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# The Reorganization of the Italian Navy in the 1950s\*

di GIACOMO INNOCENTI

***Abstract** – Questo saggio analizzerà l'evoluzione della Marina Militare Italiana negli anni successivi alla Seconda Guerra Mondiale, in particolare durante gli anni Cinquanta. Il saggio illustrerà come durante quegli anni, in particolare a seguito dell'ingresso dell'Italia nell'Alleanza Atlantica, lo Stato italiano getterà le basi per la costruzione di una nuova Forza Armata, tecnologicamente avanzata, capace di trovare soluzioni originali ai nuovi problemi operativi. Una nuova Marina integrata con gli altri membri dell'Alleanza ma anche in grado di operare autonomamente. Nonostante si fossero verificati diversi e complessi problemi per la riorganizzazione delle istituzioni della difesa dopo il Secondo Conflitto Mondiale, seguiti da seri problemi di budget, la Marina, con un occhio attento agli sviluppi politici e militari sul lungo periodo, non solo fu in grado di ricostruirsi, ma riuscì anche a trovare soluzioni tecnologicamente innovative. In particolare vi fu la creazione di una nuova classe di navi missilistiche con capacità antisommersibile e anti mine, che sfruttarono anche l'idea innovativa di imbarcare elicotteri. L'introduzione di queste innovazioni e di altre soluzioni all'avanguardia, diede alla Forza Armata la possibilità di equipaggiarsi con un numero ridotto di navi, ma con capacità superiori, permettendo alla Marina di gettare le basi per una completa ricostruzione durante gli anni Settanta (con le famose Leggi Navali di De Giorgi), in modo da tornare ad essere un importante strumento della politica estera italiana, contribuendo nel frattempo al rilancio industriale del Paese.*

## **Italian post war condition**

The 1950s proved pivotal in the establishment of the modern Marina Militare (Italian Military Navy), the current Navy of the Italian Republic. During this era, foundational steps were taken to shape a sophisticated naval fleet equipped with innovative capabilities. This period marked the Navy's reconstruction and

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reinstatement of its pivotal role, emerging as a crucial asset for Italy's international standing in the aftermath of the Second World War.

To comprehend the Navy's evolution in the 1950s and the rationale behind specific design choices for the emerging Italian fleet, an examination must commence with an analysis of the consequences of World War II. The conflict, waged between 1940 and 1945, posed formidable challenges for the entire nation. From 1940 to 1943, the Regia Marina faced the formidable British Royal Navy, the most potent Mediterranean fleet, further bolstered by support from the United States of America. Like the other branches of the Italian Armed Forces, the Navy played an intensive role throughout the conflict, with the escort of convoys between Italy and Libya being particularly demanding, leading to a series of confrontations with the British known as the "battle of the convoys"<sup>1</sup>.

The Italian fleet also engaged in operations in distant theatres such as the Black Sea<sup>2</sup>, the Atlantic Ocean, contributing with a significant number of submarines to the fight against the Allies<sup>3</sup>, the Red Sea, where the *Flotta del Mar Rosso* (Italian Red Sea Fleet) was based in Massawa, comprising two destroyer squadrons, two torpedo boats, a flotilla of submarines and other smaller units<sup>4</sup>, and the Pacific Ocean<sup>5</sup>.

Despite the adversary and substantial losses suffered in both personnel and materials, the Regia Marina remained a cohesive and efficient armed force.

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<sup>1</sup> About the naval operations during the Second World War in the Mediterranean Sea check: V. O'Hara, *Struggle of the Middle Sea. The Great Navies at War in Mediterranean Theater 1940-1945*, Annapolis, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> About the Italian Navy in the Black Sea: P.F. Lupinacci, *Attività in Mar Nero e Lago Ladoga*, Roma, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> About the Italian submarines operations against the Allies' convoys in the Atlantic Ocean: U. Mori Ubaldini, *I sommergibili degli oceani*, Roma, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> About the Italian naval operations in East Africa: P.F. Lupinacci, A. Cocchia, *La Marina Italiana nella Seconda Guerra Mondiale. Le operazioni in Africa Orientale*, (vol. X), Roma, 1961.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to the submarines that made long cruises to connect Europe with Japan, especially for the transport of materials, remains famous the voyage of Italian ship *Eritrea*. This ship travelled from Italian East Africa (Massawa) to Japan and then to Shanghai, escaping the surveillance of the Allies, check: M. Iannucci, *L'avventura dell'Eritrea*, Roma, 1985.

In fact, following 8<sup>th</sup> September 1943 (when Italy made public an armistice with the United Nations and broke the alliance with the Germans and consequently occurred the partial collapse of the Italian Armed Forces), despite painful losses (including the sinking of battleship *Roma*), the fleet reached the Allied-occupied southern regions of Italy. Through agreements with the British commanders, the Italian ships had not been disarmed, on the contrary they retained their insignia and remained at the disposal of their crews<sup>6</sup>.

