Italy's role in the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon: analytical eclecticism in action

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Abstract

After the short 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon, the UN launched the peacekeeping mission UNIFIL II. Italian Forces, already deployed in the country, initially took the responsibility to lead the operations. Ten years later, Italy is still carrying the burden of the mission with a 1400-strong force. Italy’s involvement and enduring commitment to UNIFIL II represents an empirical puzzle. Why did Italian policymakers decide to embark on such a demanding task? In order to answer this question, we will draw hypotheses from three main theoretical schools: realism, institutionalism, and constructivism. All of them provide helpful insights on the mechanisms leading to Italy’s foreign policy decision. None of them, however, is sufficiently convincing as to rule out the others. For this reason, we will argue that the best analytical approach is analytical eclecticism. In particular, we will highlight the main mechanisms at stake and the relative contribution of each paradigm.

Introduction

This article proposes to tackle the following fundamental question: why did Italian policymakers decide to embark on the demanding task of participating in the UNIFIL II mission in Lebanon? Italy’s decision to boost up its military involvement in Lebanon with its participation in the UNIFIL II mission defies each individual mainstream theoretical explanation. It is a puzzle for realism, because Italy intervened without its security being at stake. It is a puzzle for liberalism, because Italy invested considerable military as well as diplomatic resources to UNIFIL II, while simultaneously disengaging from Iraq and trimming its contingent in Afghanistan. Social constructivism also has a hard time addressing this empirical puzzle, as the humanitarian framing of the rationale for intervention in Lebanon does not adequately address the complexity of Italy’s decision.

Our case study of Italy’s decision to intervene in Lebanon lends itself to an analytical eclectic explanation of a middle power’s foreign policy decisions. With this article, we therefore aim for a twofold contribution to the literature. Firstly, we are interested in furthering the debate on International Relations (IR) theoretically based explanations of Italian foreign policy. This literature has emerged in recent years and there are several single theoretical explanations available (Cladi
and Webber 2011; Ratti 2012; Olmastroni 2014; Brighi 2013). However, an attempt to use analytical eclecticism is missing. Secondly, we contribute to the wider literature on the study of drivers of a country’s foreign policy, which has come back to the attention of IR scholars in recent years. Perhaps this owes to the fact that throughout the post-Cold War period there have been several examples of states pursuing interventions without a seeming and immediate threat to their security. Consider, for instance, US intervention in Somalia in 1992-94 and in Iraq in 2003 among others. European countries such as the UK and France have also been quite active in terms of military involvement without any seeming threat to their security. The relative stability of Europe throughout the post-Cold War period has meant that European countries have deployed military force in other regional contexts such as the UK did in Sierra Leone in 2000 and France did in Mali in 2013 (The Economist 2013). The case of a middle power such as Italy being willing to use force in a regional context is, however, underdeveloped and we aim to provide an analysis here.

Our argument is that analytical eclecticism elucidates Italy’s decision to intervene in Lebanon. We derive observable implications from the three main starting paradigms, namely realism, liberalism and social constructivism. We are conscious that additional theories beyond mainstream approaches are important, and would certainly contribute to an analytical eclectic explanation. However, for the purposes of scientific enquiry and epistemological linearity, we will focus on realism, liberalism and social constructivism. In line with Hayes and James (2014, p. 405), the potential for ‘eclectic combination’ of the main traditions of IR is ‘at a maximum’. Moreover, our observable implications are the result of intra-paradigmatic research for each IR tradition we focussed on. Put differently, realism liberalism and social constructivism are now three broad churches that explain foreign policy outcomes starting from variables located at the domestic, international and even transnational level. We will therefore restrict our focus to classical realism, liberal intergovernmentalism and strategic culture.

In order to advance the above argument the article proceeds in the following way: the first section reviews the state of the art debate on analytical eclecticism. Then the article will derive observable implications of foreign policy behaviour in line with classical realism, liberal intergovernmentalism and strategic culture. Subsequently, the article will present the empirical material pertaining to Italy’s decision to intervene in Lebanon. In the concluding section, the article will present a concise figure, which explains the casual path that led to Italy’s foreign policy decision, making the argument that the three competing theories concur in offering an eclectic explanation as neither can fully catch the complexity of Rome’s decision on its own.
Analytical eclecticism and foreign policy

Why do states engage in conflicts? What explains their decisions? These questions continue to generate interest among IR scholars who have identified a multitude of drivers to explain states’ engagement in conflicts. For example, the role of party ideologies (Rathbun 2004) and normative political frameworks (Finnemore 2003) have been important additions to the literature. Individual theories of international relations such as realism, liberalism and social constructivism still offer ways to explain and interpret state behaviour (for a recent attempt, see also Carati and Locatelli 2016). In doing so, they tend to focus on key factors which allegedly influence states’ decision to engage in conflicts. Realism, for instance, emphasises the importance of material capabilities such as military power. In order to make assertions over what type of behaviour a state is likely to have, neorealist scholars tend to look at the number of great powers in the international system and predict the likelihood of stability or instability of the international system (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). Put differently, the distribution of power among states considered as units is the key explanatory variable for states’ behaviour. Liberal scholars tend to emphasise the importance of domestic politics instead to explain what kind of foreign policy a state is likely to pursue. Social constructivist scholars would look at the identity of a given state in making sense of its behaviour in international politics.

