

# LESSONS LEARNED? THE PAST AND FUTURE OF ITALIAN DEFENSE POLICY

## DELIVERABLE 1.3

### REVIEW OF EXISTING SURVEY DATA (ELITE AND PUBLIC OPINION) ON ISSUES RELATED TO SECURITY, DEFENSE POLICY AND PARTICIPATION IN MOA



## Table of contents

1. SCOPE OF THE DELIVERABLE.....	4
2. CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW .....	5
The role of domestic factors in shaping foreign and defense policies .....	5
Continuity and change in Italian Foreign Policy and Military Operations Abroad.....	5
Analytical dimensions: threats, powers, defense mechanisms, and the use of force .....	7
3. SURVEY SELECTION AND QUESTIONS OVERVIEW .....	9
4. RESULTS OVERVIEW .....	12
Perceived threats .....	12
Opinions on international actors .....	15
Support for institutionalized defense mechanisms.....	17
Use of military force .....	23
5. CONCLUSION .....	26
6. REFERENCES.....	27



## Figures

Figure 1. Number of questions by analytical dimension .....	11
Figure 2. Public concern about the possibility of a war in NATO countries, 2022-2024 (% concerned) .....	13
Figure 3. Public concern about the possibility of a war in NATO countries, 2024 .....	13
Figure 4. Russian interference in European affairs as a threat – political elites.....	14
Figure 5. Public attitudes towards major powers and institutions (% favorable), 2012-2024 .....	15
Figure 6. Public opinion on the United States by ideological positioning (% favorable), 2012-2023 .....	16
Figure 7. Public opinion on Russia by ideological positioning (% favorable), 2012-2023.....	17
Figure 8. Public opinion on NATO by ideological positioning (% favorable), 2012-2023 .....	18
Figure 9. Defense spending (% of GDP) and public approval of increased defense spending (2024).....	19
Figure 10. Public support for a common defense and security policy, 1990-2024.....	20
Figure 11. Difference in public support for a common defense and security policy vs. support for a common foreign policy, 1990-2024 .....	21
Figure 12. Public approval of a common European army (% totally in favor and somewhat in favor) .....	21
Figure 13. A European army vs. a national army (%) – political elites.....	22
Figure 14. Public approval of Italy's military participation in MOAs by ideological positioning (%) .....	23
Figure 15. Public support for the use of force to prevent an external aggression .....	24
Figure 16. Willingness to defend another NATO country if attacked (%) – public opinion .....	25
Figure 17. Support for the use of force in hypothetical and real scenarios (%).....	26

## Tables

Table 1. List of Elite surveys, 2000-2024.....	9
Table 2. List of Mass surveys, 2000-2024.....	10
Table 3. Political elites considering NATO as 'still essential' for national security (%).....	19



## 1. SCOPE OF THE DELIVERABLE<sup>1</sup>

This deliverable is intended to trace the questions previously asked in surveys concerning Italian security policy, defense policy and military operations abroad (MOAs). One of the main objectives of this research is to delve into how Italian missions abroad, as well as other security and defense policy issues, are perceived in the broader public debate, including both public opinion and political elites. The deliverable, which is part of the WP1, aims to analyze and compare the survey questions posed to both Italian elites and the general public over the last two decades, using existing databases comprising research conducted by the University of Siena's Laboratory on Political and Social Analysis (LAPS), in collaboration with other institutes and think tanks, as well as selected surveys at European and supranational levels. This analysis has produced an initial series of questions selected from both public opinion and elite surveys, helping in identifying those most relevant to our research scope.

This deliverable is instrumental in addressing further research questions, including:

- Providing the necessary background information for preparing scientific publications on the lessons learned in previous years concerning MOAs, Security and Defense Policy (WP2, D2.1) and for drafting preliminary reports to be shared with experts, decision-makers, practitioners, NGO members, and military officers in a dedicated workshop as outlined in D2.2.
- Supplying the information required to build a dataset for comparing and controlling issues analyzed in the discourse analysis part, as designed in WP3, D3.1.
- Providing the background to develop the questionnaire(s) for mass and elite surveys during the project as per WP5, with special references to D5.1 and D5.3.

The deliverable also aims to pave the way to understanding whether and to what extent ideological cleavages, such as left-right wing political positioning, shape consensus on defense policy among the general public. This also provides a backdrop for a comparative study with other major European countries – namely, France and Germany – to better understand their approaches to lessons learned in the policy field.

---

<sup>1</sup> This deliverable was prepared by Paolo Amantini (PhD candidate, University of Siena), Francesco Olmastroni (Associate Professor, University of Siena), Filippo Simonelli (PhD candidate, University of Siena), and Valerio Vignoli (Post-doc researcher, University of Siena).



## 2. CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW

### The role of domestic factors in shaping foreign and defense policies

Scholars have long explored the 'domestic foundations' of foreign policy in Western countries. While a long-standing tradition suggests that voters primarily focus on domestic issues (Almond, 1950) or highlights a significant disconnect between voters' preferences and elite decisions (Page and Bouton, 2006; Busby and Mounten, 2012), others argue that public opinion itself defines a country's foreign and security policy. Public opinion influences electoral outcomes (Aldrich et al., 2006) and constrains the choices of elected leaders once they take office (Holsti, 2004).

Juliet Kaarbo (2015: 195) emphasized that "research has consistently shown the significance of domestic politics and decision-making to issues central to international politics", paving the way for the "domestic turn" in the study of international relations. Similarly, Krotz and Maher (2011: 572) argued that "taking domestic politics more systematically into account [...] could be one of the more significant contributions of this new field to the study of international relations", particularly when studying EU Foreign and Security Policy (EUFSP).

This perspective applies to EU member states, including Italy. Indeed, previous research has demonstrated that foreign and security policy in the European Union often benefits from a 'permissive consensus', rooted in a "combination of shallowness and ignorance" among the general public (Angelucci et al., 2024: 5). In the Italian case, what stands out is the remarkable continuity exhibited by policymakers in specific policy areas, such as defense policy and MOAs. Fabrizio Coticchia and Valerio Vignoli (2020) have identified the domestic foundation of such continuity in the parliamentary behavior of political parties. Indeed, their research reveals a strong consensus in voting patterns on several 'key votes' over nearly three decades (1994 – 2016), despite the presence of political cleavages and the substantial transformation in the Italian party system during that period.

### Continuity and change in Italian Foreign Policy and Military Operations Abroad

The continuity in Italian Foreign Policy (IFP) can be seen as both a co-cause and an effect of its evolution of since the 1990s, when Italy sought to assert its identity as a proactive 'middle power' with some regional ambitions and urgent national interests. These priorities included promoting stability in its neighborhood across the Mediterranean and securing stronger energy supply ties. This period is marked by unprecedented activism within the multilateral system, with Italy



participating in MOAs led by the UN, NATO, and the EU, and occasionally undertaking independent initiatives.

The post-Cold War era brought both continuity and change to IFP. While Italy maintained steadfast commitments to European integration and the Atlantic Alliance, following the Cold War governments' trajectory, the country also demonstrated unprecedented engagement in MOAs as part of its international projection (Ignazi et al., 2012). Over time, MOAs transitioned from being an element of discontinuity to becoming a central and consistent feature of IFP. A number of MOAs, especially in most recent years, have taken place in the "enlarged Mediterranean"<sup>2</sup>, described as a third, smaller pillar of IFP, complementing its European and Transatlantic commitments (Diodato and Marchetti, 2023). The enlarged Mediterranean has also served as a laboratory for IFP initiatives and a smaller-scale model of the country's broader ambitions, as per a rebranding proposed by the Ministry of Defense in 2015's White Book (Abbondanza, 2023).

Historical perspectives offer differing views on the continuity of IFP. Some (e.g., Attinà, 1991; Bonvicini et al. 2011) argue that Italian foreign policy remains stable across government changes, while others (e.g., Andreatta, 2008; Carbone, 2011) suggest that left-right political alignments influence the prioritization of Italy's commitments. According to the latter, center-right governments have traditionally emphasized ties with NATO and the US as well as bilateral relationships with other countries, while center-left governments have favored deeper commitment to European integration and, more generally, multilateral institutions. Nevertheless, bipartisan support for military engagement abroad highlights a remarkable continuity, with military presence perceived as a vital component of Italy's role in the international arena.

Public opinion research has shown that Italians have consistently supported a multilateral approach to foreign policy since World War II, with significant adherence to both European and Transatlantic pillars (Isernia and Everts, 2001; Battistelli et al., 2012). However, this consensus has faced increasing debate in recent years, influenced by domestic political shifts, the rise of populist parties, and international conflicts like Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Italy's defense posture has adapted accordingly, with the most recent Multiannual Programming Document (it. Documento programmatico pluriennale, DPP) prioritizing state protection as the military's core focus and, thus, signaling a potential reshaping of defense priorities.

---

<sup>2</sup> The term has been frequently used by the Italian Navy since the mid-1980s but has gained wider prominence more recently, largely due to a rebranding effort proposed by the Ministry of Defense (Ministero della Difesa, 2015). A more recent definition from the Italian Ministry of Defense (Ministero della Difesa, 2023: 1), also cited in Cotichia and Mazziotti di Celso (2024), describes the enlarged Mediterranean as "an area that encompasses Europe (Balkans and Black Sea), Middle East, North and Sub-Saharan Africa from the Horn of Africa to the Gulf of Guinea".



Despite these adaptations, it has been observed that ideological divides continue to shape beliefs about foreign policy among elites and the public. These divides influence perceptions of security threats, the use of force, and Italy's international projection. While Page and Bouton (2006), as mentioned above, highlight a 'foreign policy disconnect' between public opinion and elite preferences, Kretzer's (2020) meta-analysis suggests that such differences are relatively minor. Building on Olmastroni's (2017) findings for the Italian case, it is evident that while IFP outcomes and international commitments remain stable, ideological cleavages persist, shaping attitudes towards key issues like security, military engagement, and foreign policy projection. Italian MOAs, in particular, have enjoyed broad political consensus, while public opinion has generally shown mild support for overarching principles or indifference to specific policies.

In conclusion, Italian MOAs have generally been embraced by mainstream political elites across the political spectrum and, with some noteworthy exceptions, accepted by the general public with limited dissent. Our contribution to this PRIN project is to analyze how recent trends in political polarization have affected Italian public opinion and elites on defense, security, and MOAs, using data from past and upcoming surveys.

### Analytical dimensions: threats, powers, defense mechanisms, and the use of force

As highlighted in previous research (Olmastroni, 2017), four dimensions represent fundamental aspects of the belief structure of elites and the public regarding foreign and security policy: the perception of threats to the country's security, attitudes towards major international powers, support for institutional defense mechanisms, and support for the use of military force abroad. Analyzing these dimensions allows us to evaluate whether polarization or consensus characterizes attitudes towards security and defense policy among political elites and the general public. In a longitudinal-comparative perspective, this examination sheds light on potential divergences between policymakers and their constituents, revealing how ideological clusters may vary in their perspectives across different European countries (Italy vs. other European 'middle powers') over time.

