments or presented as limited met low authorisation friction. A request that required a visible parliamentary vote for an offensive front, without Security Council authorisation and with implications for northern Iraq, met very high friction and failed. The resulting pattern is selective alliance cooperation: Türkiye kept its alliance commitment while accepting, rejecting or restricting different forms of cooperation across channels. NATO's institutional separation of collective defence from the US-led invasion did not cause the 1 March refusal, but it changed its external consequences: refusal cost Türkiye bilateral aid and goodwill, not alliance protection.

The literature explains the failure of the 1 March motion through parliamentary agency, the structure of the decision unit and leadership weakness (Kesgin and Kaarbo 2010; Taydaş and Özdamar 2013; Yılmaz 2021). Research on foreign-policy decision-making also offers strong accounts of parliamentary support for military missions, coalition defection and fragmented authority in crises (Vignoli and Baraldi 2024; Mehrabi 2026; Hagan 2026). Much of this work explains one decision per state and episode. Less attention has gone to how authority moves among institutions as one state processes several distinct cooperation requests within a single crisis. The article contributes the proposition that authoritative decision units can migrate within a crisis, two concepts that make the proposition operational (decision arenas and authorisation friction, the latter with an explicit coding protocol), and a structured within-case comparison of the 1 and 20 March motions based on their texts.

Section 2 develops the framework. Section 3 reviews existing explanations. Section 4 sets out the design. Sections 5 to 7 trace the executive–alliance arena and the two parliamentary episodes, Section 8 adds the implementation arena and compares the full portfolio, Section 9 explains why refusal did not become alliance defection, and Section 10 draws implications for foreign-policy decision-making research.

2. From Single Decisions to Portfolios of Foreign-Policy Cooperation

The unit of outcome. Foreign-policy decision-making research has long insisted that policy is made by identifiable units, not by states as unitary actors. Hermann's (2001) decision-units framework asks who holds authority to commit

resources on a given problem and how the configuration of that unit shapes the result; Hagan (2026) shows that fragmented authority can make governments incoherent in crises; and Özdamar and Erciyas (2020) trace how Turkish leaders filtered and chose options in successive Cyprus crises. Work on parliaments and military deployments shows that legislative involvement shapes whether states participate in missions (Kesgin and Kaarbo 2010; Dieterich, Hummel, and Marschall 2015), and that mission type and government ideology shape parliamentary support (Vignoli and Baraldi 2024; Raunio and Wagner 2020). Studies of European responses to Iraq explain why states diverged from one another (Schuster and Maier 2006; Kaarbo and Lantis 2003), and studies of coalitions explain why states join, restrict their role in, or leave multinational operations (Kreps 2011; Saideman and Auerswald 2012; Mehrabi 2026).

Alliance reliability, military participation, coalition membership and parliamentary authorisation have often been analysed as distinct outcomes, each coded once per state and episode. This division of labour makes it harder to explain how several forms of cooperation are accepted, rejected or conditioned by the same state within one crisis. A crisis can generate a sequence of requests, from different allies and institutions, that reach different parts of the state. The outcome to be explained is then a portfolio: a set of related cooperation dimensions, each settled in an identifiable decision episode.

Decision arenas. A decision arena is the institutional venue through which a request is converted into state policy. It is defined by the authoritative decision unit that can commit the state, the formal rule for doing so and the actors able to influence the decision. Several institutional stages can belong to one arena. In Türkiye in 2003 three arenas mattered. In the *executive–alliance arena*, the Council of Ministers, advised by the General Staff, dealt directly with NATO; executive diplomacy, NATO consultation and military advice were stages of one pathway. In the *parliamentary authorisation arena*, requests negotiated bilaterally with Washington were turned into government motions that the TBMM had to approve. In the *executive implementation arena*, the government acted on authority it already held, or had just received, by agreeing logistics, opening airspace or holding forces in reserve. The arenas are not separate institutions that never interact; they are the pathways through which different requests travelled.

Authority migration. The central proposition follows from this. The author-

itative decision unit is not necessarily fixed for the duration of a foreign-policy crisis. As the content and channel of external requests change, authority can move among executive, legislative, military and international venues. Hermann's (2001) framework distinguishes units by whether authority rests with a predominant leader, a single group or a coalition of autonomous actors. In Türkiye in 2003 the type of unit changed from one request to the next: a single group, the Council of Ministers, could commit the state to NATO consultation and to logistical arrangements, while any foreign troop presence or overflight outside treaty obligations required a decision by the assembly, in which governing-party deputies, the opposition and, indirectly, the president and the General Staff all had influence. The same governing party therefore operated through a cohesive unit in one arena and a fragmented one in another.

Authorisation friction. Authorisation friction refers to the institutional and political obstacles that make it harder to convert an executive preference for international cooperation into authorised state policy. Party cohesion, public opposition and leadership are treated as conditions of the arena at the time of a decision. Features of the request itself are coded with a fixed protocol, recorded before the outcome, using five criteria:

- *Parliamentary authorisation (PA):* the Constitution required a TBMM vote.
- *Offensive purpose (OF):* the request authorised combat operations against Iraq from or through Turkish territory or airspace, or by Turkish forces.
- *Foreign combat footprint (FF):* foreign combat forces or aircraft would be stationed on Turkish soil for the operation.
- *Legitimacy deficit (LD):* the request supported the US-led operation, which lacked specific Security Council authorisation.
- *Northern Iraq (NI):* the request involved deployment or support in northern Iraq.

Each criterion present scores one. A score of 0 is coded *low*, 1–2 *moderate*, 3 *high* and 4–5 *very high*. The protocol is deliberately simple; it orders requests rather than measuring friction precisely, and Table 2 shows each coding decision.

Arenas, veto players and levels. Decision arenas are related to, but not the same as, veto players and two-level ratification. Veto-player theory counts the actors whose agreement is needed to change policy (Tsebelis 1995); two-level games treat domestic ratification as a constraint on international bargaining

(Putnam 1988). Both are typically applied to one policy decision at a time. The arena concept adds that, within a single crisis, different requests can face different sets of veto players and different ratification rules because they travel through different pathways. The number of veto players is therefore a property of the request-arena pair, not of the state.

The outcome concept. *Selective alliance cooperation* is a pattern in which an allied state maintains its underlying alliance commitment while accepting, rejecting or restricting different forms of cooperation across alliance, bilateral and coalition channels during the same international crisis. It is an outcome, not an explanation; authority migration across arenas and authorisation friction explain it. It differs from neighbouring concepts. *Alliance defection* and *coalition defection* involve leaving an alliance or an operation one has joined (Mehrabi 2026). *Abandonment* is failing to support an ally in a contingency covered by a commitment, and *entrapment* is being drawn into an ally's conflict against one's interests (Snyder 1984; Cha 2000; Kim 2011). *Hedging* builds alternative alignments; *buck-passing* and *free-riding* shift the costs of a shared goal onto others. *National caveats* restrict how forces are used inside a mission a state has joined (Saideman and Auerswald 2012). *Limited cooperation* describes a quantity rather than a pattern across channels, *strategic autonomy* implies distance from the ally across the board, and *bargaining failure* describes a breakdown in negotiation over price. Selective cooperation overlaps with each of these in part, and the term describes a pattern rather than a new theory.

Mechanism and expectations. A request enters an arena; the arena determines the authoritative decision unit and the rule; the rule, the request's features and the arena's conditions determine authorisation friction; friction shapes the outcome. A separate institutional factor shapes the international consequences: where an alliance has separated collective defence from a discretionary operation, refusing the operation need not cost alliance protection. Figure 2 summarises this logic. Four expectations follow, stated with scope conditions in Section 10.

- *P1.* When requests reach different decision arenas, authority over cooperation moves among decision units, and the same state may produce different choices within one crisis.
- *P2.* The observed choices become more restrictive as authorisation friction increases.
- *P3.* Requests that are defensive, treaty-based, limited or executively au-

thorisable face lower friction than requests requiring visible legislative approval for offensive military participation.

- *P4.* Where an alliance institutionally separates collective defence from a discretionary operation, rejecting the dominant ally's operational request produces greater bilateral than alliance-level costs.

3. Existing Explanations of Türkiye's 2003 Iraq Decisions

Research on Türkiye in 2003 has concentrated on the 1 March vote. Kesgin and Kaarbo (2010) use it to show that a legislature in a majoritarian parliamentary system can decide foreign policy when leadership is weak, the governing party is divided and public opinion is hostile. Taydaş and Özdamar (2013), using elite interviews and process tracing within a decision-units framework, attribute the outcome to a divided decision unit, an ideologically heterogeneous assembly and the absence of a strong leader: Erdoğan led the AKP but did not yet hold a seat. Yılmaz (2021) gives a neoclassical realist account in which systemic pressure pushed Ankara towards Washington and weak executive leadership let the motion fail. Robins (2003) emphasises inconsistent signalling by a new government caught between its European Union candidacy and Iraq. Altunışık (2006) and Hale (2007) place the decision within Türkiye's Iraq policy and its concerns about northern Iraq, Brown (2007) sets it against Türkiye's conduct in 1991, and Altunışık (2025) treats it as one episode in a longer change in Turkish–US relations, noting that the government had negotiated military, economic and political memoranda before the vote. A separate literature treats NATO's February dispute over Türkiye's defence as a symptom of transatlantic division (Gordon and Shapiro 2004; Gallis 2003).

These studies establish that the TBMM exercised real agency; that party cohesion, ideology, public opinion and leadership mattered; that northern Iraq weighed heavily; and that NATO resolved its dispute by changing the forum. They explain the failure of the 1 March motion well. What they do not set out to explain is the wider pattern: why Türkiye had already requested NATO protection and approved preparatory work, why the same assembly approved overflight three weeks later, why logistical cooperation followed, and why NATO protection was unaffected. The present framework retains their findings as conditions of the parliamentary arena and asks a different question about a different outcome.

The argument also extends recent decision-making research. Schuster and Maier (2006) explain why European governments took divergent positions on Iraq; this article examines divergence within one state's decisions. Vignoli and Baraldi (2024) find that mission type shapes parliamentary contestation across missions; the Turkish case shows mission character varying across requests within one crisis, with the same assembly approving one form and rejecting another. Hagan (2026) argues that fragmented decision units produce incoherent crisis behaviour; the Turkish case suggests that authority moving across arenas can instead yield a differentiated but internally consistent portfolio. Kaarbo and Beasley (2008) show that the structure of the governing unit shapes the extremity of foreign policy; Türkiye's single-party governments nonetheless faced constraints that varied by arena. Özdamar and Erciyas (2020) model Turkish crisis decisions as choices by leaders; the present case shows that which leaders or bodies choose can itself change during a crisis. Mehrabi (2026) explains exit from coalitions; Türkiye kept its alliance commitment while never entering the coalition. Onea and Altıntaş (2026) show how leaders deflect costs by blaming allies; in 2003 blame travelled through bilateral and domestic channels rather than through NATO.

4. Research Design

The article combines process tracing with a structured within-case comparison (Bennett and Checkel 2015; Beach and Pedersen 2019). Türkiye in 2003 is treated as a revealing, theory-generating case: several forms of cooperation were considered in rapid succession while the governing party, the assembly, the constitutional rules, the absence of Security Council authorisation and public opposition remained broadly stable. That stability allows variation in outcomes to be traced to variation in the requests and the arenas that processed them.

The primary period is 6 February to 2 April 2003, extended to 3 May for NATO's withdrawal; Security Council Resolution 1441 of 8 November 2002 (UN Security Council 2002) and the AKP's arrival in government in November 2002 are antecedent conditions. The units of analysis are six decision episodes: the TBMM's authorisation of site and port preparation (6 February); the Article 4 invocation and acceptance of NATO assistance (10–19 February); the transit motion (1 March); the overflight and northern Iraq motion (20 March); the opening of airspace and the end of Operation Northern Watch (21 March); and the agree-

ment on non-lethal logistics (2 April). Together they settle the nine dimensions of cooperation; Figure 1 shows how they unfolded on parallel tracks. The central test is the comparison of the 1 and 20 March motions, for which the TBMM record supplies both texts, the government's stated justification for the second and both vote counts (Collier 2011).

Evidence is ranked. First are records produced at the time: NATO's decision sheet and statements; TBMM proceedings of the 39th sitting (1 March) and 51st sitting (20 March), including the motions' texts; and constitutional provisions (Republic of Türkiye 1982). Second are contemporaneous reports of public statements by Turkish actors and reports by the US Congressional Research Service and the State Department. Third are retrospective accounts and peer-reviewed scholarship, used for interpretation and for elite interviews. The text distinguishes documented preferences (stated in an official record), reported preferences (from contemporaneous reporting or published interviews), retrospective interpretation and author inference.

Three limitations matter. Both motions were debated partly in closed session (TBMM 2003a; 2003b, 304), so deputies' individual reasoning is not on the public record. US–Turkish diplomatic correspondence for the period remains classified. Turkish insider accounts, such as Yetkin (2004), were not used here and could add detail. For these reasons the analysis makes claims about configurations of factors that are consistent with the mechanism, not about the independent effect of any one factor.

5. The Executive–Alliance Arena: Seeking NATO Protection

The request originated in Washington: on 6 February the North Atlantic Council discussed a US proposal that NATO's military authorities plan deterrent and defensive measures for Türkiye, and the decision went under a silence procedure until 10 February (NATO 2003b). The US proposal was broader than Türkiye's defence; it also asked allies to backfill some US forces in the Balkans (Gallis 2003). France, Germany and Belgium broke silence, arguing that approval would prejudge the case for war (Gallis 2003). On the morning of 10 February the Gül government invoked Article 4 (NATO 2003b). The authoritative decision unit was the Council of Ministers, acting through Prime Minister Gül and Foreign Minister Yaşar Yakış; the records examined contain no evidence that the step

required or received parliamentary approval. That is consistent with Article 92 of the Constitution, which reserves to the TBMM the authority to admit foreign forces except where international treaties to which Türkiye is party require their presence (Republic of Türkiye 1982); the inference that the NATO deployments fell under this exception is the author's.

The government's threat perception is documented in what it asked for. The measures NATO considered, airborne surveillance, theatre missile defence and chemical and biological defence, correspond to the threats of Iraqi missile attack and chemical or biological weapons (NATO 2003a), and on 3 March Ankara asked NATO's civil emergency coordination centre for civil capabilities to deal with possible chemical or biological attacks (NATO n.d.). These are documented preferences: requests recorded by the institution that received them.

Authorisation friction in this arena scored zero on the protocol. The request was defensive, treaty-based and directed at protecting Turkish territory; it required no vote; and it supported no operation against Iraq. Invoking Article 4 also changed the international question: the objecting allies were no longer resisting a US planning proposal but a threatened member's request (NATO 2003b).

NATO's response followed its own internal politics. When the Council remained deadlocked, the Secretary General moved the matter on 16 February to the Defence Planning Committee, of which France, then outside the integrated military structure, was not a member (NATO n.d.; Gallis 2003). Germany and Belgium dropped their objections there (Gallis 2003). The DPC tasked the military authorities that day on airborne early warning aircraft, support for theatre missile defence and support for chemical and biological defence, stating that the decision "relates only to the defence of Turkey" (NATO 2003a). On 19 February it authorised implementation (NATO 2003c). Operation Display Deterrence began on 20 February: four AWACS aircraft moved to Konya, two arriving on 26 February and two on 18 March, and Dutch and US Patriot batteries deployed to south-eastern Türkiye (NATO n.d.).

For Türkiye, this arena produced a clear choice at little domestic cost: request and accept collective-defence assistance. It also produced, as a by-product of the allies' dispute, a written separation between NATO's assistance and any operation against Iraq, which becomes important in Section 9.

6. The Parliamentary Arena I: Negotiating and Rejecting Ground Transit

The second set of requests travelled through bilateral negotiation and then into the TBMM. The Gül government did not reject them. It negotiated military, economic and political memoranda with Washington (Altunışık 2025, 55). US officials described a package costing the Treasury about $6 billion, of which $2 billion was military aid and $4 billion economic aid that could be leveraged into larger loan guarantees (Congressional Research Service 2003); press reports cited a $15 billion package (Roberts 2003), a figure that appears to count leveraged credit. On 6 February, in closed session, the TBMM authorised US technical and military personnel to prepare Turkish bases and ports for three months (Congressional Research Service 2003; TBMM 2003b, 302–303). On the protocol this request scored two (parliamentary authorisation and support for an operation lacking Security Council authorisation): it required a vote, but it was preparatory, time-limited and committed no forces to combat.

The ground-transit motion scored five. Signed by Gül on 25 February, it asked the assembly to authorise sending Turkish forces abroad under principles set by the government and the temporary stationing, for six months, of up to 62,000 foreign personnel, 255 aircraft and 65 helicopters, together with access to Turkish airspace for foreign air units (TBMM 2003a, 115–117). Article 92 required parliamentary consent conditioned on international legitimacy, and Article 96 required an absolute majority of deputies present (Republic of Türkiye 1982; TBMM 2026). President Ahmet Necdet Sezer argued that legitimacy was lacking without a new Security Council resolution (Congressional Research Service 2003). The procedural debate on 1 March turned on exactly this point: for the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), Kemal Anadol argued that the conditions of Article 92 were not met, while for the AKP Salih Kapusuz described the motion as a limited authorisation rather than a declaration of war, and Burhan Kuzu argued that "international legitimacy" lacked a settled meaning (TBMM 2003a, 123–131). The motion was visibly offensive in purpose, involved a large foreign combat presence, and bundled Turkish deployment into northern Iraq with the US front; according to contemporaneous US reporting, the arrangement under negotiation would have allowed Turkish forces to operate in a zone inside northern Iraq alongside the US advance (Congressional Research Service 2003).