These macro-theories of international relations have proved to have varying degrees of explanatory power since the end of the Cold War and a lot of ink has been spilt on this issue. But after the end of the Cold War and a number of inter-paradigmatic debates (Feaver et al. 2000), scholars have also begun to wonder whether the case can be made for combining factors belonging to different theories in order to achieve a more far-reaching explanation of foreign policy behaviour (Katzeinstein and Sil 2004). This type of scholarship stems from scholars’ desire to get closer to an analytical comprehension of an empirical puzzle without relying on a single research paradigm. As the key proponents of analytical eclecticism Rudra Sil and Peter Katzenstein (2010b, p. 412) put it, analytical eclecticism stems from a need to ‘capture the interactions among different types of causal mechanisms normally analysed in isolation from each other within separate research traditions’.

There are not many attempts to combine material, domestic and ideational variables in international relations scholarship to make sense of key empirical puzzles. A notable exception is the work of Christoph Meyer and Eva Strickman (2011), who sought to solidify constructivism by adding
material variables to it in their attempt to explain the evolution of the European Union’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) after the end of the Cold War. As Peter Katzenstein and Nobuo Okawara (2001/02, p. 154) noted, the ‘intellectual returns’ from inter-paradigmatic debates are less important than ‘making sense of empirical anomalies’. Our chosen case study of the Italian participation in the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon is precisely an empirical anomaly that lends itself to an analytical eclectic approach. The approach we advocate, in line with Sil and Katzenstein, is to take the best from different approaches, rather than emphasising the virtues of one theory over another. As Sil and Katzenstein (2010, p. 20) put it, analytical eclecticism is a ‘more open-ended analysis that can incorporate the insights of different paradigm-bound theories’. We are also not modifying theories based on empirical anomalies (Barnett 2002) or borrowing variables from one paradigm to make another one stronger (Meyer and Strickman 2011). Conversely, we start from observing an empirical anomaly and make sense of it in light of the causal mechanisms drawn from different paradigms.

A particular foreign policy course which defies expectations has various origins, which can be domestic, international or even transnational, therefore an analytical eclectic explanation is needed (Blavoukos and Bourantonis 2014; Fiaz 2014). We are conscious that there is no end in sight in an empirical debate as there is no objective truth. Moreover, as Stanley Hoffman warned more than fifty years ago, ‘excessive emphasis on one perspective produces optical illusions’ (Hoffman 1959, p. 372). So, because an empirical question such as ours lends itself to a variety of causal factors, we are interested in investigating a multi-theoretical or analytical eclectic explanation.

Given Italy’s general reticence to rely on military force compared to European great powers such as France and the UK, this case study offers an important occasion to begin a debate concerning the drivers of a middle power’s strategic decisions to engage in conflicts. Overall, we can note aspects that make the operation unique. The new Prime Minister in 2006 Romano Prodi considered the Lebanon operation as key to assert Italy’s European credentials and wanted Italy to assume a bigger role in Middle Easter diplomacy. Secondly, as the mission was reinforced in November 2006, Italy was the biggest military contributor after France and Germany with 1,100 men. Thirdly, Italy wanted to act as ‘lead nation’ in the mission (Engberg 2010, p. 416). With these premises in mind, we now turn to an analysis of the competing explanations of a state’s eagerness to military involvement.
“Going for glory”: a classical realist explanation

Central in realist thinking is the primary relevance of the state as a rational actor living under anarchy. From a realist point of view, then, we can infer two tenets: first, that Italy would intervene militarily when its interests are at stake – particularly its security, which is when there is a compelling military threat; second, regardless of the promises of institutions (Mearsheimer 1995), multilateral action will be negatively affected by the problems of collective action. However, since a military threat to Italy was not present in 2006, a realist explanation of Italy’s involvement should be looked for at the level of agency rather than structure. As Elisabetta Brighi (2013, p. 14) reminds us, ‘analyses placed at the level of agency are supposed to offer snapshots of more short-term, conjectural developments whose effects may be exhausted in a very brief span of time’. Within the realist paradigm, a body of literature has emerged that seeks to explain how states depart from structural constraints with reference to variables located at the domestic level (Tago 2014; Verbeek and Zaslove 2015; Cladi and Webber 2011). In Italy, various governmental coalitions have been in power since the end of the Cold War, almost all of them have been unstable and have embarked on different foreign policy courses (see among many others Bonvicini and Matarazzo 2009; Croci and Valigi 2013). The 2006 decision to intervene in Lebanon, for instance, was a novelty introduced by the new centre-left government led by Prime Minister Romano Prodi (Brighi 2007).

European countries typically have been capable of transcending power politics (Hyde-Price 2007). The relative stability of the European continent meant that states could look for opportunities to increase their power and influence outside European borders. Therefore, the classical realist take would be that Italy’s involvement in the Middle East does not come out of its search for stability in its immediate neighbourhood, as Italy’s security would not be enhanced by getting involved in Lebanon. However, its influence in international politics could. The classical realist explanation offers a more sophisticated way to make sense of Italy’s foreign policy purpose. Unlike what Italy had done in the 1990s, as it called for a European involvement in the Balkans, Italy’s intervention in Lebanon lends itself to an explanation of Italy wishing to pursue its own design, albeit within a framework of cooperation within the United Nations (UN) and the EU to a lesser extent. The emphasis on power politics should therefore be presented in soft format.