The first dimension examines how political elites and the general public perceive threats to national security, investigating whether significant differences exist between actors and ideological clusters in Italy. This is crucial for determining the degree of consensus or divergence in prioritizing security concerns. Indeed, perceptions of security threats are often seen as pivotal in shaping divergent worldviews across countries (Kagan, 2002; Nau, 2008) and within groups (Chittick et al., 1990). These perceptions are closely tied to the inclination to employ military measures (our fourth dimension) in response to such threats (Chittick et al., 1995). The evolving



global order, transitioning towards a multipolar environment with no singular adversary (Borrell, 2023), complicates the role of threat perception in shaping policy beliefs as this prompts questions about whether a shared understanding of strategic decisions within a country still depends on a collective sense of threat. This issue extends beyond the American context (Gries, 2022), raising questions about the impact of threat perception on public and elite preferences across countries and political systems.

While the second dimension explores attitudes towards key international actors, specifically the United States, Russia, China, and major European partners, the third dimension focuses on support for institutional defense mechanisms like NATO and a European common defense and security policy. Understanding these attitudes is important for assessing how alignment or divergence in views might influence a country's involvement in major international security frameworks. Individual positions on allies and institutional cooperation reveal differences in preferred foreign and security policy strategies. For example, *Atlanticism* typically emphasizes strong ties with the United States and NATO, while *Europeanism* focuses on enhancing relationships within the EU. These stances significantly influence decisions about how a country aligns itself internationally, collaborates with other nations, and pursues its foreign policy goals (Walt, 1987), particularly during conflicts (Tomz and Weeks, 2021). Remarkably, this dimension assumes heightened salience in recent years, driven by two key developments: Trump's overt disdain for NATO and the international order (e.g., Benitez, 2019; Blank, 2024), and the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The latter has significantly impacted all the dimensions examined in this study, bringing the threat of war closer than ever to the borders of EU and NATO countries.

The fourth dimension addresses the willingness to use military force, both in principle and specific situations, to defend the established order and national interests. This dimension highlights differences between elites and the public regarding the role of military power in defense and security policy. In Western democracies, preferences for military force have historically influenced views on international affairs during and after the Cold War (e.g., Wittkopf, 1981; Holsti and Rosenau, 1988, 1990; Reifler et al., 2011; Gravelle et al., 2017). Studies often classify foreign policy opinions using a militarist/non-militarist framework, distinguishing between those who advocate military intervention and those who prefer conciliatory solutions (Wittkopf, 1981; Nincic and Ramos, 2010). This categorization, combined with the aspect of interstate cooperation (our second dimension), has long been regarded as a 'gold standard' for categorizing the structure of foreign policy preferences (Wittkopf, 1981; Wittkopf and Maggiotto, 1983; Nincic and Ramos, 2010; Gravelle et al., 2017). Subsequent models of foreign policy attitudes incorporate these distinctions, identifying isolationists versus internationalists and assessing whether individuals support active international roles or non-forceful approaches to global politics. Notably, this



model has also proven effective for analyzing public opinion in middle-power countries (Gravelle et al., 2017, 2020).

### 3. SURVEY SELECTION AND QUESTIONS OVERVIEW

To construct our dataset of survey questions, we reviewed research on Italy's public opinion and elites conducted between 2000 and 2024, alongside periodic comparative surveys of public opinion regularly carried out by European institutions (Eurobarometer) and other organizations such as the PEW Research Center (Pew Global Project) and the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK (EPRG Project). A total of 136 questions addressing at least one of our analytical dimensions (Section 2) were selected for elite surveys (Table 1) and 718 for mass surveys (Table 2).

*Table 1. List of Elite surveys, 2000-2024*

<i>Survey name</i>	<i>Field management / [financial contributor]</i>	<i>Year(s)</i>	<i>N° of Relevant Question(s)</i>
ENEC	CIRCaP, University of Siena [various]	2014	4
EPRG	EP Research Group [Economic and Social Research Council of the UK]	2000, 2006, 2010, 2015	21
EUEngage	CIRCaP, University of Siena [EU's Horizon 2020 program]	2016, 2017	22
European Election Study	PIREDEU project [EU's 7th framework program]	2009	2
European Elite Survey	CIRCaP, University of Siena [Compagnia di San Paolo]	2006, 2007, 2008, 2010	7
IntUne	CIRCaP, University of Siena [EU's 6th framework program]	2007, 2009	8
MEP Panel data	EP Research Group [Economic and Social Research Council of the UK]	2015	20
PRIN – PEI	LAPS, University of Siena [Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca]	2016	30
Transworld	CIRCaP, University of Siena [EU's 7th framework program]	2013	22



Table 2. List of Mass surveys, 2000-2024

Survey name	Field management / [financial contributor]	Year(s)	N° of relevant Question(s)
Aspen Institute	LAPS, University of Siena [Aspen Institute Italia]	2022, 2023, 2024	49
EuEngage	CIRCaP, University of Siena [EU's Horizon 2020 program]	2016, 2017	20
Eurobarometer	EU Commission [EU Commission]	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014 (2), 2015, 2017, 2022 (2), 2023, 2024	25
IAI-LAPS	LAPS, University of Siena [Istituto Affari Internazionali]	2013, 2017, 2018 (2), 2020, 2021, 2022	155
InTune	CIRCaP, University of Siena [EU's 6th framework program]	2007, 2009	9
JOINT	CIRCaP, University of Siena [EU's Horizon 2020 program]	2023	12
MAE	LAPS, University of Siena [Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale]	2008	18
NATO	NATO Public Diplomacy division	2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024	47
PEW Global	Pew Research Center – Global Attitudes Project	2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022	69
PRIN - PEI	LAPS, University of Siena [Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca]	2016	29
Transatlantic Trends	German Marshall Fund [German Marshall Fund et al.]	2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014	280
SecEurity - Volkswagen	secEurity project (consortium) [Volkswagen Stiftung]	2023	5

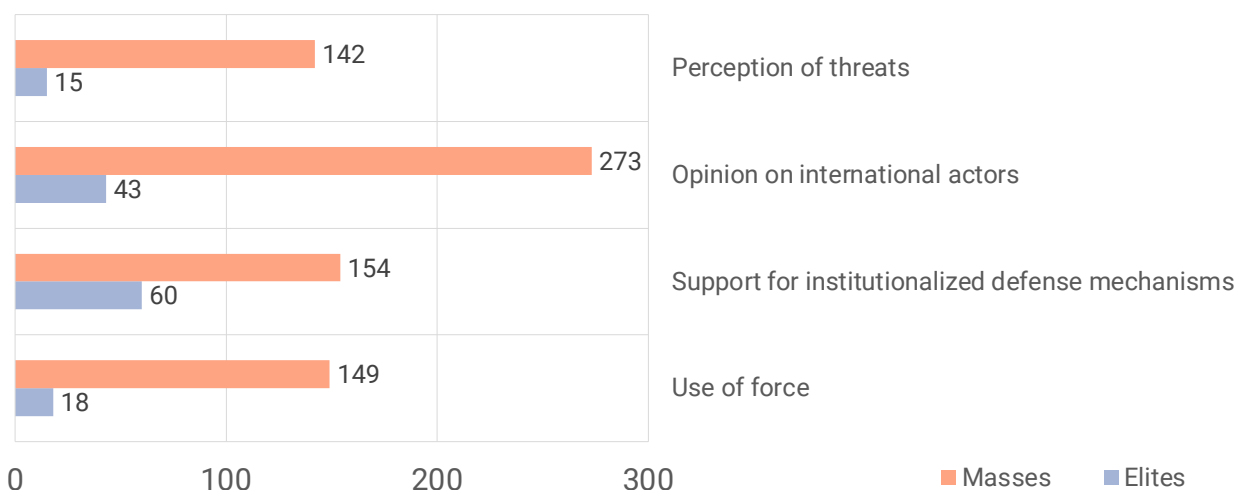
A striking observation emerges when examining the available survey data: the significant gap in elite surveys on foreign and security policy. The most recent data comes from the second wave of the EuEngage surveys conducted in 2017. This gap highlights a lack of knowledge about how elite preferences have evolved in response to international crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, which our research project aims to address in part.



It is also notable that elite surveys predominantly target European elites and Brussels-based decision-makers (i.e., members of the EU Parliament) and are primarily conducted in English. In contrast, mass surveys are necessarily more diverse in their focus and languages. It is worth noting that 27 questions in the elite surveys focused on ideological preferences, while 28 addressed this theme in the mass surveys.

In our review, questions have been divided into four categories corresponding to the four analytical dimensions outlined in Section 2 (Figure 1).

*Figure 1. Number of questions by analytical dimension*



**Perceived threats:** Questions on perceived threats were generally designed to elicit responses to explicit security challenges to a country, to prompt respondents to imagine reactions to a threat in a fictional scenario (in the case of experimental questions), or to assess whether the rise of an international actor was seen as a threat or an opportunity. A total of 15 such questions were directed at elites and 142 at the masses. The most frequently mentioned threats included China, nuclear threats, and Russia.

**Opinions on international actors:** Questions in this category typically asked respondents to rank their preferences or opinions regarding international actors that were not perceived – or framed – as potential threats. Some overlap exists with actors like Russia and China, which appear in both the threats and opinions categories. This dimension comprised 273 questions in mass surveys and 43 in elite surveys. The most scrutinized actors were the United States, Russia, China, India, and Turkey, with other countries receiving less attention (e.g., Israel, EU members).



**Support for institutionalized defense mechanisms:** Questions about support for international organizations and institutionalized defense mechanisms totaled 154 for the masses and 60 for elites. The EU and NATO featured prominently, as expected, with a significant number of questions addressing the relationship and coexistence between NATO and a potential future European single army. A smaller number of questions focused on the relationship between Europe and the United States.

**Use of military force:** The final set of questions addressed the use of military force, with 18 posed to elites and 149 to the masses. The largest share of these questions concerned the legitimacy of using force in various situations. Other topics included NATO's role in specific security and war scenarios, as well as multilateral operations agreements, which received comparable attention.

Specific questions about Italy and its security and defense priorities warrant particular focus. A review of these questions highlights the presence of certain themes over the period under examination. The most impactful issue was the War in Ukraine, which became a dominant theme in later surveys. However, other topics, such as the withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, also played a significant role in elite surveys. Recurring themes of relevance to this research include: the deployment of Italian military personnel in multilaterally governed missions (noted in 2013, 2017, 2018, 2020, and 2021); Italy's influence in international relations (highlighted in 2013, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022); the priority Italy should assign to domestic affairs over foreign policy and military commitments (discussed in 2013, 2017, 2019, 2020, and 2022).

