

Arms control in Italy: a possibly futile thing I'd certainly do again

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“Vous aviez raison de me dire que dans la vie,
ce n’est pas l’avenir qui compte, c’est le passé”

Patrick Modiano, *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*.

Alla memoria di Paolo e Beppe

Introduction

The *Unione degli Scienziati per il Disarmo* (USPID) was founded in 1983 and held its first Castiglioncello meeting thirty years ago, in 1985. The beginning of my interest in arms control and disarmament dates a little further back, in August-September 1980, when I attended the International School on Disarmament and Research on Conflict (ISODARCO) 8th Course in Venice. Arms control then became my profession until 1995, when I joined the European Commission and made of the European economy and its process of political integration my main field.

Security and disarmament are not things that can be ignored, though, especially when one has spent several years worrying about them on a daily basis. Thus, over the last twenty years I did my best to stay tuned, particularly on the nuclear sector, thanks mainly to USPID and ISODARCO.

Looking back to my career so far I cannot but conclude that I have been very lucky. I traveled far and wide and had the greatest of privileges, that is the opportunity to interact with many people who were brighter and more knowledgeable than me. In the process I also comfortably fed my family and myself, which is an achievement per se.

Is that all, though? I do not think so. My main interests in life (my fixations, or “pallini” as my credit line for this meeting says in Italian) have not been scientific, descriptive disciplines, where understanding and/or explaining a given phenomenon is the goal. Disarmament (and European integration for that matter), to the extent it is a discipline at all, is a political, *prescriptive* one: one understands and/or explains something with the further goal of convincing the polity to adopt a policy on that something.

Using this other yardstick – have my arms control and disarmament prescriptions been successful? – is perhaps a more balanced way to look back at my career. I’ll take only two of these prescriptions, here, possibly the ones I most invested in, intellectually and emotionally. And through them I’ll answer the question.

In the process, I hope to shed some light on some recurring issues of Italian and NATO military policy, on the utility of arms control in Italy and maybe also on Italian politics.

The Italian armed forces

Way back, in November 1991, the *Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale* (CeSPI) in Rome published a 41-page paper titled “La politica militare italiana: una proposta di riforma” (Italian military policy: a reform proposal).

The report had been written by a study group whose members were Giuseppe Catalano (*Forum per I Problemi della Pace e della Guerra*), Marta Dassù (CeSPI), Gianluca Devoto (CeSPI), Paolo Farinella (USPID), Giuseppe Nardulli (USPID), Rodolfo Ragionieri (*Forum per I Problemi della Pace e della Guerra*) and myself - then a CeSPI researcher and a member of USPID scientific council - who also coordinated the work of the group and edited the report.

The question that sparked the study was simple and straightforward: since the Soviet Union didn't exist anymore, Germany was reunited and the cold war over, what were we Italians supposed to do with our three armed forces (army, navy and air force), still conceived to fight a major war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact on European soil?

Pare them down substantially (manpower by more than half, expenditures by one fourth) and abolish conscription – was, in a nutshell, our answer. The idea was to keep, in terms of manpower and equipment, only what was necessary for Italy to take part in multilateral peace-making or peace-keeping missions around the world - which is indeed all Italy had to do in the years since.

If there ever was an utter, hopeless failure of a policy prescription paper, that was it – in the sense that no political quarter in Italy took up any of our suggestions.

CeSPI was then the foreign policy think tank of the newly formed Democratic Party of the Left, the biggest opposition force, heir to the Italian Communist Party and predecessor to the Democratic Party now in power. It was even located just around the corner from the party's headquarters in via delle Botteghe Oscure in Rome. Thus, even though the report had been our own initiative, if only as a gesture of gratitude to our sponsor, the first thing we tried to do was persuading the leadership of that party to bring the study's main recommendations onto its platform – the general elections of April 1992 were approaching.

We held many meetings but made zero inroads. The party was desperately trying to look mainstream and panicked at the prospect of taking onboard a proposal for unilateral cuts in the country's armed forces – no matter how much the idea might appeal to its leftist traditional electorate. Moreover, its trade unionist reflexes rejected the laying off of some 80,000 “military workers” (officers and non-commissioned officers) – even though we had made clear in our proposal that these people might, over a transition period of five years, have been assigned to other jobs within a public administration that was three million strong.