Classical realism allows us to unpack the states’ goals beyond mere survival in the system (Rynning 2010; Selden 2010). For instance, following other realist classics, like Thucydides and Hobbes, Raymond Aron (1984, p. 102) spoke of ‘eternal goals’ (such as survival, power and glory) and
‘historical goals’. The answers of classical realism are less fixed than structural realism so there is more scope for interpretation in our chosen context of analysis.

Luis Simón, in his recent classical realist analysis of European security cooperation (2016, p. 144) identified power as a ‘nation’s ability to act and assert itself against any forces that might threaten its autonomy’. While helpful to transcend considerations of mere state survival and to account for the shifting strategic priorities of European states, Italy’s autonomy was not threatened in any meaningful way in 2006. Rather, Italy’s attempt can be classified as Italy seeking to increase its influence in the regional sphere and therefore tilt the balance of power in its favour (Labs 1997). In a classical realist analysis, the emphasis is not on how the structural distribution of capabilities influenced Italy’s foreign policy course, but on Italy as a state seeking to maximise its influence through a foreign policy course. Moreover, while multilateralism provides the best option to increase its influence, we expect Italy to be aware of the limits of multilateral action. In line with the active foreign policy approach pursued since the end of the Cold War, Italy had to respond to the opportunities that the international system would present without reference to domestic politics (Ratti 2004). Our observable implication would therefore be that Italy intervened in Lebanon in order to exploit the opportunity to increase its influence at an international as well as regional level.

Liberal intergovernmentalism
Neoliberal institutionalists, much like realists, assume that the interests of states are exogenously given. They tend to conceive of state’s behaviour as aimed at maximising their welfare irrespective of other states. States, however, tend to cooperate with other states within international institutions with a series of repeated interactions that occur in a ‘tit for tat’ manner, in the interests of each (Axelrod 1984). Through active participation in international institutions, cooperation does not ensue because of moral considerations, but because it satisfies the ‘long-term interests of power-maximising states’ (Keohane 1984, p. 65).

Assuming that states use international institutions as a vehicle to assert their interests, where those interests come from requires investigation. For realism, interests are defined in terms of a state’s power. For Liberalism, interests are formulated by the governments in power and should be representative of the societies they represent. The logic of liberalism is therefore consequential rather than appropriate; governments are ‘motivated by the consequences that their actions are expected to bring about’ (Pohl, Willigen and Van Vonno 2016, p. 67). International institutions are the vehicles through which states pursue their interests. However, because institutions also exert
influence upon states’ behaviour, states struggle to utilise international institutions for their own benefit (VanHoonacker and Dijkstra 2010). In this scenario, domestic politics is not an independent variable determining how the interest is framed before it is pursued at an institutional level. Governments may pursue a foreign policy course not in order to maximise the country’s power but to stay in power. In this context, the decision to intervene in Lebanon would be circumscribed to the particular government in power in Italy in 2006; it would have not happened (or would have happened differently) with a different government coalition in power.

Yet, as the government seeks to assert its interest at the level of international institutions, it is important for it to be seen as acting legitimately. In this view, the government needs to frame the intervention as a multilateral undertaking and therefore convince its allies of the necessity to tackle a common problem. This would be in accordance with the baseline principle since the end of the Second World War that a Security Council mandate is needed to assert the legitimacy of a collective deployment of force (Reus-Smith 2005, p. 74). As part of this, Italy would undergo a process of ‘mutual adjustment’ (Keohane 1984, p. 13). It would coordinate erstwhile divergent policies in order to achieve a common goal (Wolford 2015). This approach is promising because states tend to cooperate from a military point of view for a variety of reasons, often not to face common threats to their security. In this case, ‘collective legitimization’ (Tago 2014, p. 266) is a powerful motive to lead a coalition to fulfil the objective.

This would seem to suit our case rather well. In fact, Italy’s vital security interests were not at stake and to intervene in Lebanon it needed the backing of the international community. As part of obtaining collective legitimisation, the leader of the coalition also needs its partners to endorse the motives and justification for setting up the coalition, in our case a UN collective legitimization. This is different to an alliance obligation such as article 5 of NATO. All of the above concerns the international dimension. But for liberalism the domestic level is equally important, therefore the domestic audience needs to be convinced as to the reason why a state must send troops abroad, especially when non vital interests are at stake. The observable implication we draw is therefore that Italy intervened in Lebanon as a result of a governmental interest and channelled its action through multilateral institutions.

**Strategic culture**

Social constructivism tends to be ‘more flexible and less based on preconceived notions than other major schools in IR’ (Rother 2012, p. 50). For an analytical eclectic analysis of Italy’s decision to
intervene in Lebanon a social constructivist angle is needed because it is less concerned with material considerations than realism and liberalism. Therefore, the focus should be on how Italy defined its role with respect to the conflict rather than the material considerations behind it. In other words, we would investigate the impact of ideas on Italy’s decision to intervene in Lebanon (Sørensen 2008).