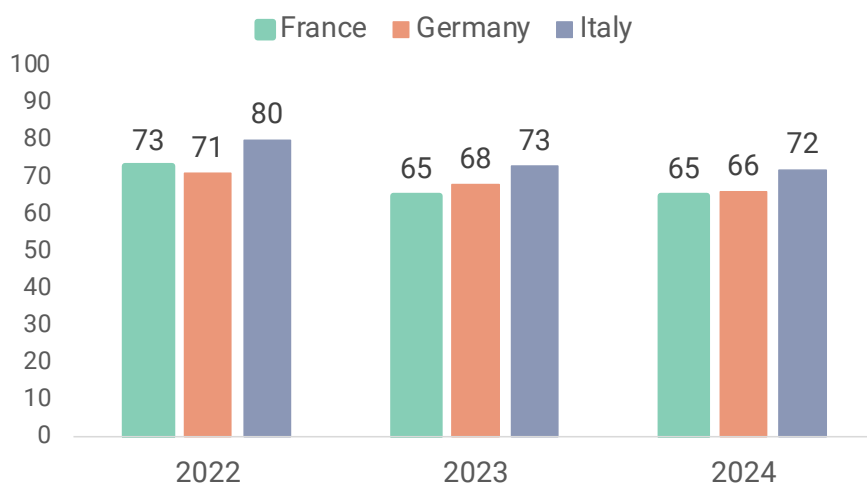
## 4. RESULTS OVERVIEW

### Perceived threats

European **public opinions** have shown some notable differences towards international politics vis a vis defense and security questions, and Italy makes no significant exception. The general instability of global politics has contributed to heightened perceptions of threats among both Italian and other European publics. While the most relevant concerns in 2022 remained climate change and the risk of new global epidemics, tensions between the West and Russia emerged as a significant perceived threat in the following period (e.g., European Commission, 2023). Data collected by NATO's division of public diplomacy shows that public concern about the possibility of a war involving NATO countries remains high across the alliance, and Italian public opinion stands out as particularly concerned about this possibility (Figure 2 and Figure 3).



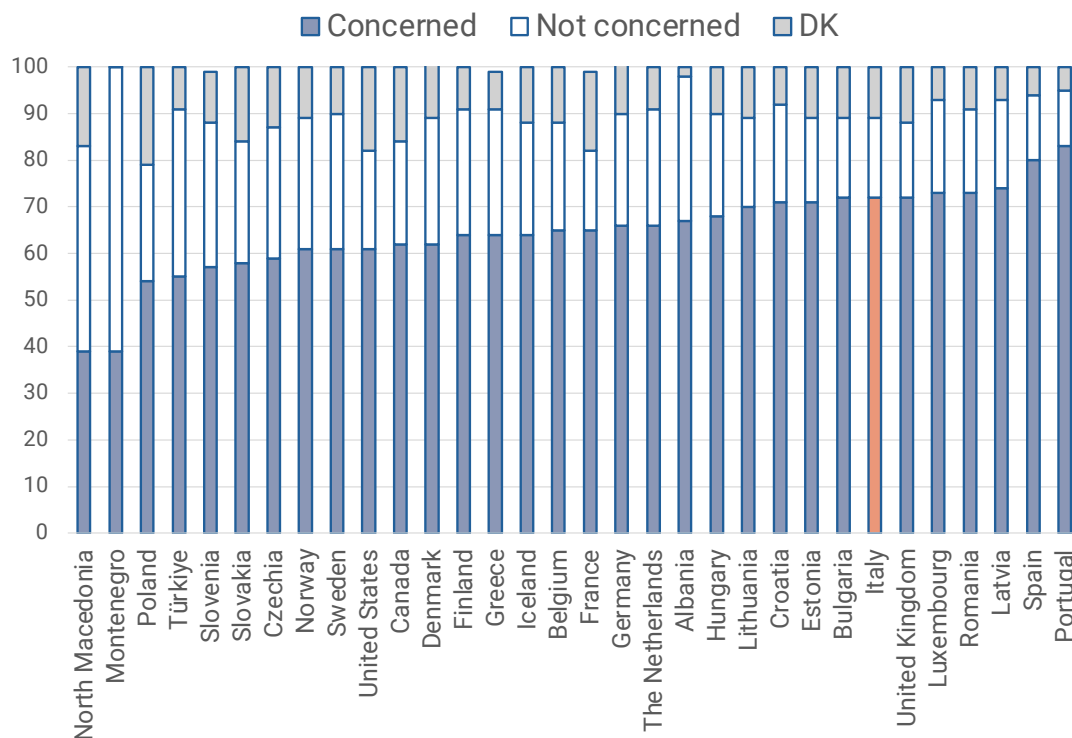
Figure 2. Public concern about the possibility of a war in NATO countries, 2022-2024 (% concerned)



**Question:** Which of the following statements best reflects your view? I am concerned about the possibility of war in NATO countries (% concerned).

**Source:** Authors' elaboration based on NATO data.

Figure 3. Public concern about the possibility of a war in NATO countries, 2024



**Question:** Which of the following statements best reflects your view? I am concerned about the possibility of war in NATO countries.

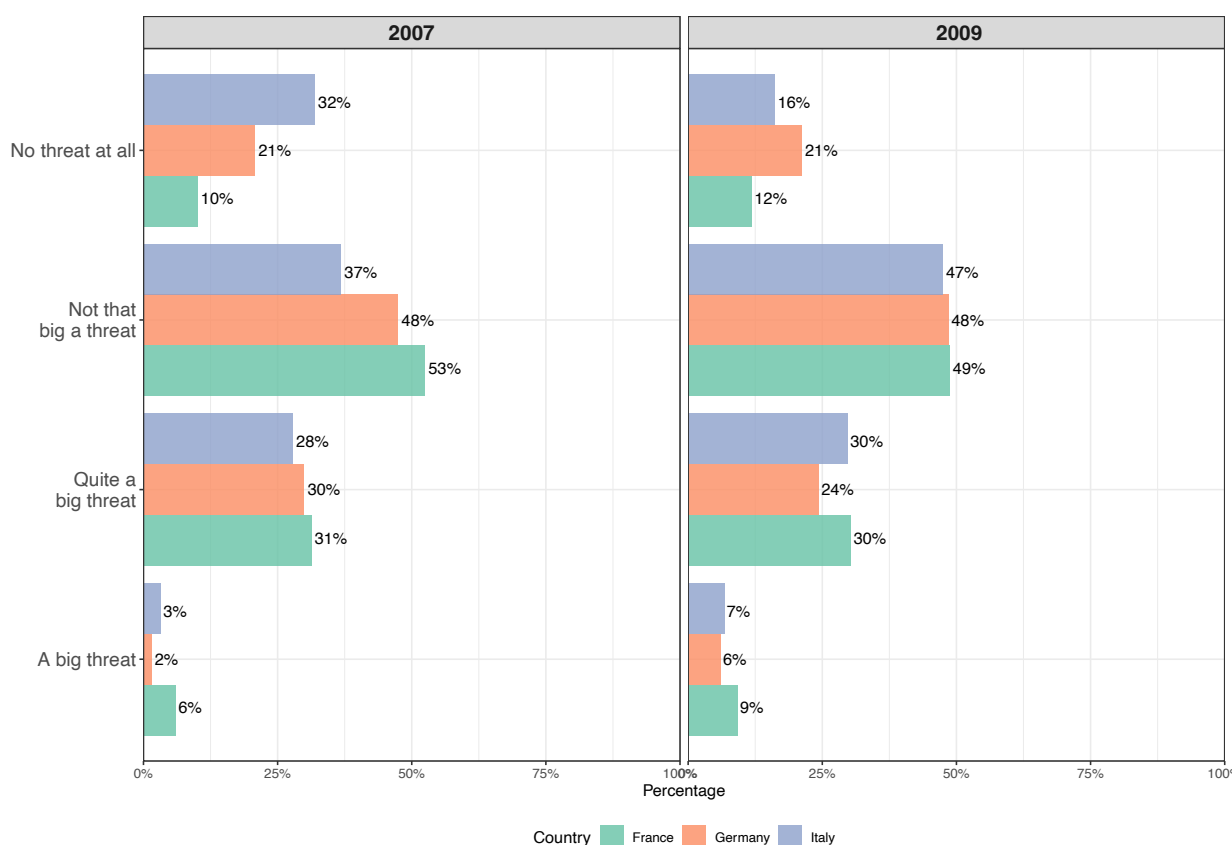
**Source:** Authors' elaboration based on NATO data.



Similarly, tensions with Russia were identified as one of the most pressing threats by an overwhelming majority of respondents in Italy (88%), France (82%), and Germany (87%), according to data collected by the JOINT project in 2023 (Borri et al., 2024).

Similar questions have not been posed to **political elites** in the past decade. However, the percentage of Italian political elites perceiving Russian interference in European affairs as a significant threat to the EU ranged from 37% in 2007 to 39% in 2009 (Figure 4). Notably, only a small proportion of Italy's political elites (3%) and governmental elites (1%) interviewed during the PRIN-PEI project in 2016 – just a few years after the 2014 Russia-Ukraine War – identified the aggressiveness of Putin's Russia as a major threat to the country, prioritizing the economic crisis, terrorism, and climate change instead (Olmastroni, 2017).

Figure 4. Russian interference in European affairs as a threat – political elites



**Question:** Can you tell us whether, in your opinion, these phenomena represent a more or less significant threat to the European Union? Russia's interference in European affairs.