The arena's conditions added further friction. Public opposition was over-

whelming (Congressional Research Service 2003). The AKP group was divided; Erdoğan, outside parliament, had said in mid-February that he opposed the war on moral grounds but would cooperate to protect national interests, a position that did not carry all of his deputies (Altunışık 2025, 55; Taydaş and Özdamar 2013). The leadership allowed a free vote, three ministers voted against, and the General Staff declined to give the motion public backing (Congressional Research Service 2003). One of those ministers, Hüseyin Çelik, later said that he had told Gül and Erdoğan in advance that he would vote against a war he regarded as lacking UN, NATO or EU backing (CNN Türk 2016). That account is retrospective, but it matches the legitimacy objections recorded in the procedural debate.

On 1 March, after a closed session in which Foreign Minister Yakış addressed the assembly (TBMM 2003a), 533 deputies voted: 264 in favour, 250 against and 19 abstaining. The motion fell three votes short of the 267 required and was not adopted (Congressional Research Service 2003; Altunışık 2025, 55; TBMM 2026). The CHP voted against as a bloc and 99 AKP deputies voted against (Congressional Research Service 2003). Under the absolute-majority rule, abstention operated as a vote against, allowing deputies to block the motion without voting against their government. The threshold rule therefore raised friction precisely for the most contested request.

The executive's immediate response shows that it treated the outcome as a setback in one channel rather than a change of alignment. The next day Gül said the vote would not harm relations with the United States, which he described as strategic and not reducible to a single motion, while Erdoğan said a new motion could be submitted if deemed necessary (RFE/RL 2003). The transit motion was never resubmitted.

7. The Parliamentary Arena II: Authorising Restricted Overflight

The second parliamentary episode is the critical test. The same assembly, under the same constitutional rules and still without Security Council authorisation, approved a second motion three weeks after rejecting the first. Table 3 sets out the comparison.

What remained constant. The TBMM's composition was unchanged, as were Articles 92 and 96, the absence of a new Security Council resolution and Pres-

ident Sezer's opposition; on 20 March Sezer criticised the US decision to go to war while the UN process was still under way (MEED 2003). The article found no evidence that public opposition had declined. If these factors alone determined the outcome, the second motion should also have failed.

What changed in the content. The second motion, dated 19 March and signed by Erdoğan, now prime minister, authorised two things for six months: the dispatch of Turkish forces to northern Iraq, to be used if necessary to maintain effective deterrence, and the use of Turkish airspace by air elements of foreign armed forces in a possible operation under rules set by Turkish authorities (TBMM 2003b, 302–303). It authorised no foreign ground forces on Turkish soil and did not include the use of Turkish bases for strike, refuelling or resupply (Congressional Research Service 2003; MEED 2003). Airspace access had been part of the failed 1 March package (TBMM 2003a, 115–117). The component that failed when bundled with 62,000 foreign troops passed when separated from them. On the protocol, overflight scores three (parliamentary authorisation, offensive purpose, legitimacy deficit) and the northern Iraq deployment two, against five for the transit package.

What changed in the framing. The government's written justification is direct evidence of how the executive presented the difference. It recorded that the earlier request had not been concluded, and argued that the situation had changed: diplomatic efforts had been exhausted, a military situation in northern Iraq had become unavoidable, and the threat from the PKK/KADEK and the risk of mass migration had grown (TBMM 2003b, 302–303). The motion's explanatory text added that Turkish units would avoid clashing with Iraqi forces unless compelled to (TBMM 2003b, 303). The request was framed as a defensive response to the consequences of a war Türkiye had not started, not as participation in launching it. The Chief of the General Staff, Hilmi Özkök, used similar terms shortly afterwards: Türkiye would not enter Iraq to fight or occupy, any reinforcement in the north would respond to threats to Turkish security, and the war was not Türkiye's to fight (Özkök 2003).

What changed in leadership and discipline. Erdoğan had won a by-election on 9 March and became prime minister on 14 March (Congressional Research Service 2003). Where the 1 March vote had been free, on 20 March he urged AKP deputies to back the motion and stressed the need to keep the party united

(MEED 2003). The vote took place on the day the war began, after Defence Minister Vecdi Gönül moved that the debate be held in closed session (TBMM 2003b, 304). Of 535 deputies voting, 332 voted in favour, 202 against and one abstained (TBMM 2003b, 305). Airspace was opened on 21 March (Congressional Research Service 2003).

What the comparison shows. Between the two votes, several things changed together: the foreign footprint fell from tens of thousands of personnel to none; the mission shifted from enabling an offensive front to permitting overflight under Turkish rules; the question shifted from helping to start a war to managing its consequences; national-security concerns that had counted against the first motion were placed in support of the second; and the new prime minister appealed for party unity. The design cannot separate these changes, and the article does not claim that lower friction alone caused the second result. The observed configuration is consistent with P2 and P3, and the process evidence supports the mechanism: the executive narrowed the request, reframed it defensively and mobilised the party behind it, and the assembly approved it. Three rival readings deserve note. A *fait accompli* reading holds that once the war was certain, deputies accepted what they could not stop; this is consistent with the record and is part of the mechanism, since it changed the responsibility attached to the request. A *pressure* reading holds that renewed US inducements carried the second vote; the sources examined record no new compensation offer between the two votes, and the aid later appropriated came with conditions attached (Congressional Research Service 2003). A *leadership* reading holds that Erdoğan's arrival alone explains the change; it explains why the government could carry its group, but not why it chose a narrower motion rather than resubmitting the transit request. The evidence on deputies' own reasoning remains missing, because both debates were partly closed.

8. The Implementation Arena and the Portfolio of Turkish Cooperation

After 20 March, authority moved back to the executive. The government opened airspace on 21 March, and Operation Northern Watch, flown from Turkish bases, was terminated the same day at Turkish request, formally ending on 1 May (Congressional Research Service 2003). On 2 April it agreed, without a vote, to let non-lethal supplies such as food, fuel, water and medicine reach US

units in northern Iraq through its territory and to permit the transit of wounded personnel (Congressional Research Service 2003). The authorised deployment to northern Iraq was held in reserve; the United States made new aid conditional on Türkiye not entering northern Iraq unilaterally (Congressional Research Service 2003), and Özkök stated that any reinforcement would be coordinated with the United States (Özkök 2003).

Table 1 sets the nine dimensions side by side, and Table 2 shows how each was coded. The pattern is consistent with P1 to P3. The two dimensions coded low (Article 4 and NATO assistance) were requested and accepted in the executive–alliance arena. The three coded moderate (site preparation, non-lethal logistics and the northern Iraq deployment) were authorised or accepted, the last held in reserve. The one coded high (overflight) was authorised only after the war had begun and with restrictions. The three coded very high (ground transit, base use and direct participation) were rejected, excluded or never formally proposed. The correspondence is close, but it is not perfect, and two points qualify it. Logistics scored moderate yet needed no vote because it fell in the implementation arena, which shows that the arena, not only the request's features, governs friction. Northern Iraq scored moderate domestically but carried high bilateral sensitivity, so the deployment was authorised but not carried out: friction in one arena interacted with costs in another, a point the framework captures only partly.

No binary label fits this record. Türkiye was not a "defector": it never joined the coalition and it relied more heavily on NATO. It was not simply an "opponent": it authorised preparatory work, overflight and logistics. It was not a "supporter": it refused the request Washington valued most. The portfolio is the outcome to be explained.

Alternative explanations. Each established explanation accounts for part of the record.

- *Parliamentary constraint and simple arithmetic* explain why the 1 March motion failed by three votes under an absolute-majority rule. They cannot explain why the same rule allowed the 20 March motion, or why decisions outside parliament differed.
- *Public opposition* explains the pressure on deputies on 1 March, but there is no evidence it fell before 20 March.
- *AKP fragmentation, leadership weakness and Erdoğan's position outside parliament* explain much of the first failure (Taydaş and Özdamar 2013; Yılmaz 2021) and contribute to the 20 March success, but they cannot

explain why the transit motion was never resubmitted once Erdoğan was prime minister.

- *Northern Iraq and Kurdish autonomy* explain hostility to a US-led front in the north (Altunışık 2006; Hale 2007). But the 20 March motion also authorised Turkish forces to enter northern Iraq and passed comfortably, so the region's salience cut in both directions depending on how the request was framed.
- *International legitimacy and President Sezer's position* explain the legal objection to the first motion; they were unchanged for the second, which was instead reframed as defensive.
- *Military reluctance* is reported for 1 March (Congressional Research Service 2003) and was later the focus of US criticism (US Department of State 2003). It is consistent with the pattern but does not explain variation across arenas.
- *Economic bargaining and US compensation* explain the negotiation but predict a renewed offer and vote once terms improved; neither occurred, and bargaining does not explain the NATO channel.
- *Strategic disagreement and anti-Americanism* fit poorly with governments that negotiated memoranda, authorised overflight and agreed logistics, and with Gül's description of the relationship as strategic (RFE/RL 2003).
- *European influence* mattered in shaping NATO's response, but there is no evidence that it shaped Turkish deputies' votes directly.

The framework does not replace these explanations; it organises them. Most enter as conditions of the parliamentary arena, and their effect depended on which arena a request entered and on its content.

9. Why Refusal Did Not Become Alliance Defection

The final question concerns external consequences. The evidence supports P4. NATO's assistance continued after 1 March: the second pair of AWACS aircraft arrived on 18 March (NATO n.d.). It was strengthened after the war began: on 20 March the DPC approved more robust rules of engagement for NATO forces in Türkiye, and the Secretary General stated that the deployments were purely defensive and separate from other operations in the region (NATO 2003d). The operation ended on 16 April on the military judgement that the threat had receded, not as a sanction, with the last elements leaving on 3 May (NATO 2003e; NATO n.d.).

The costs of refusal appeared in the bilateral channel instead. The compensa-

tion package lapsed (Roberts 2003). The northern front was abandoned and the equipment of the US 4th Infantry Division was redirected (Congressional Research Service 2003). When Congress appropriated $1 billion in aid for Türkiye on 16 April, it attached a condition on unilateral Turkish entry into northern Iraq (Congressional Research Service 2003). In May, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz publicly criticised the Turkish military for not taking a stronger lead and urged Türkiye to acknowledge a mistake, while describing the partnership as damaged but not ended (US Department of State 2003). No evidence shows Washington seeking to use NATO to penalise Türkiye.

NATO's institutional separation of collective defence from the operation did not cause the 1 March vote; there is no evidence that deputies reasoned from NATO's decision sheet. It shaped the vote's external consequences. The DPC's decision covered only Türkiye's defence and stated that it was without prejudice to other operations (NATO 2003a), and NATO continued to protect Türkiye after the refusal. Those two facts are enough to establish the moderating effect. The separation was itself a by-product of the allies' February dispute, a reminder that alliance institutions can shape the price of national foreign-policy choices in ways their members did not plan.

10. Implications for Foreign-Policy Decision Making

The case suggests that a state's response to a single crisis may consist of a portfolio of decisions made in different institutional arenas rather than one unified national choice. Five implications follow.

The authoritative decision unit can migrate within a crisis. Decision-unit analysis asks who has authority to commit the state (Hermann 2001). In 2003 the answer changed across requests within weeks: the Council of Ministers for Article 4 and logistics, the TBMM for foreign troop presence and overflight, and the executive again for implementation. Identifying the authoritative unit request by request explains variation that a single, fixed unit cannot. This is the article's central theoretical proposition, and it can be examined in any crisis in which external requests change in content and channel over time.

Domestic–international interaction is arena-specific. Two-level accounts treat ratification as one domestic level (Putnam 1988). The Turkish case shows several

domestic arenas with different rules attached to different international requests. The same governing party could deliver some commitments and not others.

Parliamentary constraint shapes the composition of cooperation, not only its level. Research on parliamentary war powers and mission contestation shows that legislatures reduce or condition participation (Dieterich, Hummel, and Marschall 2015; Vignoli and Baraldi 2024). Here the same assembly rejected one form and approved another, and the threshold rule mattered most for the most contested request.

Military-intervention research should code portfolios where they exist. Datasets of mission participation and parliamentary votes typically record one decision per state and mission (Vignoli and Baraldi 2024). For contested operations led by a dominant ally, a single code would record Türkiye in 2003 as a non-participant and miss the overflight, logistics and preparatory decisions that shaped the operation's northern dimension. Coding the separate dimensions, and the arena that decided each, would allow comparative tests of whether authorisation friction predicts the composition of allied contributions.

Alliance behaviour should be coded by channel. Studies of alliance reliability ask whether commitments are honoured in covered contingencies (Leeds, Long, and Mitchell 2000), and studies of entanglement find that allies rarely let themselves be drawn into wars they oppose (Kim 2011; Beckley 2015). Coding Türkiye's 2003 behaviour as a single act of support or refusal would miss that it honoured the alliance channel while restricting the coalition channel.

Scope conditions. The argument should travel to other allied responses to contested operations when four conditions hold: a crisis generates several distinct cooperation requests; those requests reach different decision arenas with different authorisation rules; the requests vary in offensive character, legitimacy and visibility; and an alliance institution has defined its commitment separately from the discretionary operation. Where a single executive controls all arenas, variation should be smaller; where the alliance has not separated its commitment, refusal should carry alliance-level costs. None of these conditions is specific to Türkiye: any allied government whose constitution routes some forms of military cooperation through the legislature and others through the executive can produce a differentiated portfolio when a dominant ally asks for several kinds of help at once.

11. Conclusion

Türkiye adopted different forms of cooperation in 2003 because authority over each request sat in a different decision arena. Requests that the executive could take on its own authority, framed defensively and grounded in the treaty, met little resistance. A request that required visible parliamentary approval for an offensive front, without Security Council authorisation and with large foreign forces on Turkish soil, met friction that a divided governing party under an absolute-majority rule could not overcome. A narrower request, presented after the war had begun as a defensive response to its consequences and backed by a new prime minister's appeal for unity, passed in the same assembly. NATO's separation of collective defence from the invasion kept the alliance channel intact, so the costs of refusal fell on the bilateral relationship.

Existing studies explain why the 1 March motion failed. This article explains the wider portfolio: how authority moved among the executive, the assembly and the executive again, why the same state requested, accepted, rejected and conditioned cooperation within six weeks, and why refusal did not become defection. The approach applies beyond Türkiye wherever allies' requests reach different institutional venues during one crisis. Future research could compare such portfolios across allies facing the same operation and use newly released records to examine how legislators understood the differences between requests.

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Table 1. Decision arenas and Turkish cooperation choices during the Iraq crisis, February–April 2003

Dimension of cooperation	Episode and date	External request or problem	Decision arena	Authoritative decision unit	Formal authorisation	Principal domestic actors	Friction (Table 2)	Outcome	Evidence
Article 4 consultation	E2: 10 Feb	Threat from a war in Iraq; NAC deadlock on US proposal	Executive–alliance	Council of Ministers (Gül government)	None beyond executive	Gül; Yakış	Low	Requested	NATO 2003b
NATO defensive assistance	E2: 16–19 Feb (in place to 3 May)	AWACS, missile defence, chemical and biological defence	Executive–alliance	Council of Ministers	None recorded; treaty-based (author's inference)	Government; General Staff	Low	Requested and accepted	NATO 2003a; 2003c; n.d.
US site and port preparation	E1: 6 Feb	US request to prepare bases and ports	Parliamentary	TBMM (closed session) on government motion	Parliamentary vote	Gül government; AKP group	Moderate	Authorised (about 3,500 personnel, three months)	CRS 2003; TBMM 2003b, 302–303
US ground-force transit	E3: 1 Mar	Up to 62,000 personnel, 255 aircraft, 65 helicopters for six months; northern front	Parliamentary	TBMM plenary on Gül government motion 3/189	Arts. 92 and 96: absolute majority of those present	Gül; Erdoğan (outside parliament); AKP group (free vote); CHP; Sezer; General Staff	Very high	Rejected (264–250–19; 267 needed); not resubmitted	TBMM 2003a; CRS 2003; RFE/RL 2003
Use of Turkish bases for strike, refuelling, resupply	E3: 1 Mar (excluded on 20 Mar)	Part of the US access request	Parliamentary	TBMM	Parliamentary vote	As for transit	Very high	Not authorised	TBMM 2003b; CRS 2003; MEED 2003

Coalition overflight	E4: 20 Mar; E5: 21 Mar	Use of Turkish airspace by foreign air elements	Parliamentary, then implementation	TBMM plenary on Erdoğan government motion 3/221; then Council of Ministers	Arts. 92 and 96	Erdoğan (whipping for unity); Gönül; AKP group; CHP	High	Authorised under rules set by Turkish authorities (332–202–1); airspace opened 21 Mar	TBMM 2003b; CRS 2003; MEED 2003
Turkish forces to northern Iraq	E4: 20 Mar; then held in reserve	Deterrence; PKK/KADEK, migration	Parliamentary, then implementation	TBMM; then Council of Ministers and General Staff	Arts. 92 and 96	Erdoğan; Özkök	Moderate (high bilateral sensitivity)	Authorised, not carried out; US aid conditioned	TBMM 2003b; CRS 2003; Özkök 2003
Non-lethal logistics	E6: 2 Apr	Food, fuel, water, medicine to US units; transit of wounded	Implementation	Council of Ministers (Erdoğan government)	None recorded	Government	Moderate	Accepted	CRS 2003
Direct military participation	No episode	Combat role in the invasion	None (never formally proposed)	—	Would require parliamentary vote	—	Very high	Not proposed; not undertaken	CRS 2003

Source: Compiled by the author from the documents in the final column. *Note:* E1–E6 are the six decision episodes (Section 4). Friction is coded from features of the request with the protocol in Table 2, recorded independently of the outcome. "None recorded" means no parliamentary act appears in the records examined.