Since the party had had, lately, very poor showings among the youngest electoral age group (18-25), we thought that our idea of abolishing conscription might strike a chord. We were wrong again. The party leadership still saw the draft as a guarantee of the presence of the “popular masses” in the army and as such an antidote to any coup temptation. A professional army was seen as decidedly more prone to political interference – no matter if practically all post war military coups all over the world had been done by conscription based armies.

The political right and the military themselves also thoroughly rejected our recommendations – which was to be expected as far as our proposed deep cuts were concerned, much less so as far as the change into an all professional army went. I remember in particular one Army general who argued that conscripts were a source of highly skilled personnel for the armed forces, whereas only sociopaths and fainéants would, the draft abolished, have joined the army as volunteers.

Exactly nine years after the publication of our report, on November 14, 2000, a law abolishing conscription, introduced into parliament by the leftist government of the time, was approved. The military draft, being a constitutional requirement, was not formally repealed – the Italian government may still recur to it in case of lack of volunteers, war or “very deep international crisis”. But for all practical purposes it does not exist anymore. Following the 2000 law, a government decree established in 2001 a transitional period, whereby the armed forces had to complete the replacement of conscripts with volunteers by January 1st 2007. This deadline was brought back by two years, to January 1st 2005, by the successive (rightist) government led by Silvio Berlusconi, who thus harvested before the public opinion the political rewards of a reform he had not done, just implemented.

Note that between 1991, the time of our proposal, and 2000, the time of the actual law launching the reform, practically every European NATO army not yet professional had been turned into one – a major exception being Germany. The timing is consistent with the historical pattern of Italian politics, left and right: change only when it’s inevitable – you may have noticed, for example, that it took two years *after* the fall of the Berlin wall to the Italian Communist Party to at least stop calling itself “Communist”.

Doing away with the draft was perforce to have an impact on manpower: the 2000 law abolishing conscription foresaw a reduction in the armed forces’ ranks from 270,000 (at the time of the reform; they were 380,000 in 1991) to 190,000 at an unspecified point in the future.

In the meantime, not only did our study group not exist anymore, but also had each of us shifted the focus of her/his interests away from Italian military policy. Two members of the group died prematurely: Paolo Farinella in 2000, and Giuseppe (Beppe) Nardulli in 2008. When USPID met in Bari to commemorate Beppe, shortly after his death, I mentioned our 1991 paper on Italian military policy among his many contributions to arms control and disarmament and also promised to go back to this topic to check how far Italy’s armed forces had ended up being from what we had proposed in 1991.

I never managed to summon the will to make good on my promise, though. Until one day, in January 2014, I stumbled on a piece of news announcing a “new cut” in the number of the armed forced personnel “from the current 170,000 down to 150,000”.¹ This rang a bell. The manpower level foreseen in our study was 145,000. Also the breakdown between officers (60,000) and troops (85-90,000) – I later learned - was essentially the same in the government plan as in our study.

¹ “Forze armate, pronto piano di mobilità: in 10 anni saranno tagliati 20 mila soldati”, *Il Messaggero*, January 11, 2014.

I thought “that’s it, they finally got there”. Well, actually they are not yet there and will not be for another ten years until, that is, 2025 – so it is explained in the “Defense planning document 2014-2016” forwarded to the Italian Parliament by Defense Minister Roberta Pinotti in June 2014.²

How optimistic had we been in foreseeing a transition period of five years to carry out our proposed change! Apparently, assuming no second thought will intervene in the meantime, the actual transition, if that’s still the word, is going to be 34 years long - almost the entire lifetime of the Warsaw Pact (1955-1991), whose extinction motivated the reform in the first place.

On the other hand, if one looks back to this last quarter of century, it is difficult to find any mission carried out by the Italian military for which a 150,000 strong force would have not been sufficient. Nor is it likely that this will change in the near future, a view evidently shared by the current government.