**Source:** Authors' elaboration based on InTune data.

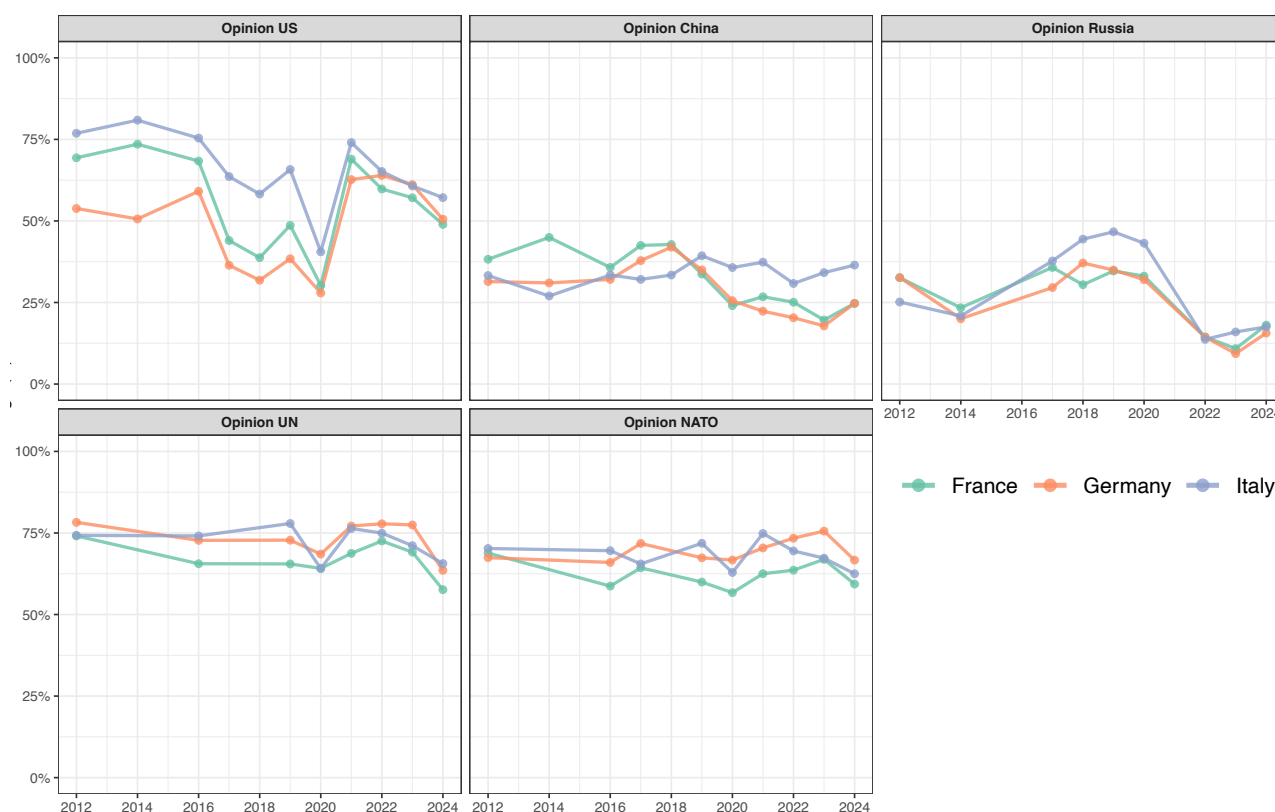


## Opinions on international actors

Our analysis reveals interesting dynamics in **public opinion** towards major powers and international institutions (Figure 5). The volatility of opinions about the United States highlights how leadership changes and their associated policies significantly influence public perceptions. Over the last decade, the fluctuations during Trump and Biden administrations reflect the impact of leadership style and international engagement strategies on European publics sentiment. This is clearly demonstrated by the heightened ideological divide in opinions during the Trump presidency, with a polarization particularly pronounced in France and Italy (Figure 6).

Similar findings emphasize the role of ideological predispositions in shaping perceptions of foreign leaders and policies, suggesting that transatlantic relations can be deeply influenced by domestic political landscapes in allied countries.

*Figure 5. Public attitudes towards major powers and institutions (% favorable), 2012-2024*



**Question:** Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of .... (% very favorable and somewhat favorable).

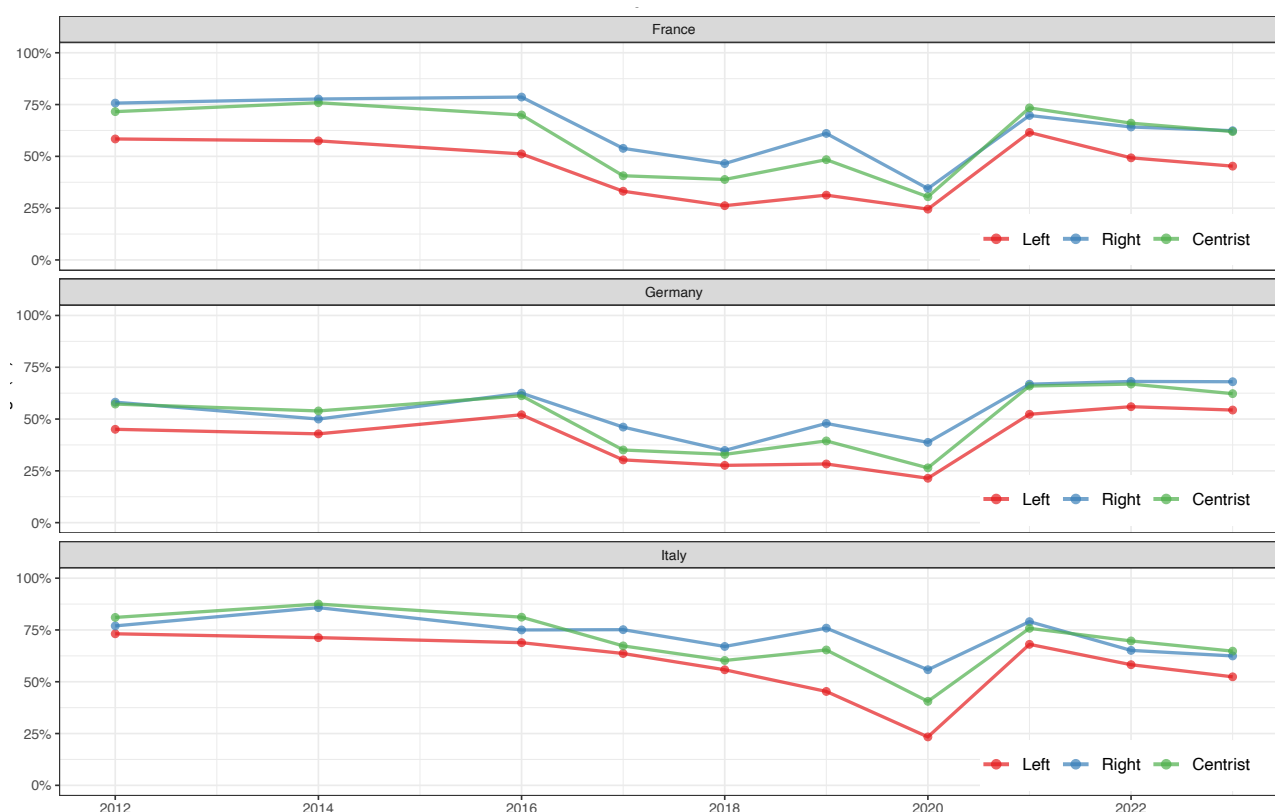
**Source:** Authors' elaboration based on Pew Research Center data.



Interestingly, China is perceived more favorably in Italy than in France or Germany (Figure 5), likely due to Italy's unique economic ties, such as its involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative. This underscores the nuanced nature of bilateral relations and the public's awareness of economic and diplomatic factors.

Moreover, Italians' alignment of opinions on Russia with other medium power publics since 2022 signifies a shift driven by the invasion of Ukraine. This military crisis appears to have fostered a more unified perspective on Russia among European publics (Unan and Klüver, 2024), narrowing previous ideological divides. This result is supported by an analysis based on the ideological self-placement of respondents (Figure 7), which shows a reduced ideological divide regarding opinions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine.

Figure 6. Public opinion on the United States by ideological positioning (% favorable), 2012-2023

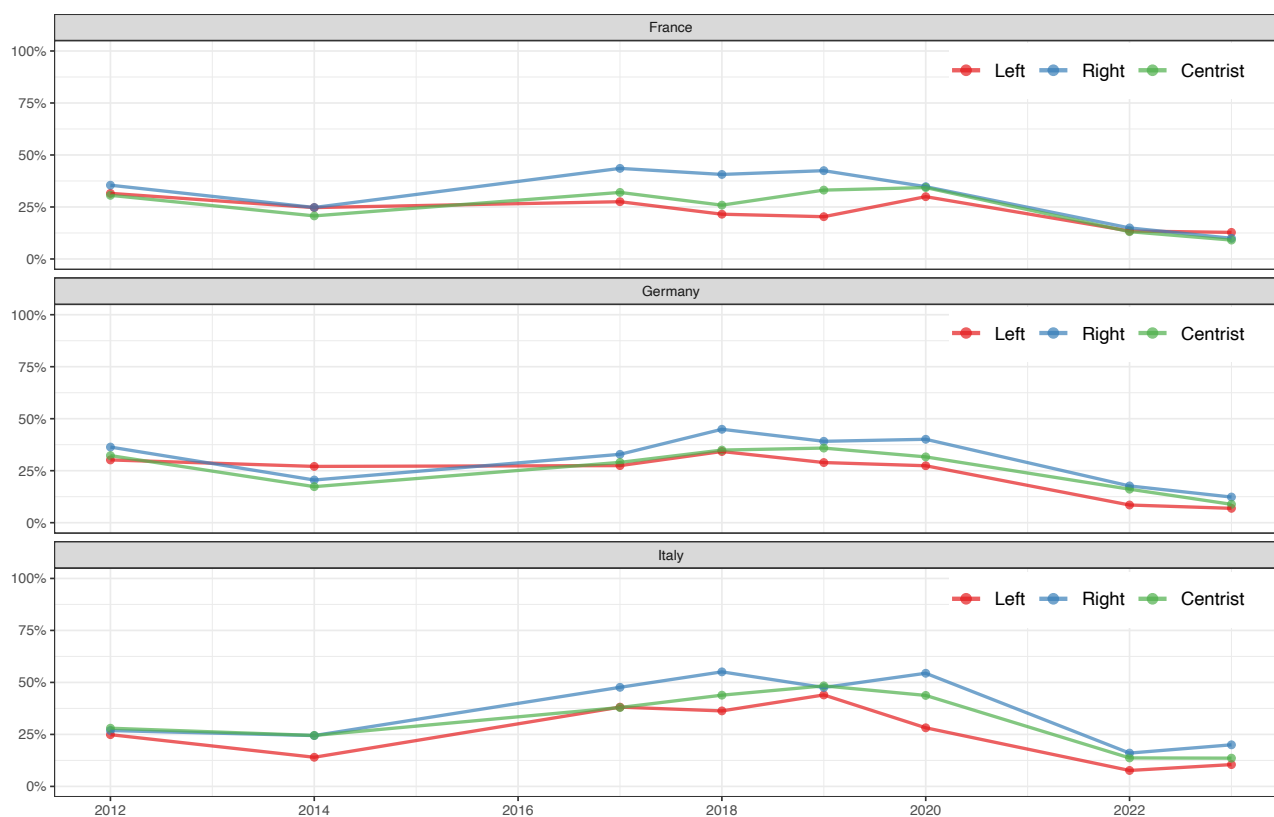


**Question:** Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of .... The United States of America (% very favorable and somewhat favorable).

**Source:** Authors' elaboration based on Pew Research Center data.



Figure 7. Public opinion on Russia by ideological positioning (% favorable), 2012-2023



**Question:** Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of .... Russia (% very favorable and somewhat favorable).