Table 2. Authorisation-friction coding protocol

Dimension	PA	OF	FF	LD	NI	Score	Friction	Coding notes
Article 4 consultation	0	0	0	0	0	0	Low	Treaty consultation; no operation supported
NATO defensive assistance	0	0	0	0	0	0	Low	Allied defensive deployments for Türkiye's protection, not for the operation
US site and port preparation	1	0	0	1	0	2	Moderate	Vote required; technical personnel, no combat forces; preparation for the operation
Non-lethal logistics	0	0	0	1	1	2	Moderate	No vote; supports coalition units in northern Iraq; non-combat
Turkish forces to northern Iraq	1	0	0	0	1	2	Moderate	Vote required; national deployment for deterrence, not part of the coalition operation
Coalition overflight	1	1	0	1	0	3	High	Vote required; strike aircraft transit; no forces or aircraft stationed in Türkiye
Use of Turkish bases	1	1	1	1	0	4	Very high	Aircraft and personnel stationed for strike, refuelling or resupply
Direct military participation	1	1	0	1	1	4	Very high	Turkish combat role in the invasion
US ground-force transit (1 March package)	1	1	1	1	1	5	Very high	Large foreign combat presence; offensive front; Turkish deployment into northern Iraq

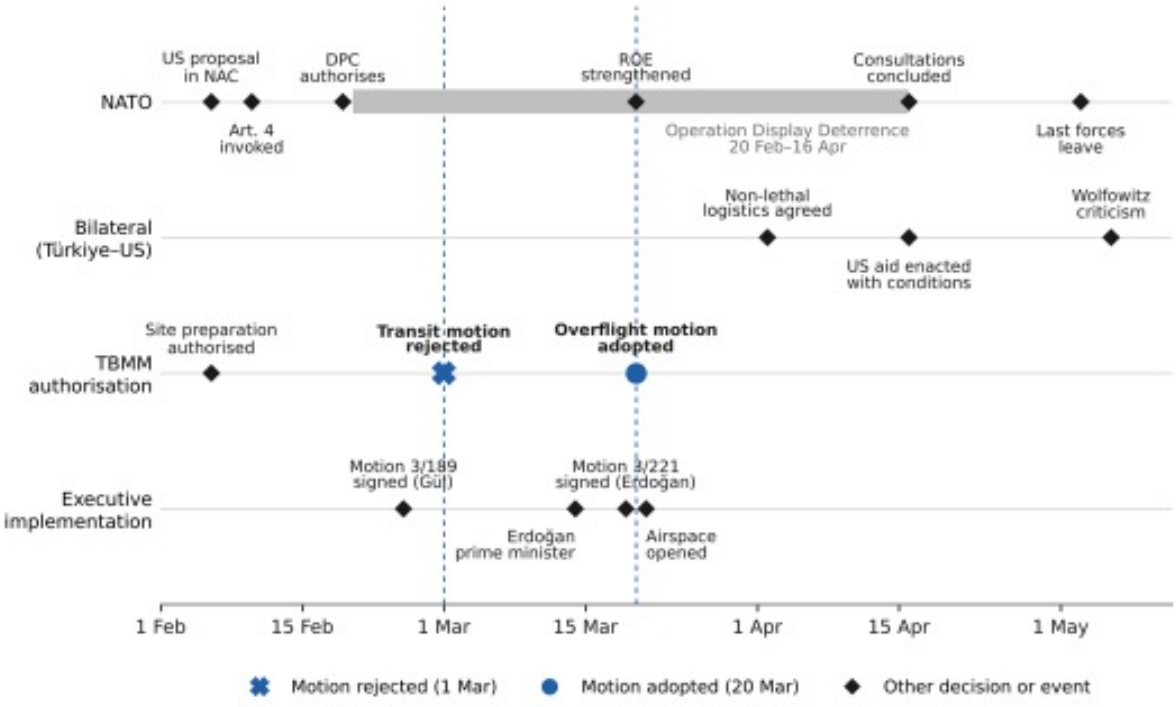
Note: PA = parliamentary authorisation required; OF = offensive purpose (combat operations against Iraq from or through Turkish territory or airspace, or by Turkish forces); FF = foreign combat forces or aircraft stationed on Turkish soil for the operation; LD = supports the US-led operation, which lacked specific Security Council authorisation; NI = deployment or support in northern Iraq. Score 0 = low; 1–2 = moderate; 3 = high; 4–5 = very high. Conditions of the arena (party cohesion, leadership, public opinion, whether war had begun) are not part of the score and are analysed separately.

Table 3. Structured comparison of the 1 March and 20 March motions

Dimension	1 March (motion 3/189)	20 March (motion 3/221)	Constant or changed
Signatory and date	Prime Minister Gül, 25 Feb 2003	Prime Minister Erdoğan, 19 Mar 2003	Changed
Foreign forces on Turkish soil	Up to 62,000 personnel, 255 aircraft, 65 helicopters, six months	None	Removed
Airspace	Access for foreign air units, bundled with ground forces	Foreign air elements may use airspace under rules set by Turkish authorities	Retained, unbundled, Turkish control stated
Turkish forces abroad	Authorised under principles set by the government	Northern Iraq, six months, for deterrence; avoid clashes with Iraqi forces unless compelled	Narrowed; defensive framing
Use of Turkish bases	Implied by stationing of forces	Not included	Removed
Friction score (Table 2)	5 (very high)	Overflight 3 (high); northern Iraq 2 (moderate)	Lower
Status of the war	Prospective	Began the day of the vote	Changed
Party discipline	Free vote; three ministers against	Prime minister urged deputies to back the motion for party unity	Changed
Security Council authorisation	None	None	Constant
President Sezer	Argued legitimacy was lacking	Criticised the US decision to go to war	Constant
Constitutional rules (Arts. 92, 96)	Applied	Applied	Constant
Assembly composition	Elected Nov 2002	Same	Constant
Government's stated justification	Operative text examined; justification not analysed here	Earlier request "could not be concluded"; diplomacy exhausted; northern Iraq situation unavoidable; PKK/KADEK and migration risks	Documented for 20 March only
Session	Partly closed (Foreign Minister Yakış)	Closed, on Defence Minister Gönül's motion	Similar
Result	533 voting: 264–250–19; 267 required; not adopted	535 voting: 332–202–1; adopted	Changed

Source: TBMM 2003a, 115–133; TBMM 2003b, 302–305; CRS 2003; MEED 2003; TBMM 2026. The quoted phrase translates the motion's wording, "sonuçlandırılamamıştır" (TBMM 2003b, 302–303

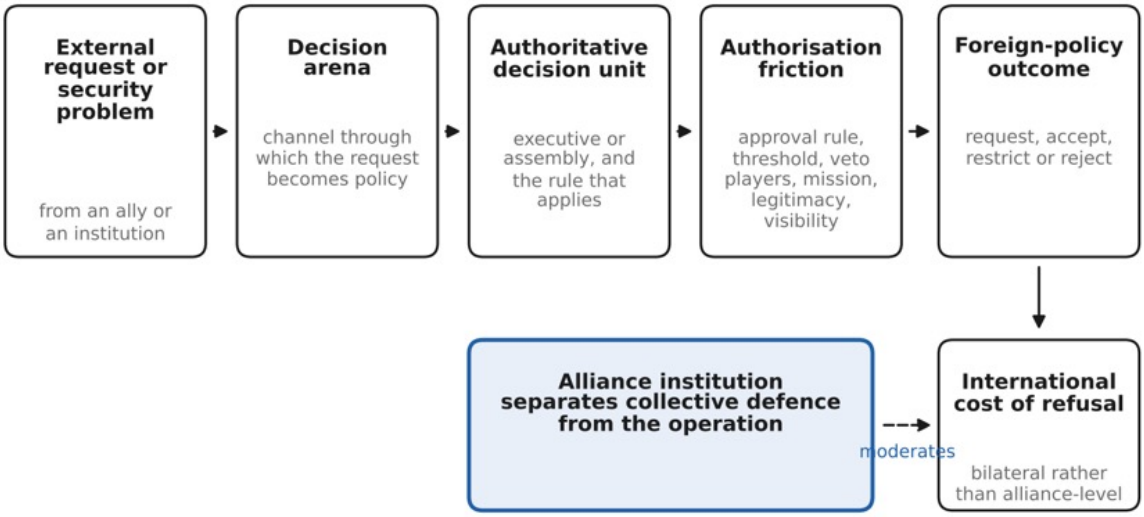
Figure 1. Türkiye's foreign-policy decision sequence during the Iraq crisis, February–May 2003



Note: Decisions and events on four parallel tracks: NATO; bilateral Türkiye–US; TBMM authorisation; executive implementation. The two TBMM decisions compared in Section 7 are highlighted: the transit motion rejected on 1 March and the overflight motion adopted on 20 March. The grey bar marks Operation Display Deterrence (20 February–16 April). *Sources:* NATO 2003a–e and n.d.; TBMM 2003a, 2003b; CRS 2003; US Department of State 2003.

Alt text: Timeline from 1 February to mid-May 2003 with four horizontal tracks. NATO track: US proposal in the North Atlantic Council on 6 February, Article 4 invoked on 10 February, Defence Planning Committee authorisation on 19 February, Operation Display Deterrence from 20 February to 16 April, rules of engagement strengthened on 20 March, consultations concluded on 16 April, last forces leave on 3 May. Bilateral track: non-lethal logistics agreed on 2 April, US aid enacted with conditions on 16 April, Wolfowitz criticism on 6 May. Parliamentary track: site preparation authorised on 6 February, transit motion rejected on 1 March, overflight motion adopted on 20 March. Executive track: motion 3/189 signed by Gül on 25 February, Erdoğan becomes prime minister on 14 March, motion 3/221 signed by Erdoğan on 19 March, airspace opened on 21 March.

Figure 2. From external request to foreign-policy choice



Note: Conceptual model. A request passes through a decision arena that fixes the authoritative decision unit and rule; these determine authorisation friction, which shapes the outcome. Where an alliance separates collective defence from the operation, the international cost of refusal is borne bilaterally rather than within the alliance. *Source:* Author's framework (Section 2).

Alt text: Flow diagram of five boxes in a row connected by arrows: external request or security problem; decision arena; authoritative decision unit; authorisation friction, listing approval rule, threshold, veto players, mission, legitimacy and visibility; and foreign-policy outcome, listing request, accept, restrict or reject. An arrow runs down from the outcome to a box labelled international cost of refusal, bilateral rather than alliance-level. A highlighted box labelled alliance institution separates collective defence from the operation points to that cost box with a dashed arrow marked moderates.

Insights

Strategic History



The Strategists of the Czar

by Ferdinando Sanfelice di Monteforte

Abstract: This article examines the development of Russian strategic thought from the late eighteenth century to the First World War, focusing on the evolution of military theory within the Tsarist Army and the intellectual legacy of General Mikhail Ivanovich Dragomirov (1830–1905). It traces the tension between the search for a distinctively Russian art of war and the adoption of European strategic doctrines, particularly those associated with Jomini and Clausewitz. Against this background, it identifies Dragomirov as an exceptional strategist whose approach combined the study of military theory with an understanding of the practical, moral and human dimensions of warfare. Through an examination of his writings on troop training, command, military education and the interpretation of Clausewitz, the article highlights his insistence on preparing soldiers for the realities of combat, cultivating initiative and confidence, and balancing moral factors with firepower and the employment of combined arms. It then considers how subsequent Russian military thinkers selectively adopted or misunderstood his ideas, particularly in debates over offensive and defensive warfare and the decisive role of firepower. The article argues that Dragomirov's enduring contribution lay in the flexibility and balance of his strategic thinking, and that the failure to preserve these qualities helps explain the limitations of Russian military thought exposed by the Russo-Japanese War and the First World War.

Keywords: Russian military thought, military education, Tsarist Russia, Mikhail Dragomirov

1. Introduction

In czarist Russia, as in the rest of Europe, until the end of XVIII century, officers were instructed through the account of the so-called "*Strategies Pursued by the great captains"* of the past. It was a sort of mix between readings of books written by great leaders of the past and a verbal transmission of knowledge, mostly done by some generals, who led by example and sometimes told stories of their previous experiences, in the bivouac, in front of a bonfire.

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As Jomini noted, "the art of war, confined in the brains of great warriors, did not exist in written treaties"[1]. Napoleon, for instance, did always bring with him the books of Ceasar, Thucydides and Frederic the Great when he left France for his campaigns.

In Asia, instead, books of "Strategic Theories" circulated already since ages. The oldest we know is the so-called *Arthasastra* (the code of power), written in India by Kautilya, a contemporary of Alexander the Great of Macedonia. Later, several Chinese authors wrote on the subject. Among them the most famous was Sun Tsu.

These books about "Strategic Theory" did not deal only with the art of war – as Strategy was called in these times – but many among them were focused on Grand Strategy as well, i.e. the coordinated and effective use of all instruments of power by a political leader. It would take quite some time, though, before the same practices were introduced in Europe.

At least initially, scholars started analyzing campaigns of the past, and then extracted recommendations and principles, to be used appropriately, according to circumstances. Some among them added the lessons learnt during their career. Few years later, during the XIX century, Staff Colleges were introduced in many European countries, and in Military Academies teaching of Strategic Studies was introduced. After the 1960s, another step was made, by introducing Strategic Studies in Western Universities as a speciality of the international relations. All in all, thanks to these changes, the study of strategy took another course.

We can say, therefore, that scholars and strategists have two ways to approach Strategic thinking: the first is to study the campaigns of the past, and the second is to elaborate theories and principles, able to provide a general guidance to decisionmakers. Needless to say, these two ways are strictly intertwined, so that it is difficult to keep them separate.

2. *The beginning of Russian strategic thinking*

Czarist Russia did seldom suffer from a lack of able generals. The most famous among them is Field Marshal Alexander Suvorov, the general who was never defeated. He left several directives over the instruction of troops and cad-

1 A. H. Jomini, *Précis de l'Art de la Guerre* (1837). Ed. Ivrea 1994, p. 5.

res, among them a very short pamphlet, only eight pages long, *The Art of Victory*, intended as "a manual of practical advice directed at junior officers and non-commissioned officers"[2].

His death, in the year 1800, in the immediate aftermath of his difficult Swiss campaign against the French troops led by Masséna, did not allow him to write lengthier essays on his approach to strategy.

After him, his subordinates, especially generals Michail Kutuzov, Michael Andreas Barclay de Tolly and Piotr Ivanovic Bagration, gained a well-deserved appreciation in their struggle against Napoleon, first during the numerous wars of coalitions against the French Emperor, and then in defense of Russia in 1812.

It is worth underlining that Russian generals were able to defeat the powerful Grande Armée by following a strategy quite innovative for their time. In fact, they applied a scorched earth approach and took care of avoiding decisive battles. During the French retreat, then, they exploited guerilla formation, whose actions were coordinated with the movements of the regular Army. Finally, during the campaign against Napoleon – in the period of the so-called 100 days – the Russian contingent, led by Emperor Alexander I himself and by general Barclay de Tolly, contributed to the defeat of Napoleon. None of these generals, though, left any treatise on what was called at that time *The Art of War*. Therefore, Russian strategy continued to be a science orally transmitted to the younger generations of officers by those who had served under these generals.

It is also interesting to note that some foreign officers had joined the Russian Army, as counselors or even staff members. Their names have been forgotten in some cases, as the Italian general Filippo Paulucci delle Roncole, while two others became famous and are still considered among the classic writers of military strategy, i.e. Carl von Clausewitz and Antoine Henri Jomini.

While the first had an indirect, albeit belated influence on Russian strategic thinking – as we will see later - Jomini, a Swiss-born Brigadier General of the French Army, was directly involved in creating structures able to develop strategic thinking among the military.

He had already been the author of several essays on strategy, when he was

2 W. Pintner, «Russian Military Thought: The Western Model and the Shadow of Suvorov». In: Peter Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy.* Princeton U.P., 1986, p. 356.

contacted by Russian envoys. He then held secret negotiations with senior personalities of the Czarist court, in 1807. The Czar himself wanted to co-opt him, to improve the effectiveness of his Army. In fact, he had become most popular in Russia, so that "most of his writings were translated into Russian soon after their publication in France"[3].

These negotiations did not bring immediate results, as Jomini did not want to betray Napoleon. In August 1813, though, "shortly after (the battle of) Bautzen, where he had distinguished himself"[4], during an armistice, the general crossed the Prussian lines and reached Prague, where Alexander I had his Headquarters. He was immediately received and joined the Russian Army with the rank of Lieutenant General.

His first period under the Czar lasted only few months, as he resigned when he understood that the Coalition intended to violate Swiss neutrality. Only some years later, in 1819, he rejoined the Russian Army, having retained his rank, and "served in several staff positions, including acting as a tutor in military affairs for the Tsarevich, the future Emperor Nicholas I"[5].

