12 Italy and the Nuclear Choices of the Atlantic Alliance, 1955–63

Leopoldo Nuti

ITALIAN DEFENCE STRATEGIES IN THE EARLY 1950s

This chapter attempts an evaluation of the Italian reactions to the nuclear choices formulated by the Atlantic Alliance from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s. The growing importance of nuclear weaponry for NATO strategy compelled the Italian military and, to a minor extent, the Government, to pay increasing attention to the problem of access to the new arms; this chapter examines the main reasons behind the policies ultimately adopted. A first section briefly describes how the Italian military conceived the defence of national territory in 1954–55, that is on the eve of the arrival of tactical nuclear weapons in Italy; the following sections focus respectively on the diffusion of tactical weapons, on the issue of nuclear sharing as it developed in the late 1950s, and on the role played by Italy in the development of the Multi-lateral Force. A final section examines how Italian decisions were shaped not only by military considerations, but also by political factors, as well as by considerations of status and prestige.

Post-war Italian security required the solution of two main problems, namely the prevention of an armed revolutionary uprising and the defence of the region bordering on the Free Territory of Trieste, where an attack was most likely in case of war. By the early 1950s the fears of a Communist armed coup had receded into the background, but the defence of the north-eastern frontier of the country continued to present a problem for Italian military planners. The tight budgetary policy followed by the Italian Government required that the armed forces be kept to a minimum level of strength in peacetime, with additional troops mobilised only in case of aggression. Consequently Italy needed at least a week’s advance notice of an attack. On the north-eastern frontier, however, such a
breathing spell could not be easily obtained because the nature of the terrain made it very difficult to hold an aggressor at the border for the time necessary to mobilize the country's resources. Indeed the lowlands stretching westwards from the Ljubljana gap were regarded as a natural gateway through which an aggressor could penetrate directly into the Po valley, with its important concentration of industrial wealth. Support from the Allied troops deployed both in Austria and in the Free Territory of Trieste was considered indispensable, as was pointed out by the Italian army chief of staff during the conversations with leading US generals preceding the creation of the Atlantic Pact. Important as it was, particularly in view of its political implications, co-operation with Allied occupation troops clearly could not make up for the lack of an adequate protection of the border.

The only solution envisaged was to defend north-eastern Italy on Yugoslav rather than on Italian territory. The mountains east of Ljubljana could be defended long enough to give the Italian army time to mobilise. If this was impossible for political reasons, there was the alternative of fighting a delaying action along the Isonzo river, which in its upper course runs mostly through Yugoslavia, but only a few miles from the Italian border. Special armoured units could be rushed forward at the first signs of an invasion to meet the enemy outside Italian territory along what was the so-called Isonzo line. At the same time the Allied occupation forces in Austria could fight a delaying action on Austrian territory, and the combined effect of both manoeuvres would be such as to gain enough time to complete the mobilisation of Italy.

The most obvious obstacle to the practical implementation of this strategy was the attitude of the Yugoslav Government, whose relations with Italy were strained because both countries laid claim to the Free Territory of Trieste. Although a final settlement for Trieste was not achieved until October 1954 the possibility of fighting along the Isonzo line was first discussed by the Western military as early as 1951, and later on Tito was reported by Field Marshal Montgomery to have promised to accept an Italian advance of a few miles into Yugoslav territory if this could help Italian defence.

Thus, as a result of the increasing ties between Yugoslavia and the West and of NATO's showing a greater interest in the defence of northern Italy, the holding of the Isonzo eventually became part of NATO strategy. Besides, in all the studies of the time the Italians made clear their preference for this forward strategy to any other solution, such as a fallback position along the Apennines.