The core features of a country’s foreign policy are socially constructed and not pre-determined. Alexander Wendt warned scholars of the lack of straight empirical application of social constructivism by saying that ‘readers looking for detailed propositions about the international system, let alone empirical tests, will be disappointed’ (1999, p. 6). We are not claiming that ideational factors were the prevailing force in Italy’s decision – otherwise it would not be an eclectic approach – but they did affect the way Italy intervened. Moreover, as Jeffrey Legro (2005, p. 2) pointed out, ‘something more than ideas has to be involved in major foreign policy transformations’. Still, a consideration of ideational factors is important, as rational calculation alone is not sufficient to account for the reasons and the ways Italy approached the problem.

So, how can ideational factors such as norms influence a country’s decision to get involved in a conflict? This can happen in various ways. One possible explanation deals with the legitimacy of intervention in order to alleviate severe humanitarian distress. Such a norm does not shape the interest per se but, as Panke and Risse (2007, p. 93) have argued, it can ‘influence strategic choices and enable, sanction or prevent certain actions’. Martha Finnemore makes a similar point in arguing that the ‘normative context [...] shapes conceptions of interest’ (1996, p. 310). Governments do not decide for intervention to maximise the country’s power, nor to assert their credentials within international institutions. They decide for intervention because it is appropriate for them to do something about a particular situation. They therefore respond to societal pressures for action, especially in response to mediatised events (Robinson 2001). Therefore, states need to consider how domestic audiences will judge intervention beyond the normative context in which they operate. National discourse and its impact upon populations becomes quite important (Knudsen 2013).

The norms that influence a group of states’ behaviour tell us about what is appropriate to do in a given situation (Katzenstein 1996). Collective norms are intersubjective understandings, however, and it is not possible to deduct foreign policy behaviour from them. To understand how the argument for intervention is framed, considerations of how the government in power uses discourse to legitimise the intervention as appropriate are needed. In the case of 2006, the EU roundly
condemned Israel’s disproportionate use of force and thus created the normative context for the deployment of a peacekeeping force in Southern Lebanon (Smith 2006). The UN legitimised Israel’s war with Hezbollah but condemned, along with European and Arab states, Israel’s ‘unnecessarily disproportionate violence that had caused a human disaster’ (Makdisi 2011, p. 13). So, following this logic, constructivism would explain Italy’s behaviour on the ground that it considered intervention the appropriate response to a humanitarian concern.

In the same vein, the constructivist perspective can also shed light on the way Italy decided to intervene – in other words, the humanitarian framing of the mission. Indeed, when UN resolution 1701 called for a strengthened UNIFIL force, the nature of the mission was far from clear: whether Hezbollah would surrender without resistance, and Israel forces withdraw or not, was just a matter of speculation. In other words, when the decision to intervene was taken, the operational goals, rules of engagement and eventually the very same level of violence that Italian soldiers were about to experience remained uncertain.

This is where strategic culture kicks in: borrowing (among many) from Johnston’s seminal contribution, we can define the concept as “an integrated set of symbols […] that act to establish pervasive and long-standing grand strategic preferences by formulating concepts of the role efficacy of military force” (Johnston 1995, p. 36). As argued by many authors (Coticchia and Giacomello 2008; Ignazi, Giacomello, Coticchia 2011; Pirani 2010) one of the main traits of the Italian strategic culture is the framing of military interventions as “peace” and “humanitarian” operations. As a result, following this logic, we should expect that both the public debate and the operational planning represent the Italian contribution to UNIFIL II in these terms.

3. Italy’s choice to intervene in Lebanon: motives and drivers

From a domestic perspective, the war in Lebanon came at a critical juncture time for Italian politics. The newly appointed Prime Minister, Romano Prodi had taken office on May 17th – i.e. less than two months before the war erupted – and was dependent on an unstable centre-left coalition. The broad coalition supporting the Prodi government, known as L’Unione (The Union), included as many as 7 different parties covering the whole spectrum of the left, from the former Cristian Democrats to the Greens and Communists1. Even so, the government could count on just a tiny majority (only 10 votes) within the Upper Chamber of the Parliament (Senato della Repubblica

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1 France played a key role in leading the negotiations within the UN Security Council; furthermore, UNIFIL I was under the French command.
2006a: 76). This gave smaller parties a significant blackmail potential (Sartori 1976: 123-125), as witnessed less than two years later, on January 24th 2008, when the Senate passed a vote of no confidence following a scandal involving Clemente Mastella, the leader of the small UDEUR party.

Beyond that, the war in Lebanon resulted in a proving ground for the alleged U-turn in foreign policy that Prodi and his allies had trumpeted during the electoral campaign. As stressed most clearly by Caffarena (2007: 156), regardless of all the possible sources of tension within the coalition, the centre-left made clear that an immediate goal of its foreign policy would be to take distance from the previous Berlusconi’s centre-right government. As a result, contrary to the purported subjection to the US dictates of the previous administration, Prodi would rather seek for ‘a relationship of a different type – loyal, but not subordinate – towards the United States’ (Ibidem). By reverse, partnership with Europe would be chosen as ‘the natural seat and multiplier of the effectiveness of the international political strategy of the country’ (Ibidem), and multilateralism (as embodied by the UN) would return as the guiding principle of Italy’s international action. Finally, ‘greater attention [would be] dedicated to the Mediterranean area to cultivate the historic siting of Italy’ (Ibidem; see also D’Alema 2006).