More importantly, he was "involved in the establishment of a General Staff Academy for the training of Russian officers"[6]. Later, he was part, upon the Czar's request, of the planning and conduct of the Russo-Turkish war (1828-29) and later of the Crimean war (1853-56). During the first campaign he found in general Hans Karl von Diebitsch a determined and daring leader, who adopted an innovative approach, consisting in a close cooperation between the Army and the Navy. In fact, the Czarist Army relied upon the Navy to conquer enemy-held coastal positions from the sea, which were then used to supply land forces. This accelerated the march of the Russian Army toward Adrianople, which was conquered on August 19, 1829. It would be impossible to exclude Jomini's contribution to this masterful plan.

The Crimean war, instead, was a hopeless endeavor, as two major European powers, England and France, were involved in support of the Osmanlis, and even

3 Charles River Editors, *Antoine Henry Jomini.* Amazon Italia, p. 29.

4 J. Shy, «Jomini ». In: P. Paret (ed.), Makers of Modern Strategy. Princeton U.P., 1986, p. 153.

5 Charles Rivers Editors, op. cit. p. 35.

6 Ibid.

the genius of Jomini could not possibly devise a successful plan. Only defense to the last man of the Russian fortress town of Sevastopol was possible, and this is what happened.

All in all, cooperation between Jomini and Russia marked the beginning of several strategic studies among the officers of the Russian Army, thus allowing the Nation to possess a class of officers better prepared in strategy, as compared to the past.

3. *Russian strategic thinking after Jomini*

It should be noted that the old influence of the Prussian approach to warfare, known as "*Frederician model*", was still present among Russian generals, notwithstanding the innovations introduced by Suvorov.

On the wake of the heritage of Suvorov, the debate between those who supported "the notion of a Russian art of war"[7] and those inspired by the feats of great European leaders, as Frederic the Great of Prussia, and by the works of Clausewitz and Jomini became increasingly harsh. As a Russian

> "leading military theorist of the second half of the XIX century, G.A. Leer, later wrote, 'it is usually said of Frederician tactics that they were buried at Jena and Auerstädt. Indeed, their outer cover, their forms, were buried, but their spirit continued to live, at least in our army in the 1850's".[8]

These two parties will continue to exist in the following decades, to the expenses of officers who followed the General Staff Academy, who were taught alternatively, one or the other doctrine.

Another bone of contention was whether to give priority to defense or to offensive warfare. Initially, as a consequence of the successful campaign of 1812 against Napoleon, the prevailing current of thought in the newly established General Staff Academy was to prioritize defense. Among others, Colonel (then general) Modest Ivanovich Bogdanovich (1805–1882)

> "Emphasized the importance of defense as a means of weakening the enemy, and the value of a large standing army for that purpose and praised (general) Kutuzov for avoiding unproductive battles"[9].

7 Ibid.

8 W. Pintner, op. cit. p, 358.

9 Ibid. p. 359.

The Crimean war was a shock for Russia, to the point that the czar Alexander II decided to deeply reform the Nation, starting with the abolition of serfdom. The Army, too, underwent radical innovations thanks to Field Marshal Dimitri Miliutin, who was Minister of War from 1861 to 1881.

Among other reforms, Miliutin struggled to

> "raise the quality of military education, particularly of officers but for rank and file as well. (However) he recognized that Russian society, not just the Russian Army, had to undergo modernization if Russia was to maintain its position among the major powers"[10].

These improvements in the military culture of officers, though, did produce only partially satisfactory results. In fact, as one scholar said,

> "Despite many effective military leaders and despite the development of an extensive literature on the theory of war in the nineteenth century, Russia produced no strategic thinkers whose work has had more than a temporary impact".[11]

It should be noted, though, that Russian military problems were significantly different from those of the majority among European countries. On one hand, the Russian Army had relied with success, until 1861, on

> "serfdom. The harsh but effective device of forcibly enrolling a relatively small number of serfs for lifetime (later twenty-five years) service to maintain a large standing army of professional soldiers was the basis for Russia's remarkable success from 1709 to the mid nineteenth century"[12].

When serfdom was abolished and the Army relied on universal service, the problem of soldiers' instruction became a major concern of military leaders, as recruits had a low cultural level, as their majority was formed by peasants.

4. *General Dragomirov and his strategic thinking*

There is a notable exception, though, among the Russian strategists of that period, an officer who had a deep impact not only on Russian thinking but also elsewhere in Europe, especially in France. This man was Michail Ivanovič Dragomirov (1830-1905).

10 Ibid, p. 362.
11 Ibid. p. 354.
12 Ibid, page 355.



Michail Ivanovič Dragomirov,
Portrait by Ilya Repin (1889)

Born in Ukraine, in 1830, he joined the Russian Army in 1843 in the Noble Regiment of Saint Petersburg. After having attended the General Staff Academy, where he distinguished himself, earning a gold medal, he was dispatched as an observer to the Second Independence War in Italy, in 1859. During this period, he had already published an essay on amphibious operations, and, after his experience in the field of Solferino and San Martino, he wrote an account on the operations he had witnessed.

In 1860 he started his teaching career, at the Russian General Staff Academy, an activity interrupted by his assignment to a Cavalry Division, as Chief of Staff. During the Austrian-Prussian war of 1966 he was again dispatched as an observer to the Prussian General HQs.

In 1873 he became Commander of the 14th Infantry Division, with the task of improving its performance, which had been assessed as poor. Few years later, the 14th Division had been transformed so radically, thanks to his efforts, that it played a major role during the war with the Ottoman Empire of 1877-78, in the successful crossing of the Danube under enemy fire.

Few months later, while engaged in subsequent clashes with the Ottomans, he was severely wounded, to the point of being compelled to retire temporarily from the Army. After his recovery, he became the Commandant of the General Staff Academy until 1889, when he was promoted first to the role of Military Commander of the Kiev District and then Governor General of Kiev, Volyn and Podolsk. In 1905 he declined the offer of becoming Commander general of the Far East Army, during the war against Japan, and died few months later, in his hometown of Konotop.

His theories became well known in France, thanks to his friendship with Gen-

eral Lucien Cardot, who "discovered Clausewitz (for the French Army) and was the propagator of Dragomirov ideas"[13]. The Russian general, in fact, is credited for having deeply influenced the French Infantry Regulations from 1884 to 1913.

Dragomirov main three works are:

- *Manual for the preparation of troops to combat*;[14]
- *Essential principles for the conduct of war, An Interpretation of Clausewitz* 1888) [15];
- *War and Peace by Tolstoi from a military standpoint*. [16]

In his Manual, Dragomirov starts from assessing that the work's main scope is to "*Prepare for war the will and the knowledge of the soldier, develop together all his skills, which he will put in practice on the battlefield"*[17]. In fact, as we will see, he hated the excesses of what he called "*Prussian drills*", i.e. the parades in full uniform which are still most popular in Russia and wanted, instead, to have the education, the instruction and the training of soldiers being focused on warfare and tactics.

To achieve this aim, he recommended to "*accustom the soldier to the facts of war, through maneuvers totally conform to the realities of combat, so that the soldier would have seen a real assault nothing else than a simple maneuver"*[18].

The key agent to achieve this aim was to be, according to Dragomirov, the officer who should become the

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13 D. Queloz, *De la Manoeuvre Napoléonienne à l'offensive à outrance.* Ed. Economica, 2009, p. 388.

14 Опыт руководства для подготовки частей к бою, St. Petersburg, V. Bezobrazov, 1866 ss, trad. fr. *Manuel pour* la *préparation* des *troupes* au *combat*, 3 vols (compagnie, bataillon, trois armes). Paris, Librairie Militaire L. Baudoin, 1886-8).

15 *Учение о войне Клаузевица : основные положения* (V. S. Balachev, St Petersburg, 1888). Trad. fr. *Principes essentiels pour la conduite de la guerre: Clausewitz interprété par le Général Dragomiroff* (Paris, Librairie militaire L. Baudouin, 1889

16 «Война и мир графа Толстого с военной точки зрения», *Oroujeïny Sbornik*, 1868, 4, pp. 103-134 . trad. fr. par le commandant Moulin, *«Guerre et Paix» du comte Tolstoï au point de vue militaire*, Paris, Librairie Militaire L. Baudoin, 1896. See Dominic Lieven, "Tolstoy on War, Russia, Empire", In: *Tolstoy On War: Narrative Art and Historical Truth in "War and Peace"*, ed. by Rick McPeak and Donna Tussing Orwin, Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 2012, pp. 12-25.

17 Art Roë (Patrice Mahon 1865-1914), «Le Général Dragomirow», *Revue des Deux Mondes* CXXXII 1895, pp. 149-173. Reprint by Amazon, 2026, p. 16.

18 Ibid, p. 17.

> "cornerstone of the Army: all rests on him, both as he must consolidate the subordinate cadres in their role, or support soldiers badly cemented between each other in their mutual balance. He is, finally, the only fixed reference of the (military) system, among the environment always unstable of his own knowledge and the assets always incomplete of his troops"[19].

The aim to be pursued by officers was, according to Dragomirov, to "bring a man twenty years old to the degree of development which will transform him in a modern soldier"[20]. When these lines were written, in fact, the average cultural level of the soldiers was very low – not only in Russia – so a special care should have been required to improve the quality and effectiveness of the single individuals, who were not any more to be considered "cannon fodder", but essential members of a tactical group whose aim was to succeed in the mission assigned to it.

To achieve this aim, as Dragomirov recommended "thanks to him (the officer) between the officer and the soldier a strict and really structured reciprocity has to be established"[21]. Summing up, Dragomirov wanted officers to lead their soldiers through example and confidence, not only through strict discipline.

According to him, instruction of the soldiers had to be focused on tactics, among other disciplines. For instance, the soldier "*has to know when and how to utilize the projectile* (of the gun) *or the bayonet; or when and how to assemble the troop for a formation"*[22].

Dragomirov was fully aware that such a teaching was not easy to be understood by illiterate soldiers, so he recommended to

> "break the theory of war in practical examples, increasingly narrow, simples, albeit always apt to attract the group as participant to a general idea; to focus on acts which are related to the energy and – to a certain extent – to the initiative of the single member of the troop"[23]. Soldiers' instruction should follow three phases: "individual instruction, group instruction and tactical instruction"[24]

19 Ibid, p. 18.
20 Ibid. p. 19.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid, pp. 19-20.
24 Ibid, p. 20.

Tactics, however, were not the only subject to be taught to the soldier. His education was considered by Dragomirov to be more important than instruction, so to have him "devoted and apt to sacrifice (but) having the means to defend himself and to harm the enemy"[25]

What is more important for Dragomirov, is that soldiers should acquire "the confidence inspired by the chief, more than the blind faith on the virtues of command"[26]. The soldier, in fact, should "know where he is going, why he is going, when and in what order he is going"[27]. A lesson not everybody has learnt in Russia even in our days.

Apparently, as a French writer says, "Dragomirov subordinates the mechanical value of the weapon to the personal gallantry of the soldier"[28] thus placing himself in the group of French post-1870 military theoreticians, followers of Charles Ardant du Picq, who extolled moral values above all, even at the expenses of massive firepower.

This assessment does not correspond to reality. In fact, Dragomirov showed a more balanced approach to this subject. In describing the normal development of a battle, he said that

> "it is Cavalry which shows up without warning and which charges; it is Artillery which fires over the friendly lines and which, working far away for them, causes worries and deafens (the enemy). Infantry fires on targets, among them motionless troops assembled; she brings rapidly her fire in motion; she carries on and withstands attacks ending in a scuffle"[29].

Dragomirov, though, did not focus only on how to create a body of high quality and disciplined soldiers. His second book is even more remarkable, as it is the translation of a document written by Clausewitz in 1812 and addressed to the Royal Prince of Prussia, with the addition of his comments. Its title, "*Essential Principles for the conduct of war"* indicates that it is a summary of Clausewitz conceptions, a sort of "*Strategic Breviary"* whose scope is to summarize the most important principles and recommendations useful to a leader in wartime. Inev-

25 Ibid, p. 21.
26 Ibid. p. 25.
27 Ibid. p. 26.
28 Ibid. p. 21.
29 Ibid. p. 27.

itably, this work is more prescriptive and less philosophical than his major unfinished work, "*On War",* thus being ideal to teach Strategy to the students of a Staff Course.

As Dragomirov says in his introduction to the document,

> "this brief contains the core of the whole system of Clausewitz. He shows clearly to which point this genial man had penetrated in depth the same essence of war and had understood that it is an issue of will, infinitely more than an issue of intelligence; (he also) is aware that success is assured by the execution more than by conception; finally, that in the last instance all ends up in defeating the enemy. Therefore, the most important thing is to seek him and that the simplest way to attain it is always the better"[30].

Dragomirov continued by extolling Clausewitz over Jomini, as he considered the first decidedly clearer and more straightforward than the latter; he also admitted that "there are some parts which have become obsolete, as his opinion on utility of a normal combat order"[31] but concludes his introduction by saying that "all concerning the spirit of war is decidedly ultimate"[32].

Interestingly, many of his comments are quotations from some French authors, especially Cardinal Jean François de Gondi de Retz (1613-1679), a controversial personality, promoter of the *Fronde* and therefore becoming an enemy of Cardinal Mazzarino and François de la Rochefoucauld. Notwithstanding that, Cardinal De Retz work on philosophy was mostly praised.

Since the introductory lines of the book, Dragomirov quotes the Cardinal for his comment on moral factors: "you should risk to a possible extent each time you feel able even to profit of a lack of success"[33].

The book, only 47 pages long, is divided in several paragraphs. The introduction, titled "*Principles regarding war in general",* is followed by "*Tactics or Theory of combat"* (defensive, offensive, employment of troops, utilization of the terrain), "*Strategy"* (general principles, defensive, offensive), and, as a conclusion, "*Application of previous principles to war"*.

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30 C. von Clausewitz, *Principes essentiels pour la conduite de la guerre.* Ed. AOJB, 2026 p. 5.

31 Ibid. pa. 6.

32 Ibid.

33 C. von Clausewitz, *Essential principles for the conduct of war, interpreted by Dragomirov.* Ed. AOJB, 2026, p. 7, nt 1.

Dragomirov comments can be classed in two categories: the first includes notes focused on moral factors, among them the importance of human behavior, and collective feelings, either positive (gallantry, devotion to the Nation) and negative (fear, hatred). The second category includes comments related to the effects of improved weaponry, as compared to Clausewitz times. This shows the distance between him and the French followers of Ardant du Picq.

We can say that both this book – obscured by Clausewitz' major work – and Dragomirov comments are worth being considered in our times, as open war has replaced peacekeeping and stabilization operations.

Dragomirov's last book, *War and Peace by Tolstoy from a military standpoint* apart from its argumentative content, has three important series of argument, which are indicative of the general's conceptions.

The first is related to the bad habit of giving priority to formal military parades. Dragomirov, on fact, mentions a chapter of Tolstoy's book where a regiment commander, just having led his troops through a march of thirty plus kilometers, is informed that his

> "Commander- in – chief will pas in review the troops the following morning. The soldiers spend the night to wash themselves and to clean their parade uniforms. The following morning the regiment is ready and so shining that it would not be excluded from the drill camp of Saint Petersburg"[34].

Unfortunately for the commander of the regiment, early in the morning, an Aide-de-Camp informs him that the commander – in – chief, though, wants to see the regiment as it was after the march, in combat attire. Therefore, he orders his soldiers to change dress, and all the efforts to be "*spic and span"* have been spent in vain.

The second part is focused on a chapter of the book where Tolstoy mentions corruption in the Army and the bad habit of concealing it, "*for the honor of the regiment".* To make a long story short, an officer whose performances are poor is transferred to the supply services, where he has much more freedom of action in robbing and stealing, while everybody keeps silence.

So far, Dragomirov is in full agreement with Tolstoy, who, by the way, had

34 General Dragomirov, *War and Peace by Tolstoy from a military standpoint.* Librairie Militaire Baudoin, 1896, p. 5.

been an officer in the Russian Army between 1851 and 1855, taking part to the conquest of Caucasus and to the defense of Sevastopol, and he knew well the bad habits of the Army he was part of. When, though, the great novelist starts speaking of the role of the so-called "*Top Brass"*, the disagreement with the general becomes profound.

Tolstoy, in his book, stated that:

> "the generals do nothing during a combat, (and he added that) Napoleon gave orders, some among them, however, had already been executed before, and others could not be executed and were not applied. All dispositions regarding the position and the employment mode of troops were taken by the most immediate chiefs (i.e. low-ranking officers) of the different components without reporting them neither to Ney nor to Davout nor to Murat, nor even to Napoleon"[35].

Tolstoy, however, contradicts himself, as he provides the opposite argument, duly highlighted by Dragomirov, when he depicts the behavior of general Bagration, one among the leaders of the victorious defense of Russia against Napoleon's "*Grande Armée"*. He is depicted, by Tolstoy, in a moment where chaos among the troops is reaching a climax, due to an enemy attack.

The general, instead, notwithstanding the intense enemy fire,

> "frowns, looks behind him, and then he turns his head with the utmost indifference, as to say 'why are we occupied with similar stupid things'. And he stops his horse for a moment to free his sword entangled with his coat"[36].

This anecdote ends up with a remark

> "the presence (of Bagration) produced enormous effects. The generals who were approaching him with a distraught face, became again calm near him, soldiers and officers cheered him happily, becoming more active in his presence and showed in front of him their gallantry"[37].