This unexpected treatment, given the context of the conflict, was partly attributed to the significant contributions of the Admirals Raffaele de Courten (1888-1978), at that time Minister of the Navy, and Alberto da Zara (1889-1951), Commander of the VII Division<sup>7</sup>. They met, respectively in Taranto and in Malta, the British Admiral Andrew Cunningham (1883-1963), Commander of the Mediterranean Fleet, who had been the Regia Marina's greatest adversary until then. Thanks also to the great commitment of the Italian Minister of the Navy, de Courten, in the Apulian city an agreement was signed between de Courten himself and Cunningham, which established the collaboration between the Italian Navy and the Royal Navy.

As a result of the relatively good relations established with the former enemies, the fleet was able to participate actively in the post-armistice operations. As a “*cobelligerante*” (co-belligerent) force, not allied, the *Regia Marina* performed several functions, including convoy escort and joint training with the Anglo-American forces.

Despite this collaboration the claims of the victorious Powers would not be changed: at the end of the conflict the armistice clauses would have provided for the demobilization of the fleet, with the delivery to the winning nations of a very substantial number of the surviving ships.

The first concern for the Ministry of the Navy was precisely this: ensuring the Country the survival of the fleet, so that Italy could

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<sup>6</sup> About the *Regia Marina* after the 8th September '43 and its activities on Allies' side: AA.VV., *La partecipazione della Marina alla guerra di liberazione (8 settembre 1943 – 15 settembre 1945)*, in “Bollettino d'Archivio”, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> About Admiral Alberto da Zara he wrote the memoirs: A. da Zara, *Pelle d'ammiraglio*, Roma, 2014.



still have a role in the Mediterranean Sea. At that time, precisely from 23 July 1943, Admiral de Courten was still the Minister of the Navy and at the same time he held the office of Navy Chief of Staff. In this role the admiral played a crucial role in preserving not only the autonomy of the Armed Force, but also its consistency<sup>8</sup>.

The efforts of Admiral de Courten were extremely important in helping to preserve the unity of the fleet, and this was also due to his personal prestige and esteem with the British. Nevertheless, the *Regia Marina* had already been greatly reduced.

In fact, the fleet had diminished from 600,000 to 300,000 tons, consisting of two old battleships (*Doria* and *Duilio*), four cruisers (*Garibaldi*, *Duca degli Abruzzi*, *Montecucoli*, *Cadorna*), four destroyers (*Carabiniere*, *Granatiere*, *Grecale*, *Da Recco*), two escort notices (*Orsa*, *Orione*), seven torpedo boats (*Aretusa*, *Calliope*, *Cassiopea*, *Clio*, *Libra*, *Sagittario*, *Sirio*), thirty-six smaller units and some minesweepers. The merchant fleet, already severely impacted, stood at only 10% of its pre-war capacity.

The naval clauses of the 1947 Treaty of Paris were largely influenced by Great Britain and designed to secure the supremacy of the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean. As a matter of fact, these clauses were highly punitive to Italy: the fleet should have been reduced even more; and the articles were crafted to ensure that the Italian fleet could not evolve<sup>9</sup>.

Provisions included a prohibition on the construction of new military ship until 1950 with restrictions on battleships, aircraft carriers, submarines, torpedo boats, assault vehicles. The naval tonnage was capped at 67,000 tons.

The country would also have to deprive itself of about 200,000 tons of ships, both military (including three battleships, five cruisers, seven fighters, eight submarines, sixty-five minor combat units) and auxiliary (seventy units)<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> P. Alberini, F. Prosperini, *Uomini della Marina. 1861-1946. Dizionario biografico*, Roma, 2015, pp. 176-177. About Admiral Raffaele de Courten's personal feelings there are its memoirs: R. de Courten, *Memorie di de Courten*, Roma, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Check: M. Buracchia, *La Marina del Trattato di Pace*, in Commissione Italiana di Storia Militare (CISM) (eds), *L'Italia del dopoguerra. Il trattato di pace con l'Italia*, Roma, 1998, pp. 157-167.

<sup>10</sup> G. Giorgerini, *Da Matapan al Golfo Persico. La Marina militare italiana dal fascismo alla Repubblica*, Milano, p. 591.

### The first actions to preserve the fleet

Given this situation, which could have jeopardized Italy's ability to protect its maritime and strategic interests, the primary focus of the Navy leadership was to prevent the near-certain destruction of the Armed Forces. This commitment was approached with utmost seriousness and dedication, both by the Minister of the Navy, de Courten, and his successor at the helm of the General Staff, Admiral Franco Maugeri (1898-1978). They were supported in their decisions by the Minister of Defense, Luigi Gasparotto (1873-1954)<sup>11</sup>.

The tireless efforts of de Courten and, notably, Maugeri, backed by the Italian Government, yielded positive results. Compensation claims from Great Britain and the United States were cancelled, those of France reduced by 50%, while those against Greece, though minimal were implemented. Additionally, all the ships required by the Soviet Union were delivered. A significant outcome was that these disposals were recognized as war reparations, resulting in cost savings for the funds to be remitted to the victorious Powers.