The number 150,000, or rather 145,000, in our proposal is in no way magic. We had arrived at it by first positing the number of major units or weapon systems (brigades and tanks for the army, warships for the navy, combat aircraft for the air force) that looked reasonable to us to field once the mission of countering a possible attack from the North-East of the country had vanished. And then through some international comparison on, in fact, the ratio between manpower and equipment.

Thus, as it was to be expected, it turns out that in terms of major units or weapon systems, as well as manpower, the reality of the Italian armed forces is converging on what we proposed 24 years ago.

For the Army we had proposed to bring down the number of brigades from 26 (1990) to 8 and the number of main battle tanks from 900 to 400. Today the Italian army fields 11 brigades, 160 *Ariete* main battle tanks and 314 *Centauro* armored reconnaissance vehicles (light tanks). We foresaw 75,000 soldiers of all ranks, as opposed to about 100,000 today (and possibly 80-85,000 in 2025).³

The Navy has now practically the same number of ships as we proposed, the major exception being two carriers that we would have done away with altogether and five units less for mine warfare.⁴ Also, the number of seamen is now much closer to that put forward in our study than to the 1990 starting point (50,000).

	sub	car	dst	frg	ptr	mine	amph	personnel
Navy as of 2014	6	2	4	19	14	10	3	31,000
Navy in Cespi 1991	8	-	4	20	15	15	2	25,000

² See Ministero della Difesa, “Documento Programmatico Pluriennale per la Difesa per il triennio 2014-2015”, Presentato al Parlamento dal Ministro della Difesa Roberta Pinotti (Rome: June 2014).

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all data are from International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1990-1991* and *2015*.

⁴ To make the comparison possible, 3 ships of the Bergamini class and 5 ships of the Minerva class, that *The Military Balance* classifies, respectively, as destroyers and corvettes, are counted here as frigates.

For the Air Force, we had proposed some 300 combat aircraft - 100 fighter bombers, 100 air superiority and 100 close air support aircraft. The current lineup, at 242 “combat capable” aircraft, is already well below that level and bound to remain so: the air superiority fighters (Eurofighter Typhoons), when delivery is completed, will be indeed close to 100 (96), whereas the 60 F-35A currently on order will have to play the roles of both fighter bombers and close air support.⁵ Our proposal also foresaw 45,000 personnel, as opposed to the current 42,000. Thus on both counts – combat aircraft and manpower – the Air Force has already gone below the levels we put forward.

Military personnel in the 5 biggest NATO European countries (x 1,000)

	Active 2014	Active 1990	Paramilitary 2014
France	215	461	103
Germany	182	470	---
Italy	176	390	184
Spain	133	274	81
UK	160	306	---

The table above shows that the armed forces widely regarded as the most effective in Europe – the UK’s – are the least manpower intensive after Spain. All, however, went a long way down from 1990, cutting their ranks in about half, including the UK that in 1990 already had a professional army.

Germany is a special case: in 1990 it had to absorb also the former East Germany’s armed forces, the *Nationale Volksarmee*, then about 150.000 strong. Taking this into account, its military personnel are now 28% of what they used to be a quarter century ago - at about the same level as Italy even though its population is one fourth bigger.

While France (*Gendarmerie*) and Spain (*Guardia Civil*) have substantial paramilitary forces, Italy has now more people in the *Carabinieri*, *Guardia di Finanza* and *Guardia Costiera* than in the three armed forces themselves. *Carabinieri*, mainly regarded as a police force, respond to the Ministry of Defense, field two brigades with armored personal carriers and regularly take part in Italy’s military missions abroad.

⁵ The naval aviation, which did not exist in 1990, has 16 AV-8B *Harrier* fighter bombers. These will be more than replaced by 30 F-35B.

Military and civilian personnel absorb 70% of Italy's military budget in 2015 – it was 40% in 1990 and 47% in our proposal. This is seen as problematic by the Defense Minister who considers 50% as the target.⁶ Again, as in our proposal.

In terms of overall resources our study had foreseen, once expired the five year transition period, a contraction of 25%. In reality, the Italian military budget went, in constant 2011 U.S. dollars, from 37,4 billion in 1991 up to a peak of 44,0 billion in 2004, then down to 31,0 billion in 2014.⁷ The latest figure is a reduction of about 16% from 1991 and 30% from the peak in 2004.