This anecdote *allows* Dragomirov to state that

> "for a chief, the most difficult and terrible trial has always been and will be the direction of troops during combat; not in the sense of indicating to each (subordinate) his precise role, but a direction exerted in a way that the soul

35 Ibid. page 66.

36 Ibid, p. 18.

37 Ibid.

of each succeeds in bring to a positive end what circumstances impose"[38].

To corroborate his argument, Dragomirov quotes the French Maréchal De Saxe, who said

> "There is the need for an army general not to be busy on a day of fighting. The examination of the place and of the deployment of the troops must be prompt as the flight of an eagle; his dispositions (should be) short and simple as: the first line will attack, the second will sustain, or this Corps will attack and the other will support it. If the general wants to act as a Battle Sergeant during the fight, and be everywhere, he will be like the fly on the coach"[39].

Back to the problem of the comparative importance of moral factors vs armament, Dragomirov wrote:

> "the prime condition for success is the will to fight. However, this will cannot be else than the result of the confidence in achieving victory, in case of a scuffle. This confidence is increased or reduced by the value of the armament and the disposition of the troops from the standpoint of combat, with the relative number of soldiers to be opposed to the enemy, and with the confidence that the chief himself has been able to instill to his subordinates"[40]

There was, finally, another contentious issue between Dragomirov and Tolstoy, who claimed that

> "there is and cannot exist any science of war, and consequently no genius of war can exist"[41]. Dragomirov reply was sharp: "Nobody can have the idea that a science of war can exist. But this does not mean that no theory of the art of war exists, precisely as it happens in all liberal and pacific arts. It provides the knowledge of the characteristics of troops and terrain; it shows models, the masterpieces produced in the domain of war and, consequently, facilitates those who have been provided by nature of military capabilities"[42].

Needless to say, this approach of considering that strategy is an art, thus needing a supporting theory, and has no right of being a science, is still predominant among strategists and academics in France.

38 Ibid. p. 16.
39 Ibid. p. 22.
40 Ibid, p. 88.
41 Ibid. p. 33.
42 Ibid. p. 36.

5. *Russian strategic thinking after Dragomirov*

After Dragomirov, the debate among Russian strategic thinkers focused increasingly on defense versus offensive. However, the first strategist to be mentioned, Lt. Colonel (then Major General) A. A. Gulevich, was an exception as he

> "recognized the intimate connection of modern war and the national economy. He even foresaw that the next European war would probably be drawn out and exhausting rather than quick and decisive"[43]. He failed, though, as he was too much optimistic about Russian capability to withstand such a catastrophic event.

Another thinker who gained an international relevance was the already mentioned general Genrikh Antonovic Leer (1829 – 1904), who succeeded Dragomirov as director of the General Staff Academy.

> "For him, the basic elements of strategy were permanent, unchanging, and to be derived from the study of the great commanders and writers of the past in European warfare. Leer emphasized the decisive importance of cold steel – firepower was preparatory, the bayonet decisive, and victory depended ultimately on moral force"[44].

This approach to strategy was similar to the prevailing thought among French strategists, with colonel (then Field Marshal) Foch as the front runner. Leer did not live enough to witness the defeat of his Nation in the Russian – Japanese war, which saw the fallacy of an indiscriminate adoption of both the protracted defense in the style of Kutuzov (the Russian retreat in front of the Japanese Army was not sufficient to save Mukden, which was the strategic pivot of the whole campaign) and of the excessive use of bayonets in the attacks, a system which implied a heavy loss of soldiers.

Inevitably, a drastic change of approach had to follow this defeat and the main interpreter of the new way of thinking was colonel (later general) Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Neznamov (1872 – 1928), who noted that

> "in the days of modern fire power, Russia still dreamt of thunderous bayonet charges, put its faith on the gallantry of its soldiers, and expected the war to give birth to a hero-commander. Reversing Suvorov and the long line of his followers, he firmly asserted (that) fire decides battles"[45].

43 W. Pinitner, op. cit. page 365.

44 Ibid. p. 368.

45 Ibid. p. 369.

However, colonel Neznamov was not flawless in his conceptions. In fact, while he believed that

> "the goal of war remained the destruction of the enemy army in a quick, decisive battle, even if he realized that such an outcome was unlikely in a future war"[46]. Even though, he "did not foresee the stalemate of trench warfare but expected the continued deployment of large forces over wide areas with considerable movement as each side tried to outflank the other, a scenario that presumably could not last for more than some months, so that the war would be short"[47].

World War I would demonstrate that Neznamov ideas required a superior power and an organization which the Russian Army did not have, as compared to the enemy, the Imperial German Army. Therefore, when put into practice against the forces of the German Emperor, his theories proved catastrophic, while they had the merit of being effective against the Army of Austria-Hungary.

6. *Conclusions*

Summing up, among the strategic thinkers of the czarist Russian Army, Dragomirov stands alone thanks to the flexibility and balance of his strategic thinking.

First of all, it is worth highlighting Dragomirov's greatest feat as a strategist: he introduced Clausewitz teaching in the Russian Staff Academy, even if through a booklet which nowadays has been almost forgotten. His innovative ideas, however, were not totally disregarded by those who replaced him at the Staff Academy, even if they were distorted in great part.

For instance, nobody fully understood the need for education of troops. He preached in vain that Russian troops needed to be strongly motivated and educated, besides being thoroughly educated and instructed to become effective in combat. He believed in the need to transform every single soldier into a weapon, aware of what was happening and able to react to unforeseen events.

The excess of formalities, like parades, most popular in Russia also nowadays, was mercilessly lambasted by him, and he also despised corruption in the Army. He did not, however, underestimate the importance of firepower and of a combined arms approach in war, even if focused his works on the importance of the

46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.

human factor, often underestimated in his Country.

In addition to that, he made two remarks which were not considered by those who followed him. The first one was that battles take place only when both contenders want to fight, as they

> "have good reasons to count on the probability of victory more than of defeat. When such a belief dose not exist among the two opponents, they do not seek the fight, they avoid the battle"[48].

Too many times Russian generals were compelled to accept battle in unfavorable conditions, with the result of being defeated with great loss of lives.

The second remark is even more important. Dragomirov says that, in strategy, "*an idea does not belong to the individual who conceived it first, but to the man who undertake to put it in practice, with the responsibility of all consequences that his decision can involve"*[49]. Many brilliant strategic conceptions were conceived by his successors, but few were put in practice.

All in all, his lessons were misunderstood by his successors, who extolled some – and not all – aspects of his strategic thinking, thus giving birth to a class of officers whose education was one-sided, and causing the series of defeats Russia suffered in the beginning of the XX century.

Only one Russian general after him was successful, as he fully applied Dragomirov lesson. The man was Alexej Alexseevic Brusilov (1853 – 1926) who showed a flexibility of mind which is the real lesson taught by the great strategist.

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48 Dragomirov, op. cit. p. 60.

49 Ibid, p. 55.

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Anticipating Russian Tactics in the War in Ukraine

Learning from German and Soviet Tactical and Strategic Manouvers in WWII

by Giangiuseppe Pili

Abstract. The analysis highlights lessons from the German Wehrmacht, which ultimately failed due to stubborn decision-making, chronic manpower issues, and logistical shortages. Ukraine (AFU) must stabilize procurement chains and address manpower deficiencies, as logistical failings determined the German defeat. The study emphasizes that infantry and artillery remain the central pillars of combat, and relying solely on drone warfare is insufficient to hold ground. Current Russian operations strongly resemble Soviet tactics, which relied on overwhelming quantitative superiority in manpower, tanks, and artillery. Soviets pursued 'active defense' and excelled at exploiting breakthroughs with independent armored forces for deep thrusts and encirclements. A specific parallel is the skill of infiltrating lines with small detachments under cover, seen in both historical and current conflicts. To counter Russian attritional warfare, Ukraine must maintain agility, avoid strategic inflexibility, and be willing to trade space for time. The AFU should adopt active defense and maneuver warfare concepts. The core strategic lesson is to apply the Liddle-Hart principle: avoid fighting the enemy's strength and instead search for and strike weaknesses, shaping their options in advance.

Keywords: Land Warfare, Maneuver Warfare, Soviet and German Tactics in WWII, War in Ukraine

The recent Russian offensive operations have got a momentum in critical areas of the frontlines in Eastern Ukraine near Pokrovsk and Dobropillya, marking a dramatic moment for the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Intense fighting is reported across the frontline.[1] In 2025, the Russians were able

1 See Center for Strategic Studies, "Russia's war on Ukraine. 15.08.25", 2025, available at: https://cdsdailybrief.substack.com/p/russias-war-on-ukraine-150825

NAM, Strategic History
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to cross the Oskil River and establish a stable presence there. Lately, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation were able to create several pockets that could be exploited.

Attritional warfare is a war of relentless pursue and, similarly to WWI, can be won by the progressive collapse of the other side's capacity to sustain the fight. However, Ukraine's general resilience and determination is still able to stall the Russian advances, but they cannot rely only on drones if they want to maintain enough ground meanwhile diplomacy goes on. The battlefield has a direct effect on the 'peace talks' especially after the meeting between Trump and Putin in Alaska.

Despite the difficult moment for the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), there is still time to understand and anticipate future Russian offensive operations as they clearly show many similarities with defensive and offensive operations between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in WWII. Importantly, the Wehrmacht faced problems and experiences in the frontlines from which it is important to learn and anticipate future defensive and offensive operations to avoid similar problems such as stubborn decision-making, manpower issues, procurement and supply shortages.

Indeed, the Germans could not solve them also because they had to fight three-front war without significant allied forces. Instead, Ukraine is much better placed to survive, hold and expand but drones alone are not going to solve the problem. As a result, it will be very important to consider what we can learn from both sides of the Eastern Front in WWII as those lessons are extremely valuable now more than ever.

How the Germans Tried to Overcome Numerical Inferiority

The Soviet Union employed a range of successful tactics against German defensive lines, particularly effective in countering the Germans' consistent inferiority in manpower and materiel on the Eastern Front. However, the Germans mixed flexible maneuvers and fixed defensive lines to hold the ground, including counterattacks on the flanks or use of armored divisions and artillery to stop the Russian advances.[2]

2 CMH Pub 104-14-1, "GERMAN DEFENSE TACTICS against RUSSIAN BREAK-

Both armies adjusted their fighting styles and strategies and tactics across time where the Germans had persistent logistic and procurement hurdles that piled up with the complexity of the front lines meanwhile the Soviets got momentum. However, Soviet methods invariably relied on 'overwhelming by the numbers' and they benefitted by German decision-making unable to maintain strategic and operational flexibility especially when their offensive culminated and the initiative passed to the Soviets.[3] The German high command never had any alternative for a quick win and was unable to keep the territory after the first phases of the invasion proved unsuccessful. Doctrinally, similarly to the Soviet 'active defense', the Germans understood the importance of 'elastic defense'.[4]

The Germans used several means to achieve operational defensive operations and tactical successes at the front line. They established defensive lines often comprised infantry divisions supported by mobile elements such as panzer divisions, assault gun battalions, motorised antitank units, GHQ artillery, rocket projector regiments, and engineer units.[5] As stated by the *Truppenführung* manual (1933), the infantry and the single soldier remained the pillars of combat. The entire ethos of war resides with them.[6]

Position defense in strong points and improvised fortresses were common, especially in inhabited localities. Germans appreciated urban warfare in two different ways: as a fortified positions and as places to pin down the enemy forces to concentrate firepower both for offensive and defensive operations (Stalingrad, Leningrad, Rostov etc.).[7] Urban warfare is an inescapable component of the cur-

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THROUGHS", Center of Military History U. S. Army, ·Washington, D.C., 1951, first chapter.

3 Ibid, 61.

4 Way, T., *Standing Fast: German Defensive Doctrine on the Russian Front in WWII*, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1949, 1-6, online at: armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/combat-studies-institute/csi-books/wray.pdf

5 CMH Pub 104-14-1, "GERMAN DEFENSE TACTICS against RUSSIAN BREAKTHROUGHS", Center of Military History United States Army ·Washington, D.C., 1951, 29.

6 See Gen. Beck and Geman Army, *Truppenführung*, German Field Service Regulations, 1933, 1-26, (upload wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/02). Suggested in the outstanding translation, Condell, B. and Zabecki, D.T. eds., *On the German art of war: Truppenführung*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001.

7 CMH Pub 104-14-1, *German Defense Tactics Against Russian Breakthroughs*, Center of Military History United States Army ·Washington, D.C., 1951, 7 (for tank use in concen-

rent armed conflicts.[8] This is clearly mirrored in the war in Ukraine, where the main battles all revolve around important towns and cities such as Bakhmut, Avdiivka and Pokrovsk.[9]

Given the chronic numerical inferiority, which the German military had to overcome even before 1941, the sheer survivability of the force was only possible under the assumption of mobility and deployment of mobile reserve units in the right place and time.[10] Having sufficient force at the rear is key for force survivability overall and these troops must be ready and prepared. Meanwhile, armored units such as tanks and motorized infantry units were used for local counterattacks to halt the Soviet advances, blocking actions, and sealing gaps, taking advantage of terrain, good road networks to reach critical points quickly. Notably, these concepts were all explored by German doctrine since the end of WWI.[11] Importantly, when it came to defending the lines, German never found a better way to hold the ground than entrenching and defending through infantry units, but it was never enough and combined armed operations were required.

The capacity of the German military to adapt was never sufficient to overcome the chronic manpower unbalance in the long term. However, even more crucially, the Germans were unable to solve the procurement of military weapons, munitions, and, especially, all the related supplies required for maintaining the lines.[12]

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tration of force around Kharkiv) and 34.

8 Discussion of Dr. Jack Watling, in NATO, "MultiDomain Operations - Contemporary Perspectives", *NATO Allied Rapid Reaction Corps*, 2022, online at: youtube.com

9 Powers, B., "The Battle for Bakhmut: When Is a Battlefield Loss a Strategic Victory?", U.S. Army, 2025, online at: army.mil/article/284124 and BBC, "Ukraine in maps: Tracking the war with Russia", *BBC Visual Team*, 2025 (online at: bbc.co.uk/news/ articles)

10 "The penetrating force and momentum of a motorized division depended to a large degree upon the mobility of all its elements." In Bergin, W., et. All., *German Armored Traffic Control During the Russian Campaign*, Department of the Army (USA) Center of Military History United States Army Washington, D.C., 1984, p. 18, Klein, J., *The German Campaign in Russian Planning and Operations (1940-1942)*, Department of the Army (USA), No. 20-261a, 1955, p. 96 (online at: history.army.mil/portals/143 /Images/Publications/ catalog/104-21.pdf)

11 See Zabecki, D.T. eds., *On the German art of war: Truppenführung*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001 second section on armored units.

12 CMH Pub 104-14-1, *German Defense Tactics against Russian Breakthroughs*, Center of Military History United States Army ·Washington, D.C., 1951, 46, Bergin, W., et. All., *German Armored Traffic Control During the Russian Campaign*, Department of the Army (USA) Center of Military History United States Army Washington, D.C., 1984, p. 12, 25, Klein, J., *The German Campaign in Russian Planning and Operations (1940-1942)*, De-

This was one of the major problems of the first stages of the invasion, when the Soviets seemed completely caught by surprise and the Wehrmacht seemed unstoppable.

Due to the manpower issue, the Germans had to resolve to significantly sub-optimal solutions to find a way out of the situation. Ultimately, the solutions worked only in specific situations, but they could not create the conditions for success. They used service troops and rear echelon personnel as infantry, employed engineers as infantry, formed alert units from personnel of transportation, signal and supply units as temporary combat forces.[13] There was a widespread problem of training these units. They also tried even less appealing solutions such as involving civilian labour, using auxiliary units from the Soviet prisoners of war,[14] activated native units from other nationalities explicitly understood as anti-Communist.

The core belief that nationalism across the Soviet Union would have brought to local uprising and support to the cause was assumed by Hitler very early on operation Barbarossa.[15] Exactly because of the centrality of infantry, the German Army tried to maintain an ongoing recruitment process trying to improve the training to speed up the process. For armored units, German basic training for recruits lasted 12 weeks, but this was later reduced to 8.[16] Hence, reducing the time for training is not a viable option for Ukraine as for any other armed forces and inefficiency or defections must be expected otherwise determining low morale and overall distrust in the general population.[17]

partment of the Army (USA), No. 20-261a, 1955, p.61.

13 CMH Pub 104-14-1, *German Defense Tactics against Russian Breakthroughs*, Center of Military History United States Army ·Washington, D.C., 1951, 21, 28.

14 See United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Forced Labor: Soviet POWs January 1942 through May 1945 - Military Campaign against the Soviet Union", Holocaust Encyclopedia, available at: https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/forced-labor-soviet-pows-january-1942-through-may-1945

15 Klein, J., *The German Campaign in Russian Planning and Operations (1940-1942)*, Department of the Army (USA), No. 20-261a, 1955, p. 14.

16 Klein, J., *German Tank Maintenance in World War II*, Department of the Army (USA), 1952, Center of Military History United States Army Washington, D.C., 1982, 29-30.

17 According to sources, the current training time for a Ukrainian soldier is 45 days: NVU, "Ukraine's new basic military training program: Preparing recruits for combat", *New Voice of Ukraine*, 2024, https://english.nv.ua/nation/how-long-does-the-bmt-last-what-is-in-the-updated-program-what-is-issued-to-conscripted-persons-50465553.html.