Given these domestic constraints, whence the Italian determination to play an active role in settling the conflict in Lebanon? In order to address this point we will first provide a brief overview of the 2006 war in order to outline the security implications for Italy as well as the situation on the field when the troops were deployed. Secondly, we will describe the actual reaction of the then Prodi government: in this section, we will dwell upon the foreign policy initiatives launched since the end of July to bring the issue to the attention of the international community. In particular, the early involvement in the issue during the G8 meeting in St. Petersburg, the peace conference held in Rome on July 26th, the diplomatic effort aimed at reaching a UN agreement on a new resolution, and the pressure on France to grant its commitment to an eventual peacekeeping mission. Finally, we will sum up the main themes discussed in the parliamentary debates on Lebanon from June to October 2006.

3.1 A concise overview of the war in Lebanon

The conflict between Israel and Hezbollah started on the 12th of July 2006. That day a Hezbollah-related group attacked a contingent of Israeli soldiers south of the so-called Blue Line, killing 8 and kidnapping two. The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) reacted quickly, first by bombing Hezbollah’s
strongholds in various regions, then with sweeping sorties of the land forces in southern Lebanon. This strategy proved insufficient to dismantle Hezbollah that retaliated in turn with a massive launch of missiles targeting the northern regions of Israel. In a few weeks the death toll had grown to the disturbing figure of about a thousand civilian casualties and one million displaced persons in Lebanon alone (Giunci 2007; Makdisi, Göksel, Hauck and Reigeluth 2009: 21, Ronzitti, 2007).

In the face of a possible escalation of the conflict, with involvement of regional powers like Syria and Iran, the international community reacted swiftly. As we will see in the next paragraph, the peace conference on Lebanon, hosted in Rome on July 26th, gathered all the main players in the region, including the US, the High Representative for the Common Security and Defence Policy Xavier Solana, the UN General Secretary Kofi Annan, and regional players like Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, it was on August the 11th that the fighting suddenly ended, with UN resolution 1701. The UN called for a truce among the parties and upgraded the existing UNIFIL mission (dating back to 1978) strengthening the 2000-strong contingent already deployed with up to additional 13000 soldiers (IISS 2007). Within a few days both factions suspended hostilities and, apart from minor accidents, they complied with the resolution.

From the very beginning, then, the UN forces were given a variety of tasks that qualified the operation most properly as robust peacekeeping. In fact, the range of tasks spanned from “ensur[ing] humanitarian access to civilian populations and the voluntary and safe return of displaced persons” (UNSC, 2006: 3) – which is clearly a civilian task – to “Monitor[ing] the cessation of hostilities” and “support[ing] the Lebanese armed forces as they deploy throughout the South, including along the Blue Line, as Israel withdraws its armed forces from Lebanon” (Ibidem) – the most traditional peacekeeping function. Beyond that, the Resolution also called the multinational force to support the Lebanese army in the attempt to re-establish control over southern regions of Lebanon. In particular, as spelt out in paragraph 8 of the document, this implied:

– full respect for the Blue Line by both parties;
– security arrangements to prevent the resumption of hostilities, including the establishment between the Blue Line and the Litani river of an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL […], deployed in this area;
– full implementation of the relevant provisions of the Taif Accords, and of resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1680 (2006), that require the disarmament of all armed groups in
Lebanon, so that, pursuant to the Lebanese cabinet decision of 27 July 2006, there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese State;– no foreign forces in Lebanon without the consent of its Government;– no sales or supply of arms and related materiel to Lebanon except as authorized by its Government;– provision to the United Nations of all remaining maps of landmines in Lebanon in Israel’s possession (UNSC, 2006: 2-3);

The detailed wording of these lines clearly meant that UNIFIL had the responsibility to make sure that Hezbollah (and eventually other groups, for that matter) would give all the weapons up and any external source of procurement would be cut off. In a nutshell, then, the UN cast a high responsibility on the contingent, as it was supposed to support the Lebanese forces (LAF) with the disarmament of warring militias (a task well beyond LAF’s reach). For Italy, this task meant embarking on a mission scarcely similar to the ones already deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq (Ignazi, Giacomello, Coticchia, 2011: 78).

3.2 Italy’s reaction to the war and foreign policy activism

It is worth stressing that Italy had been involved in Lebanon with a number of initiatives well before the war erupted. The most widely known is certainly the military contribution to UNIFIL I, although the sheer number of troops at the time was in the order of 50 units. Other initiatives were aimed at promoting development through aid and donations (about 86 million Euros), mostly in the agricultural and water management sectors. When the war broke out Italy provided Lebanon with emergency and humanitarian support worth about 1.35 million Euros. On top of that, 540.000 Euros were also destined to the war-torn regions via the World Health Organisation (WHO), the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian affairs (OCHA) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM), and 30 more millions were allocated to rebuild the infrastructures damaged or destroyed by the war (Camera dei Deputati, 2006a: 197; 2006b: 26).