Over the same period 2004-2014, Italy's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) shrank by 5% (but it's now 9% below its peak in 2007), whereas public debt went from 100% to 132% of GDP.⁸ It is easy to conclude then, that the real driver of the country's military reductions has not been any strategic consideration – such as the end of the cold war – nor any master plan – such as the CeSPI study – but rather a severe economic contraction coupled with a huge crisis of public finances.

The power of scarcity. The power of hunger.

Tactical nuclear weapons

As many in USPID, my interest in arms control was triggered by “gli euromissili” – as Italians used to call the U.S. Pershing 2 and cruise nuclear missiles NATO decided on 12 December 1979 to deploy in Europe to counter the build-up of Soviet SS-20s. It looked to me like a preposterous and dangerous further step in the nuclear arms race that had to be stopped. So I tried to understand the basics of what was going on.

And here is what I discovered. That throughout Western Europe thousands and thousands of shorter range nuclear weapons were already deployed, some of them outright crazy – such as the Atomic Demolition Munitions, or the nuclear projectiles for howitzers – to the extent that their use was the nuclear equivalent of shooting oneself in the foot. Or more precisely in the temple.

The “doctrine” regulating their use and non-use was even crazier. They were equalizers, compensating for NATO conventional inferiority vis-à-vis the Warsaw Pact - but the Soviets had counter-equalized and over-compensated by deploying thousands of their own.

They were supposed to “couple”, or “link”, an armed conflict in Europe with the U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal by way of escalation from their almost inevitable use by NATO (“use ‘em or lose ‘em”) all the way up to the big missiles. But at the same time escalation was supposed to be controlled or “dominated” by NATO, meaning that maybe Europe and the U.S. were not that coupled after all and, who knows, a nuclear exchange was limitable to Europe. We Western Europeans were told by our leaders to be happy with this American “nuclear umbrella” – thanks to which most European nations had given up the nuclear option in

⁶ See “Documento Programmatico etc.”, cit.

⁷ Figures are from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “NATO Military Expenditure data 1949-2014”, Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet available at http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database.

⁸ See Eurostat at <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>.

the nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which is perhaps the only positive role played by tactical nukes – that guaranteed us incineration in any conceivable scenario of nuclear use, limited or unlimited.

Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNW) implied a much lower nuclear threshold than “gli euromissili” and thus looked to me far more dangerous. I also thought that the assumption on which the deployment of TNW was based, i.e. NATO conventional inferiority vis-à-vis the Warsaw Pact, was simply wrong - particularly in the case of NATO’s southern flank that Italian armed forces had to cover. Which led me in 1986 to the following stance: go ahead with the deployment of cruise missiles if you wish, but please withdraw TNW.⁹

This policy prescription of yours truly also went wholly unheeded, in Italy and elsewhere – despite being conveyed this time by the journal of a most respectable institution such as the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies. Things actually went in the opposite direction: on 8 December 1987, the U.S. and the USSR signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) that eliminated Pershing, cruise and SS-20 missiles. TNW were left in place.

Until one fine day of August 1991, an attempted coup against the Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev, led to his confinement in Crimea. Who was left in command of the vast Soviet nuclear arsenal? No one knew. The following month the U.S. President, George H.W. Bush, thought wise to unilaterally withdraw entire categories of TNW (except aerial bombs) from “forward deployments”, simply asking Gorbachev – in the meantime reinstated as head of state – to reciprocate, which he did.

The power of fear.

Over the years since 1991, the leftovers, i.e. B-61 nuclear gravity bombs deployed in Europe, have been progressively reduced in numbers and are now 180 in five countries: Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey. Italy hosts the highest number: 70, of which 20 are assigned to the Italian Air Force at Ghedi and 50 to the U.S. Air Force at Aviano. The air forces of Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands also have some 20 B-61s each assigned to them. The bombs and their attendant custodial means are undergoing a costly modernization program, which is a clear sign that for the time being they are meant to stay.¹⁰

There are any number of good reasons to do away with these weapons once and for all. Since I’m now, after thirty years, sick and tired of mentioning them let me simply refer in the footnote at the end of the

⁹ See Marco De Andreis, “The nuclear debate in Italy”, *Survival*, May/June 1986. There were almost 6,000 U.S. TNW in Europe at that time: aerial bombs, surface to air and surface to surface missiles, artillery rounds, atomic demolition munitions, and depth bombs. More than 400 of these were deployed in Italy.