The Germans tried several ways to minimize the chronic shortages of supplies especially after 1942. They restricted heavy fire areas at only crucial points, prioritizing defensive operations and concentration of specific units such as assault guns, panzers and tactical air support.[18] This effort in concentrating the forces was constant and included antitank defenses around important points.[19] Despite the gigantic effort of keeping the pace of production constant, they still developed more efficient tanks (e.g. Tiger and Panther) and improving legacy equipment to achieve qualitative superiority.[20] However, in practice, both in the Western and Eastern fronts, they were not necessarily successful or the improvements sufficient to overcome the quantitative inferiority.

Importantly, the Germans tried to improve tank maintenance services which included better equipment, depot maintenance installations in occupied Soviet territory.[21] This was seen also in the War in Ukraine at least from the Russian side.[22] Similarly, irreparable tanks were cannibalized for saved parts, and they also used Soviet acquired equipment. At tactical and sub-tactical levels, they also tried to increase the production of automatic weapons. Finally, when motored vehicles started to be too precious, they resolved to horse carts for day-to-day supplies.[23] It must be said that across the entirety of WWII armies, horses, motorbikes and any other means of transportation were never discharged and in fact discussed even at doctrinal level.[24] This has been seen even in the current war in Ukraine in the Russian side at least. When motorcycles tactics appeared in the war in Ukraine they were saluted as inferior ways to fight where, in fact, they were considered part of all armies, though used in different ways.[25]

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18 CMH Pub 104-14-1, *German Defense Tactics Against Russian Breakthroughs*, Center of Military History United States Army ·Washington, D.C., 1951, 31.

19 Ibid, 30.

20 Klein, J., *German Tank Maintenance in World War II*, Department of the Army (USA), 1952, Center of Military History United States Army Washington, D.C., 1982, 24-25.

21 Klein, J., *German Tank Maintenance in World War II*, Department of the Army (USA), 1952, Center of Military History United States Army Washington, D.C., 1982, 21-29.

22 See the outstanding analysis Aleksić, M., Cvrk, S., and Božović, D., "Analysis of Land Army Maintenance Techniques in the War in Ukraine", *Military Review* – U.S. Army Press, May-June 2023 (online at: armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review).

23 See "Horse drawn vehicles", online at: kfzderwehrmacht.de/Homepage.

24 This is explicit in several parts of *Truppenführung* (1933), Zabecki, D.T. eds., *On the German art of war: Truppenführung*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001

25 Frontelligence Insight, "21st-Century Dragoons: Dissecting Russia's Motorcycle Assault

Soviet Offensive Operations in the Eastern Front against the Wehrmacht

The position of the Soviet at the beginning of the German invasion determined the way in which future offensive operations were conducted. However, there were constant recognizable patterns across time. Firstly, the Soviets always tried to avoid passive defense expressed through the notion of 'active defense', even when these implied significant losses.[26] Secondly, the Soviet entrenched and created strong defensive lines to hold chokepoints and particularly relevant cities which they deemed too important to be lost even when the Army Group South tried to pursue a wide penetration toward the Caucasus.[27] Thirdly, Soviet military had significant numbers of resources *in absolute terms* but not sufficient to equip all the soldiers and, especially in the first phases of the war (1941-1942) they even resolved to use unfinished rifles.[28] This means that the Soviet deliberately decided to engage the enemy even in very difficult material conditions. True, this shows a very low esteem or interest in the preservation of the soldier but also the overall determination which, ultimately, is what makes the difference in wars of attrition.

When it comes to offensive operations, the Soviet military always knew that its main advantages resided on two pillars: the terrain and the sheer manpower. As a result, they exploited both independently of the prices paid by the soldiers and the rest of society. As the early Roman Empire, the Soviets liked to win through numbers. The Soviets consistently used overwhelming quantitative superiority in manpower, tanks, and artillery.[29] Ironically, the German army remarked that the Soviets were willing to pay any human price showing a "total disregard for the value of human life", as if the Germans proved any different.[30]

Tactics", *Frontelligence Insight*, 2025 (online at: frontelligence.substack.com).

26 For an excellent analysis of Russian and Soviet military doctrine across time, see Monaghan, A., *Blitzkrieg and the Russian art of war*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2025 and Leonhard, R., *The art of maneuver: Maneuver warfare theory and Airland battle*. Presidio press, 2009, 52-58.

27 Klein, J., *The German Campaign in Russian Planning and Operations (1940-1942)*, Department of the Army (USA), No. 20-261a, 1955, p. 85-86.

28 Ibid, 119.

29 For an analysis of Russian and Soviet artillery, see Pili, G., Evans, B., Finn, R., (2025), 'Russia's God of War - The Political and Military Power of Artillery', *Royal United Service Institute*, London (UK), 02.2025, available at: https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-god-war-political-and-military-power-artillery

30 Bergin, W., *Small Unit Actions During the German Campaign in Russia*, Washington: Department of the Army (USA), 1953, 4.

The Soviet did try to concentrate significant mass before any infantry attack which had to be followed by independent armored forces to push deeply the Germans back exploiting momentum. Ideally, the intention was to pierce, pursue and encircle the enemy.[31] In fact, it has been reported that the Soviets demonstrated extraordinary skill in exploiting even the smallest penetration with speed forcing the Germans to react very quickly to avoid the full collapse of the lines and specifically river crossing and bridgehead seizure. Moreover, the Soviets believed in deep thrusts by independent armored forces for exploiting openings in the lines as a way to pursue breakthroughs, allowing them to push deeply into enemy rear areas and achieve encirclements when possible.[32] This seems like what we are seeing today, as when there is a breakthrough able to hold the ground, the Russians were able to exploit it, though at very high cost and far less successfully when it comes to deep armored penetrations.

Importantly, the Soviets excelled at infiltrating German lines without visible preparation or major fire support.[33] This often occurred under cover of darkness or in difficult terrain, with small detachments moving through gaps, entrenching themselves, and quickly receiving reinforcements, another remarkable commonality with what reported in the current war for the Russian side.[34] Soviet units could hold out for days even when encircled, tying down significant German forces and serving as jump-off bases for future operations. It is impossible to no see a regular pattern even here as Russian sabotage troops were reported infiltrating the Ukraine lines northeast of Dobropillya before a major infantry movement was then achieved.[35]

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31 See the extensive analysis accross CMH Pub 104-14-1, *German Defense Tactics Against Russian Breakthroughs*, Center of Military History United States Army ·Washington, D.C., 1951, and Bergin, W., *Small Unit Actions During the German Campaign in Russia*, Washington: Department of the Army (USA), 1953, 108.

32 Beyond this being one of the most explored principles of Soviet manouver theory, for an application, see the vivid description of the battle of Dnepr in Ziemke, E., *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East*, Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington D.C., 2002, 174-196.

33 See for example Bergin, W., *Small Unit Actions During the German Campaign in Russia*, Washington: Department of the Army (USA), 1953, 248-253. This feature is very well documented across the sources.

34 Meduza, "'The situation is difficult and fluid' What we know about Russia's reported breakthrough in Ukraine's Donetsk region", *Meduza*, 2025 (online at meduza.io website)

35 Haward, C., et. All, ISW, "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 12, 2025",

Offensive operations were always based on exploiting terrain and weather that, consistently, proved Soviet allies. The Germans remarked how better the Soviet soldiers were able to fight even under extreme weather during winter and, in fact, they never stopped fighting in 1941, pinning down consistently the German forces across time and denying them the possibility to rest.[36] Terrain and weather were the basic factors that allowed effective concentration of fire which, historically for the Russian forces, was achieved through artillery and combined arms.[37] Soviet air support was notably concentrated against German artillery positions which shows, once again, the persistent importance of artillery.

Finally, since the very beginning of the German invasion, the Soviet citizens were overall not very much persuaded to help the Germans and there has been significant partisan warfare which was based on frictioning the German forces constantly.[38] Partisans effectively cut German supply routes (rail and highway), disrupted communications, and tied down substantial German combat forces in rear areas.[39]

In spite of Clausewitz's distrust for deception and surprise, the Soviet high command believed in searching for both.[40] Soviet camouflage and concealment were reported as capable, with forces moving at night and disappearing during daylight. For example, they successfully employed feints or reconnaissance thrusts to divert German defensive forces from the true point of main effort. Simi-

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Institute for the Study of War, ASug. 12, 2025, (online at understandingwar.org).

36 It is interesting to see how many times the word "weather" is reported in the source and associated to widespread problems for the German Army and explicitly far less so for Russian fighting forces: Klein, J., *The German Campaign in Russian Planning and Operations (1940-1942)*, Department of the Army (USA), No. 20-261a, 1955.

37 Pili, G., Evans, B., Finn, R., (2025), 'Russia's God of War - The Political and Military Power of Artillery', *RUSI*, London (UK), 02.2025 (online at: rusi.org website).

38 CIA, "Soviet Partisan Warfare", *Central Intelligence Agency*, 1949, online at: https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-01634R000400140001-2.pdf

39 The then-called 'partisan warfare' was such a problem that the U.S. Army series have an entire study on security of the rear: US Army, *Rear Area Security in Russia - The Soviet Second Front Behind the German Lines*, Department of the Army (Washington, D.C. USA), CMH Pub 104-16 (history.army.mil/portals/143 /Images/ Publications/catalog/104-16.pdf).

40 For understanding how deep this belief is, see Monaghan, A., *Blitzkrieg and the Russian art of war*, Manchester: Manchester U. P., 2025.

lar concepts were seen once again recently as sabotage and reconnaissance[41] units prepared the advance near Pokrovsk but, more impressively, in Kursk.[42]

Soviet success was often amplified by German strategic errors, such as Hitler's rigid "hold at all costs" orders, which led to the annihilation of encircled German units that might otherwise have withdrawn. This strategic inflexibility, combined with chronic German manpower and materiel inferiority, allowed the Soviets to sustain their offensive momentum.

Lesson (Un)learned from Second World War

General Franz Halder Chief of Staff of the Army High Command was tasked to write a series of fundamental historical analyses on how the Wehrmacht fought against the Soviet Union after WWII. These lessons still apply and should be studied carefully because many of the current Russian ideas directly resembles Soviet concepts and tactics. However, Russia is not the Soviet Union and that is reassuring.

Defensively, there is a need for redundancy, and no single weapon can be considered sufficient. Over relying on drone warfare is not going to substitute for artillery and infantry.[43] Both the German and Soviet experiences both underline the centrality of infantry and artillery with the tanks or armored units to be used to pursue the openings of the line or anticipating any. Secondly, there is no way to keep the lines stable unless solid procurement chains and manpower issues are fixed. Ultimately, the Wehrmacht could not achieve an early victory because of logistical reasons and manpower shortage determined its end. This remains the most urgent problems from Ukraine to fix and for the Western 'league of the willing' to ensure in terms of weapon procurement. Thirdly, there is no substitution for concentration of fire when needed from diverse weapon systems regardless of

41 Haward, C., et. All, ISW, "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 12, 2025", *Institute for the Study of War*, 2025, online at: understandingwar.org/ research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-12-2025/

42 Bellamy, D., "Russian forces use gas pipeline to attack Ukrainian troops in Kursk", *Euronews*, September 3, 2025, online at: euronews.com/2025/03/09/russia-soldiers-launched-surprise-attack-in-kursk-through-gas-pipeline.

43 Jajcay, J., "I Fought in Ukraine and Here's Why FPV Drones Kind of Suck", *War on the Rocks*, 2025, online at: warontherocks.com/2025/06/i-fought-in-ukraine-and-heres-why-fpv-drones-kind-of-suck/.

how dispersed the firing units are.[44] Lastly, the battlefield is the ultimate decider of what works. Horses, mules, new tactics such as the turtle tanks cannot be discharged as inferior unless the fight proved so.

Offensively, the Russian tactics today very much resemble what the Soviet army experimented and tested. They still rely on overwhelming the opponent with numerical superiority in both manpower and weapons and they are in serious troubles when they cannot do so, and they are not going to change. Ukraine cannot afford 'decision-making stubbornness' and accept to be agile at multiple levels, be movable and, at strategic level, be willing to trade space for time when required. They will have to be prepared to active units behind the direct lines of the front including new and old tactics without discharging highly mobile assaults. Active defense and maneuver warfare can be seen in different ways, and the Germans and Soviets elaborated different views.[45] However, they are united by the need to avoid passive defense at all costs as the price for that is unacceptable.

But the most important lesson remains the one taught by Basil Liddle-Hart; you do not want to fight the enemy's strength and search for weaknesses and strike them there. As a result, don't engage the enemy if you don't need to and find smarter ways to anticipate its moves shaping its options in advance.

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44 For a very neat analysis of this point, see Watling, J., *The Arms of the Future - Technology and Close Combat in the Twenty-First Century*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023.

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Recensioni / Reviews

Strategic History

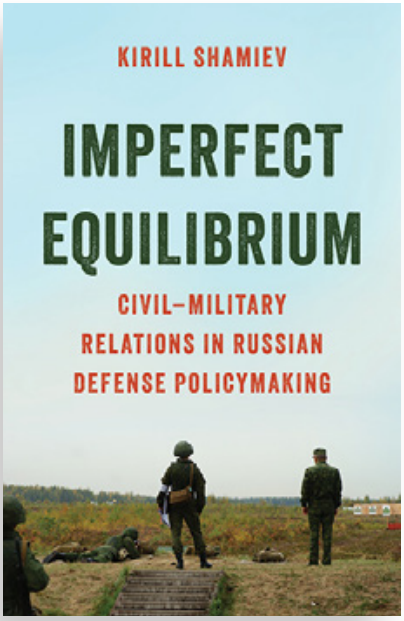


Kirill Shamiev,

Imperfect Equilibrium:

Civil-Military Relations in Russian Defense Policymaking

C. Hurst & Co. 2026. 268 pp. $34.99



In *Imperfect Equilibrium*, Kirill Shamiev examines how Russian civil–military relations have influenced the effectiveness of the armed forces from the collapse of the Soviet Union to the war in Ukraine. The book starts from an apparent paradox: despite major increases in defence spending and repeated reform efforts since the First Chechen War, the Russian military has continued to display serious operational weaknesses. These include poor strategic assessment, inadequate intelligence, weak command-and-control structures, and deficiencies in logistics and equipment maintenance. According to Shamiev, these shortcom-

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ings became particularly visible during the war in Ukraine.

The central question driving the book is why Russian governments have repeatedly failed to significantly improve military effectiveness. Shamiev argues that the main obstacle lies in the configuration of Russian civil–military relations. Reform attempts have often remained partial or ineffective because they emerged within a system characterized by a highly centralized presidency and a military establishment capable of resisting or diluting unwanted changes. Rather than acting as a fully compliant institution, the armed forces frequently behaved as a veto player.

The volume is divided into five chapters. The opening chapters reconstruct the evolution of Russian civil–military relations after the Soviet collapse and discuss the organizational culture of the armed forces. Shamiev highlights the persistence of Soviet institutional legacies and emphasizes the military's traditional reluctance to intervene directly in domestic politics, even during periods of instability. At the same time, officers are portrayed as conscious of their informational advantages and often skeptical of civilian expertise in defence matters.

The empirical core of the book is organized around three phases. The first (2000–2007) corresponds to Putin's early years and is marked by limited reform ambitions. The second (2007–2012) follows the war in Georgia and the reform agenda promoted by Defence Minister Anatolii Serdyukov, which generated substantial resistance within the military establishment. The final phase (2012–2022) examines the growing use of military power under Putin alongside the persistence of institutional rigidities that ultimately undermined effectiveness. Across these phases, Shamiev identifies the absence of robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms as a recurring weakness.

Shamiev's sources are personal experiences of military people (from interviews, memoirs and blogs), independent surveys, and official data (statements, documents, law and rules), all interpreted and intertwined to build a theoretical framework centred on the concept of equilibrium. Effective defence policymaking requires alignment among the main actors involved in the reform process. When such equilibrium is absent, reforms tend to remain incomplete, inconsistent, or ineffective.

To conceptualize these dynamics, Shamiev relies on the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier, 1988). Defence policymaking is presented as the outcome

of competition among coalitions composed of political, military, bureaucratic, and societal actors. In the Russian case, the author identifies three principal coalitions: the presidential coalition, centred on the executive and state institutions; the civilian coalition, including parliamentarians and civil society actors; and the military coalition, built around the General Staff and parts of the military-industrial complex. Each coalition controls distinct resources, such as expertise, political influence, public legitimacy, or administrative access. Shamiev particularly stresses the military's informational advantage and the cultural divide separating military and civilian actors. This reflects a broadly Huntingtonian understanding of civil–military tensions, where differences in professional norms and expertise complicate cooperation between political leaders and the armed forces.

According to the book, successful reform depends on a condition of "perfect equilibrium," in which the major coalitions converge around shared reform objectives. Russian civil–military relations, however, have consistently been characterized by misalignment. Disagreements over strategic priorities, the future character of war, and the role of the armed forces repeatedly obstructed reform efforts. Since governments lacked the capacity to impose reforms unilaterally, military resistance significantly constrained policy outcomes.

Shamiev also emphasizes how the progressive concentration of authority within the presidency weakened civilian oversight. Parliamentary scrutiny, societal input, and external accountability mechanisms gradually lost influence, leaving defence policymaking increasingly isolated within the executive. This marginalization of civilian actors reinforced disequilibrium and reduced the likelihood of effective reform.