The Italian involvement in the crisis was not limited to humanitarian assistance. In fact, the diplomatic reaction displayed by the Prodi government showed a remarkable degree of foreign policy activism. Three main lines of action have been pursued with particular care: 1) in the conflict area, especially with Lebanon and Israel (Brighi 2013: 129; 2) in multilateral fora, 3) at the EU level. Whether these initiatives proved successful or not is beyond our interest. Nor we can assess
here if such activism eventually led to gain more influence internationally. Our goal in the following pages is to understand Rome’s goals and strategy. To proceed with order, we will provide a concise overview of the main initiatives in chronological order.

In terms of activism in multilateral forums, Italy’s first initiative came just a few days after the war erupted, at the G-8 Summit in St. Petersburg. On that occasion, while recognising the need for peace and stability in the region, the major powers did not share a common view on how to bring violence to a halt. For example, in a joint press conference on 16 July, President Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair blamed Hezbollah – implicitly defined as a terrorist organization – responsible for the war and openly expressed their support for Israel (the only cautionary note being that Israel’s retaliation should be proportionate) (President George W. Bush 2006b). On the contrary, Italy explicitly boasted its ‘equi-nearness’ with both Israel and Lebanon (Senato della Repubblica 2006b: 13). Different orientations forced the G-8 leaders to agree on a very general and open-handed statement (G-8 Summit 2006): the wording of the document did not even spell out the term ceasefire, nor the idea of a peacekeeping mission. Conversely, the final statement called for the UN to intervene, with a view to implement previous UNSC Resolutions 1559 and 1680 through an ‘international security/monitoring presence’. From a diplomatic perspective the problem was then two-fold: to gather consensus on the form the UN intervention should take (i.e. how to frame a new resolution), and to avoid that the ensuing operation would be plagued by the problem of collective action (in other words, how to make sure that an eventual blue-helmers mission was operationally capable).

In order to tackle the first problem, in concert with the US, Italy hosted an international conference in Rome on the 26th of June: in his hearing at the joint committees on foreign affairs of the Senate and House of Representatives, Foreign Affairs Minister Massimo D’Alema spelt out four main goals: 1) to strengthen humanitarian action; 2) to forge consensus on a UN mission to be deployed in Southern Lebanon; 3) to persuade the international community to fund programs for the reconstruction and stability of Lebanon; 4) discuss the conditions for a ceasefire (Senato della Repubblica 2006b: 6). The second and fourth pints were obviously interrelated, as they had to do with the possibility for Israel to accept foreign military forces at its borders – a critical step to deploy a UN-mandated mission. The main division among the parties was between those (like Italy and France) who called for an immediate ceasefire, to be followed by negotiations on how to intervene and address the deep causes of the conflict; and those (the US and Israel) that required in the first place to negotiate the terms of the ceasefire, to make sure that Hezbollah could not take
advantage of the ceasefire. Eventually, the conference did not bridge the distance between the two competing views, and found a sort of lowest common denominator by urging ‘to reach with the utmost urgency a ceasefire […] that must be lasting, permanent and sustainable’ (International Conference on Lebanon 2006), and calling for a UN intervention, so setting the stage for the upcoming UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

Admittedly, Italy’s role in promoting UN resolution 1701 is debatable. In fact, after the Rome Conference, Prodi and D’Alema operated (with little success) at the GAERC meeting on 1 August and through bilateral consultations with the warring parties. Arguably, not being a member of the Security Council at the time, its capability to affect negotiations and have an impact on the text of the resolution were limited. In fact, according to Engberg (2010: 421) and Podrazik (2007: 7) it was the France-US tandem that set the tone of the diplomatic bargain. In Podrazik’s account, one of the most contentious issues was the leadership of the military mission to be deployed in Lebanon, with the UN and NATO being the main available options. It is worth quoting a full passage:

UN leadership was at some point dismissed by Israel and the United States, while NATO’s involvement, though welcomed by Israel, was rejected by France and Germany, though later Germany reconsidered its stance. The EU’s candidacy was briefly floated by the Finnish Foreign Minister, Erkki Tuomiojaa, representing the Presidency of the EU for the second half of 2006, but his suggestion was never seriously considered (Podrazik 2007: 10).

This stalemate was eventually overcome by a US-France agreement, which was reached on 3-4 August. The two Security Council permanent members issued a draft (that later became the nucleus of Resolution 1701) in which they convened to call for ‘a full cessation of hostilities based upon, in particular, the immediate cessation by Hezbollah of all attacks and the immediate cessation by Israel of all offensive military operations’ (quoted in Engberg 2010: 422). The UN mandate for a renewed UNIFIL mission, however, required an immediate military commitment. Those who favoured this solution to the war were now asked to carry the burden of sending their troops in an all-but-easy scenario. In other words, a typical collective action problem.
To overcome this obstacle, Italy tried to compensate the risk that other powers might fail to provide the necessary troops by signaling from the very beginning its commitment to deploy military forces. Prodi released public statements as early as in the aftermath of G-8 summit (Marozzi 2006), and D’Alema reiterated the Italian willingness to contribute massively in terms of soldiers and capabilities in his opening speech at the conference. In practical terms, since mid-July Italy deployed a humanitarian operation (Operation Mimosa) and a (Interim) Maritime Task Force (Marta 2009: 3-4). For a variety of reasons, Italy had to negotiate with France the terms of their burden sharing. In fact, by the end of August an agreement was reached that Italy would contribute about 3,000 out of the planned 10,000 European units (Economist Global Agenda 2006), although in the end about 2,500 Italian soldiers were actually deployed according to the data made available by the Italian Ministry of defence (Ministero della Difesa 2007: I-C4). Furthermore, Rome would take over the command of the mission right after the end of the French term, in February 2007.