**Source:** Authors' elaboration based on Pew Research Center data.

## Support for institutionalized defense mechanisms

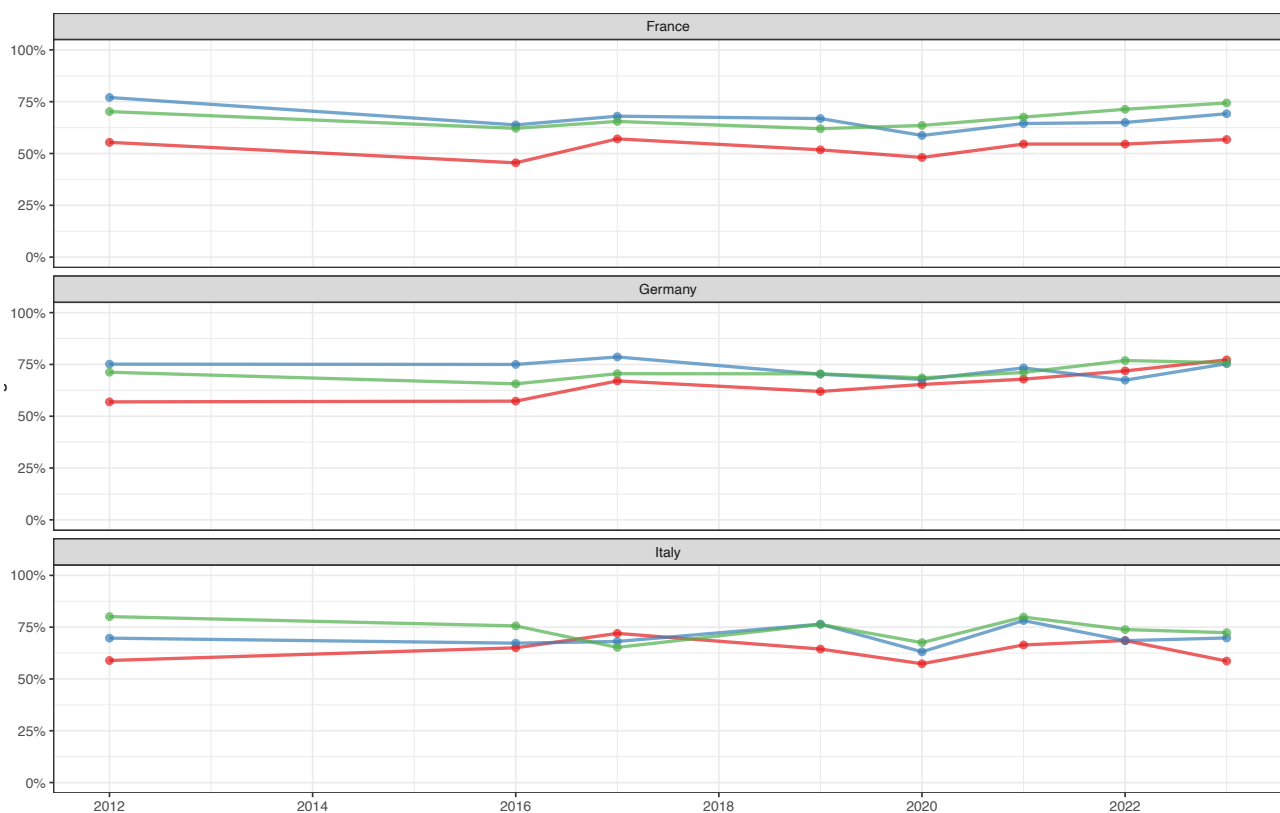
Support for multilateral institutions such as NATO and the United Nations remains robust among Italian **public opinion** (Figure 5), reflecting enduring confidence in collective defense mechanisms and global governance. This approval likely indicates public recognition of these institutions' roles in maintaining international stability and addressing emerging challenges. Still, an ideological divide persists on NATO in France and Italy (Figure 8), thus suggesting that views on the Atlantic Alliance are still shaped by deeper political and cultural attitudes towards military alliances and multilateralism.

Despite some fluctuations over time, an overarching favorability towards NATO is present when examining **political elite** survey data, particularly in Germany and Italy (Table 3). German policymakers exhibit the highest levels of confidence in NATO as an essential defense framework,



though their favorability has declined significantly from 88% in 2006 to 61% in 2013 (last data point for the examined question). Italian policymakers display relatively stable confidence in NATO, ranging from 52% to 61% over the years. In contrast, France shows the most variability, with a favorability drop to 33% in 2008, potentially linked to controversies surrounding NATO's role and French national policies on defense, followed by a rebound (51%) in 2013.

Figure 8. Public opinion on NATO by ideological positioning (% favorable), 2012-2023



**Question:** Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of .... NATO (% very favorable and somewhat favorable).

**Source:** Authors' elaboration based on Pew Research Center data.

Recently, NATO membership has increasingly emphasized the commitment to allocate at least 2% of GDP to defense spending, a benchmark set to enhance collective security and burden-sharing among member states (NATO, 2024b). However, **public opinion** across NATO countries indicates a some disconnect between this goal and domestic support for increased military budgets.



Table 3. Political elites considering NATO as 'still essential' for national security (%)

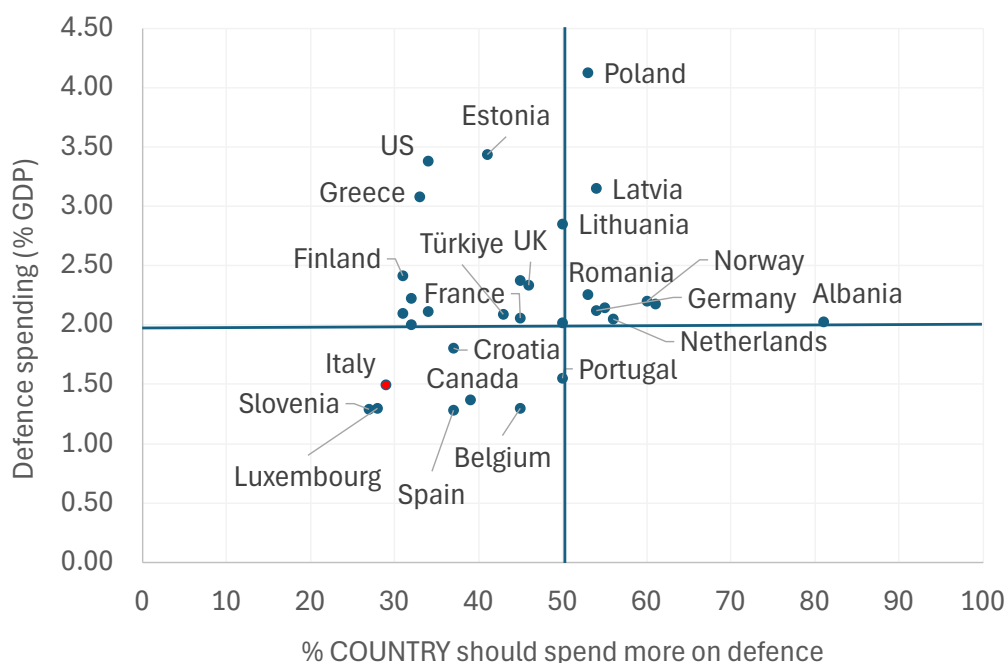
Country	2006	2007	2008	2013
France	50	45	33	51
Germany	88	81	70	61
Italy	59	58	61	52

**Question:** Some people say that NATO is still essential to our country's security. Others say it is no longer essential. Which of these views is closer to your own?

**Sources:** European Elite Survey; Transworld.

An analysis of NATO public opinion data reveals that in countries spending less than 2% of GDP on defense, public resistance to increased defense spending is widespread (Figure 9). While Portugal stands as a partial exception, with 50% of its public supporting higher defense budgets, the NATO 2% target appears to face significant public resistance in other 'under-spending' member states. The Italian public, in particular, shows low enthusiasm for boosting defense expenditures, with less than one-third supporting an increase in 2024.

Figure 9. Defense spending (% of GDP) and public approval of increased defense spending (2024)



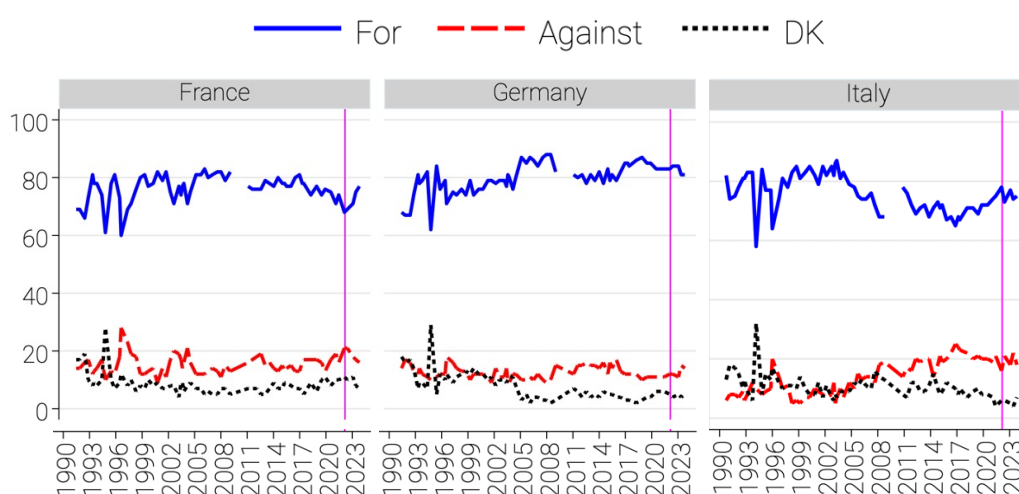
**Question:** Which of the following best reflects your view on your nation's defence spending? (% Country should spend more on defence). Other options are: Country should spend less on defence; Country should maintain current defence spending levels; Don't know.

**Source:** Authors' elaboration based on NATO data. For defense expenditure data, see NATO (2024a).



As noted by Isernia and others (2022), there is substantial consensus on the need for a unified European stance in addressing international crises and protecting human rights, with support ranging between 80% and 88% in Italy, according to Eurobarometer data. This is further confirmed by the expressed support for a common security and defense policy among EU member states (Figure 10), which remains significantly higher in Italy, France, and Germany compared to the support for a common foreign policy (Figure 11).