One of the book's major contributions concerns the literature on Russian civil–military relations. Much of the existing scholarship, particularly during and after the Cold War, has portrayed the Russian military as highly obedient under conditions of strong subjective civilian control (Perlmutter & Bennett 1980; Belkin 2003). Shamiev challenges this interpretation by showing that the armed forces often maintained preferences diverging from those of the political leadership and were capable of obstructing reforms even under Putin's centralized regime. In this respect, the military emerges not simply as an instrument of repression, but as an influential political actor within the policymaking process.

The book also contributes to broader debates on civilian control and military

effectiveness. Recent scholarship has increasingly examined how different forms of civilian oversight affect defence outcomes rather than focusing exclusively on obedience (Bruneau & Matei 2008; Pion-Berlin & Martínez 2017). Shamiev advances this discussion by demonstrating that centralized executive control may secure political loyalty while simultaneously weakening military effectiveness.

Particularly important is the book's discussion of accountability and civilian expertise. Shamiev argues that genuine civilian supremacy depends not only on hierarchical control, but also on openness, oversight, and the presence of competent civilian actors capable of counterbalancing the military's informational advantages. Although not explicitly framed in these terms, the analysis aligns with recent work emphasizing the importance of epistemic communities and civilian expertise in defence policymaking (Martínez 2024).

Finally, the book intervenes in the debate on regime type and military effectiveness. Shamiev suggests that excessive concentration of power within the executive ultimately undermined the Russian military's capacity to reform and adapt. In doing so, the book indirectly supports the argument that pluralistic and accountable forms of civilian control are more conducive to military effectiveness than narrowly centralized systems.

Overall, Imperfect Equilibrium provides a theoretically informed and empirically rich analysis of Russian defence policymaking. Its main strengths lie in the clarity of its analytical framework, the detailed reconstruction of reform dynamics, and its ability to connect the literature on civilian control with debates on military effectiveness. By challenging the widespread image of the Russian military as merely obedient, Shamiev offers an important contribution to the study of civil–military relations.

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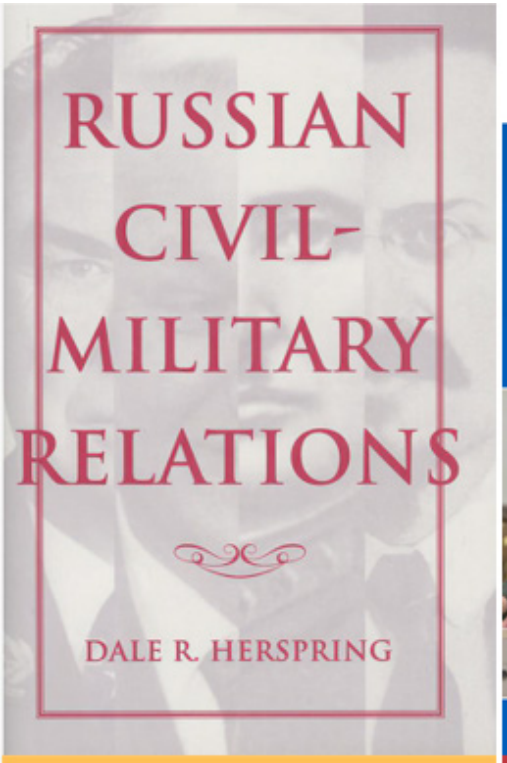
MATTEO MAZZIOTTI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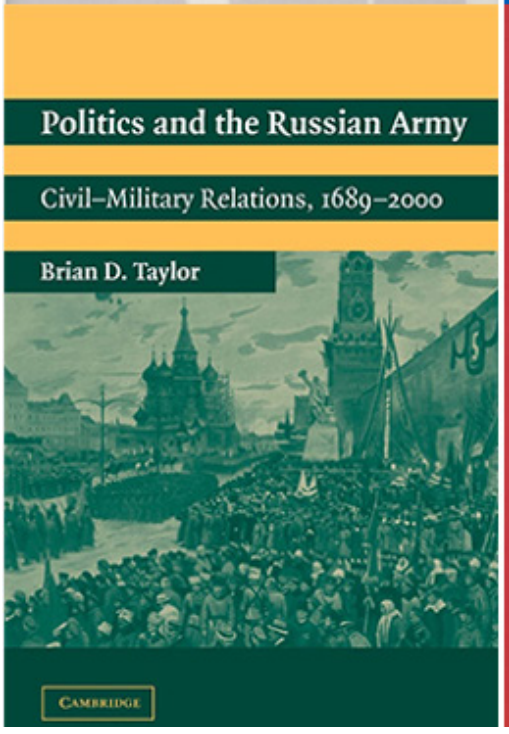
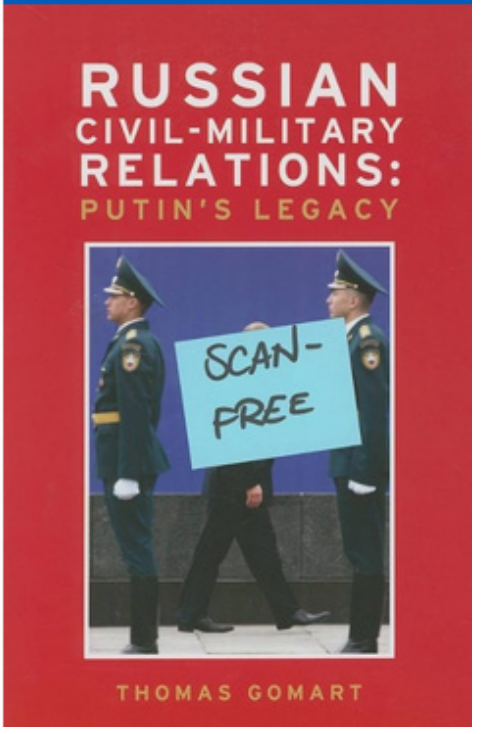
Wartime Russian Civil-Military Relations
Dimensions, Tensions, and Disruptions
Julian G. Waller and Cornell Overfield


Politics and the Russian Army
Civil–Military Relations, 1689–2000
Brian D. Taylor
CAMBRIDGE


RUSSIAN
CIVIL-MILITARY
RELATIONS:
PUTIN'S LEGACY
SCAN-
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THOMAS GOMART

Roberto Motta Sosa,

Il mito di Jalta

Churchill e la divisione dell'Europa

Prefazione di Fabio L. Grassi

Anteo Edizioni, Cavriago (RE), 120 pp.



Il mito di Jalta, Churchill e la divisione dell'Europa (The myth of Yalta, Churchill and the division of Europe) by Roberto Motta Sosa, in retracing the stages that led from the Great Anti-Fascist Alliance to the Cold War, through an updated use of sources and a vast literature, aims to show how the Yalta Conference of February 1945 was an attempt to find an alternative solution to the logic of spheres of influence, rather than a step forward in that direction.

The study aims to counter the "false myth of Yalta", described as the epochal

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event in which the three world leaders allegedly divided Europe into spheres of influence, which imposed itself on the collective imagination starting the day after Yalta, and was consolidated through interested political interpretations, a simplistic journalistic language, and "a certain historiography".

Moreover, but Motta Sosa does not mention this aspect, the most solid historiography had reached his same conclusions over half a century earlier. It is enough to mention, for all, J.B. Duroselle, *Histoire diplomatique de 1919 à nos jours*, Paris 1966 (the first edition was in 1953), who highlighted the climate of cooperation at the conference, the granting to France of an occupation zone in Germany, the agreement on the borders and government of Poland, the Russian commitment to intervene in the war against Japan, and, above all, the "Declaration on Liberated Europe", which provided for democratic governments through free elections. This is the so-called "spirit of Yalta" (cooperative), as opposed to the overwhelming "myth of Yalta" (partitioning) that Motta Sosa strives to demolish.

The author recalls the conclusion reached by Italian diplomacy on February 15, 1945, regarding the talks of the Big Three allied leaders in Crimea. The Ambassador in Moscow, Pietro Quaroni, writing to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alcide De Gasperi, illustrated how the initial impression regarding the results of the conference suggested that no victory of one side or the other could be recorded, since: "the main contracting parties made each other significant concessions to put cooperation on a solid footing […] at least in the immediate postwar period." Quaroni added: "While the tendency that prevailed until now seemed to divide Europe into two zones of exclusive influence, one Soviet and the other Anglo-American, the principle of cooperation now seems to have prevailed." And this was, in fact, the sense that the Yalta Conference was meant to convey to public opinion from the conclusion of the proceedings.

On February 12, the final communiqué signed by the Big Three was released to the press, affirming, among other points, the will to pursue unity in (future) peace, as well as in war.

The author recalls that according to Sergio Romano, former Italian Ambassador to Moscow, in Crimea there was no "partition because the war was not yet over and many issues, out of necessity or cunning, were addressed in very general terms [...] the three leaders had different ambitions and [...] Stalin, in particular, was determined to politically control all the territories that the Red Army would



seize before the end of the conflict. But in those days [...] there was no division of Europe into spheres of influence that many attribute to the tripartite meeting of February 1945".

At the beginning of the "false myth of Yalta", according to various sources, it was de Gaulle, irritated by France's exclusion from the conference, who argued that that meeting had been the cause of the international situation as it had unfolded in the post-war period.

Another component of the myth came from the American Republican Party, by vocation anti-Rooseveltian, which emphasized the weakness of the President, already tired and ill, who would have been deluded by Stalin into giving him half of Europe.

The third component of the false myth would be the easy inclination towards conspiracy theories, that is, the tendency to find a single fact that explains everything, a single cause of events, when instead "historical events are the result of a multitude of factors that almost always escape their control".

During the period in which the myth of Yalta was born, took shape, and consolidated in the collective imagination (roughly the early postwar years), Motta Sosa observes, "Soviet diplomacy – curiously – attributed to the Anglo-Saxons (the United States and the United Kingdom) the desire to reach secret agreements for the partition of the world into reciprocal spheres of interest".

Moreover, this view was consistent with the *necessary Soviet imperialism* which, by the way, showed a curious resemblance to the *manifest destiny* that gilded the massive territorial acquisitions of the United States following the war with Mexico of 1846-48.

The concept of *necessary Soviet imperialism*, confirmed in hindsight by various political scientists, stems from a memorandum of September 1944, in which the US Chargé d'Affaires in Moscow, Kennan, suggested the idea that drove Soviet geopolitics: "If Russia could not rely on the Western nations to save her, it then seemed to Russian minds that the alternative lay not only in the utmost development of Russian military power within the 1938 borders, but also in new territorial acquisitions designed to strengthen Russia's strategic and political position, and in the creation of a sphere of influence even beyond these limits. In drawing up this expansionist program, Soviet planners leaned heavily on the latter-day traditions of tsarist diplomacy".

That is to say, as outlined by Cesare La Mantia at the Conference *Sixty Years After the Warsaw Pact*, Gorizia 2015, "that strategic imperative which over time has pushed modern Russia – whatever its system of government – to pursue a (geo)politics capable of keeping as far as possible from its western borders the line of a hypothetical military confrontation with any European power".

The author also cites Geoffrey Roberts, who states that "the extension of Soviet influence beyond its western borders can be seen as an intentional and coherent model of expansionist territorial policy [...] Stalin indeed feared the formation, as a reaction, of an anti-Soviet bloc (as actually partly happened later, especially with the creation of NATO). Churchill, for his part, feared that such a scenario could leave the United Kingdom alone to confront the Soviet giant on the Old Continent or, worse, that London would end up being crushed between the United States and the Soviet Union, losing what had been the greatness of its *empire*." […]

For Roberts, the failure of the vast and heterogeneous programmatic framework of the Big Three would have generated a geopolitical and hence historical paradox. According to this thesis, the Cold War would have had two causes, one of which was primary. Certainly relevant was the level of perception of the communist threat in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, from which the confrontation would emerge that would later involve the two superpowers, following the intuition/

prophecy of Tocqueville, who in his famous essay on *Democracy in America* (1840) depicted the United States as the power of freedom, social equality, and democratic energy, whereas Russia was the power of authority, discipline, and centralized power. The other cause was the erroneous Soviet calculation regarding the possibility of establishing a strategic security belt in Eastern Europe, while at the same time maintaining good relations with the United Kingdom and above all with the United States.

And therefore, the outcome in the system based "on the coexistence of two great opposing spaces, one led by the United States and the other by the Soviet Union, roughly included, the first, in NATO and, the second, in the Warsaw Pact".

However, the author conveniently clarifies that the construction of the Yalta myth rests on the precedents of the Yalta Conference, in particular the so-called Anglo-Russian Percentage Agreements, especially the second one, signed in Moscow on October 9, 1944, between Churchill and Stalin. Harriman, the US Ambassador to Moscow, had been theoretically invited to the talks, but was kept aside. Indeed, "Roosevelt believed that a possible division into opposing blocs would shatter his ideal of a global world (*One World*), while at the same time compromising the *Open Door* policy, advocated by Americans since the late 19th century, which Washington deemed essential for America's prosperity (also) in the postwar scenario."

The original source for this agreement is Churchill's work *The Second World War* and Sir Martin Gilbert's biography of the statesman, which describes the circumstances that gave rise to the pact between the two leaders: "Churchill produced what he called an *indecent document*, listing the *percentage interests* of Russia and Great Britain [...] For Romania, his figure was 90 percent Russian interest and 10 percent British; for Greece, he proposed 90 percent for Britain *together with the USA* and 10 percent for Russia. Yugoslavia and Hungary were divided 50/50, and Bulgaria 75 percent for Russia and 25 percent for *the others*. Stalin [...], Churchill would later write, took a blue pencil, drew [...] a large check and [...] returned [...] [the] pencil-marked sheet.

Even though those agreements, especially to take into account Washington's opposition to the doctrine of spheres of influence, were formally referred to the conduct of the war and not to the post-war situation, as Motta Sosa highlights, "Already on 10 October 1944, after a conversation with the British Prime

Minister, Harriman wrote to Roosevelt that Churchill and Eden, together with the Soviets, would try to create in the Balkans what appeared to be defined as spheres of influence".

Moreover, Motta Sosa emphasizes, "the *appeasement* he [Churchill] pursued with Eden towards Moscow […] was intrinsically destined to bear bad fruit".

London's primary goal was to "secure the British Empire's positions in the southern reaches of the Balkan Peninsula and thus in the Eastern Mediterranean, whose main strategic pivot continued to be the Suez Canal. This ambitious plan would also have fulfilled the task of preserving the *balance of power* on the continent, a (European) prerequisite for averting the *inclinatio imperii*".

In truth, the agreement, says Motta Sosa, "which can be classified as *secret diplomacy*, [...] proposed by Churchill and signed by Stalin, had a legal-diplomatic value inversely proportional to its secrecy. In fact, beyond its duration, it did not even specify the rationale for the listed percentages". However, this very agreement "can be said to have constituted the cause of the geopolitical involution into opposing blocs in post-war Europe".

Moreover, I personally note that in the aforementioned *indecent document*, there is a detail that fits perfectly with one of the post-war developments, the equal division of the *percentage interests* of Russia and Great Britain, which, as far as Yugoslavia was concerned, came true in 1948 with the split between Stalin and Tito: Yugoslavia was not the prerogative of either of them, but in some respects it looked to the East, in others to the West.

"On March 12, 1947, the Truman Doctrine was proclaimed, by which Washington announced its support for Greece and Turkey, both threatened by Soviet assertiveness", with the Byrnes corollary, enunciated by the US Secretary of State in Stuttgart on September 6, 1947: "We intend to continue our interest in the affairs of Europe and the world".

Motta Sosa's conclusion is that "The weakness of the geopolitical framework conceived [by the British], colliding, on the one hand, with the *necessary Soviet imperia*lism and, on the other, with Washington's aversion (now close to the *translatio imperii ad Americam*) to London's policy regarding spheres of influence in the Old Continent, determined, by contrast, the Sovietization of Eastern Europe and thus the beginning of the bloc-based opposition that would characterize the post-World War II period. The Cold War was therefore not the

result of the implementation of what was agreed in Crimea regarding Europe, but, on the contrary, of the failure to implement the decisions taken by the Big Three during that conference".

Personally, I observe that the geopolitical developments of the post-war period, up to the present day, with the dizzying acceleration of history and the international disorder that accompanies it, are consistent with the division into blocs wrongly attributed to Yalta. The division into blocs can be linked mainly to two myths, to remain within the realm of geopolitical mythology, which are more relevant today than ever: on the American side, the *Monroe Doctrine* of 1823 (exclusion of European interference in Latin America, but also USA self-restraint), the subsequent ideology of *Manifest Destiny* (enormous territorial acquisitions in the mid-19th century), the *Roosevelt Corollary* of 1904 (*big stick*: US right of intervention in Latin America), and finally, in December 2025, with President Trump's new USA national security strategy, which states that "the United States will reassert and enforce the Monroe Doctrine to restore American pre-eminence in the Western Hemisphere […] Our goals for the Western Hemisphere can be summarized as Enlist and Expand". The operation in Venezuela in January 2026 is highly illustrative, accompanied by the strangulation of Cuba and strong pressure and threats to Mexico, Panama, and others. Conversely, the document states that "we cannot afford to be equally attentive to every region and every problem in the world", which, even in light of the scathing criticism of Europe, can be interpreted as a prospect of American disengagement in that area, which certainly does not displease Moscow, with all due respect to the Ukrainians and Europeans.

