

# Italy and its international relations. Getting real on relative positions

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## Abstract

What is the position of Italy in contemporary international politics? How does Italy compare with its neighbors or with the so-called great powers in terms of power? What are the most influential factors to be considered when evaluating Italian foreign policy? Contemporary international politics is multidimensional and multifaceted and positioning a country in the international system involves looking at various and diverse domains. These domains and trajectories have experienced substantive changes and, in turn, the role and relative position of Italy have dramatically changed. This article aims to provide empirical trends in Italy's positioning in international relations, showing the existence of some unsolved issues and the reasons for specific underlying tensions in Italian foreign policy.

## 1. Introduction

What is the position of Italy in contemporary international politics? How does Italy compare with its neighbors or with the so-called great powers in terms of power? What are the factors we have to take into account when expecting something from Italian foreign policy or when evaluating Italian foreign policy? Contemporary international politics is multidimensional and multifaceted and positioning a country in the international system involves looking at various and diverse domains. These domains and trajectories have experienced substantive changes and, in turn, the role and relative position of Italy have dramatically changed. However, without a solid and systematic empirical discussion about trends and relative positions over different international realms, academic analysis – but perhaps even most importantly, policy-making – could be anchored to the past and operate on erroneous assumptions. Hence, this piece aims to provide empirical trends in Italy's positioning in international relations, showing the existence of some unsolved issues and the reasons for specific underlying tensions in Italian foreign policy. The reader, therefore, should take this piece as an empirical complement to this special issue where we have selected some data sources and illustrated some trends. Moreover, we have explicitly opted for breadth (hence, several phenomena and indicators) rather than depth when discussing these trends.

Different schools of thought look at international politics from different perspectives and tend to weigh a given sphere of interaction over others. Our purpose in this article is not to support a specific interpretation of contemporary international politics

over others.<sup>1</sup> Rather, we aim at providing the necessary tools and data to readers who, starting from different theoretical traditions, want to conceive Italy's role in the current international system. We are aware of the limitations that derive from trying to achieve this goal in a single article, but we believe that we can nonetheless provide a useful service for colleagues and policy-makers. Therefore, for the purpose of this special issue, we decided to produce an empirical framework that privileges breadth over depth.

We organize our data presentation<sup>2</sup> by dividing it into three main sections. In the first section, we present the position of Italy in the field of hard power and international security. The Realist school of International Relations primarily focuses on security dynamics, military might and power politics. The current international system is marked by severe security crises, and some of the major powers are actively competing for leadership of the system. Thus, taking stock of the position of Italy in terms of power capabilities seems a necessary starting point to understand the position of the country in the international system. In the second section we consider the position of Italy in the international economy, as power and wealth have always been key goals for human political entities and a system of free international trade has been at the center of Liberal theories of International Relations since their first conception. In the same section we also present Italy's position concerning two crucial non-economic transnational flows: refugees and migrations. These phenomena have become increasingly important in contemporary international politics, and especially for Italy, given the country's geopolitical position. Liberal approaches to international politics have deeply investigated the role of transnational dynamics (Cerny 2010; Rosenau 2018) and migrations and refugee flows embody crucial dimensions of globalization according to Liberal lenses. However, the same phenomena can also be interpreted as security issues through the lenses of Realism and, therefore, it seems doubly useful to look at the position of Italy in these fields. Finally, in the third section, we provide a brief selection of data trends representing the engagement of Italy in international politics via international organizations.

First, we compare the commitment of Italy with other major European countries in European missions. Compared to other international organizations, the EU is still relatively modest in terms of size of military deployments. However, different roles and engagements among the major European states are clear. We then present trends of Italy's behavior compared with world powers within the United Nations, both in terms of providing blue helmets for peace operations and voting in the UN general assembly. The UN is the major non-state actor in organizing and deploying troops globally and Italy is one of the major contributors among European states. Finally, we summarize the findings to suggest some lessons that could be useful for scholars working on Italy but also for policy makers. In an international system where bipolarity belongs to the past and we struggle between unipolarity and multipolarity, a more empirical and data-driven approach is necessary. Theories help us navigate the complexity of international politics, but only a combination of theoretical frameworks with a systematic use of empirics can guide us in this challenging exploration.

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<sup>1</sup> For those dissatisfied with this approach, a reference point is the piece by Mearsheimer & Walt (2013).

<sup>2</sup> When providing graphs of values over time we have opted for colored lines to facilitate their reading. However, as always, lines over time — when observations are missing — could provide untrue trends. Though, we do not believe any major trend is wrongly reported due to missing observations.

## 2. Italy, international security and contemporary power politics

For centuries, international politics has been the realm of power politics and the Realist school of thought has interpreted international relations by emphasizing the security dimension, focusing on the relative power of states and usually stressing the balance of power and alliance politics as the only way to stabilize the system and avoid constant conflict (Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979). Even though scholars and practitioners can also gain from alternative approaches, such as Liberalism (Keohane and Nye 1977; Russett and Oneal 2001) and Social Constructivism (Wendt 1999), Realism, and its focus on the role of power politics, seems to keep its relevance today. Over the last few years, international organizations have been losing legitimacy and are often questioned by their own member states, Russia has rediscovered armed force as a useful tool of foreign policy and China and the United States of America are openly competing for hegemony. However, if the implications and dynamics of power politics are clear – though not uncontested – in theory, it is often hard to measure power empirically, rank states in terms of power and have a clear picture of power constellations in the international system, especially when it comes to so-called medium powers like Italy. If power is inherently a relational concept (Baldwin 2012; Dahl 1957), the best scholars and policy-makers can do is to assess the relative position of states in power politics trying to calculate their power capabilities. To this aim, a widely used indicator of a state's power is Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which records the value of all goods and services produced within a country in a given year. While, strictly speaking, GDP is an economic indicator, several scholars argue that it captures both economic and military capacity, because states can easily convert economic resources into military force (Beckley 2018). In the literature on civil war, GDP (per capita) has also been considered a measure of a state's capacity to control its territory and population (Fearon and Laitin 2003).

However, if we focus on the International Relations literature, the most commonly used indicator to measure power is probably “war potential”, the capabilities useful for waging war, which combines measures of gross economic output and gross military resources. The basic idea behind this approach is that power in international politics is ultimately needed to fight and win major wars, and winning major wars requires a big army backed by a considerable military budget and substantial industrial capacity. The most widely used measure of a country's war potential was elaborated by the Correlates of War Project (COW) (Singer and Small 1994) and is the Composite Indicator of National Capabilities (CINC), which first appeared in the 1960s and is based on annual values for total population, urban population, iron and steel production, energy consumption, military personnel, and military expenditure (Singer et al. 1972).<sup>3</sup>

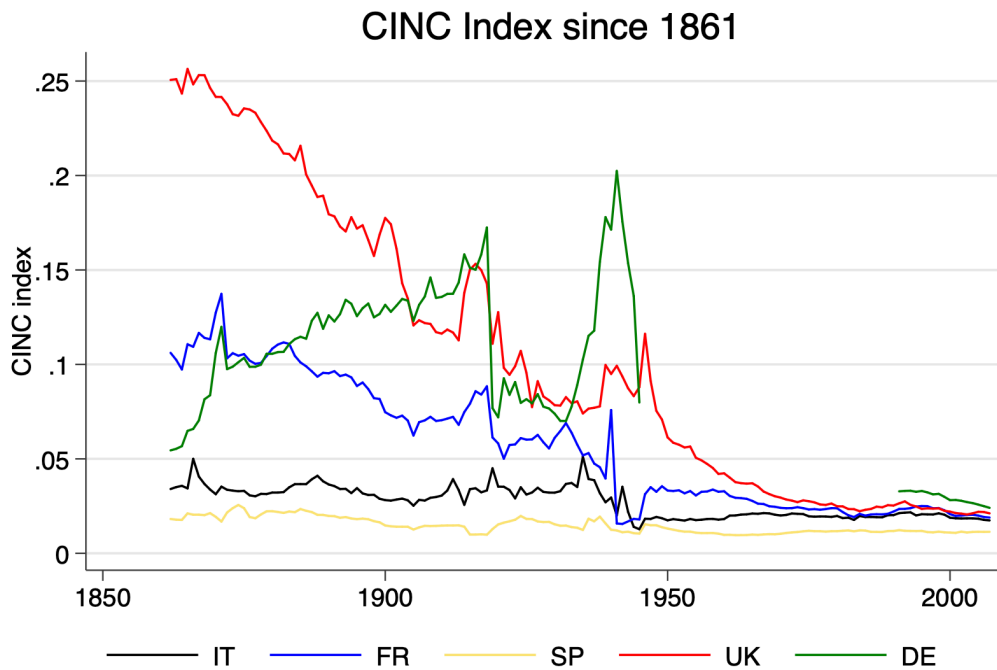
The CINC score aggregates these six individual measured components of national material capabilities into a single value per state year. The CINC reflects an average of a state's share of the system total of each element of capabilities in each year, weighting each component equally. In doing so, the CINC will always range between 0 and 1. A “0.0” would indicate that a state had 0% of the total capabilities present in the system in that year, while a “1.0” would indicate that the state had 100% of the capabilities in a given year

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<sup>3</sup> The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) provides more accurate data on national military expenditures, but the time series are shorter and investigations of long-term trends are therefore impossible. We will use the SIPRI data below as a separate indicator.