Figure 10. Public support for a common defense and security policy, 1990-2024



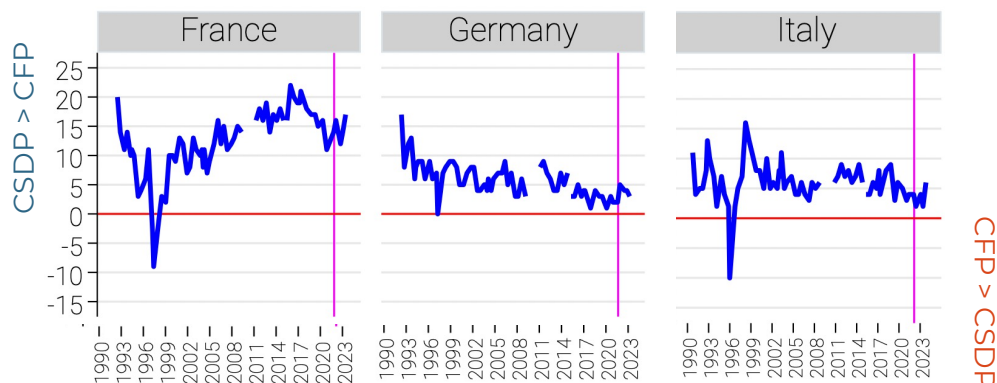
**Question:** What is your opinion on each of the following statements? Please tell me for each statement, whether you are for it or against it. A common defense and security policy among EU Member States.

**Source:** Authors' elaboration based on Eurobarometer data.

These values drop significantly if the institution of a European rapid military reaction force is added to the picture (63% to 73%); even more if the questions call into question the existence of a European Army (Figure 12). Here it is worth noting that achieving consensus on stronger cohesion between European countries in defense matters has often been limited to abstract terms in survey questions. When asked by the JOINT project (2023) to choose their preferred framework, respondents favored national armies coordinated at the EU level (55% in Italy; 60% in Germany; 65% in France) over a European army replacing national armies (21% in Italy; 19% in Germany; 16% in France). Similarly, 64% of Italian respondents interviewed by the Aspen Institute in collaboration with LAPS-UNISI in 2022 supported the idea of a common European army. However, only 23% viewed it as a substitute for national armies, while 41% preferred a model of cooperation between the two.



Figure 11. Difference in public support for a common defense and security policy vs. support for a common foreign policy, 1990–2024



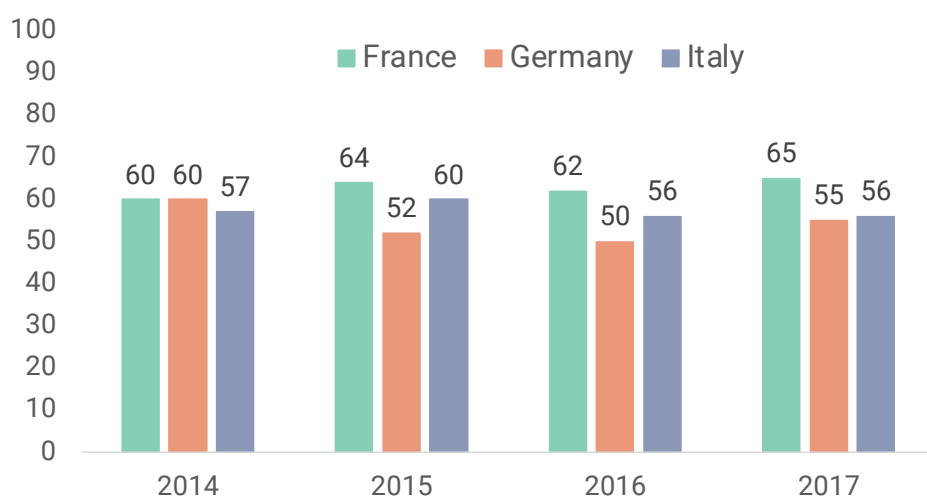
**Questions:** 1. What is your opinion on each of the following statements? Please tell me for each statement, whether you are for it or against it. A common defense and security policy among EU Member States. 2. What is your opinion on each of the following statements? Please tell me for each statement, whether you are for it or against it. A common foreign policy of the 28 Member States of the EU countries.

Difference in support = % support for a common defense and security policy - % support for a common foreign policy

Positive values indicate higher support for a common defense and security policy; Negative values indicate higher support for a common foreign policy.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurobarometer data.

Figure 12. Public approval of a common European army (% totally in favor and somewhat in favor)



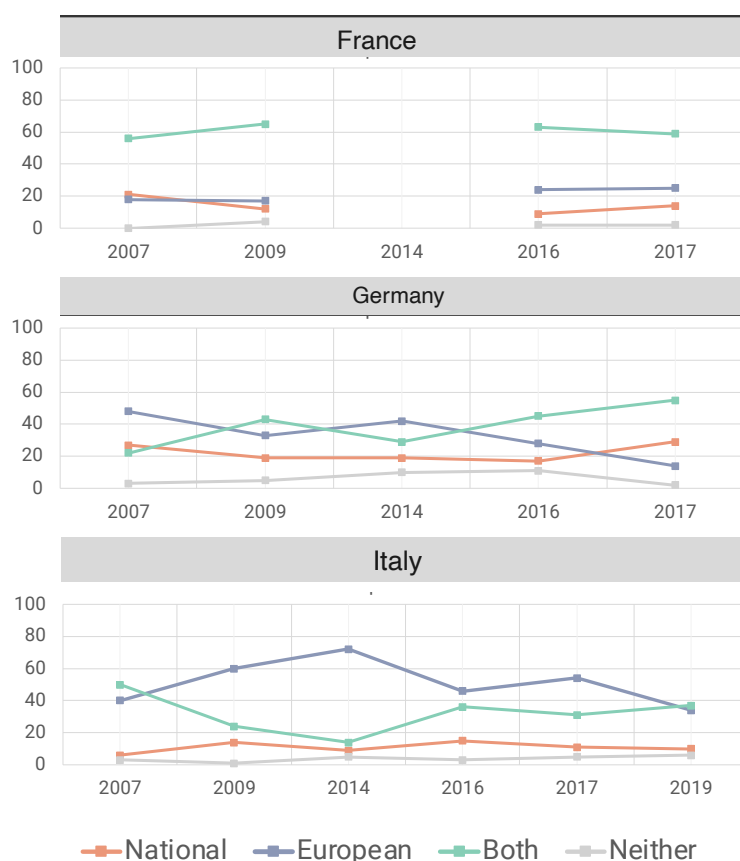
**Question:** Thinking about the future of the EU, please tell me whether you are in favour or opposed to the following statement: the creation of an EU army.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurobarometer data.



Italian **political elites** exhibit a distinct perspective on these topics. Between 2007 and 2019, six surveys explored preferences for a national army, a common European army, or a combination of both. Responses in Italy revealed more irregular trends compared to France, with support for a common European army peaking at 72% in 2014 before declining to 34% in 2019 (Figure 13). However, elites have shown consistent views on NATO-EU relations in defense. Across the three EPRG surveys conducted between 2000 and 2015, over 70% of Italian respondents agreed on the need for the EU to play a more prominent role in managing European defense and relative majorities (43% in 2006; 68% in 2010) supported the idea that a “EU foreign policy should develop as a counterweight to the United States”.

Figure 13. A European army vs. a national army (%) – political elites



**Question:** Some say that we should have one single European Union Army. Others believe that every country should keep its own national army. Which of the following comes closest to your view?

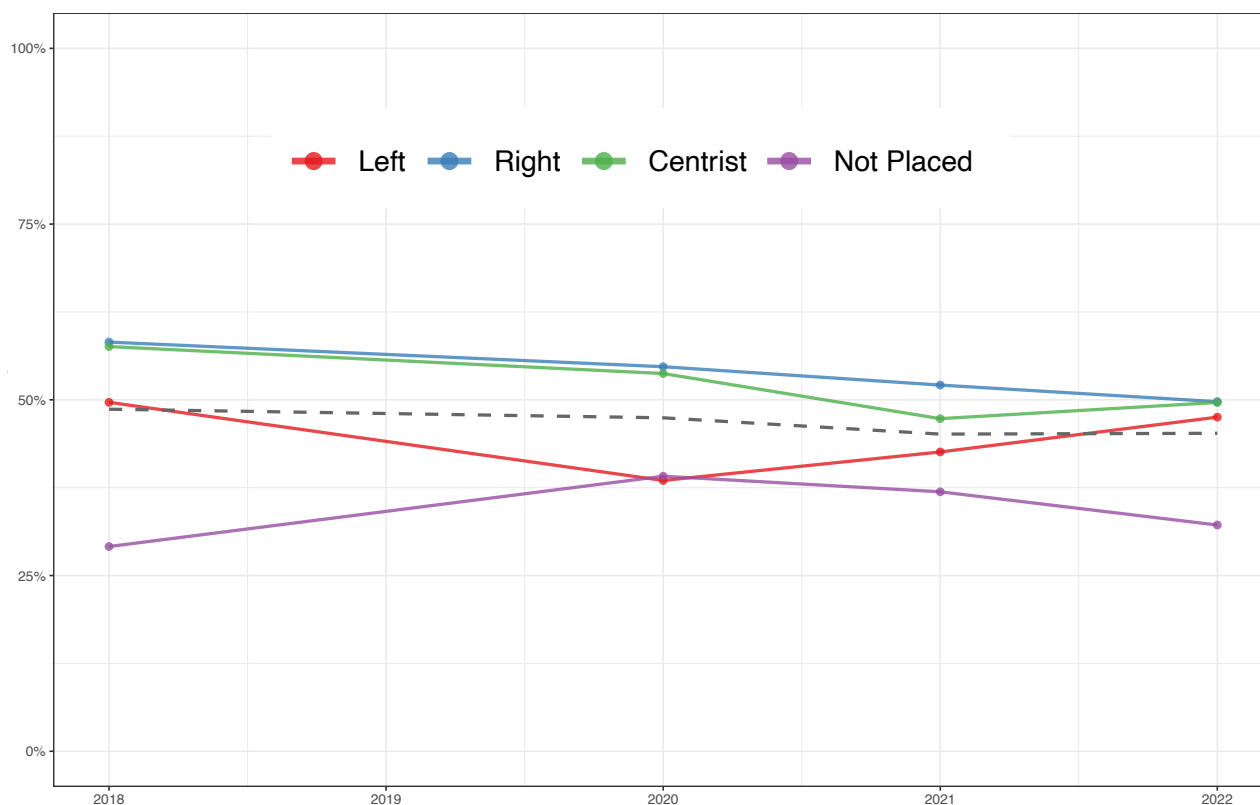
**Source:** Authors' elaboration based on data from InTune (2007 and 2009), ENEC (2014), EUEngage (2016 and 2017), Italian Elite Survey (2019).