As for the *necessary Soviet imperialism* highlighted by Motta Sosa, in my opinion, it is also a myth. Many political scientists portray Russia as a militaristic power by necessity, forced to arm itself and threaten to avoid being threatened in turn. Russia's strategy requires it to acquire spatial depth to ward off the nightmare of invasion. Peter the Great reached the Baltic, Catherine acquired Belarus and Ukraine, Alexander I reached Warsaw and the Moldavian river Prut, Stalin all the way to Berlin. Russian strategic choices also reflect this condition: from the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, to the partition of Yalta (a historical fabrication), to the recent opposition to any NATO enlargement. It's not just a question of strategic depth. Territorial expansion allows the Russians to claim the rank of a great power with global ambitions, which national psychology self-assigns. The

Napoleonic War of 1812 is shrouded in legend, especially in the pages of *War and Peace*. Tolstoy described the campaign as "self-made", as neither side had full awareness and control of its actions; rather, it was the masses who drove history. I believe Tolstoy was right on this point, but Moscow continued to fuel that literary fascination with the narrative of a homeland attacked by enemies and defended by its citizens until victory (the myth of the Great Patriotic War).

History is not just a collection of facts, but also of narratives that societies construct to give meaning to their past. For example, in the historiography of the Roman Empire, with Titus Livius (Livy) being the most important example, myth is not a simple ornament, but a political, cultural, and identity-building tool: a founding myth of Roman identity, a myth of imperial legitimacy, and an edifying myth for citizens.

Some myths are not simply legends: they are true interpretative frameworks that influence our reading of historical events. Historical analysis, in considering myth, must not limit itself to considering it merely as a historical fake, but also as an interpretative lens, a narrative device that gives meaning to the past, or a symbolic code that reveals the values and fears of an era.

Moreover, it must be kept in mind that, today more than ever, there are narrative models deeply rooted in Western culture: the myth of inevitable progress and its opposite, decadence, the myth of the Golden Age and that of the hero who changes history, the myth of invasion or external threat. Contemporary historiography is called upon to recognize these myths, so as not to be dominated by them.

Thus, the "myth of Yalta", while unfounded in historical reality and divergent from the true "spirit of Yalta", was consistent with the antecedents of the Yalta Conference and the subsequent developments. It inevitably lent itself to labelling Yalta as the division between the Western and Eastern blocs, a label commonly used in political and journalistic language.

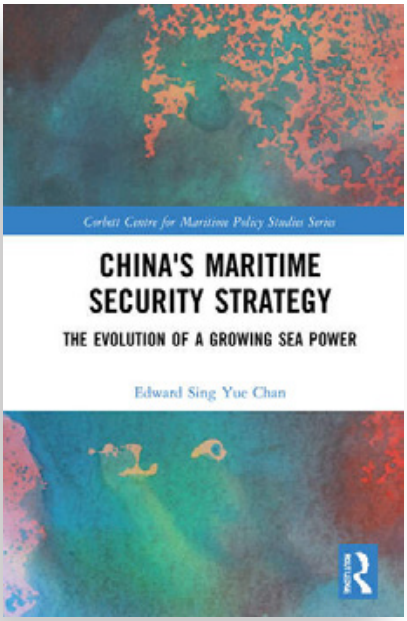
In this sense, Motta Sosa's book, highly intriguing and impeccable in its "philological" accuracy from a historiographical point of view, opens up further fascinating avenues for research.

Maurizio Lo Re

Edward Sing Yue Chan,

China's Maritime Security Strategy: *The Evolution of a Growing Sea Power*

London and New York, Routledge, 2022



This work by Edward Sing Yue Chan explores the forty-year transformation of China's maritime security strategy from a limited coastal defence focus to an assertive global sea power. What the author is focused on is how strategic guidelines from successive leaders – from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping – have developed throughout the years. The text analyses the roles of domestic actors, such as the People's Liberation Army Navy and the China Coast Guard, so that it frames a shift towards safeguarding maritime rights and interests in the Indo-Pacific. In a few words, the sources provide a framework for understanding China's modern sea power as a multidimensional force which aims at

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the same time at being both cooperative and assertive, therefore showing a comprehensive analysis of Beijing's transition from a continental power with limited maritime interests to an assertive global sea power.

The book is structured chronologically, through four generations of Chinese leadership from 1978 to 2020. The monograph is divided into seven chapters, beginning with a theoretical and historical foundation. In particular, the first introductory chapter sets the stage by questioning why China has shifted from a constrained to a more assertive maritime strategy. The second chapter establishes the book's analytical framework by exploring the evolution of the concept of maritime security in both Western and Chinese contexts. The author identifies five key components that tracked throughout the subsequent chapters: strategic guidelines, policy discussion, capability building, strategic framework, and policy implementation. What strikes the reader's attention is that even before the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 had the Republic of China's government claimed sovereignty right in the South China Sea (p. 12).

The chronological structure of the book starts with chapter three, dealing with Deng Xiaoping and describing a period of limited maritime security agenda. In a few words, it was under Deng's leadership that a structural naval strategy was set. As far as this was concerned, Liu Huaqing, the commander of the Chinese Navy from 1982 to 1988, emphasised the importance of a sufficient maritime defence capability, so that the near sea active defence strategy could be set up. In a broader context, Liu Huaqing's near sea active defence strategy proposed that China's strategic selective engagement in national defence should focus on the near sea (pp. 46-47). The following chapter marks Jiang Zemin's era, with the introduction of the concept of protecting maritime rights and interests. What the author highlights about Jiang's Administration is that China's economic interactions and trade with the outside world increased and sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) became gradually important, which included access to overseas resources (especially oil and gas), the safety of commercial cargos, and the trading relationship with African and European countries (p. 73). The fifth chapter covers Hu Jintao's Era, when the objective of constructing a strong sea power was first mentioned in official documents. What is of paramount importance is the so-called "Malacca dilemma", referring to China's dependency on the Malacca Strait for its energy supply and SLOCs (p. 95). The historic missions of the new century, therefore, showed that China began to address a greater variety of security issues

not involving direct confrontation with neighbouring countries. In a few words, China's maritime security strategy had to show a cooperative and responsible growing power (p. 99).

Xi Jinping shaped the so-called China Dream involving the construction of a strong maritime power. At this point, Beijing had developed a more assertive attitude towards national interests, which resulted in aggressive moves such as land reclamation in the South China Sea. However, the author outlines that becoming a major power suggests that China should engage more with international politics, thus aiming at advocating itself regionally and internationally and become a strong sea power (p. 140). In a nutshell, greater responsibility had finally been assigned to the Navy in order to demonstrate China's legitimacy as a sea power by participating in both traditional and non-traditional security issues (p. 167). The final chapter synthesises the findings, reinforcing the factors that consistently drive China's maritime security strategy. In particular, reactions from other countries on Beijing's construction of sea power are assessed, as nations like the US, Australia, Japan, India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines have perceived that China's ascent is a potential security threat. In light of this, the formulation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, commonly known as the Quad, with the United States, Australia, India, and Japan, is regarded as a response to balance the PRC's overseas expansion in the afore mentioned area and as an evidence of containment of Beijing's maritime power (p. 194). A central theme of the monograph is the technological and operational evolution of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). The author uses the concepts of Brown, Green, and Blue navy to illustrate this progression. In the Deng era, the PLAN was characterised as a Brown-water Navy, being only capable of operations along the coastline or inshore. The transition to a Green-water Navy began in the Jiang and Hu eras. As a matter of fact, at the dawn of the XXI century the Far Eastern country had developed significant near-sea capabilities to maintain a sea-denial capacity within the regional waters of the East and South China Seas. Finally, under Xi Jinping the goal shifted towards building a Blue-water Navy, which Chan describes as a world-class navy capable of global reach.

According to the sources, Edward Sing Yue Chan identifies four major factors that have consistently driven and shaped the 40-year development of China's maritime security strategy. First of all, National Strategic Guidelines, according to which maritime security strategy is viewed as a subset of China's grand strat-

egy depending on the primary national objectives of a specific leadership generation. Having said that, actors like the People's Liberation Army Navy, the State Oceanic Administration (SOA), the China Coast Guard (CCG), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), compete for resources and propose different policy directions based on their institutional interests. What is also pivotal to underline is that Chan's work occupies a unique space between International Relations (IR) studies and the History of International Relations scholarship. In actual fact, while the book is deeply informed by IR theory, the author intends to move beyond international relations theory (p. x) to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese politics. Chan begins the second chapter by evaluating four major IR theories, that is offensive realism, defensive realism, constructivism, and organisation theory, and their ability to explain Chinese behaviour. Chan's stance is that no single theory is sufficient to explain forty years of development. Instead, he adopts a framework emphasising the practical adaptation of resources to attain political goals. The book leans heavily into the History of International Relations by providing a detailed, chronological narrative of how China's maritime policy has evolved through specific leadership shifts and historical events. By analysing the strategic guidelines of each leadership generation, the author treats the history of the Chinese Communist Party's evolving worldview as the primary driver of maritime policy, rather than just abstract systemic pressures.

As far as originality and the use of sources is concerned, the research is notable for its extensive use of primary and secondary Chinese-language sources. As an evidence of this, suffice it to quote a few official documents such as Five-Year Plans (FYPs), National Defense White Papers (NDWPs), and leader's speech collections. Furthermore, there are Military and Government Media, that is articles from *People's Navy*, *Modern Navy*, and the *PLA Daily* providing facts on policy implementation and missions. The author concludes that China has successfully developed into a comprehensive sea power characterised by a multidimensional and often complicated strategy. In this way Chan states that this evolution was driven by four consistent factors: central strategic guidelines, the involvement of domestic actors, the expansion of maritime defense capability, and the prioritisation of national interests. As an outcome of this, the Dragon now possesses dual maritime identities, which means being cooperative in the far seas on non-traditional security issues to adhere to international norms, yet remaining assertive and unyielding in near-sea territorial disputes to safeguard national core interests.

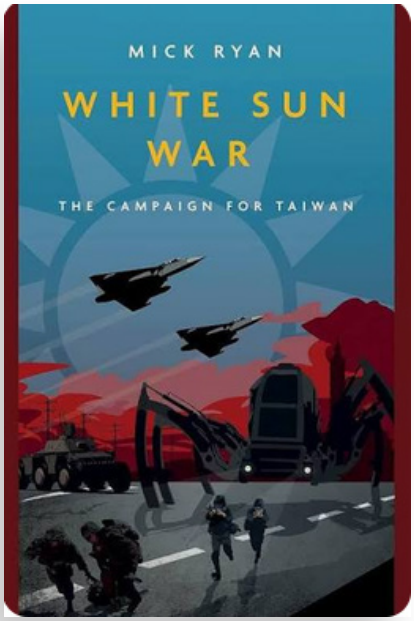
In conclusion, the book highlights areas where the PRC has been cooperative, such as escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and information sharing on fisheries. Chan challenges the idea that China became a maritime threat overnight, instead characterising its rise as a long historical process moulded by specific sea incidents and shifts in national priorities, such as placing territorial integrity at the top, followed by economic development and then cooperation.

BRUNO PIERRI

Mick Ryan,

White Sun War: *The Campaign for Taiwan*

Casemate Fiction, May 2023, ISBN 978-1636242507



The white sun in *White Sun War* is the emblem of the old Nationalist China and, today, of the Republic of China, de facto sovereign but without international recognition, on the Taiwan archipelago. The People's Republic regards it as part of China and pursues reunification by diplomatic means, as in the case of Hong Kong. The author, retired Major General Mick Ryan, who commanded the Australian Defence College from 2018 to 2022, states that he adopted the narrative model of a celebrated American historical novel, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1974: Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*, which recounts

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the Battle of Gettysburg through the perspectives of both sides[1].

White Sun War is not, however, a historical novel (such as Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Frank Thiess's *Tsushima*, or Georges Duby's *The Sunday of Bouvines*, all frankly better known and more representative than *The Killer Angels*), because it does not concern an event that actually happened, whose protagonists, details, developments and outcome are known to us, but an imagined event. The book is therefore an example of war fiction, the literary genre of future war that was highly popular in Europe and America between 1871—with the celebrated The Battle of Dorking—and 1914[2], and was later absorbed into the development of science fiction, being applied more often to interstellar wars than to terrestrial ones. The genre resurfaced marginally during the Cold War and was revived in 1984 by Tom Clancy (1947–2013) with the novel later adapted into the magnificent film *The Hunt for Red October*. It is a genre more apotropaic than prophetic, since the scenarios and events it anticipates seem to have one thing in common: they never come to pass. Yet it offers little reassurance, because predictions of the costs and outcomes of imagined conflicts have invariably been infinitely more optimistic than historical reality.

Moreover, the "contemporary relevance" of *White Sun War* naturally reflects the events of the year in which it was conceived and written, namely 2022. At the time, Western observers speculated that the United States' and NATO's commitment to supporting Ukraine after Russia's invasion was leaving the Pacific front "exposed" and offering China an opportunity to seize Taiwan. Ryan dates the invasion to 2028, while his fictional characters recount its events and developments retrospectively on the tenth anniversary, in 2038. This is a potentially suicidal gamble for the book, since it projects the geostrategic context of 2022 sixteen years into the future—a context that, by May 2023, when the book was published, already appeared to be changing at dizzying speed and to have become impossible to predict with any reasonable confidence. One need only consider the rapid growth in the interdiction capabilities of drones and missiles, and their industrial and strategic implications, as well as the new form of economic warfare arising

1 Mike Ryan, "Exploring 'White Sun War'. My Forthcoming novel on a future campaign on Taiwan", *Futura Doctrina*, Mar 12, 2023.

2 Virgilio Ilari (ed.), *Future Wars. Storia della distopia militare*, Quaderno SISM 2016, Società Italiana di Storia Militare. Acies Edizioni: Milan, 2016.

from the American seizure of resources in Venezuela and Greenland, Ukraine's offensive against Russian refineries and merchant shipping, and the blockade of energy and fertiliser supplies from the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

Ryan thus imagines the "Sino-communist" invasion of Taiwan in almost exclusively military terms, as a reprise of Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine: both conflicts begin on a regional, low-intensity scale, but are subject to technological and/or horizontal escalation and could therefore potentially trigger a Third World War. The book is nevertheless of considerable interest from the standpoint of military history, precisely because it offers an authoritative reflection—albeit subject to all the obvious constraints imposed by secrecy—of the Australian perspective on Taiwan's security. It also enables the attentive and well-informed reader to discern differences from American and Taiwanese perceptions.[3]

As noted above, the geostrategic picture Ryan considers in the book is that of 2022: a militarily weak and isolated China, supported only by North Korea and, fleetingly, by Russia, and surrounded by nearby adversaries—India, Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan and South Korea—as well as by the Western QUAD. These powers constrain China's access to maritime lines of communication, seriously harming its ability to obtain the raw materials required for industrial production. Moreover, China's strategy of access denial in the China Sea is still far from being fully realised. Ryan has, however, subsequently written several assessments of the lessons learned from the Russo-Ukrainian conflict,[4] including the online essay *Translating Ukraine Lessons for the Pacific Theatre* (Australian Army Research Centre, August 2025).

Even when dated, the strategic assessments of an insider remain of considerable interest, despite being personal and filtered through security constraints. Equally interesting are the fictional characters portrayed by an Australian author,

3 See also some of Ryan's works published before 2022: 1 T*he Ryan Review* (2016). A strategic review reform document used in Australian Army education and training. 2 *Thinking About Strategic Thinking* (2021). Report on developing strategic thinking in military institutions. 3 *War Transformed: The Future of Twenty-First-Century Great Power Competition and Conflict*. February 2022 (Naval Institute Press).

4 *The War for Ukraine: Strategy and Adaptation Under Fire*. August 2024 (Naval Institute Press). *The Future of Deception in War: Lessons from Ukraine* (with Peter Singer), New America, June 2025.

especially the Taiwanese as seen through Australian eyes.

Ryan draws seven general lessons from the Russo-Ukrainian war. First is the importance of satellite surveillance of the battlefield, along with the advantages and disadvantages of private networks, particularly Elon Musk's Starlink. Second, surprise has become more difficult, while AI has reduced the frequency of close-contact operations by shortening the interval between the detection and destruction of targets. Drones have offset Ukraine's numerical inferiority along the front: drone walls create deep kill zones in which mechanised forces cannot operate and freeze land fronts, while enhancing long-range aerial penetration, albeit less effectively than stand-off air strikes. Other lessons are that stalemate at the front increases the need to train junior officers and commanders capable of making decisions; sanctions and other economic-warfare measures can also affect operational capabilities; initial strategic errors are increasingly difficult to rectify; and the home front and international support remain important.

Not all these lessons, however, can be applied to the prospect of a communist attack on Taiwan, given the maritime environment and the greater complexity of Western logistical support. Unlike Russia, China is the world's second-largest economy and can invest heavily in the research and development of advanced technologies, while security arrangements in the Indo-Pacific do not offer the same degree of operational readiness as NATO. China's manpower potential is overwhelming and virtually unlimited. Control of the First Island Chain would be sufficient to prevent Western operations in the China Sea area. Although China's nuclear arsenal cannot match those of Russia or the United States, it is supported by an extensive array of space-based sensors and anti-satellite networks that ensure a retaliatory capability. A conflict in the Pacific would encourage cooperation among Russia, China, North Korea and Iran to develop into a formal alliance, undermining the resolve of key allies, particularly South Korea and Japan.

Mario Romeo



C. Eisen invenit. *De la Fosse sculpsit.*

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