¹⁰ See Hans M. Kristensen, “Italy’s Nuclear Anniversary: Fake Reassurance For a King’s Ransom”, Posted on June 30, 2014, in the website of the Federation of American Scientists (<http://fas.org/category/nato>). In a more recent post of September 10, 2015, “Upgrades At U.S. Nuclear Bases in Europe Acknowledge Security Risk”, Kristensen wrote that the number of bombs deployed at Aviano “might have been reduced” to 25-35. He also called attention to the fact that the Incirlik air base, where the nuclear bombs are deployed in Turkey, is only 110 km far from the border with Syria, a theater of war since 2011. Aviano and Incirlik are the two bases mentioned in the post where security upgrades are taking place.

present sentence to a not too old USPID document that did that.¹¹ There is now, however, an additional reason and this is a potential terrorist threat.¹²

Dodging the duty of argumentation, as I just did, is a serious breach of the academic rules governing our discussions, so I owe you not only an apology but also an explanation. As with tango, it takes two to argue. Back in the eighties, there were people, many people, with whom one could debate the merits and demerits of TNW deployments – hawks and doves, remember? NATO had a doctrine concerning their use. Those who wanted the weapons here in Europe had names, faces. The pre-requisites for having a discussion, with pros and cons, were there.

No longer now. There are names and faces only on our side, on the side of those who advocate their withdrawal. The other side is nameless and faceless. There is almost nothing audible thence. Sometimes one hears whispers on “insurance policy”, “last resort”, “*quieta non movere*” and other barely intelligible platitudes. Far from having a doctrine, NATO seems to be embarrassed by TNW and goes to great lengths to explain that they target no country and that their readiness is measured in months.

If only bureaucratic inertia is seemingly a reason for TNW to still be in Europe and no one defends or at least explains their continuing deployment, what have we to argue? With whom are we supposed to argue?

Most people in Italy ignore their existence, which is understandable since they are never mentioned.¹³ Last year, on 19 August 2014, two Tornado fighter bombers from the Ghedi air base crashed one against the other in mid air, killing all four people onboard. No article in the press made readers aware that the aircraft and their crews were nuclear certified, had potential nuclear missions.

When informed of TNW existence and their deployment in Italy, politicians – especially leftist politicians – are often shocked and indignant and ready to fight for their withdrawal. Once in power, as with the present government, they quickly forget and happily preside over their continuing deployment – and assignment to the Italian air force.

On a contiguous issue, the elimination of weapon usable fissile material, USPID Scientific Council wrote in March 2014 a brief appeal to the Italian government of the time, namely to the Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, the Defense Minister Roberta Pinotti and the Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini, urging not only its rapid disposal but also more information on the matter.¹⁴ We got no answer at all, despite the fact that Ms. Mogherini, when an opposition MP, had shown a keen interest in nuclear disarmament matters, also attending Pugwash and USPID initiatives.

¹¹ See USPID, “Eliminating NATO Tactical Nuclear Weapons” (http://www.uspid.org/Documenti/AltriDocumenti/Archivio/UfficialiConsiglioScientifico/2008_05_CS_en.pdf).

¹² On July 22, 2015, Christensen reported that “Two suspected terrorists arrested by the Italian police allegedly were planning an attack against the nuclear weapons base at Ghedi” (<http://fas.org/blogs/security/2015/07/ghedi-terror>).

¹³ The journalist Stefania Maurizi who writes for the newsmagazine *L'Espresso* is an exception.