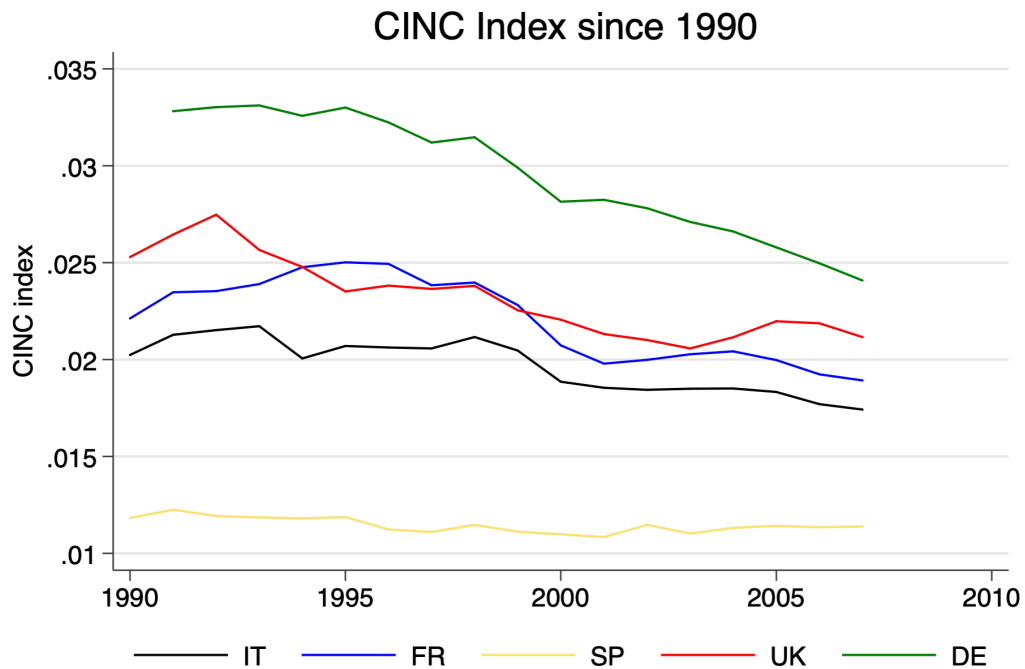
(and on the contrary that every other state had exactly 0% capabilities in that year). Below we use CINC to compare the power share of Italy with the power share of other European countries over two different time spans. Figure 1 shows the trends of power share between 1861, the year in which Italy was unified under the same kingdom, and 2007, latest year of available data from the COW project. Figure 2 focuses on the post-Cold War period until 2007. Looking at the long-term trends, we can see that Italy's share of world power shows a moderate but clear and structural fall immediately after the end of World War II, but has remained essentially stable since 1945. On the contrary, France and the United Kingdom have experienced a dramatic loss of power share and have substantially converged to the level of Italy (below 5% of world power) since the mid-1970s. The decolonization process accelerated a trend that – especially for the UK – had been going on since the late nineteenth century, when the relative power of the British Empire began decreasing as a result of the emergence of other great powers such as the US, Japan, and unified Germany. Notable, therefore, is a convergence of European countries towards closer power relations. If the nineteenth century was a clear period of preponderance for countries such as the UK and France, the two World Wars sanctioned a European convergence and shifted the power center toward the USA.

**Figure 1.** Power CINC index trends in the long run



Data source: Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey (1972). *Correlates of War*.

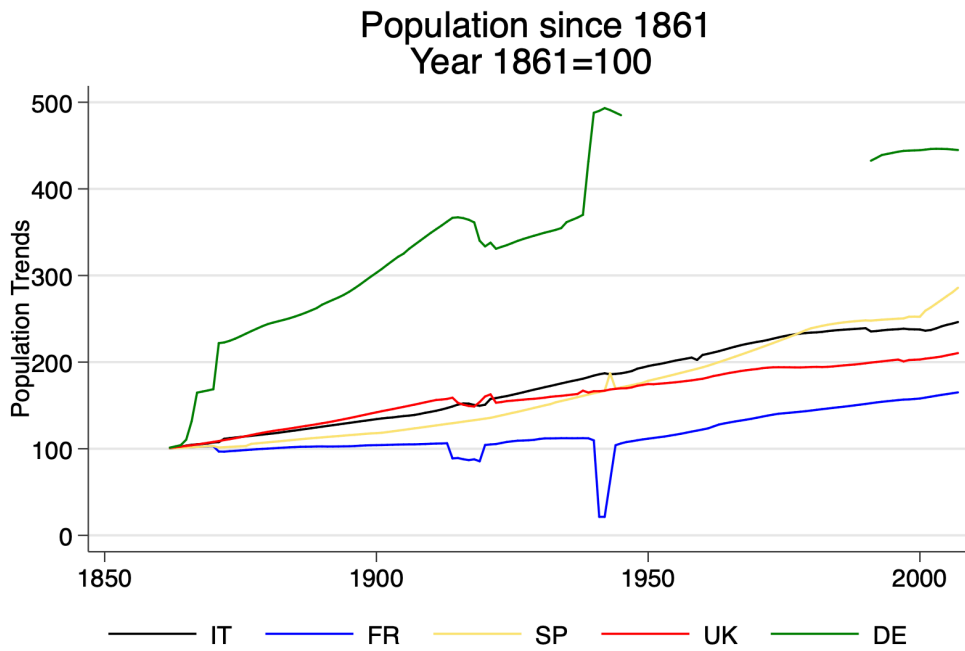
If we focus on the post-Cold War period thanks to Figure 2, we can see that all major European countries have lost power since 1990, except for Spain, which nonetheless shows by far the smallest war potential. However, while Europe shows a general loss of power as the main trend, the two most powerful European countries at the beginning of the post-Cold War era (Germany and the UK) have lost more than France and Italy, resulting in a clear convergence of power shares.

**Figure 2.** Power CINC index trends after the Cold War (1990-2007)

Data source: Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey (1972). *Correlates of War*.

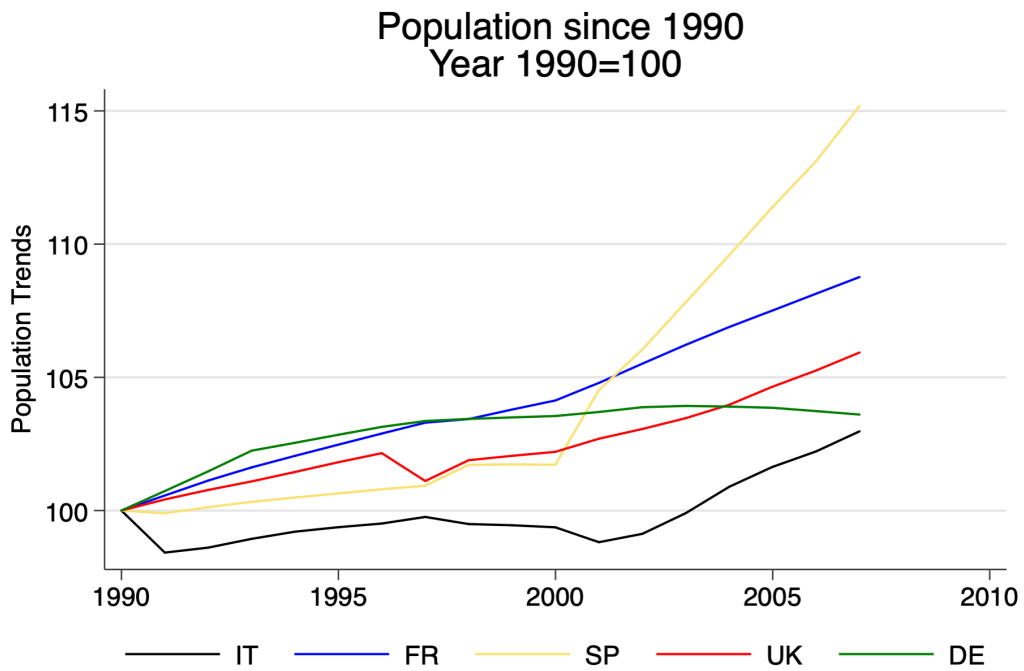
If we decompose the CINC index and look at some of the factors that are considered crucial in evaluating the power of states, we can have a better idea of the reasons behind the trends depicted in the figures above. Figures 3 and 4 show the evolution of the national populations of Italy, France, Spain and the UK in the long run and in the post-Cold War era. The reader should note that we have indexed as 100 the starting level of each country at the beginning of the time-series, to better gauge and compare the variations in the countries' populations. Figure 3 clearly shows that the Italian population experienced a huge growth in the long run, increasing the level of 1861 by about 2.5 times and therefore much more than in France and the UK. However, when we focus on the post-Cold War era and move to Figure 4, where we indexed as 100 the population in 1990, we can see that the situation is completely overturned: Italy shows the smallest increase in population among the four European countries considered and the Italian population actually experienced a net fall between 1990 and 2003, while the populations of the other countries have always, though slowly, increased. Demography, usually understood as a merely domestic factor that can affect labor force or public expenditure, is also a central indicator of the possible external power projection of a country. Demographic shifts have been studied to explain different levels of conflict and cooperation between countries (Brooks et al. 2019) and losses or gains of power status in the international system (Goldstone, Kaufmann, and Toft 2012).

Figure 3. Population trends in the long run



Data source: Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey (1972). Correlates of War.

Figure 4. Population trends after the Cold War (1990-2007)

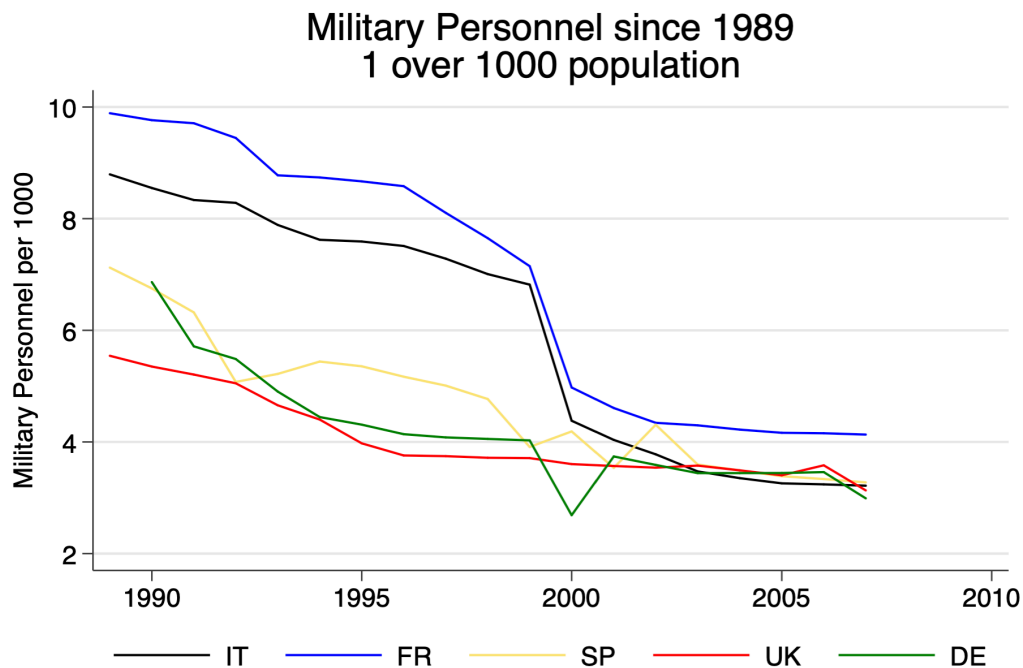


Data source: Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey (1972). Correlates of War.