## Use of military force

The use of military force remains relatively peripheral in survey questions, except when linked to specific military operations. In this context, Afghanistan has been the most frequently referenced topic in recent years, gaining particular prominence in 2021 with the withdrawal of Western troops<sup>3</sup>. More broadly, **Italian public** support for Military Operations Abroad (MOAs) remained steady, with 45% to 49% of respondents in the 2018-2022 IAI-LAPS surveys expressing approval. Remarkably, in recent years, we have observed a narrowing of the ideological gap, with respondents from leftist, centrist, and rightist orientations showing a nearly equal split on the issue of Italian military involvement in MOAs, a trend that underscores the polarizing nature of the issue across ideological lines (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Public approval of Italy's military participation in MOAs by ideological positioning (%)



**Questions:** 1. In general, regarding the deployment of Italian military personnel in overseas missions, are you...? (% in favor). 2. Are you in favor or against the deployment of Italian military personnel in overseas missions? (% in favor).

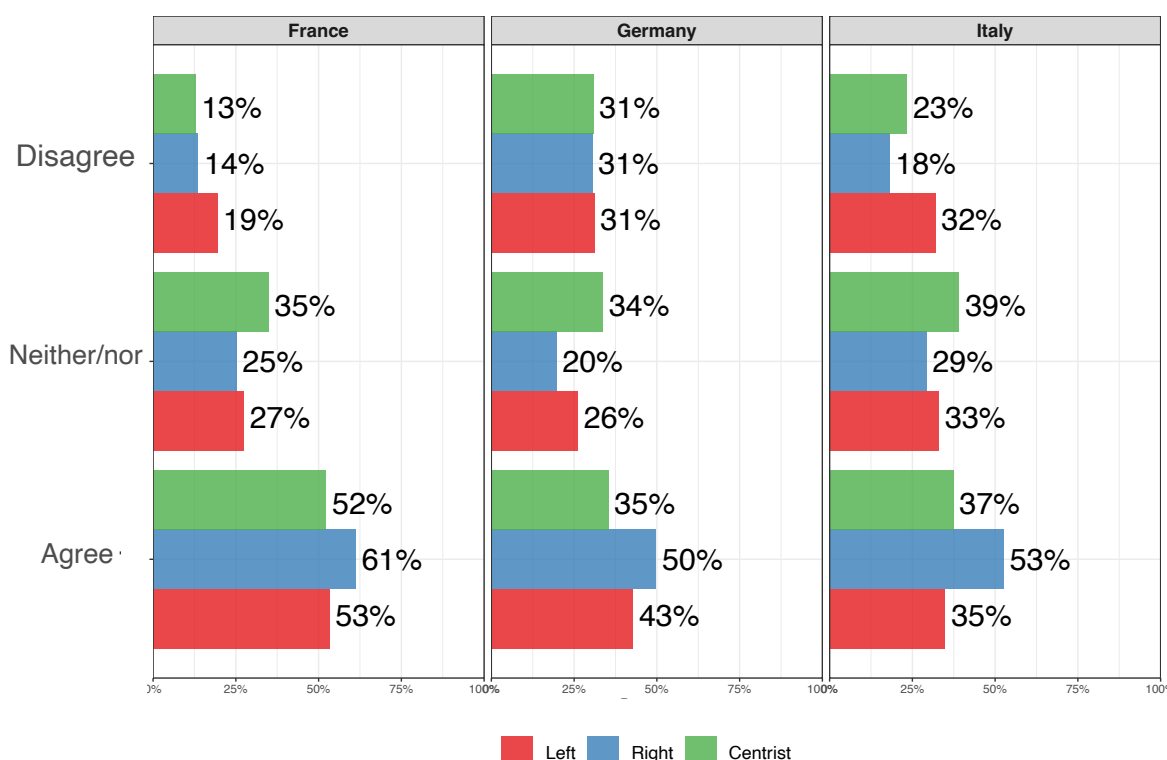
**Source:** Authors' elaboration based on IAI-LAPS data.

<sup>3</sup> In this case, a majority of the Italian public (59%) supported the withdrawal, while a significant proportion (58%) of Brothers of Italy voters opposed it.



That said, right-wing respondents remain more supportive of the use of military force, even when its objective falls within the category of ‘foreign policy restraint’ (Jentleson, 1992; Jentleson and Britton, 1998) – specifically, to prevent aggression by an expansionist power (Figure 15). This ideological divide is evident not only in Italy – as highlighted by Olmastroni (2017) in comparisons of public and elite views on the use of force – but also in France and Germany.

Figure 15. Public support for the use of force to prevent an external aggression



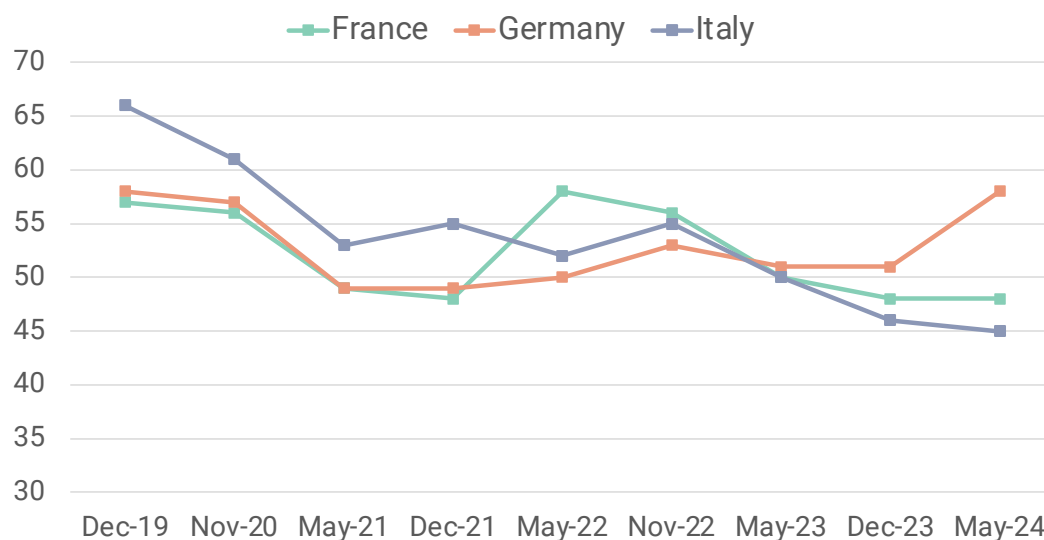
**Question:** And now tell us whether you agree or disagree with each of the following items. [COUNTRY] should take all steps including the use of force to prevent aggression by any expansionist power.

**Source:** Authors' elaboration based on Aspen-LAPS data.

Finally, three years after the beginning of the Ukraine-Russia war, there is a significant decline in public willingness to support the use of military force for strategic purposes and alliance commitments. According to data from NATO's Public Diplomacy Division, less than 50% of Italian and French respondents agreed that their country should defend another NATO member if attacked. Italy showed the most significant decrease compared to France and Germany, dropping from 66% in 2019 to 45% in 2024 (Figure 16).



Figure 16. Willingness to defend another NATO country if attacked (%) – public opinion



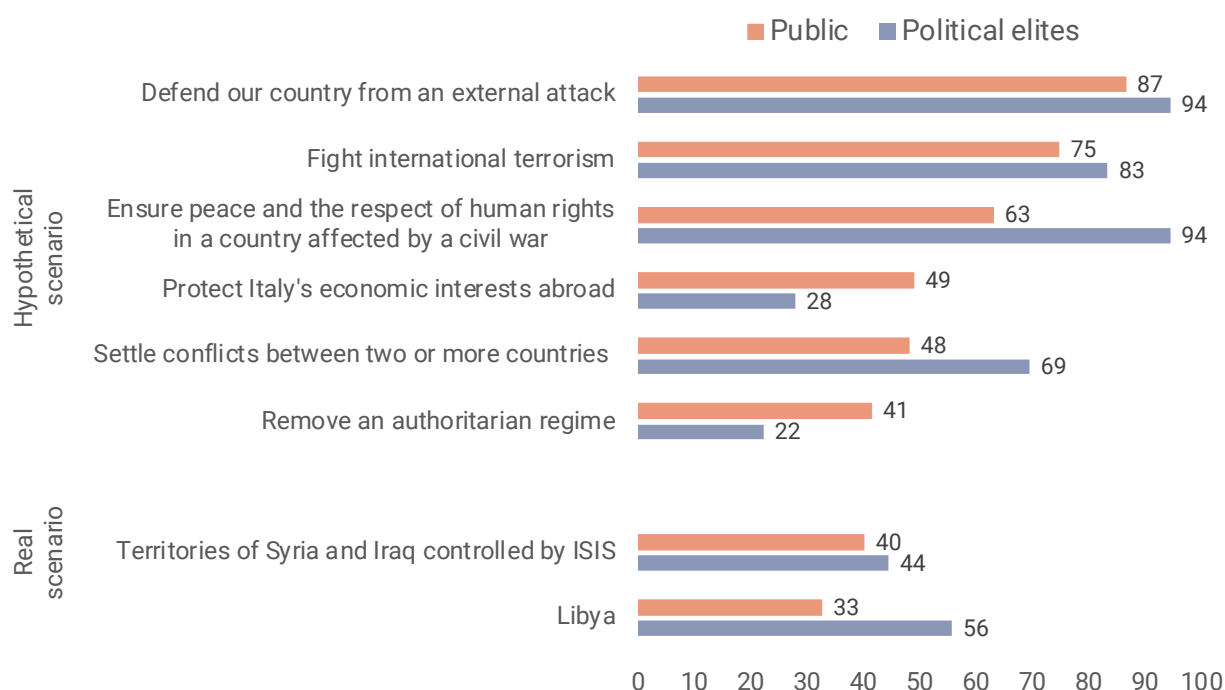
**Question:** To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? [COUNTRY] should defend another NATO country if attacked (% agree – values ranging from 7 to 10 on a 0-10 agreement scale).

**Source:** Authors' elaboration based on Aspen-LAPS data.

It is worth noting that **political elites** generally showed greater support for the use of military force in both hypothetical and real scenarios. With the exception of scenarios involving the use of military force to protect Italy's economic interests abroad or the removal of an authoritarian regime in another country, Italian politicians tend to view the exercise of military power as more legitimate than their constituents, particularly in cases of combating international terrorism or conducting humanitarian interventions aimed at ensuring peace and upholding human rights. In 2016, this gap was also evident when comparing attitudes towards the use of force in real scenarios, such as in Libya and the ISIS-controlled territories of Syria and Iraq (Figure 17).



Figure 17. Support for the use of force in hypothetical and real scenarios (%)



**Questions:** 1. For each of the following circumstances, please indicate whether Italy's use of military force is very justified, somewhat justified, not very justified, or not justified at all? (% very/somewhat justified). 2. Would you favour or oppose Italy's participation in a multilateral military intervention in...? (% strongly/somewhat favourable).