Emphasizing Maugeri's pivotal role, it is important to note that he oversaw the transfer of naval units to other navies, successfully executing this operation despite concerns that some commanders might scuttle their ships. Contrary to expectations, the transfer of these vessels under foreign flags proceeded smoothly without any incidents<sup>12</sup>.

It is noteworthy, in this context, to acknowledge the level of dependence that Italy experienced with the victorious nations. Maugeri's appointment, even during de Courten's tenure, required the approval of British Admiral Algernon Willis (1889-1976), the Commander of the Mediterranean station and the de facto overseer of the Italian Navy under the still-active armistice regime<sup>13</sup>.

During de Courten's last period as Minister of the Navy, a crucial institutional transition unfolded, the referendum on choosing between monarchy and republic. Although Admiral de Courten

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<sup>11</sup> On Luigi Gasparotto there is his autobiography: L. Gasparotto, *Diario di un deputato. Cinquant'anni di vita politica italiana*, Roma, 1945.

<sup>12</sup> On Admiral Franco Maugeri activities: F. Maugeri, *Ricordi di un marinaio*, Milano, 1980, pp. 285-288.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibi*, pp. 264-267.

held staunch monarchist sentiments, as did many other officers, his exemplary approach and that of the entire Navy personnel during the referendum's outcome, indicating the success of the Republican choice, prevented any notable resignations within the Navy. When the now former monarch Umberto II dissolved the military from the oath of loyalty to his person, there were no particular cases of resignation in the ranks of the Armed Forces<sup>14</sup>.

On a strictly military level, what remained very worrying was the continued constraints on the future development of the Navy. The Treaties, as mentioned, prevented Italy from producing new ships, especially of the kind of units whose fundamental importance was demonstrated by the conflict.

Compounding this challenge was the severe wear and tear experienced by Italian boats due to intense operations in the Mediterranean. It became evident that some vessels were outdated or irreparably damaged, necessitating a comprehensive modernization effort. This modernization included the incorporation of the latest technologies, such as advanced sonar models and efficient radar systems, into naval units. In certain cases, the condition of the ships available to Italy imposed significant limitations.

The state of the Navy, coupled with treaty-imposed constraints and the evident lack of confidence from European counterparts and the United States, appeared to relegate Italy not only to the status of a second-tier power but potentially to near irrelevance from a maritime perspective.

Furthermore, the creation of a unified Ministry of Defence faced resistance from individual military ministries. The Navy, in particular, argued that standardizing the thinking of officers and technical bodies was essential before establishing a truly interforce entity. Given the time required for this standardization, the Navy

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<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, de Courten himself resigned, because in addition to the fatigue and stress accumulated in those days, he was also the victim of a serious road accident, the consequences of which forced the admiral a long recovery. Considering all this, in December 1946 de Courten will leave his place precisely to Admiral Maugeri who, as mentioned above, will continue the activities related to the armistice. On the admiral's attitude to the institutional referendum check.: R. de Courten, *op. cit.*, pp. 595-624. Maugeri also had to carefully follow the reaction of his men to the change in the institutional framework, but no exodus occurred between officers and sailors, check: F. Maugeri, *op. cit.*, pp. 266-267.

proposed encouraging coordination through existing bodies, such as the Defence Committee and the Chief of Staff General.

In the Navy's envisioned framework, the Chief of Staff General would receive orders from the Committee, composed of the Ministers of the "military" Offices (Aeronautics, War, and the Navy)<sup>15</sup>. Although these proposals were challenging to implement, they likely served as a delaying tactic, aimed at postponing the unification of military ministries to safeguard the autonomy of the Navy. The Navy was apprehensive that such unification would subordinate the budget to the preferences of the larger armed force, the Army.

As expected in such complex situations, opinions within the Navy regarding the unification of military ministries varied considerably. This debate found expression in the pages of the *Rivista Marittima* (the official Italian Navy magazine), hosting diverse perspectives, ranging from staunch opposition to more favourable stances that advocated a gradual process of integration and training for an effective interforce collaboration among officers and troops<sup>16</sup>.

As known, the unification of military ministries was formalized with the *Decreto del Capo provvisorio dello Stato* (Decree of the Provisional Head of State) on February 4, 1947, No. 17, a protracted process ultimately solidified by the Law of December 12, 1962, No. 1862, and the subsequent Law of October 9, 1964, No. 1058.

The Navy, grappling with stringent budgetary constraints, treaty limitations, and challenges associated with the transition toward defence integration, seemed destined for an extended period of decline.

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<sup>15</sup> Consiglio Superiore di Marina – Riunito in comitato Supremo, datato 23-01-1947, n. di protocollo 25, n. del verbale 17195, Fondo Maristat – Verbali di Riunioni presso lo Stato Maggiore della Marina, Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare (AUSMM), b. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Check: L. Biancheri, *Il problema dell'Alto Comando*, in "Rivista Marittima", Gen. 1947, pp. 3-6; G. Lei de Leon, *Sulla unificazione dei ministeri militari*, in *ivi*, Feb. 1947, pp. 111-118; E. Giurati, *Unificazione o coordinamento*, in *ivi*, Mar. 1947, pp. 217-227 e R. Alberini, *Alcune considerazioni sull'unificazione delle Forze Armate*, in *ibi*, Mag. 1947, pp. 143-146.