If we go on unpacking the CINC components and focus more on the military dimension, as in Figures 5-8, we notice some other interesting time trends in the amount of military personnel per capita. In Figure 5 we can see that at the end of the Cold War, Italy and France could count on large armies relative to their population, with a share of military personnel over population close to the value of the US (in Figure 6): just fewer than 10 soldiers over 1000 inhabitants. In the following years, the major European countries reduced their military personnel and the value dropped significantly in Italy and France at the end of the 1990s. In 2007, Italy, Spain and the UK converged to a value of around 3.2 members of the armed forces over 1000 inhabitants, while France was just above 4/1000. Italy and France had more than halved their military personnel in 18 years. A similar trend also occurred in the three great powers studied in Figure 6 (USA, Russia and China), even though the slope of the decreasing trend is usually smaller than it is for the European countries. Among the three great powers, Russia is the one with the largest downward slope, but it still remains the great power with the highest share of military personnel over population.

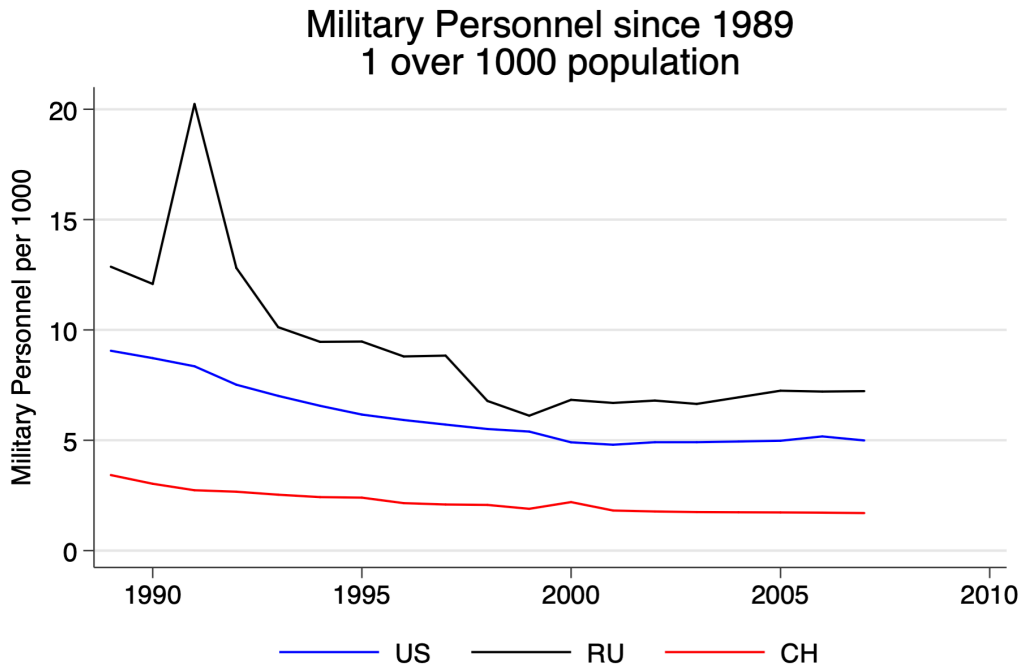
Figures 7 and 8 show post-Cold War data about military expenditure, another crucial component of CINC and war potential, even though in this case we used data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). These data are the most accurate and up-to-date cross-sectional empirics on national military expenditures (Dunne and Smith 2019). Interestingly, while the share of Italian government spending allocated to military expenditure increased in the second half of the 1990s and remained approximately stable for about ten years, it then experienced a decrease, and the initial (1990) and final (2019) values are approximately the same.

**Figure 5.** Military personnel trends in Europe after the Cold War (1989-2007)



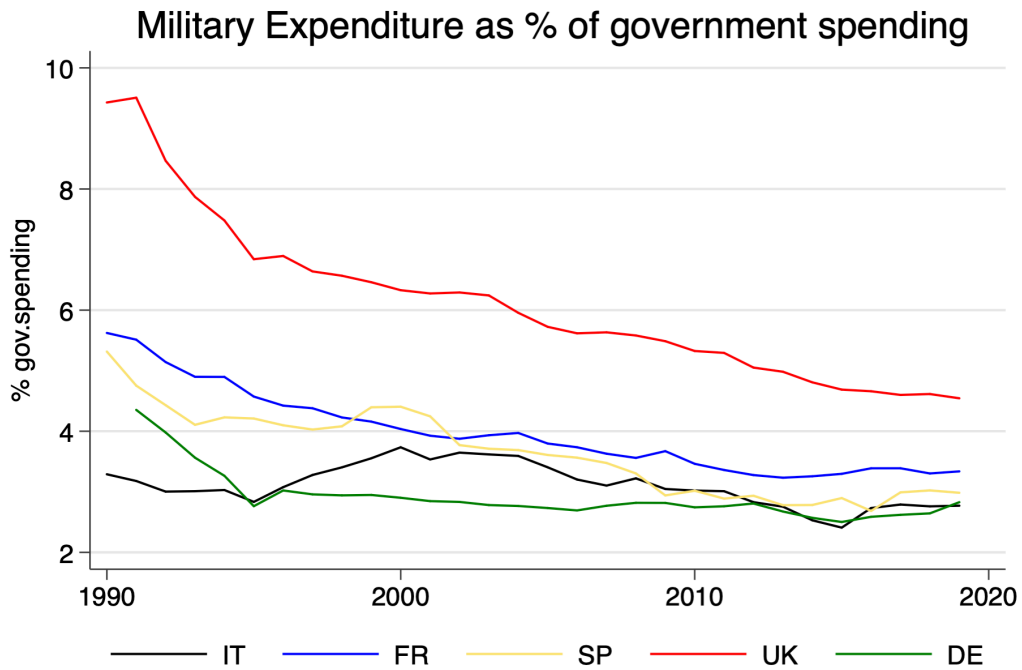
Data source: Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey (1972). *Correlates of War*.

Figure 6. Military personnel trends of the great powers after the Cold War (1989-2007)

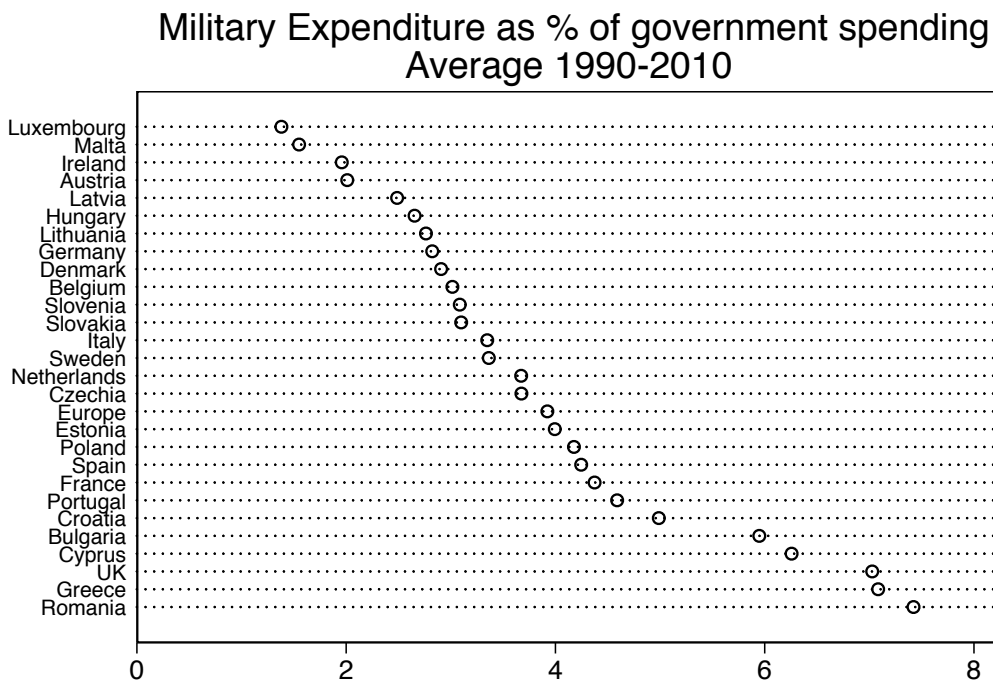


Data source: Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey (1972). Correlates of War.

Figure 7. Military expenditure after the Cold War (1989-2007)



Data source: SIPRI (2020).

**Figure 8.** Average military expenditure among European countries (1990-2010)

Data source: SIPRI (2020).

On the contrary, the other major European states have reduced the share of government spending dedicated to the military sector to a much larger extent, thus leading to another case of convergence. In fact, while all other countries started the post-Cold War era with larger shares of public resources dedicated to the armed forces, nowadays Spain and Germany essentially allocate the same share of government spending as Italy (2.8%), with France just above (3.3%). Only the UK keeps assigning around 5% of its government spending to the military budget, but it is also the country that experienced the largest reduction over the post-Cold War period among the five countries considered. As terms of comparison, in 2019 the USA spent 9.4% of their government spending on the armed forces, China 5.4% and Russia 11.4%. It is useful to note that NATO's guidelines on defense expenditure as percentage of GDP is 2.5%: in 2019 Italy spent 1.4%, compared to 3.4% in the USA, 1.9% in France, 1.7% in the UK, 1.2% in Spain and 1.4% in Germany.

Figure 8 shows average military expenditure as the share of government spending among European countries in the period 1990-2010. The mean in Europe was around 4%, with a wide variation from 1.3% (Luxembourg) to 7.3% (Romania) and with Italy (3.3%) below the European mean.

