

BOOK REVIEW

## *Conflitti consensuali. I partiti italiani e gli interventi militari*

By Valerio Vignoli, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2022. 232p. €23 paperback, €15.99 e-book.

Tiziana Corda 

Social and Political Sciences, Università degli Studi di Milano, Milano, Italy  
Email: [tiziana.corda@unimi.it](mailto:tiziana.corda@unimi.it)

(First published online 23 November 2023)

With global conflict trends and conflict-related fatalities reaching the highest levels in three decades, military interventions have once again taken centre-stage in scholarly, policy, and even public debates. While many issues are at stake in such discussions, one particularly relevant for democracies concerns the domestic political and institutional constraints to the decision of intervening in such conflict-ridden areas with foreign military operations. This is precisely the issue the volume ‘*Conflitti consensuali. I partiti italiani e gli interventi militari*’, recently published for Il Mulino by Valerio Vignoli, aims to address. Focusing on the Italian case, the author builds on his extensive research on Italian foreign policy to provide the first comprehensive analysis on the relationship between Italian political parties and military operations abroad from 1994 until the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, shedding light not only on which parties supported interventions the most, but also on which factors influenced those decisions by testing all the main expectations emerged from the literature on party support for military interventions with new data and quantitative analyses of parliamentary votes and speeches.

The volume is structured in six chapters. After an overview of the academic debate related to party support for military operations abroad, with a focus on the Italian scholarship (Chapter 1), the volume examines the position and salience of the major Italian parties with regard to foreign military interventions (Chapter 2), the way they voted and debated them in the Italian parliament (Chapter 3), their impact on government coalitions (Chapter 4), the evolution of such patterns with the emergence of new populist parties after 2013 (Chapter 5) and the outbreak of the 2022 Ukraine war (Chapter 6).

The empirical analysis throughout these chapters reveals the existence of a strong bipartisan consensus (86.8% average parliamentary support for foreign military interventions in 1994–2013, 75.4% in 2013–2016, 84.9% 2017–2020) over the numerous foreign military operations Italy has contributed to over the past decades. Italy has been surprisingly active in this, at least when compared to other major European countries, despite lower military expenditures. The book tracks well over 130 military operations abroad for Italy since the end of the Cold War against a mere 19 in 1945–1989, a trend certainly influenced by the increase in the demand for military interventions during the early conflict-ridden 1990s, but also facilitated by peculiar domestic factors.

Weighing the role of ideology, on the one hand, and of strategy (in terms of government-opposition dynamics), on the other hand, this volume provides a detailed picture of the domestic factors which influenced this convergence the most. Empirical evidence confirms both ideology and strategy have played a role in the Italian case. While support for military missions abroad has on average come more from right-wing than left-wing parties, it is another kind of ideological divide, the one between moderate and radical parties that best summarises Italian

parties' support for military interventions, as the strongest support has come from centre-left and centre-right parties. These findings confirm recent comparative research arguing that party support for military operations follows curvilinear –rather than linear– models on the right–left scale, where centrist moderate parties are on average more interventionist than those at the extremes.

Besides the moderate-radical ideological cleavage, this volume shows another decisive explanatory factor is the strategic government-opposition dynamics. Being part of the government has been strongly associated with support for military interventions for strategic reasons; given the low salience military interventions have had in Italian society, no government party has been interested in undermining the ruling coalition for an issue most of their electorates perceive as minor. An exception to this pattern came only from far-left parties, which once withdrew support to the centre-left governing coalition on foreign policy matters, thus revealing some differentiated effects of the government-opposition divide across left- and right-wing coalitions in the Italian case.

On the contrary, reforms in Italy's law-making process, such as the introduction of the 2016 *legge quadro* on military missions which has since allowed parties to vote every year for each mission separately rather than *en bloc*, have only slightly modified such relations, not always empowering the opposition as originally expected. Quite the opposite, being allowed to vote for individual missions, traditionally anti-militarist opposition parties have recently supported missions that feature distinctive peacekeeping traits, whereas governing parties have remained supportive as expected. Only the higher salience of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine partly altered these patterns. As Chapter 6's analysis shows, *Fratelli d'Italia* (identified as a non-moderate right party) proved to be a staunch supporter of military shipments even when at the opposition, while several government parties (most notably *Movimento 5 Stelle* and *Lega*) initially proved more recalcitrant, in apparent defiance of both the above-mentioned government-opposition dynamics and the curvilinear ideological model, although in the end their votes aligned with the government's position.

This volume seamlessly blends methodological sophistication with reader-friendly accessibility. Making statistical and text-as-data techniques accessible also to a non-expert readership fulfils the author's ambition to target an audience that is broader than the sole scientific community. However, this very quest for broader accessibility makes some assessments perhaps not detailed enough to an academic eye. While the methodological contribution of this research remains indisputable, the analysis would have certainly benefitted from some more fine-grained details in the presentation of the data on these operations and their context, for instance by complementing the information on expenditures and personnel size with data on their relative shares in relation to Italy's aggregate expenditure and to a multilateral mission's total troops contributions. Similarly, the inclusion of multivariate regressions would have provided stronger analytical rigour. The quantitative analysis here consists only of correlations which do not systematically take into account the interactive effect of other variables, nor do they control for structural international and domestic factors such as the level of international instability (the demand for military interventions the author frequently mentions, yet does not measure) or Italy's financial situation. To be sure, other contributions by the author do precisely this kind of analysis, albeit in a fragmented fashion regarding arguments, data, and time span; integrating them in this more comprehensive volume would have certainly ensured higher quality analysis.

Overall, however, this research unambiguously shows that, even though fierce contention generally dominates Italian politics, its major political parties cooperate surprisingly often on military interventions. A high level of bipartisan consensus has been evident across the major parties since 1994, showing remarkable continuity despite the emergence of new parties over the years. Parties do differ in preferences, as shown by the volume's original analysis of the different narratives they use in parliamentary debates emphasising multilateralism and humanitarianism on the left against prestige and security on the right, but they are ready to sacrifice them in the name of

more crucial government-opposition dynamics. By providing a detailed picture of the main patterns of party support for post-Cold War Italy's missions abroad which largely confirms previous expectations but also offers original considerations, this volume will readily serve as the new reference point on the topic in Italy but also as a useful contribution to the broader and growing comparative literature on the role of parties in foreign policy and military interventions.