## The Cold War, the Adriatic and NATO membership

The dynamics of the Cold War, however, facilitated a resolution of this serious and weakened situation, particularly with Italy becoming a founding member of the Atlantic Alliance on April 4, 1949. Since the end of the conflict, the United States recognized the importance of bolstering Italy for the security of Europe<sup>17</sup>. Initially, there was significant opposition to Italy's entry into the Alliance, with scepticism coming from not only the United States but also from Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, and Norway<sup>18</sup>.

Various reasons were cited to justify the distrust towards Italy as an ally. One such reason was a perception of Italy's unreliability based on its behaviour in past global conflicts. Furthermore, there was apprehension about an overly broad extension of commitments for the alliance, particularly beyond the North Atlantic sector<sup>19</sup>.

Conversely, there were multiple reasons that contributed to the acceptance of Italy. In fact, France played a role in this favourable resolution for Italy. The country's support for the extension of the Atlantic Alliance to include Italy aligned with the French desire to broaden the Alliance's area of interest to encompass the Mediterranean front<sup>20</sup>.

To push the United States to accept Italy in the Alliance will be also the consideration of the potentialities of development of the Country and its geographic position, for the obvious implications above all in marine key.

In the period immediately following the end of World War II, in addition to securing a position within the Western alliance, one of the major concerns for the Italian state was the intricate

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<sup>17</sup> L. Incisa di Camerana, *L'adesione dell'Italia all'Alleanza Atlantica*, in CISM (a cura di), *L'Italia del dopoguerra. Le scelte internazionali dell'Italia*, Roma, 1999, p. 99.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibi*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>19</sup> For a more in-depth exploration of this topic, compare Acheson's memorandum (Washington 2.03.1949) on Italy's accession to the Alliance. Cfr.: O. Barié *et al*, *Storia delle relazioni internazionali. Testi e documenti (1815-2003)*, Rastignano, 2004, pp. 604-606.

<sup>20</sup> E.T. Smith, *The United States Italy and NATO 1947-1952*, London, 1991, p. 71.

relationship with its Yugoslav neighbour. This was particularly pronounced due to tensions related to the city of Trieste<sup>21</sup>.

During those years, the eastern border was a source of significant concern within the Italian General Staff. General Claudio Trezzani (1881-1955)<sup>22</sup>, serving as the Chief of the Defence Staff, conveyed these apprehensions to Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi (1881-1954):

The problem of Adriatic maritime borders in reality is just one aspect – the most vivid currently – of the more general issue of Italy's maritime borders. However, it is not excluded that, in due course, it may be necessary to draw attention to other sectors of our maritime borders [...] I consider it my duty to express to you the very serious concerns that the possible and perhaps predictable solutions to the Adriatic border problem raise in the Navy, with the consequent situation that would emerge to the detriment of Italy [...]<sup>23</sup>.

The Navy General Staff was cognizant that the presence of an American aircraft carrier, accompanied by four cruisers and their escorts, along with a group of cruisers featuring British light aircraft carriers, supplemented by units of various nationalities, provided a broad security framework in the Mediterranean. However, simultaneously, at Palazzo Marina (the former Ministry of the Navy, now housing the navy staff), it was accurately assessed that this presence wouldn't be able to comprehensively cover every area of the Mediterranean<sup>24</sup>.

The General Staff, in fact, identified the Adriatic Sea as one of the theatres where a clear supremacy of Western forces in the event of conflict would be challenging to achieve immediately. This consideration was especially pertinent given the Soviet deployment

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<sup>21</sup> In reality, the Adriatic problem was a priority for the Italian defence during the whole period of the so-called Cold War, and was exacerbated during the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

<sup>22</sup> On General Trezzani a brief biography could be found on the official page of the Italian Ministry of Defence: [https://www.difesa.it/Area\\_Storica\\_HTML/pilloledistoria/Pagine/Generale\\_designato\\_dArmata\\_Claudio\\_TREZZANI\\_primo\\_Capo\\_SMD.aspx](https://www.difesa.it/Area_Storica_HTML/pilloledistoria/Pagine/Generale_designato_dArmata_Claudio_TREZZANI_primo_Capo_SMD.aspx).

<sup>23</sup> G. Giorgerini, *op. cit.*, p. 599. Translation from Italian by the author.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibi*, p. 600.

of units in Saseno and Vlora, including a notable number of submarines<sup>25</sup>.

The Navy suggested several solutions to bolster the defensive measures in the Adriatic in the event of hostilities. These included organizing a naval presence on the island of Corfu or neutralizing Albania. To enhance the safety margin, the Navy autonomously reinforced the bases of Brindisi and Taranto. Simultaneously, the Navy developed a strategic approach to be implemented in the event of hostilities.