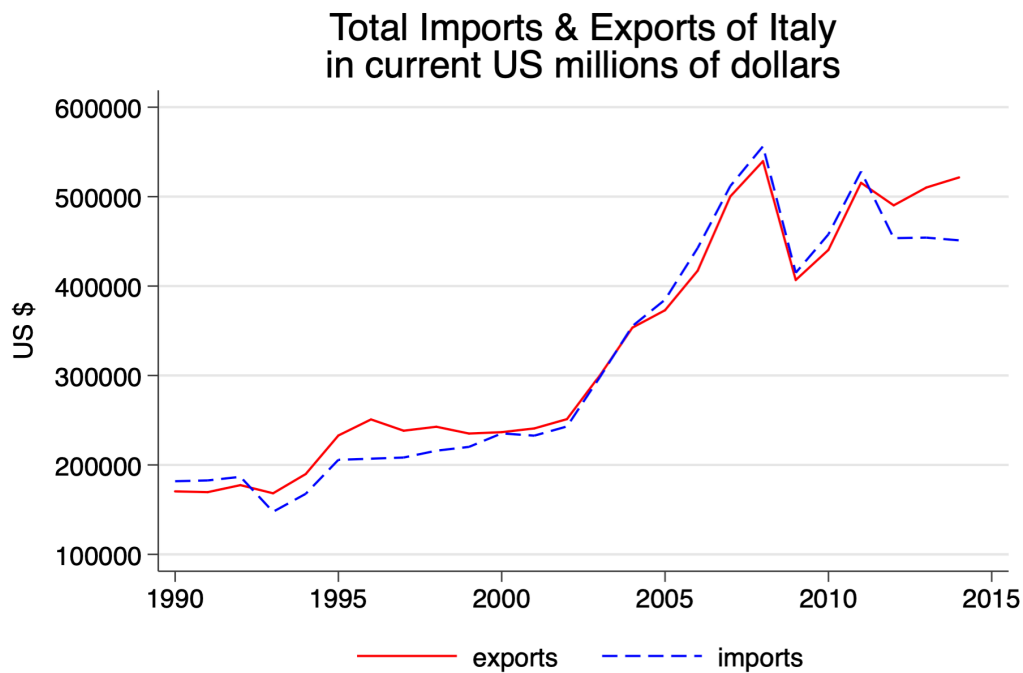
Therefore, considering different empirical proxies, if Italy often scores lower than the other major European countries in terms of power and power components, it definitely scores higher than Spain, and in the last three decades the other countries have been converging towards Italy in several measures of power capabilities. Some scholars have recently criticized the measurement of power through gross indicators (such as GDP), since these indicators systematically overstate the power of populous countries, accounting for the benefits of having a big population, but overlooking the costs of being a populous country (Beckley 2018). A large population can produce a large amount of

resources, but also consumes a lot. In order to be a great power, a state needs to stock a large mass of resources and therefore produce high output at low costs. Unfortunately, all gross indicators measure only the size of a country's resources, not how efficiently a country uses them. Anders, Fariss and Markowitz (2019) have proposed decomposing GDP into two distinct forms of income: "subsistence income" represents resources needed to cover the basic subsistence needs of the population, while "surplus income" represents the remaining resources that could be allocated to "guns" or "butter", that is the income states can devote to arming and projecting power. As a result of this shift from gross indicators to net indicators, Anders, Fariss and Markowitz (2019) recommend substituting GDP with SDP (surplus domestic product) and show that estimates using GDP as a proxy measure of power resources systematically overestimate the power resources of low-income states with large populations. This is particularly relevant for correctly ranking China during the Cold War and India in the post-Cold War era, but what is important for Italy is that irrespective of the measure used, Italy constantly features in the top ten powers ranked by their average share of global power resources since 1816. While this is clearly not a new finding, it is something that often goes unnoticed today and seems worthy of renewed consideration

### **3. Italy in a globalized world: international economy and trans-national flows**

Clearly, placing Italy in contemporary international politics requires going beyond pure international security and balance of power calculations. Foreign policy has always been a matter of composing economic benefits and security interests (Gilpin 1987), even more so after the end of the Cold War, with the exponential increase in all economic flows. Thus, it is crucial to understand the position of Italy in these flows, realize the size of Italian involvement in contemporary international economy and single out the countries that are more tightly connected to Italy. This is essential in order to evaluate what Italy can meaningfully do and what it cannot reasonably do, what the pros and cons are of specific foreign policy moves, the bonds and the opportunities. Thanks to an explicit understanding of Italy's position relative to other countries over different dimensions, it is possible to understand its own limits and constraints. Only by confronting ideas with these empirically grounded premises, can analyses and policy implications be fruitfully developed.

Figure 9 shows the evolution of Italian involvement in international trade in the post-Cold War era. As we can see, the value of international trade for Italy has significantly increased in the last twenty-five years, even though the negative consequences of the economic crisis that began in 2008 are clearly visible on the right-hand side of the figure. It is also interesting to see how the values of Italian exports and imports have been essentially the same over the period considered – therefore showing an extremely equilibrated balance of trade – even though in recent years the value of exports has been notably higher than the value of imports.

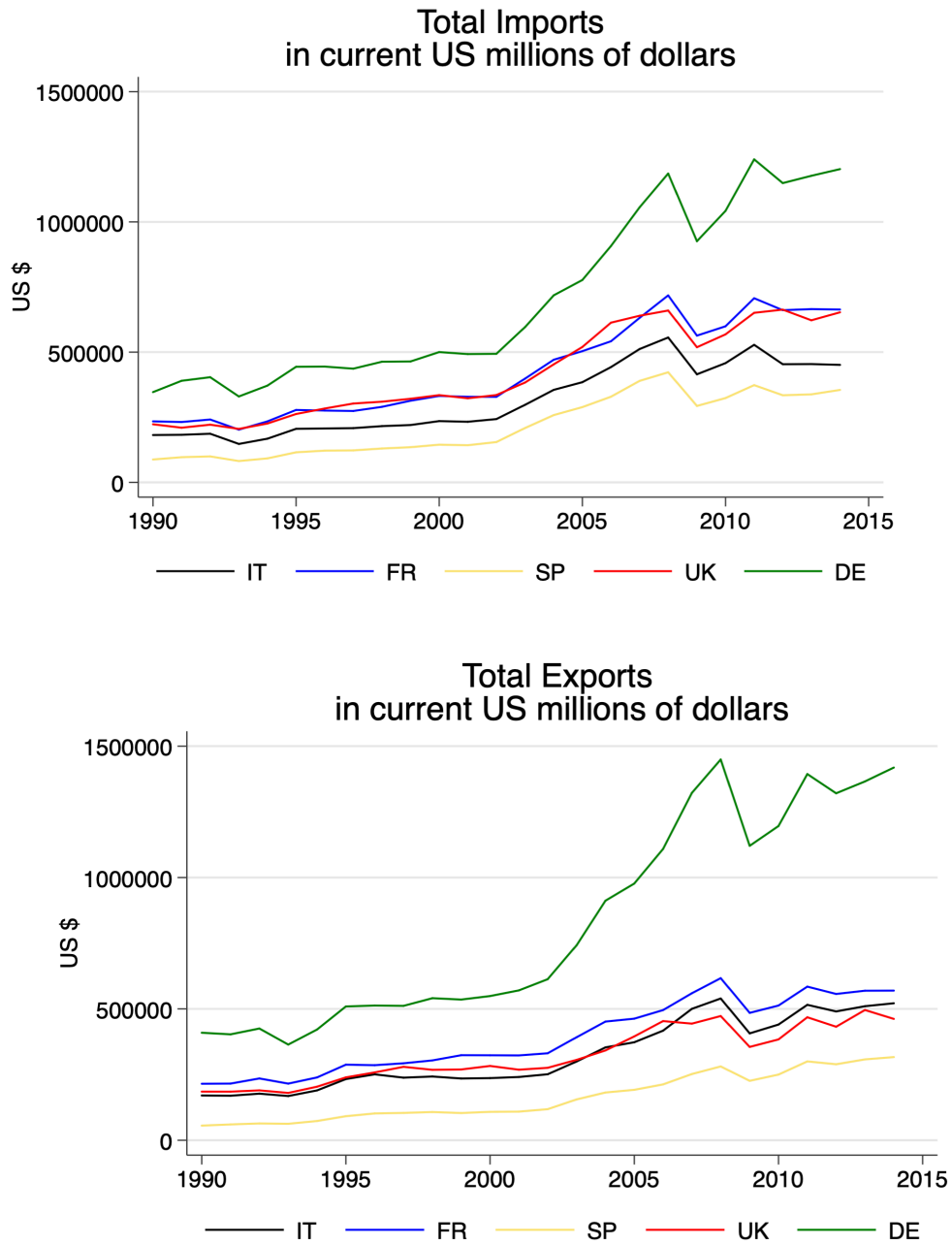
**Figure 9.** Italian imports and exports after the Cold War (1990–2014)

Data source: Barbieri and Keshk (2017).

In order to have a more accurate perspective on Italian involvement in international trade, Figure 10 compares the evolution of Italian imports and exports after the end of the Cold War with the same data for France, Germany, Spain and the UK. The trajectories of the countries' lines look quite interesting. First of all, we can see that exports increased for all major European states over the period considered. This was a global trend and represented the "optimist phase" of globalization. However, contrary to what happened in the area of international security and power relations, in the realm of international trade we witness a divergence, and not a convergence. As a matter of fact, the most striking trend is represented by the prominent increase in German imports and exports, beginning in 2002.

Germany already enjoyed the highest value of international trade among the five countries in 1990, and the gap between Germany and all the other four countries has remarkably expanded over the years. In particular, the difference between German exports and the exports of the four other countries has more than doubled. On the contrary, the trajectories of imports and exports for Italy, France, Spain and the UK have developed much more in parallel, even though the gaps have generally increased, and the position of Italy is worthy of note. In fact, while the value of Italian exports was lower than the value of British exports in 1990, Italy has been steadily exporting more than the UK since 2007. Moreover, while Italy imported less than France and the UK in 1990, this difference has more than doubled over the period considered.