3.3 The Parliamentary debate

The Italian Parliament closely followed the events in Lebanon and the government’s reaction. In the present analysis we have taken into account all the available Parliamentary acts from the outbreak of the hostilities up to the ratification of the military intervention – i.e. from July to September 2006. Both Chambers have discussed at length the ongoing operations in the years that followed, mostly with a view to confirm the financing of the mission with ad hoc laws, but we find the parliamentary debate in this case to be quite shallow. On the contrary, the positions expressed by the Members of both Chambers in the wake of the war provide an exhaustive picture of the rationales driving the Italian involvement in the conflict.

The most vocal pledge to the intervention is the one expressed on September the 6th by Senator Roberta Pinotti (Ulivo), then president of the IV Committee – Armed Forces and currently Minister of Defense. Her point is based entirely on moral grounds: given the high stakes in terms of security, it is a moral obligation for Italy to do whatever it can to prevent further escalation or spillover independently from the costs that this may imply. It is worth quoting the entire passage of her intervention:

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2 The main example of this problem was France: as illustrated by Katarina Engberg (2010: 419), French President Jacques Chirac had initially offered as many as 3,000 units for the peacekeeping mission, but its commitment soon appeared to waver. Likewise, Germany was initially reluctant to be involved in a theatre so close to Israel.

3 France played a key role in leading the negotiations within the UN Security Council; furthermore, UNIFIL I was under the French command.
The political initiative that we are carrying out is of the utmost importance, for substantive reasons that imply in general peace in the world, the security of Israel and Palestine, and the start of a cooperative solution to deep-rooted problems that risk to inflame the Middle East and explode the whole region, so involving Europe and the entire world.

The mission […] will be long, demanding, costly and risky. But it is just and necessary and for this reason it must be supported (Camera dei Deputati 2006b: 6).

These considerations are consistent with the content analysis carried out by Fabrizio Coticchia on Parliamentary acts and government communication (Ignazi, Giacomello, Coticchia, 2011: 78-80). As shown by the previous statements, the political discourse of both the executive and legislative bodies displays as main rationale for the involvement in Lebanon the Italian attempt to promote peace and stability. Equally relevant, of the five categories analysed by Coticchia – multilateralism peace, risk, security and war – the one that occurs most frequently is multilateralism. This is due to the continuous references to the UN resolution 1701, but also to the self-professed role that Rome was playing in gathering a coalition of allies.

The emphasis on multilateralism is therefore critical to explain the Italian reaction to the 2006 war for at least two reasons: first, the government’s pledge to a multilateral framework for intervention allowed the Parliament to reach bipartisan consensus and avoid a majority-opposition stalemate. In fact, while representatives of the opposition parties openly claimed a different vision of multilateralism (i.e. a Western-based, US-led, vision as opposed to the government’s EU-based conception) (see, for instance, Gianfranco Fini’s and Pier Ferdinando Casini’s statements in Camera dei Deputati 2006b: 16), only the Lega Nord voted against the intervention; Forza Italia (FI), Alleanza Nazionale (AN) and Unione di Centro (UDC) did not raise any objection of substance to the DL 253/06, claiming in turn their sense of responsibility (Ibidem).

Secondly, it might well be argued that the multilateral approach pursued by the government was functional to a complementary goal of the government: to raise the country’s status and prestige (Santoro 1991). In other words, this approach represents one of the main constants in the Italian foreign policy, and is justified by the country’s relative position as a middle power (Andreatta 2008; Valigi 2010). Active participation in multilateral institutions with stronger partners has constantly been perceived by the political elites in Rome as the only way to compensate for the Italian weakness as an international actor (Bonvicini et al. 2011, Santoro 1991). This is witnessed in
particular by the two main lines of action followed by Italy’s foreign policy since World War II: Atlanticism and European integration (Cladi and Webber 2011; Croci 2007; Romano 2009; Walston 2007). The Italian adventure in Lebanon, therefore, can be understood as a way to bolster its leading role within the EU in particular, and the West in general.

Finally, what proved missing in the public debate is any reference to the idea of national interest. Not, at least, to a concept that might be watered down to the classical conception of power and security.

**Conclusions**

The military operation in Lebanon testifies probably more than any other to Italy’s commitment to multilateral peace support operations. Operation Leonte, as it was called, marked the renewed and increased commitment of the Italian forces within the broader framework of UN-mandated peacekeeping operation UNIFIL II. Several reasons point to the exceptionality of the mission in Italian history: firstly, from a purely military perspective, the Italian contingent in Lebanon brought the fruit of a 15-year-long process of transformation (Coticchia, 2010; Coticchia, Locatelli, Moro, 2016). Secondly, and most importantly for our purposes, Italy’s involvement in the war between Israel and Lebanon was anticipated by a remarkable (and at least partially successful) degree of foreign policy activism.