Given the Adriatic's narrow expanse, which inherently facilitates the manoeuvrability of light ships, a defence strategy was devised. This strategy entailed offensive operations involving nimble units, such as torpedo boats, in the Upper Adriatic. Vigilance measures, complemented by raiding actions and the laying of mines, were implemented in the Middle Adriatic. Additionally, naval operations were undertaken to safeguard the coasts of Salento in the Lower Adriatic and the Ionian Sea.

In this kind of situation, the Italian Navy had to try to organize some form of defence of the Adriatic coast with the few means at its disposal. In particular, the operating regulations of the General Staff of 12 November 1947 established the use of twenty light units, such as rafts with engine and motorboats, in the Upper and Lower Adriatic, while one or two destroyer squadrons would be deployed in the Lower Adriatic. Merchant traffic would be safeguarded by swift coastal units and the deployment of the San Marco Battalion<sup>26</sup>, relocated on armed rafts. Enhanced coastal surveillance would also be guaranteed through the installation of new coastal radar stations<sup>27</sup>.

The Adriatic issue saw a partial resolution with the rupture of relations between Tito and Stalin in 1948, and, most significantly, with the return of the city of Trieste to national administration in

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibi*, p. 599.

<sup>26</sup> Today, it is no longer a battalion but is defined as the San Marco Marine Brigade, for an in-depth analysis: M. Bussoni, *Brigata Marina San Marco. Il rug-gito del leone*, Fidenza, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Stato Maggiore della Marina Militare (MARISTAT) Prot. N. 1370 R.P.

1954<sup>28</sup>. However, the Navy remained vigilant in the area, recognizing its continued importance for the country's security<sup>29</sup>.

As previously mentioned, joining the Alliance provided Italy with increased security and the opportunity for gradual rearmament. Within the Alliance, the Italian Navy was primarily tasked with mine warfare and dredging, overseeing the Adriatic Sea and the Otranto Canal in coordination with other Alliance members, defending traffic routes in the Tyrrhenian Sea, and collaborating with allied navies in the central Mediterranean<sup>30</sup>. These tasks were undeniably intricate, but they did not constitute "major" assignments. Instead, they reflected the limited reputation and the lack of trust that the Italian Armed Forces held among European and North American partners. A clear manifestation of this lack of trust was Italy's exclusion from the military leadership of the organization, specifically the Steering Committee or Standing Group, which was at that time comprised only of the United States, Great Britain, and France.

Nevertheless, with the lifting of the constraints of the Treaty of Paris in 1951, it appeared that the fleet could finally embark on a trajectory toward gradual reconstruction, signalling a potential resurgence to a significant role in the Mediterranean.

Italy sought to capitalize on the new international context by securing significant naval supplies from the United States, made possible through the Mutual Defense Assistance Act of 1949<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> About the role played by the Italian navy for the return of Trieste to Italy is recommended: G. Manzari, *5 ottobre 1954: il ritorno di Trieste all'Italia*, in "Rivista Marittima", supplemento Agosto-Settembre 2004. For a more extensive study of the problem of Trieste we recommend: M. de Leonardis, *Guerra Fredda e interessi nazionali. L'Italia nella politica internazionale del secondo dopoguerra*, Soveria Mannelli, 2014, pp. 85-213.

<sup>29</sup> P.P. Ramoino, *Una storia «Strategica» della Marina Militare Italiana*, in "Rivista Marittima", supplemento Settembre 2018, p. 143.

<sup>30</sup> M. Buracchia, *La Marina e la NATO*, in CISM (a cura di), *L'Italia del dopoguerra. Le scelte internazionali dell'Italia*, cit., pp. 121-129.

<sup>31</sup> The Mutual Defense Assistance Act of 1949 was a United States law that aimed to provide military aid to U.S. allies during the early years of the Cold War. It was part of the broader U.S. strategy to support countries resisting the influence of the Soviet Union and communism. Cfr.: *United States: Mutual Defense Assistance Act of 1949*, "The American Journal of International Law", vol. 44, n. 1, Supplement: Official Documents (Jan., 1950), pp. 29-38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2213859?origin=JSTOR-pdf> (Last consultation on 27-11-2023).



The hope, though considerably ambitious and unattainable, was to acquire, both from international sources and through national production, a light aircraft carrier, two battleships, twelve escorts, twenty-four corvettes, one hundred and ten minesweepers, one hundred and twenty fast coastal combat units, one hundred and eighty-one auxiliary units, fifty-eight special vehicles, one hundred anti-submarine aircraft, and thirty-two maritime reconnaissance aircraft<sup>32</sup>.