**Figure 10.** Imports and exports of major European countries (1990-2014)

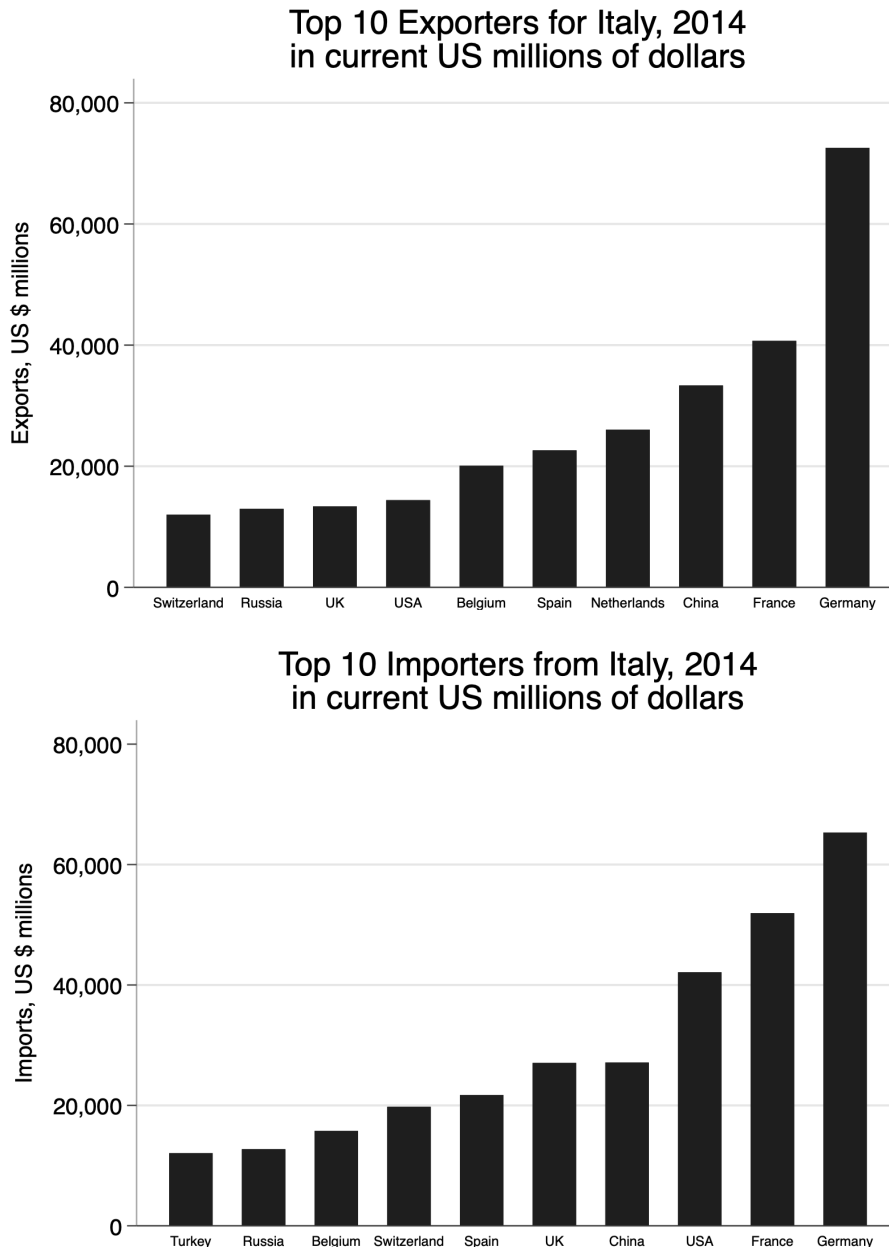


Data source: Barbieri and Keshk (2017)

If we disaggregate the data on Italian trade by country, we see Italy's major trading partners in contemporary international economy and the strength of the economic interdependence between Italy and Germany becomes immediately clear. In fact, Figure 11 shows that Germany is by far the top exporter to Italy as well as the largest importer from Italy. France scores second in both categories, whereas there is imbalance in the links between Italy and the US: while the US is the third destination for Italian exports, Italy imports more from the Netherlands, Spain and even Belgium than from the US. China is the third largest exporter to Italy and the fourth largest importer from Italy.

However, Italian trade remains robustly linked to Europe: it is sufficient to note that Italian exports to China match Italian exports to the UK and the value of Italian exports to Belgium is higher than the value of Italian exports to Russia.

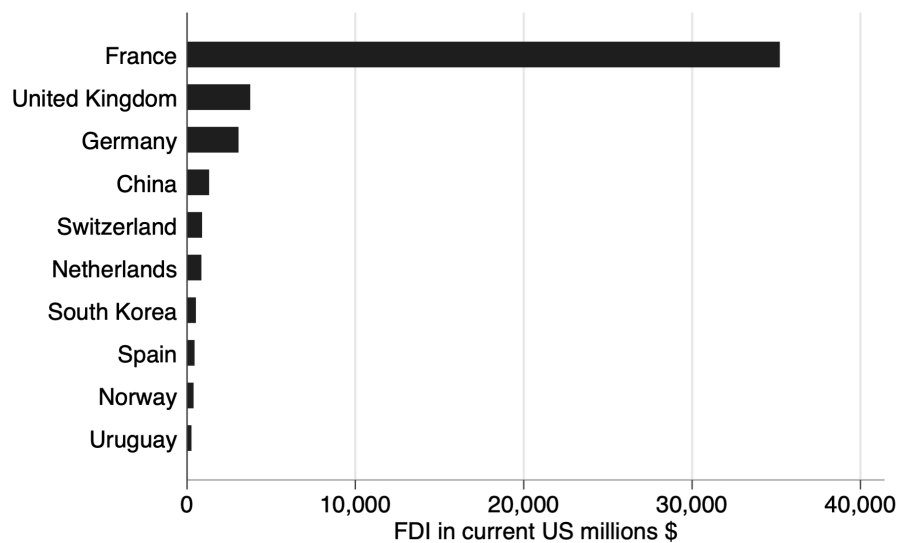
**Figure 11.** Italian imports and exports disaggregated by country (2014)



Data source: Barbieri and Keshk (2017)

The same holds if we shift from international trade to international investment flows. In fact, Figure 12 shows the ten largest sources of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) stock in Italy in 2018, the latest available year in the OECD data, and we can see that France is by far the largest foreign investor in the Italian economy, while China is fourth and the USA does not appear among the top ten sources of FDI.

**Figure 12.** International FDI in Italy (2018)

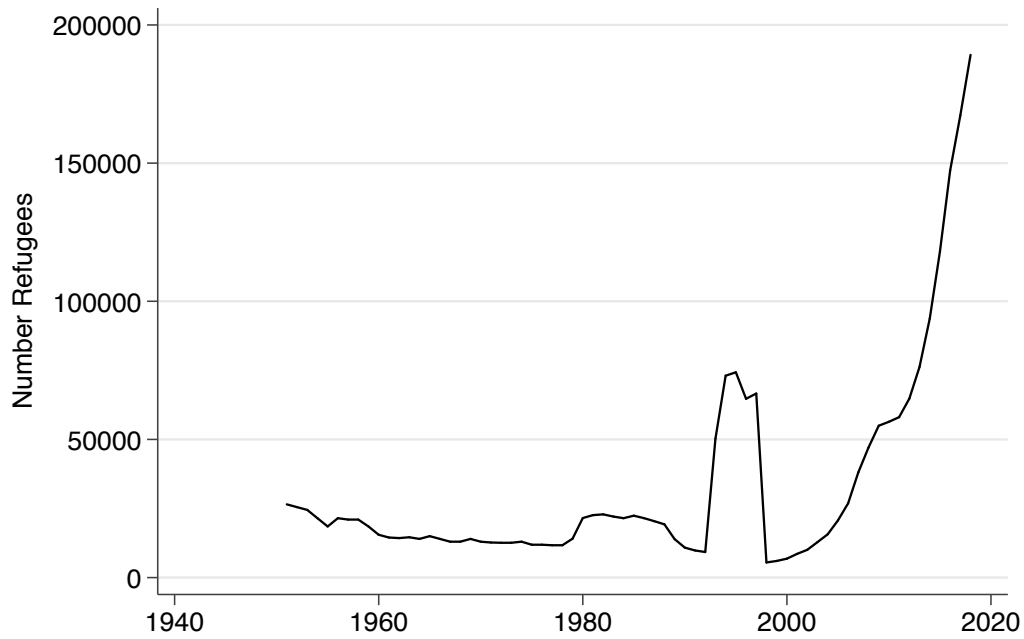


Data source: OECD (2020)

As we all know, the globalized world has different facets and it is not only about economic flows. Global politics is also about other social issues, such as migrations and refugee flows (Betts and Collier 2017), which have also sparked heated debates in Italy and Europe in the last few years. Hence, hereafter we provide some trends on movements of people, refugees and migrants. These are likely to remain key topics in the next few years and it is therefore important to recognize Italy's relative position in these dimensions to elaborate or assess its foreign policy. The overall number of refugees has been growing since 2011 and according to the latest data available we have reached 25.9 million refugees in the world (UNHCR 2020). Altogether, more than two thirds (67 per cent) of all refugees worldwide come from just five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia. At the end of 2018, the war in Syria had produced approximately 6.7 million refugees and Turkey featured as the country with the highest number of refugees on its territory (about 3.6 million). No European country was included in the list of top ten major host countries of refugees, with the exception of Germany, which hosted more than one million refugees. In fact, at the end of 2018 the major European countries showed a huge variation: Italy hosted 189.2 thousand refugees, while France hosted 368.3 thousand, the UK 126.6 thousand and Spain only 20.4 thousand. A similar remarkable variation also emerges from the analysis of the trends. As we can see in Figure 13, the total number of refugees in Italy has grown exponentially since 1998 and a similar trajectory can be found in France, even though the absolute figures are considerably higher, since France already hosted almost 130 thousand refugees in 1999. Quite differently, Spain never hosted more than 10 thousand refugees between 1992 and 2013, while the UK reached the highest number of refugees hosted (303.2 thousand) in 2005 and then experienced a sharp decrease for the following ten years and basic stability between 2015 and 2018. If we consider the number of refugees as a share of the host country's population, at the end of 2018 the ranking was dominated by Lebanon, where refugees equaled 13.6% of the population. In Jordan (which shows the second highest share), the number of refugees reached 7.2% of the population and in Turkey 4.5%.