**Source:** Authors' elaboration based on PRIN-PEI data.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this deliverable highlights the complex dynamics shaping Italian elite and public views on security and defense policy, including preferences for institutional defense mechanisms and support for the use of military force abroad. Despite significant transformations in the global security environment, Italian defense policy demonstrates remarkable continuity. This consistency is reflected in the broad consensus among political elites, even as public opinion displays greater variability over time. Remarkably, public support for defense initiatives – whether through NATO or the EU – remains often contingent upon the framing of threats and the perceived necessity of military engagement (Olmastri, 2014). While ideological divides persist, recent trends indicate a narrowing gap in attitudes towards military engagement across the political spectrum. This shift shows broader shifts in the ways security concerns are



conceptualized by both elites and the public. Moreover, it reflects the polarizing impact of specific crises, such as the war in Ukraine, on perceptions of international stability and collective defense responsibilities.

The comparative analysis with France and Germany demonstrates Italy's unique positioning in the European defense landscape. In general, Italian public opinion shows strong support for multilateral defense mechanisms (i.e., NATO and the EU's security and defense policy), while skepticism persists regarding increased defense spending and the creation of a fully integrated European army. These findings underline the balancing act Italy faces in aligning its commitments to further European integration in defense policy with domestic concerns about sovereignty and fiscal priorities, particularly in times of international crises.

The deliverable provides a foundation for addressing future research questions concerning the drivers of continuity and change in Italian defense policy. In particular, it highlights the need to examine how ideological, institutional, and contextual factors shape elite and public perspectives on defense mechanism and policy choices. Understanding the interplay between these dimensions is essential for anticipating how emerging challenges in European and global security will be perceived by domestic actors. By delving deeper into the attitudes of different types of elites (political, military, and civil) and comparing them with those of Italian citizens, our project can not only fill a gap in knowledge about elite preferences and their alignment (or divergence) from public opinion, but also trace interesting patterns for comparative research.

## 6. REFERENCES

- Abbondanza, Gabriele (2023). "Italy's quiet pivot to the Indo-Pacific: Towards an Italian Indo-Pacific strategy." *International Political Science Review*, 45 (5): 669–679.
- Aldrich, John H., Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver, Jason Reifler, and Kristin Thompson Sharp. (2006). "Foreign Policy and the Electoral Connection." *Annual Review of Political Science* 9: 477–502.
- Almond, Gabriel A. (1950). *The American People and Foreign Policy*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.
- Andreatta, Filippo (2008). "Italian foreign policy: domestic politics, international requirements and the European dimension." *European Integration*, 1 (30): 169–181.



Angelucci, Davide, Pierangelo Isernia, Carlotta Mingardi, and Francesco Olmastroni (2024). "Public Opinion and the European Foreign and Security Policy: Is there a Risk of Politicisation?" Joint Research Papers no. 25. [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/joint\\_rp\\_25.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/joint_rp_25.pdf) (Accessed April 23, 2025).

Attinà, Fulvio (1991). "Cultura e consenso nella politica estera italiana." In Imco Brouwer (ed.) *Pace e Conflitti nel Mediterraneo e nel Medio Oriente. Atti delle conferenze pubbliche e dei seminari 1987-1990*. Acireale: Bonanno, pp. 157–173.

Battistelli, Fabrizio, Galantino, Maria Grazia, Livia Fay Lucianetti, and Lorenzo Striuli (2012). *Opinioni sulla guerra. L'opinione pubblica italiana e internazionale di fronte all'uso della forza*. Milano, Franco Angeli.

Benitez, Jorge (2019). "U.S. NATO Policy in the Age of Trump: Controversy and Consistency." *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 43 (1): 179–200.

Blank, Stephen (2024). "Donald Trump and the Calamitous Renationalization of International Security." Center for European Policy Analysis. <https://cepa.org/article/donald-trump-and-the-calamitous-renationalization-of-international-security/> (Accessed April 23, 2025).

Bonvicini, Gianni, Andrea Carati, Alessandro Colombo, Raffaello Matarazzo, and Stefano Silvestri (2011). "Italian foreign policy in 2010: continuity, reform and challenges 150 years after national unity", ISPI Working Paper. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai1106e.pdf> (Accessed April 23, 2025).

Borrell, Josep (2023). "Multipolarity Without Multilateralism." European External Action Service, Brussels, September 24. Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/multipolarity-without-multilateralism\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/multipolarity-without-multilateralism_en) (Accessed on April 4, 2025).

Borri, Rossella, Pierangelo Isernia, Carlotta Mingardi, and Francesco Olmastroni (2024). "European Public Opinion on the Challenges and Future of EU Foreign and Security Policy." JOINT Research Papers no. 23. [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/joint\\_rp\\_23.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/joint_rp_23.pdf) (Accessed April 23, 2025).

Busby, Joshua W., Jonathan Monten (2012). "Republican Elites and Foreign Policy Attitudes." *Political Science Quarterly*, 127 (1):105–142.

Carbone, Maurizio (ed.) (2011). *Italy in the Post-Cold War Order: Adaptation, Bipartisanship, Visibility*. Lanham: Lexington Books.



Chittick, William O., Keith R. Billingsley, and Rick Travis (1990). "Persistence and change in elite and mass attitudes toward U.S. foreign policy." *Political Psychology*, 11 (2): 385–401.

Chittick, William O., Keith R. Billingsley, Rick Travis (1995). "A three-dimensional model of American foreign policy beliefs." *International Studies Quarterly*, 39 (3): 313–331.

Coticchia, Fabrizio, Matteo Mazziotti di Celso (2024). "Still on the same path? Italian foreign and defence policy in the Enlarged Mediterranean." *Mediterranean Politics*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2023.2294252>

Coticchia, Fabrizio, and Valerio Vignoli (2020). "Italian Political Parties and Military Operations: An Empirical Analysis on Voting Patterns." *Government and Opposition*, 55 (3): 456–473.

Diodato, Emidio, and Raffaele Marchetti (2023). *Manuale di politica estera italiana*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

European Commission (2023). "Standard Eurobarometer 100: The EU's response to the war in Ukraine."

<https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/api/deliverable/download/file?deliverableId=90583>  
(Accessed April 23, 2025).

Gravelle, Timothy B., Jason Reifler, and Thomas J. Scotto (2017). "The structure of foreign policy attitudes in transatlantic perspective: Comparing the United States, United Kingdom, France and Germany." *European Journal of Political Research*, 56: 757–776.

Gravelle, Timothy B., Jason Reifler, and Thomas J. Scotto (2020). "The structure of foreign policy attitudes among middle power publics: a transpacific replication." *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 75 (2): 217–236.

Gries, Peter (2022). "Beyond Power Politics: How Ideology Motivates Threat Perception—and International Relations." *International Studies*, 59 (4): 289–314.

Holsti, Ole R. (2004). *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Holsti, Ole R., and James N. Rosenau (1988). "The domestic and foreign policy beliefs of American leaders." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 32 (2): 248–294.

Holsti, Ole R., and James N. Rosenau (1990). "The structure of foreign policy attitudes among American leaders." *Journal of Politics* 52 (1): 94–125.



- Ignazi, Piero, Giampiero Giacomello, and Fabrizio Coticchia (2012). *Italian Military Operations Abroad: Just Don't Call it War*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Isernia, Pierangelo, and Philip Everts (eds.) (2001) *Public Opinion and the International Use of Force*. London: Routledge.
- Jentleson, Bruce W. (1992). "The pretty prudent public: Post post-Vietnam American opinion on the use of military force." *International Studies Quarterly*, 36 (1): 49–74.
- Jentleson, Bruce W., and Rebecca L. Britton (1998). "Still pretty prudent Post-Cold War American Public Opinion on the Use of Military Force." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 42 (4): 395–417.
- Kaarbo, Juliet (2015). "A Foreign Policy Analysis Perspective on the Domestic Politics Turn in IR Theory." *International Studies Review*, 17(2): 189–216.
- Kagan, Robert (2002). "Power and weakness." *Policy Review*, 113: 3–28.
- Kretzer, Joshua D. (2022). "Re-Assessing Elite-Public Gaps in Political Behavior." *American Journal of Political Science*, 66 (3): 539–553.
- Krotz, Ulrich, and Richard Maher (2011). "International Relations Theory and the Rise of European Foreign and Security Policy." *World Politics*, 63 (3): 548–579.
- Ministero della Difesa (2015). *Libro Bianco per la sicurezza internazionale e la difesa*. <https://flpdifesa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Libro-Bianco-30.04.2015-5a-versione-def-sul-sito-MD.pdf> (Accessed April 23, 2025).
- Ministero della Difesa (2023). "Documento Programmatico Pluriennale della difesa per il Triennio 2023-2025." [https://www.difesa.it/assets/allegati/30714/dpp\\_2023-2025.pdf](https://www.difesa.it/assets/allegati/30714/dpp_2023-2025.pdf) (Accessed April 23, 2025).
- NATO (2024a). "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)." [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_226465.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_226465.htm) (Accessed April 23, 2025).
- NATO (2024b). "'To Prevent War, NATO Must Spend More': Speech by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte at the Concert Noble, Brussels." [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_231348.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_231348.htm) (Accessed April 23, 2025).
- Nau, Henry R. (2008). "Iraq and previous transatlantic crises: divided by threat, not institutions or values." In Jeffrey Anderson, John G. Ikenberry, and Thomas Risse (eds.) *The End of the West. Crisis and Change in the Atlantic Order*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pp. 82–110.



- Nincic, Miroslav, and Jennifer M. Ramos (2010). "Ideological structure and foreign policy preferences." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 15 (2): 119–141.
- Olmastroni, Francesco (2014). *Framing War: Public Opinion and Decision-Making in Comparative Perspective*. New York and Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Olmastroni, Francesco (2017). "The alleged consensus: Italian elites and publics on foreign policy." *Italian Political Science Review / Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 47 (2): 149–182.
- Page, Benjamin I., and Marshall M. Bouton (2006). *The Foreign Policy Disconnect: What Americans Want from Our Leaders but Don't Get*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Reifler, Jason, Thomas J. Scotto, and Harold D. Clarke (2011). "Foreign policy beliefs in contemporary Britain: structure and relevance." *International Studies Quarterly*, 55 (1): 245–266.
- Tomz, Michael, and Jessica L. P. Weeks (2021). "Military alliances and public support for war." *International Studies Quarterly*, 65 (3): 811–824.
- Unan, Asli, and Heike Klüver (2024). "Europeans' Attitudes toward the EU Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine." *Political Science Research and Methods*, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2024.62>
- Walt, Stephen M. (1987). *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Wittkopf, Eugene R. (1981). "The structure of foreign policy attitudes: an alternative view." *Social Science Quarterly*, 62 (1): 108–123.
- Wittkopf, Eugene R., and Michael A. Maggiotto (1983). "Elites and masses: a comparative analysis of attitudes toward America's world role." *The Journal of Politics*, 45 (2): 303–334.