The reality, as they would soon discover, turned out to be somewhat different. However, in 1949, a new and challenging process of rearmament and fleet modernization commenced. These initial steps, aided significantly by the efforts of Hon. Randolfo Pacciardi (1899-1991), who served as the Minister of Defence from 1948 to 1953, led to noteworthy developments between 1951 and 1958. During this period, the light cruisers *Pompeo Magno* and *Giulio Germanico* were converted into the destroyers *San Giorgio* and *San Marco*, while two new destroyers, *Indomito* and *Impetuoso*, were constructed. Additionally, the frigates *Centauro* and *Canopo*, a minesweeper, and twelve minesweepers were added to the fleet. It was also during this period, precisely in 1954, that the submarine component of the fleet saw reconstruction with the submarines *Leonardo da Vinci* and *Tavazzoli*, along with the launch of the *Giada* and the *Vortice*<sup>33</sup>. Indeed, the implementation of these

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<sup>32</sup> M. Buracchia, *La Marina e la NATO*, in CISM (a cura di), *L'Italia del dopoguerra. Le scelte internazionali dell'Italia*, cit., pp. 124-125. It should be added that during those years, the Italian Navy and the Italian Aviation were debating the possibility of the latter having its own fixed-wing component. When the Americans transferred some antisubmarine aircraft to the Italian Navy, at Napoli-Capodichino, they were initially taken by the Aviation, which exploited the so-called "1500 kg law." This law assigned the management and piloting of all fixed-wing military aircraft weighing over 1,500 kilograms to the Air Force. To address the issue with the Navy, the Minister of Defence issued Law No. 968 on October 7, 1957, establishing the Anti-Submarine Aviation. According to this law, anti-submarine units were under the Air Force, but operational use was assigned to the Navy, with mixed crews from both Armed Forces. Exactly, due to the inability to have a dedicated component of fixed-wing aircraft (as they remained under the control of the Air Force), the Navy placed a strong emphasis on the development of helicopter usage, both for reconnaissance and for conducting anti-submarine operations.

<sup>33</sup> G. Giorgerini, *op. cit.*, p. 621.

projects spanned a considerable period, reflecting the challenges associated with budget constraints.

The General Staff of the Navy was headed by Admiral Emilio Ferreri (1894-1981) between 1948 and 1955. He held the position for seven years, making him the last Chief of Staff of the Navy to maintain such a prolonged tenure during that period<sup>34</sup>.

In his capacity, Ferreri advocated for the acquisition of larger ships from the United States. However, the United States hesitated to grant such requests. Instead, they preferred Italy to demonstrate its commitment within the Alliance by initiating a substantial national investment policy. Only after a genuine national commitment would the U.S. Congress consider supporting funding for a partial reconstruction of the Italian fleet<sup>35</sup>.

Simultaneously, it becomes evident that NATO countries promptly sought to integrate Italian naval forces with those of other alliance members. Italians were invited to participate in joint exercises, notably for anti-submarine activities, such as the exercise at Londonderry in 1951<sup>36</sup>.

Participating in these joint exercises, besides providing the Italian fleet with valuable insights into the tactics employed by its allies, served as a testament to the growing confidence in Italy. It clearly demonstrated the significance of the Italian fleet within the Alliance, with a focus on maintaining stability in the southern front and the Mediterranean Sea. Certainly, these joint exercises also underscored the importance of interoperability among naval forces and beyond. They highlighted the crucial need to make the

<sup>34</sup> On Admiral Emilio Ferreri: P. Alberini, F. Prosperini, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

<sup>35</sup> M. Buracchia, *La Marina e la ripresa*, in CISM (a cura di), *L'Italia del dopoguerra. L'Italia nel nuovo quadro internazionale. La ripresa (1947-1956)*, SMD, Roma, 2000, p. 26.

<sup>36</sup> Actually, the Italian Navy was not in the condition to send any ships, but the invitation by the Royal Navy was clear demonstration of interest for the Italian training standard made by the Allies. Fondo Operazioni e Pianificazione, "Esercitazione a.s. a Londonderry", b. 340, f. 3, AUSMM. During the next years: ibi, "Direttive di addestramento di Hafse; direttive di Shape relative al mascheramento ed occultamento; organizzazione del terreno; ispezioni addestrative; norme N.a.t.o. di riferimento nelle comunicazioni scritte", b. 368, b. 1, AUSMM; ibi, "Direttive di addestramento di Shape e di Hafse per esercitazioni di allarme, modalità di aero-cooperazione, manovre interalleate nell'Italia meridionale", b. 368, f. 2, AUSMM; ibi, "Relazioni tra i comandanti subordinati N.a.t.o. e autorità nazionali in guerra e in pace", b. 368, f. 3, AUSMM.

alliance efficient and capable of operating consistently in a multi-national dimension.

### **The relaunch of the Italian Navy**

In recognition of Italy's efforts, marked by policies of defence spending, Washington, in accordance with the Mutual Defense Assistance Act<sup>37</sup>, decided to grant some ships. However, the allocation fell short of the Navy's requirements. Specifically, Italy received two destroyers (*Artigliere* and *Aviere*), three escort-destroyers, then classified as frigates (*Altair*, *Aldebaran*, *Andromeda*), six gunboats (*Alano*, *Bracco*, *Molosso*, *Spinone*, *Segugio*, *Mastino*), ten small landing craft (some were second-hand, while others were under construction), four ocean minesweepers (*Sgombro*, *Squalo*, *Storione*, *Salmone*), and eighteen coastal minesweepers<sup>38</sup>.