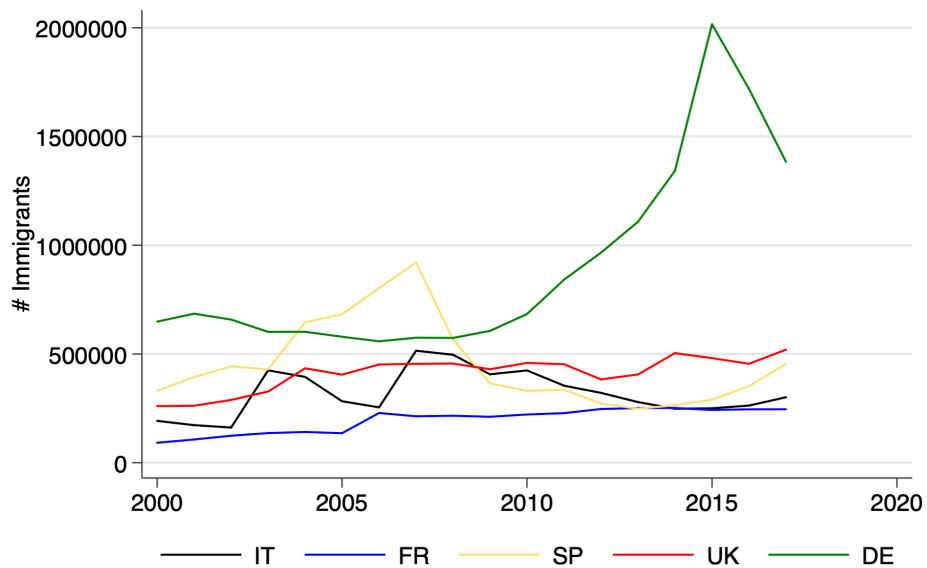
Sweden was the European country with the highest share of refugees (2.4% of the population), while in Italy refugees amounted to 0.3% of the population. In the same year, the refugees hosted in Germany equaled 1.3% of the national population, while France was at 0.5%, the UK at 0.2% and Spain below 0.1%.

**Figure 13.** Total number of refugees in Italy (1950-2018)



Data source: UNHCR (2020)

**Figure 14.** Migration inflows in the major European countries (2000-2017)

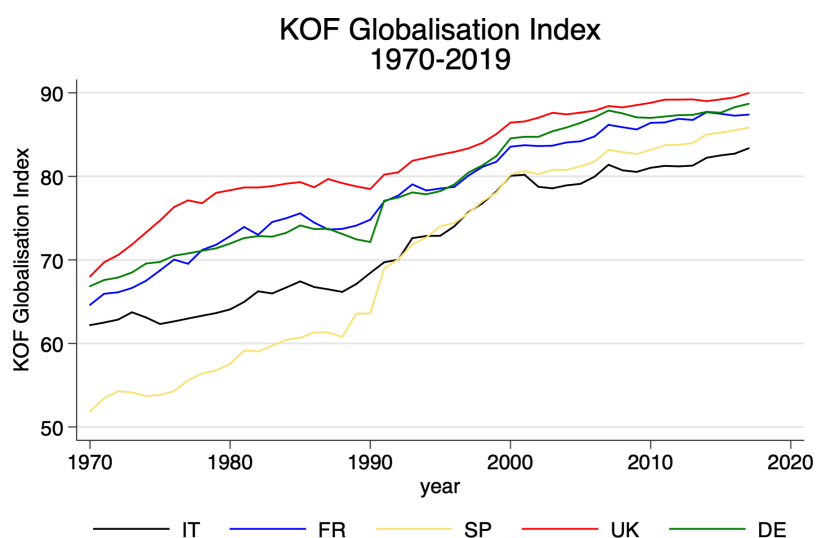


Data source: OECD (2020)

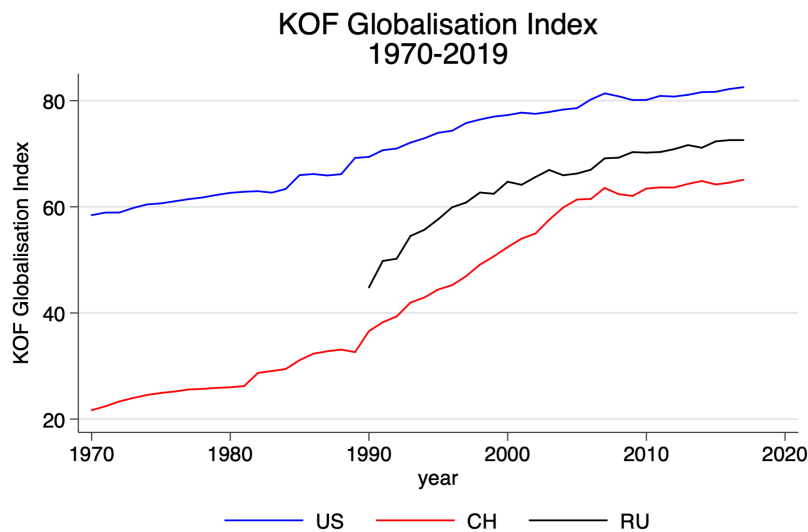
If we look at migrations, according to UN estimates (UNDESA 2020), the stock of international migrants in Italy in 2019 amounted to about 6.3 million people, and it has only mildly increased since 2010 (5.8 million people). The phase of a marked increase in the migrations towards Italy was from 2000 to 2010, and especially between 2007 and 2010, with a peak in 2007, when Italy received 515 thousand new immigrants. As we can see in Figure 14, the trajectories of migration inflows in the twenty-first century have been strikingly different for the major European countries. The French line remains almost flat for the whole period, although with a noticeable increase between 2005 and 2006, when the number of new immigrants in France went from 136 thousand to 228 thousand. On the contrary, Germany has constantly attracted and admitted more than 550 thousand new migrants per year since 2000, with a sharp increase beginning in 2010 and culminating in 2015, when Germany admitted 2 million migrants in a single year. As a result of these numbers, the UN estimates that in 2019 Germany hosted 13.1 million migrants, which means more than double the stock present in Italy and Spain (6.3 and 6.1 million, respectively) and 5 million more than in France.

Concluding this section, we present the KOF Globalization Index, which measures the economic, social and political dimensions of globalization (Gygli et al. 2019). This is a synthetic index that summarizes several dimensions of globalization such as trade and finance, but also cultural and political aspects such as migration, freedom to visit and civil liberties. In Figure 15 we show that all the major Western European countries that we have studied so far increased their level of overall globalization between 1970 and 2019. However, since the early 2000s Italy has become the least globalized among these countries, following a sharp increase in the level of globalization for Spain in the 1990s. Moreover, according to the KOF index, all these five European countries are more globalized than the great powers of the international system (Figure 16). In fact, only the USA has a level of globalization comparable to Italy, while Russia's level of globalization today is close to the level of Italy twenty years ago and China is approximately as globalized as Italy in 1970.

**Figure 15.** Level of globalization for the major European countries (1970-2019)



Data source: Gygli, Haelg, Potrafke and Sturm (2019)

**Figure 16.** Level of globalization for the US, Russia and China (1970-2019)

Data source: Gygli, Haelg, Potrafke and Sturm (2019)

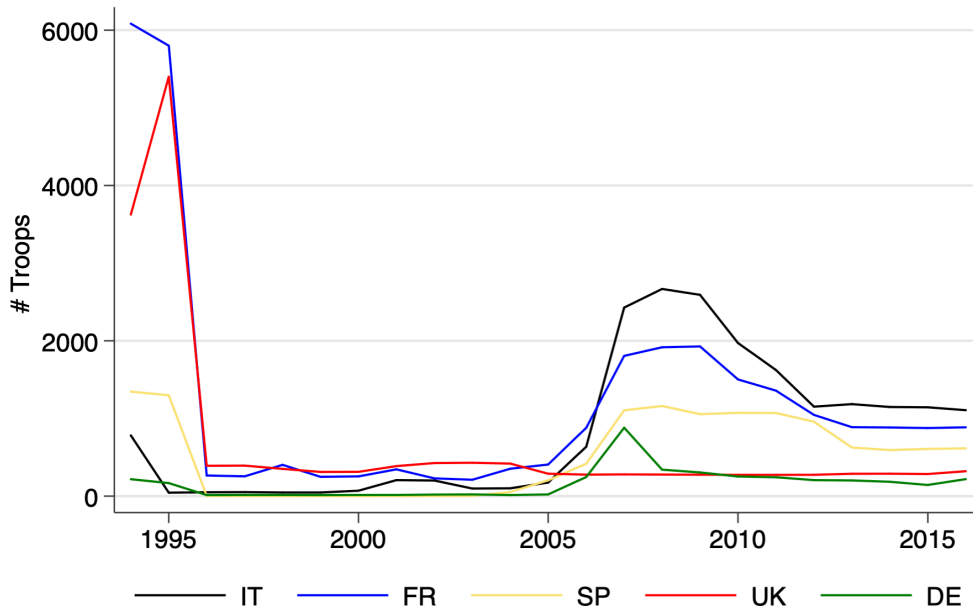
#### 4. Italy's engagement via International Organizations

In order to have an appropriate and complete view of the position of Italy in contemporary international politics, it is also crucial to consider at least some of the actions taken by Italy and how Italy has interacted with other countries through diplomacy and within international organizations. Obviously, it is impossible to consider the actions of Italy in all international organizations within the limits imposed by this article. For this reason, we will focus on the UN and the EU, and especially on the peacekeeping missions enacted by these two organizations, given the importance attached to these activities by the Italian government.