As mentioned in the opening statements of the paper, then, why did Italy invest so much in terms of credibility, prestige, money and personnel in this short conflict? Which drivers can be brought to bear in accounting for Rome’s behaviour? More in detail, what are the motives underlying such difficult choices? Through an eclectic blend of the insights drawn from the observable implications discussed in the first section of the paper, we argue that the following causal mechanism took place (see figure 1).
Figure 1. Causal path leading to the deployment of UNIFIL II.

Although the War in Lebanon did not represent a direct threat to Italy, nonetheless it posed a problem (or an opportunity) for the newly appointed Prodi government. Differently from other crises, it has emerged from the outset as a foreign policy emergency. For several reasons – the ongoing presence of Italian soldiers in the UNIFIL I mission, the enduring engagement with Lebanon through aid and development programs, and the likely implications of the war in the MENA region – the government concluded that immediate reaction was needed in order to prevent the crisis from escalating and spreading to neighbouring countries. The regional effects of the crisis – that might be properly defined as systemic yet not structural (Buzan, Jones and Little 1993; Snyder 1996) – called for a multilateral solution. But this also raised the problem of collective action: the international community had all the interest in a quick solution to the conflict, but all members had an incentive to free ride. Conscious of this problem (the transatlantic crisis over Iraq being a lively reminder of the limits of multilateralism), the government faced a dilemma: either buckpassing or taking the lead.

In order to understand the course of action undertaken by Prodi in the summer of 2006 we need to take into account domestic politics. Since one of the main foreign policy traits of the centre-left coalition was to mark its difference with respect to the previous centre-right majority, the war in Lebanon provided at least three opportunities: a) to stress the virtues of multilateralism, allegedly discarded by the Berlusconi government’s subjugation to the US; b) to revive the EU as an international actor (recall that since 2005 the Constitutional Treaty had been stalled after France and the Netherland failed its ratification); c) to increase Italy’s standing and reputation vis-à-vis the US
and other major powers (Caffarena 2007: 160). Coherently with the liberal hypothesis, then, playing an active role in the solution of the war was perceived by the government as a ‘governmental interest’ (Pohl, Willigen and Van Vonno 2016), as it would allow to display coherence with its electoral manifesto as well as resolve in the eyes of public opinion.

The lead-or-buckpass dilemma was then solved with a clear commitment towards the first option. The Italian engagement took the form of diplomatic activism, as we have seen in paragraph 3.2. First with consultations at the G8 Summit, then by organizing the Rome Conference, to conclude with pushing and enacting UN resolution 1701, Italy made clear to the international community that it would carry the burden (and responsibility) of settling the issue. This behaviour is also in line with the liberal hypothesis, especially the neoliberal institutionalist view that sees international organisations as a tool that states use to reach their goals (Keohane 1984). But, one may argue, this is also consistent with the realist-inspired take on power and influence: through its diplomatic and subsequently military commitment to ending the war, Italy was increasing its status in three critical arenas: vis-à-vis the US, by proving to be a worthy ally; within Europe, showing the resolve and leadership needed to revitalise the integration process; and in the Middle East, proving to be a honest broker between the warring parties (Senato della Repubblica 2006b: 5).

Finally, diplomatic activism led to military intervention. The idea of strengthening the ongoing peacekeeping mission appeared from the very beginning as the most viable (although not necessarily successful) solution. As a result, the main diplomatic concern for Italy was not just to forge consensus for a UN resolution, but also to get together a military force strong enough to fulfill the demanding tasks laid out in the mandate of the resolution. Signalling Rome’s commitment to deploy a significant amount of troops proved critical to overcome the problem collective action, but forced Italy to follow her words this action⁴. Once again, the domestic constraints – both in terms of strategic culture and coalition politics – shaped the government’s actions. Coherently with the constructivist view, the strategic narrative of the war in Lebanon has been framed in terms of humanitarian emergency and regional (in)stability – as opposed to an instance of national security. Consequently, the mission has been discussed (and actually designed) as a humanitarian intervention, too.

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⁴ It is worth recalling that at the time Italy was launching Operation Leonte, the government was putting an end to the mission in Iraq (all troops were finally withdrawn by December 2006); on the contrary, the decision to confirm the Italian contribution to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan in July was met with significant resistance from far left members of the ruling coalition.
By the light of these considerations, we argue that analytical eclecticism allows for a fuller account of the Italian contribution to UNIFIL II than any of the competing paradigms may aspire to. The components of classical realism, liberal intergovernmentalism and strategic culture can be combined in meaningful manner: in particular, our focus on the key motives and actions of the Italian government sheds light on the interplay of third- and second-level variables, as well as the overlap between material interest and ideational factors. In particular, we argue that Italy’s peculiar reaction to the war in Lebanon was made possible by the Prodi government’s interest in multilateralism: this was a ‘governmental goal’, as it maximized the unity of the coalition, it provided a point of departure from the previous Berlusconi administration and allowed for international legitimacy. At the same time, from a realist perspective, the government proved sensitive to power politics in two ways at least: firstly, by leading diplomatic negotiations and carrying a significant share of the burden, it proved aware of the limits of multilateralism; secondly, whereas it denied any deliberate attempt to pursue anything of the sort of a national interest, the Prodi government also tried to increase the Italian standing and influence in international institutions. Finally, the constructivist focus on culture and norms allows us to make sense of the narrative that informed the parliamentary debate and the overall conception of Italy’s role in Lebanon.

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