Indeed, the allocation fell short of the expectations harboured by the Italians. As evident, the received ships were tailored to fulfil the lesser tasks assigned to the Navy within NATO<sup>39</sup>. The United States did invest in Italian shipbuilding through the Offshore Procurement Programs in 1952 and 1954. These programs

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<sup>37</sup> To deepen the topic C.J. Pach, Jr., *Arming the Free World: The Origins of the United States Military Assistance Program, 1945-1950*, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2010.

<sup>38</sup> M. Buracchia, *La Marina e la NATO*, cit., p. 126. Check: "Consegna all'Italia di diciotto dragamine U.s.a. tipo "AMS/60" e di quattro dragamine U.s.a. tipo "AM oceanici", Fondo Operazioni e Pianificazione, b. 24, f. 2, AUSMM and ibi, "Piani nautici dei dragamine U.s.a. consegnati all'Italia", b. 358, f. 2, AUSMM.

<sup>39</sup> The attribution of this role to Italy in those years can be noted by the care that was given to training in the fight against mines in the training of crews, check: Fondo Operazioni e Pianificazione, "Direttive e programma per l'addestramento dei dragamine anno addestrativo 1954-1955", b. 77, f. 1, AUSMM and ibi, "Direttive generali e particolari di Cinnav per l'addestramento 1954-1955", b. 77, f. 2, AUSMM. The Italian navy was very interested and careful on the evolution and the structuring of NATO, in particular in the Mediterranean Sea: "Organizzazione N.a.t.o.: pubblicazioni, schemi, abbreviazioni, indirizzi", b. 340, f. 2, AUSMM and "Organizzazione di Comandi N.a.t.o.: Cincafmed; Cincsouth; Hafse; Shape; Saclant; Comando settore sud-est; Comando Mediterraneo; Comando Medio oriente", Fondo Operazioni e Pianificazione, b. 371, b. 1, AUSMM.

involved the construction of ships in Italian shipyards, partly intended for deployment in other navies within the Alliance<sup>40</sup>.

Specifically, as part of these programs, two frigates, *Cigno* and *Castore*, along with eight *Alcione* class corvettes (four of which were constructed for the Danish and Dutch fleets), and two vessels for laying obstructions, *Alicudi* and *Filicudi*, were built. Additionally, a transfer of technology was included, enabling Italy to narrow the technological gap with other navies<sup>41</sup>. In 1953, United States aid to Italy totalled approximately 164 billion lire, with 122 billion allocated for ships and 42 billion for miscellaneous materials (based on the monetary value of the Italian Lira in 1955)<sup>42</sup>.

The boats produced in national plants for foreign countries were consistently smaller units, and this had two effects: it promoted the revitalization of Italian shipbuilding and showcased the capabilities of the Italian naval industry abroad. Concerning this last point, it must be noted that Italian shipyards were not immediately prepared to ensure the prompt delivery of ships. This was due to both technological delays and the challenges in restarting production, given that they had been dormant for years. The orders, therefore, had two clearly positive effects: revitalizing national shipbuilding, bringing in hard currency to Italy, generating employment opportunities, and contributing to the economic recovery of the country; and fostering the development of national technology.

During the tenure of Pecori Giraldi as Chief of Staff ('55-'62), the initial results of the efforts made in previous years became evident. Similar to Admiral Ferreri, Pecori Giraldi also held the position for almost seven years ('55-'62), slightly less than his predecessor<sup>43</sup>. It was particularly under his leadership that the Italian

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<sup>40</sup> Among others, check: "Studio per l'impegno dei fondi assegnati alla Marina durante l'esercizio finanziario 1952-1953 – Verbale della riunione tenuta a Maristat il 10 gennaio 1952", b. 17, Fondo Riunioni presso Maristat, AUSMM and "Promemoria di Intesa fra il Governo degli Stati Uniti e il Governo italiano relativo alle commesse "off-shore", 08.03.1954, Fondo Santoni 2, b. 227, f. 1, AUSMM.

<sup>41</sup> M. Buracchia, *La Marina e la NATO*, cit., p. 126.

<sup>42</sup> G. Giorgerini, *op. cit.*, p. 621.

<sup>43</sup> On Admiral Pecori Giraldi: P. Alberini, F. Prosperini, *op. cit.*, pp. 405-406.

military industry gained distinction in the production of radar and missiles<sup>44</sup>.

Admiral Ferreri himself expressed the desire to visit the United States, with the full support of the Italian Government, aiming to request a substantial number of ships. However, upon his return to Italy, he did so without any concrete outcomes. The Americans, while treating him with courtesy, made it clear that Italy needed to allocate more resources and energy to the national production of ships. Only if the Italian government demonstrated a strong commitment to invest in the Navy would the United States consider granting additional resources to Italy and its navy.