After the end of the Cold War, Italy participated in a number of peacekeeping missions and military interventions abroad (Ignazi, Giacomello, and Coticchia 2012) and these missions represented one of the major foreign policy activities for Italy. Figure 17 shows the trend of troop contributions to UN peacekeeping missions by the five major European states we have so far analyzed and compared. The data are from the International Peace Institute in New York. As we can see, while European states were among the major contributors to UN peacekeeping missions in the early 1990s, their overall contribution has rapidly declined and remained almost absent for about ten years. Italy became the largest European contributor in 2006, when the UN Security Council decided to strengthen the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon, where Italy still has more than 1000 soldiers deployed. As we can see in Figure 18, originally drawn by Bove and coauthors (2020), Italy is the only European country and the only NATO member included in the list of the top twenty contributors of troops to UN peacekeeping missions. Notably, Germany did not provide any soldiers for many years until 2006 and is still the lowest contributor to UN missions among the major European countries. In fact, in the last twenty years UN peacekeeping missions have largely become an issue for Asian and African countries, which participate in the missions partly as a way to increase their status within the community of states and partly as a way to pay higher salaries to their armed

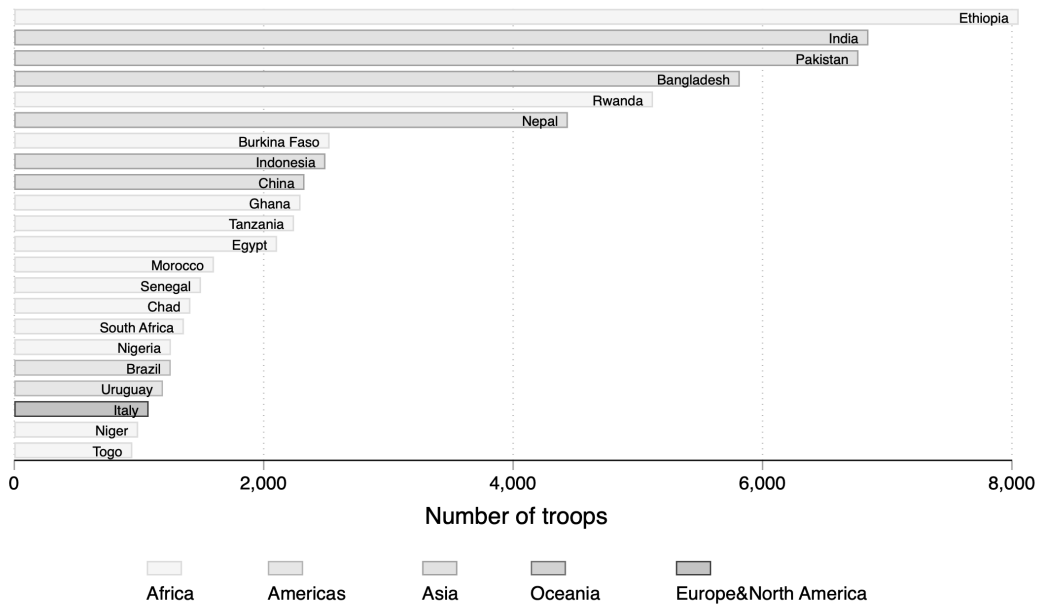
forces (Bove and Elia 2011). On the contrary the most powerful and developed states of the international system (with the exception of China) have privileged other forms of international intervention over UN peacekeeping missions, such as unilateral action, ad-hoc coalitions and regional organizations.

**Figure 17.** Troop contributions to UN missions by the major European countries

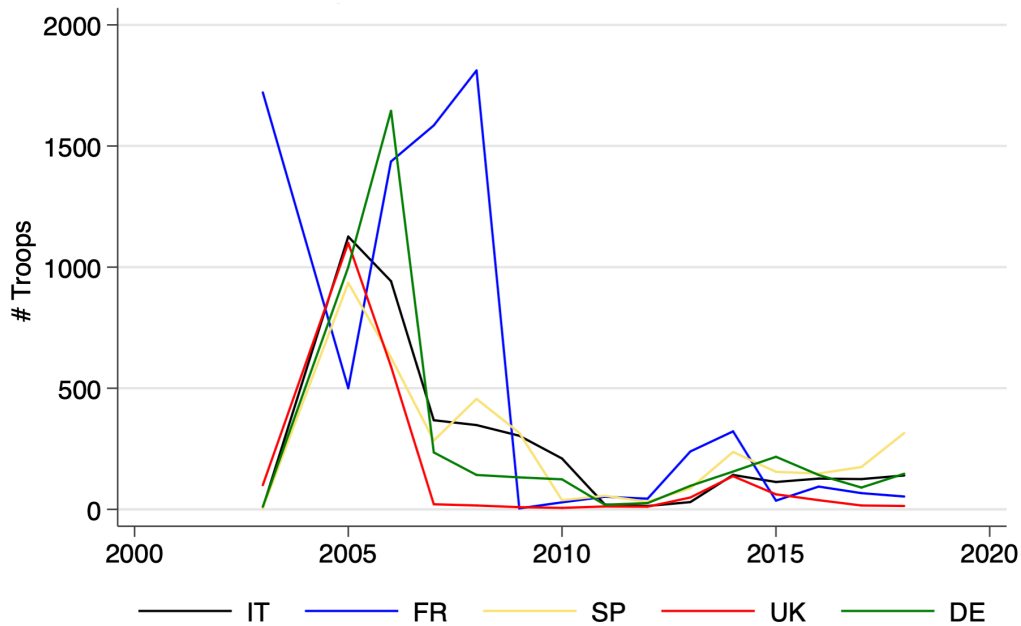


Data source: IPI (2020)

**Figure 18.** Top twenty contributors of troops to UN peacekeeping in 2017



Data source: IPI (2020)

**Figure 19.** Troop contributions to EU missions by the major European countries

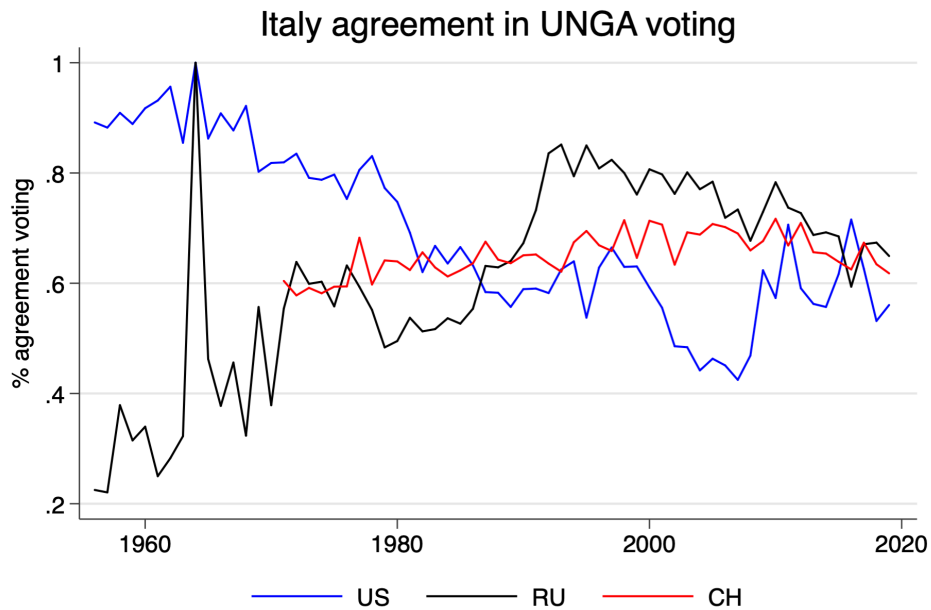
Data source: Meiske (2019)

Moving to briefly analyze the engagement of Italy within the EU security framework, Figure 19<sup>4</sup> shows that France and Spain have occasionally contributed to EU missions with several hundreds of soldiers, but only for very short periods and in any case the EU missions have counted on very low numbers over the last ten years, despite severe turbulence in the international system. France has been a major contributor, but in recent years all these countries have provided similar and small numbers of troops. It is important to stress this point because various studies (Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon 2019; Ruggeri, Gizelis, and Dorussen 2013) have demonstrated that contemporary multidimensional UN peacekeeping missions can effectively reduce violence in conflicts and stabilize post-conflict situations, but these missions often need more than ten thousand soldiers deployed to be fully effective. Thus, without robust deployments of troops, peacekeeping missions can hardly tackle the politically difficult and military dangerous situations they often have to face.

Finally, we show four Figures (20, 21, 22, 23) representing the pattern of Italian voting in the UN General Assembly, compared to the patterns of voting of the major European countries and the great powers of the international system (the US, China and Russia). The votes in the UN General Assembly have successfully been used in many studies to evaluate and compare the foreign policies of states over a broad set of issues, beyond specific topics and circumstances (Carter and Stone 2015; Voeten 2000). Figures 20 and 21 show the rate of agreement between Italian votes in the UN General Assembly and the votes of the US, China and Russia. When the value equals one, Italy and the country under scrutiny expressed exactly the same votes in a given year.

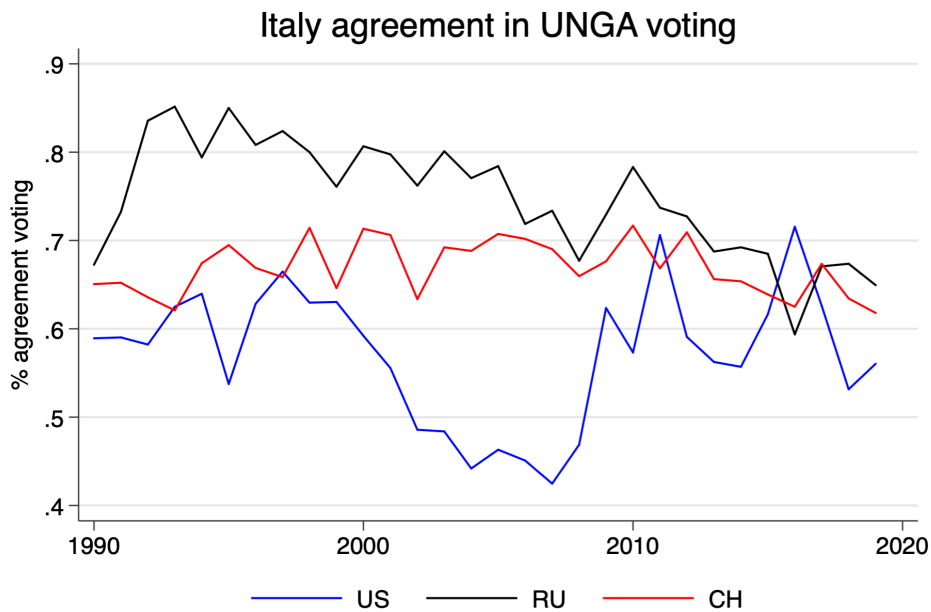
<sup>4</sup> We thank Maline Meiske for providing these otherwise unavailable data. For more on EU peacekeeping missions, see Meiske (2019).