¹⁴ http://www.uspid.org/Documenti/AltriDocumenti/Recenti/UfficialiConsiglioScientifico/2014_03_09_AI_Presidente_e_Ministri_Esteri_e_Difesa.pdf

The situation I just described makes the advocacy of TNW withdrawal – at least here in Italy - not only pointless but also slightly embarrassing, inasmuch as the advocate may well be perceived as a paranoid who sees nonexistent threats .

So, what else can one do beyond waiting for the next scare?

Conclusions

In theory, an author of the 1991 CeSPI report could take pride in the fact that time vindicated its prescriptions: Italy's armed forces are becoming what we foresaw, even if by necessity rather than by design. Being able to say "I told you so", however, is small consolation. Political and economic affairs often go in cycles: over the long run almost any prediction becomes true. And while the changes that do take place are only those whose time has come, getting the time of reforms right is an art in which the risk of being too early or too late is extremely high.¹⁵

Thus, let's face it: my arms control and disarmament prescriptions for Italy/NATO have been a resounding failure. I wasn't alone of course: the 1991 CeSPI report had six other authors besides myself. The withdrawal of TNW is a stance taken by USPID as a whole. If I keep using the first person (me,me,me...) is because I hesitate to involve colleagues and friends in such a negative appraisal. Egotism is perhaps excusable if there is only blame to share.

Could I have done more to make myself heard? Yes. In retrospect, I believe I only now appreciate the importance of promoting ideas. In other words, coming up with an idea, a policy prescription, is just the beginning of the journey. Then one has to push, push, push – a job that needs investment, dedication and know how. A job looked at haughtily by the average Italian intellectual who tends to believe that her/his ideas are self-enforcing.

Beyond myself, had I to assess the impact the Italian arms control community as a whole had on national and international security, what would my conclusion be? I don't have a definitive answer, but it seems to me that the only clear-cut success was, back in the seventies, Italy's eventual ratification of the NPT.

I'd be happy to be shown as too pessimistic by anyone with a different idea. Note however that, in my opinion at least, only cases in which Italian decision-making was involved should be assessed. Joining the NPT was such a case, as is the deployment of TNW. The deployment of INF was also such a case, but the treaty eliminating them was not. Sure, the latter was also the product of the lobbying of the international arms control community, in which we Italians take part. But what I am after here is the influence we may have had on Italy's government's decision making on defense, security and arms control. Was it substantial or unsubstantial? Relevant or futile? My tentative answer makes me lean toward the latter.

The two case studies I presented above also humble the supposed power of persuasion through rational argumentation – a weapon we all have faith in, following a noble tradition that goes as far back as Greek

¹⁵ "I mean, one half step too late or too early you don't quite make it. One half second too slow or too fast and you don't quite catch it" – says Al Pacino in his famous locker room speech in Oliver Stone's movie *Any given Sunday*.

philosophy, and that makes us write papers, organize workshops, make presentations and debates. For in the end the things that have worked in the two examples above, the truly decisive factors, were but hunger and fear. Pre-rational animal instincts.

Finally, there is Italy. On which our two examples tell us a couple of things. First, reform is very slow. And late: when it finally comes about it risks irrelevance. This is indeed the case with the armed forces: when we published our CeSPI report, in November 1991, the Treaty of Maastricht, which eventually led to the European monetary union, had just been signed. Today, when the survival of the euro depends on a closer political union, it makes no sense to have national armed forces in Europe and all Europeans should start thinking in terms of a European army.

Second, public spending and public employment are easy to build up but hard to cut down – a feature common to all rich countries but that seems particularly acute in Italy. It is not acceptable that demobilizing from the cold war take as long as the cold war itself. Think of all the money wasted in the meantime maintaining an oversized military establishment. Rigidities like this go a long way to explain the sharp contraction of Italy's wealth creation and the precarious state of its public finances.

Is the impact of an idea on decision making, crucial as it is, the only parameter to judge it, however? I doubt it. Effective or not, one can still think that a certain stance was the good one given the circumstances, and that it was worth taking it on, yes, moral grounds. Do the right thing.

There is a story by the late David Forster Wallace in which he recounts his week long experience on a cruising ship, whose title is "A supposedly fun thing I'll never do again".

In the end, all I can say of my arms control experience in Italy is that it has been "A possibly futile thing I'd certainly do again".