**Figure 20.** Voting in the UNGA (Italy vs. US, China and Russia), 1950-2019



Data source: Bailey et al. (2017)

**Figure 21.** Voting in the UNGA (Italy vs. US, China and Russia), 1990-2019

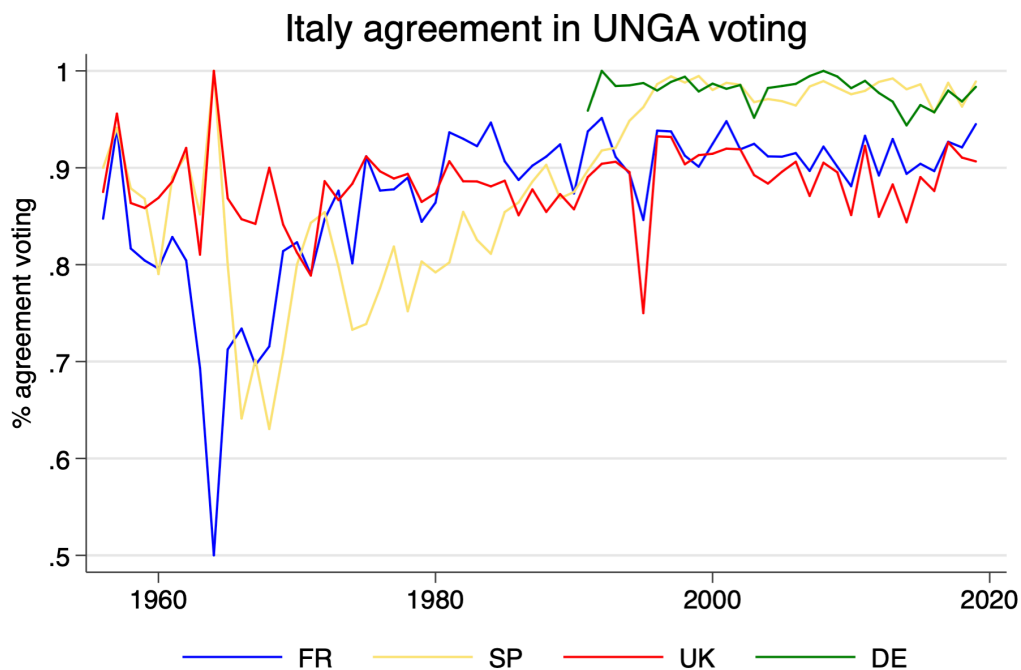


Data source: Bailey et al. (2017)

As we can see, both the long-term trend (Figure 20) and the post-Cold War trend (Figure 21) display some clear and interesting features. Most notably, while public debates in Italy have focused on the growing distance between the American and Italian foreign policies only in specific moments, for instance at the time of the Iraqi War or currently under the Trump administration, agreement between Italian and US votes in the UN General Assembly has been decreasing for decades, essentially since the 1960s,

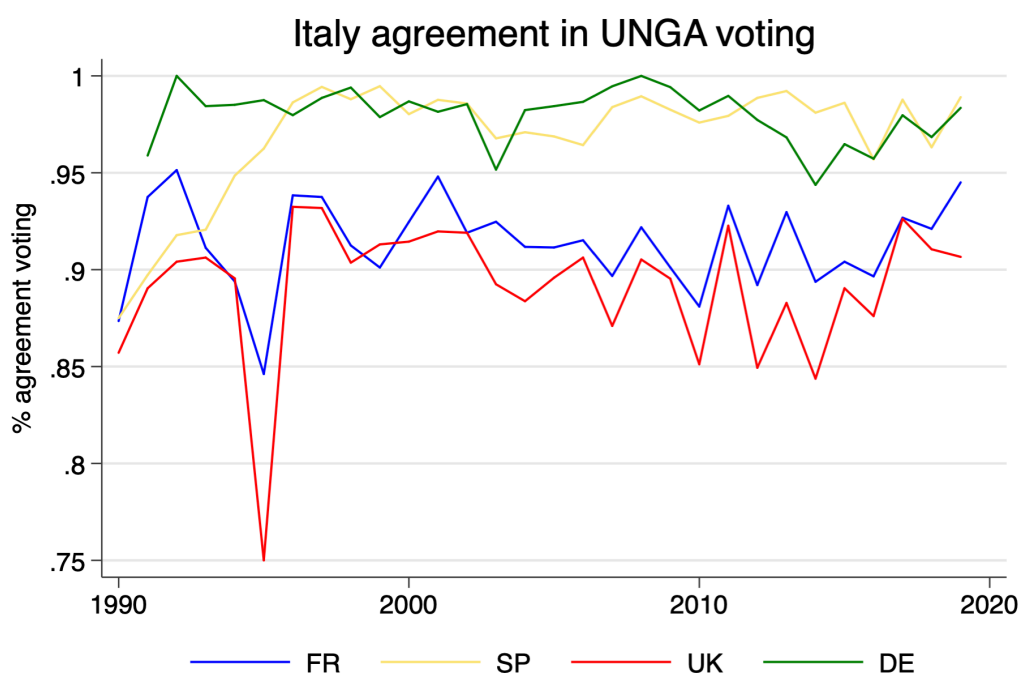
while the agreement between Italy and the USSR/Russia grew between the early 1960s and the end of the 1990s. Interestingly, the rate of agreement with Russia started decreasing with the advent of the Putin era, but it still remains higher than the rate of agreement with the US. For sure, the repeated votes of the UN General Assembly on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – a topic which separates the US from most European countries – contribute to making the distance between Italy and the US seem larger than it actually is. On the other hand, the long-standing relations and cooperation between the US and Italy within NATO cannot be forgotten, even though they do not appear in these data. However, the Israeli-Palestinian issue should influence trends only to a limited extent and tensions within NATO are a well-known fact. If we focus on the post-Cold War era, we can see that the rate of agreement with China has been much more stable and it has remained between the rates of agreement with the other two great powers for the whole period after 1990.

**Figure 22.** Voting in the UNGA (Italy vs. Major European countries), 1950-2019



Data source: Bailey et al. (2017)

Figures 22 and 23 also reveal some interesting trends. First of all, Figure 22 clearly shows that since the 1960s Italy has agreed much more with European countries than with any of the great powers, including the USA. Moreover, Figure 23 shows that since the end of the Cold War, Italy has constantly voted in agreement with Germany and Spain on more than 95% of issues. The rate of agreement with France and the UK has been very similar, but although high (above 85%), it is clearly lower than with Germany and Spain.

**Figure 23.** Voting in the UNGA (Italy vs. Major European countries), 1990-2019

Data source: Bailey et al. (2017)

## 5. Conclusions

Italy is not a major power and for this reason, perhaps counterintuitively, Italian policy-makers should be even more aware of their own country's capabilities, opportunities and limits than governments of major and rising powers. At the global level, we have experienced major changes and adjustments in trade and security patterns in the last two decades. Bipolarity is a faded memory, hegemonic stability a daily puzzle and multipolarity an increasing uncertainty. The core goal of this brief article was to provide some empirical bases to think more strategically and analytically about Italy in contemporary international politics. We do not claim to have provided an in-depth empirical analysis covering all the possible facets and issues that Italy can face in its international relations. Quite the contrary, we have drawn broad-brush patterns, but some of these patterns that have emerged call for further attention.

First, if we look at the security realm, in the last decades we have witnessed a convergence in terms of hard power among relatively comparable European countries. This convergence, however, is not due to an increase in military might from the Italian side, but rather to the decline and disinvestment of previously pivotal players in international politics such as France and the UK. Moreover, a demographic decline is more evident in the Italian case compared to other European counterparts. Neither defence policy nor demographic decline seems to have a key role in the agendas of the main Italian political parties and recent different governments.

Second, in terms of economic performance and interactions, we could indicate a divergence comparing Italy with other European countries. Germany's trade growth is not comparable with the Italian performance, but even in absolute terms the value of Italian trade is much lower than the values of trade for Germany, France and the

United Kingdom. Moreover, the FDI flows indicate major investments from neighbouring countries. When using indicators of globalization, we can see that Italy is relatively less globalized than major European countries.

Third, in terms of Italian engagement with international politics and international organizations, several patterns are notable. First of all, compared to other European countries, Italy has been more committed to deploying troops within the UN framework. In addition, Italy has also provided troops to the EU missions, but to an extent that is similar to what other European countries have done. Finally, as regards the voting patterns in the UN General Assembly, over time Italy has increasingly disagreed with the US, agreed to a certain extent with China and Russia, and converged with EU countries.

Hence, Italy faces several challenges in international politics. On the one hand, there are convergences with the European countries both in military capabilities and in the views expressed within international organization. However, this convergence could be more due to the declining role of European countries in the international arena than the result of coordination and convergence of strategies among them. On the other hand, when we observe Italy's position in the international political economy, trade and financial flows show that Italy is strictly linked to Europe, while losing terrain in terms of economic performance and also being tested by new migrations flows. These tensions partly explain why Italian foreign policy in the last years has appeared ambiguous and the overall picture seems to put the country at a crossroads. The future of international politics is uncertain, but it is time to make choices and develop sound strategies, starting from the reality of facts. If Italy and its ruling class do not face these realities and tackle these challenges the future could be less uncertain, but grimmer.

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## Appendix: data sources for Figures

- *Figures 1-6; 9-11*: Data from the Correlates of War Project (online at: <https://correlatesofwar.org>). For this article we have used only data for their index CINC, population, military personnel, trade. This project began for data collection about conflict; now it is a data hub for several datasets by many IR scholars. Hence, there are many other datasets within the project such as militarized disputes, wars, alliances, and memberships in international organizations. The full reference for the trade data is Barbieri, Katherine and Omar M. G. Omar Keshk. 2016. Correlates of War Project Trade Data Set Codebook, Version 4.0.
- *Figures 7-8*: Data from SIPRI (<https://www.sipri.org>); we have used only the dataset on military expenditures, but SIPRI also collects data on arms transfers, arms industry and peace operations.
- *Figures 12 & 14*: Data from OECD (<https://stats.oecd.org>); this is an extremely rich source of data, especially for aid data.
- *Figure 13*: Data from UNCHR (<https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>). They provide global data on refugees, but also asylum seekers and internally displaced people.
- *Figures 15 & 16*: Data from the KOF project, based at ETH (available online at: <https://kof.ethz.ch/en/forecasts-and-indicators/indicators/kof-globalisation-index.html>). We used their overall index but different dimensions of globalization have sub-indexes and can be explored.
- *Figures 17 & 18*: Data from IPI (<http://www.providingforpeacekeeping.org> ). We have used only the national contribution data to UN missions but IPI also provides data on missions' gender composition and financial support.
- *Figure 19*: Data are from the DPhil thesis by Maline Meiske; for the moment the EU does not provide out-of-shelf data.
- *Figures 20-23*: Data are from Bailey and coauthors (2017). They provide yearly updates on the UN general assembly voting patterns.