Similarly, when certain Italian diplomats attempted to engage with diplomats from NATO allied countries, asserting that Italy's participation in the alliance had not yielded specific political advantages, they were informed that Italy should view NATO not solely for the benefits it could receive but for the contribution it could make to common security. This was a clear indication that Italy should play a substantial role before expecting substantial returns<sup>45</sup>. Italy had to expend a considerable amount of energy on the reconstruction of its Navy to garner support for its new naval program.

Indeed, despite Italy being a NATO member and the new allies showing politeness and goodwill toward the Italian Navy, the situation compelled Italy to initially seek a national solution. While this condition might not have pleased the Italians at the time, it ultimately paved the way for a long-term program of innovation in the field of naval technology and shipbuilding<sup>46</sup>.

The revitalization of the Italian Navy occurred during those years. Recognizing that the altered national and international context would not permit the fleet to reach the size of the previous era, the Navy's leaders made a strategic decision to prioritize quality over quantity for naval units. The emphasis was placed on equipping these units with the best available technologies. To achieve

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<sup>44</sup> For a deepening on the important contribution given by the personnel of the Italian Navy to the technological development, in particular from the Body of the Naval Weapons of Italian Navy, check: AA.VV., *Ancora e Gladio il Corpo delle Armi Navali*, Chiavari, 2008.

<sup>45</sup> M. de Leonardis, *Guerra Fredda...*, cit., pp. 271-272.

<sup>46</sup> G. Giorgerini, *op. cit.*, pp. 619-620.

this level of excellence, there was a strong impetus for the development of original, functional, and, most importantly, nationally innovative solutions<sup>47</sup>.

To achieve this high standard, several solutions were studied, some of which later became the standard not only for the Italian fleet but also for allied fleets. Various sectors represented flagships for Italian innovation, including radar technology. Initially relying on imported naval radars in the first years after the conflict<sup>48</sup>, Italy initiated ambitious programs for the study and development of this technology. Consequently, the ships of the Navy were equipped almost exclusively with radars of national production<sup>49</sup>.

The commissioning of these ships, which were ordered in the early 1950s, occurred quite late, only partially between 1955 and 1958. This delay was attributed to a combination of factors, including a lack of funds, challenges in developing advanced technologies, and the allocation of resources to the construction of merchant ships or their diversion to the foreign market<sup>50</sup>.

Another crucial sector was naval missiles. The decision to embrace the use of missiles on ships, particularly with the introduction of surface-to-air missiles for anti-aircraft operations, proved highly significant. By the second half of the 1950s, Italy was able to deploy ships equipped with cutting-edge anti-aircraft systems (Terrier type) and anti-ship systems (some with dual capabilities).

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<sup>47</sup> For a deepening on the evolution of the Italian naval strategy: G. Giorgerini, R. Nassigh, *Il pensiero navale italiano dal dopoguerra ad oggi*, vol. I, Roma, 1996 and voll. II, III, 1997; L. Dandolo, *Storia della dottrina navale italiana*, Roma, 1996. A more recent and concise treatment: F. De Ninno, F. Zampieri, *Oltre gli Stretti. La proiezione oceanica e il potere navale italiano*, "Limes", Set. 2022, n. 08, pp. 71-84.

<sup>48</sup> On the acquisition of foreign radar systems check: Promemoria per il Capo di Stato Maggiore, verbale della riunione 22.12.1947, Fondo Santoni, b. 105, AUSMM.

<sup>49</sup> About the acquisition of foreign technology, it is very interesting that some ships in the previous years, were purchased by the Navy in order to obtain information about the tools used by the Anglo-Americans in the anti-submarine struggle. This happened immediately after the end of the conflict and traces can be found in the purchase of Liberty class cargo ships in 1948: Fondo Santoni, Promemoria per il Capo di Stato Maggiore, 14.01.1948, busta 105. For an in-depth study on the development of radar and its applications in the Navy check: AA.VV., *Ancora e Gladio il Corpo delle Armi Navali*, cit., pp. 25-50.

<sup>50</sup> G. Giorgerini, *op. cit.*, p. 616.

Later, Italy advanced to the stage of introducing boats equipped with wells for launching ballistic missiles, such as the Polaris. This transformation led, during the 1950s, to the conversion of the cruiser *Giuseppe Garibaldi* into the first European-produced missile cruiser, which entered service in 1961 and conducted its first missile launch in 1962<sup>51</sup>. The inclusion of ballistic weaponry on the cruiser would have positioned it at the core of NATO's Multinational Force, securing a central role for the Italian Navy in NATO's deployments in the Mediterranean<sup>52</sup>.

The project and subsequent construction of units capable of carrying Polaris missiles were not only driven by the desire to develop national technology. Within the context of the Cold War, Italy aspired to become a nuclear power. This pursuit could have brought Italy closer to the United States politically. The ability to launch Polaris missiles from ships might have strengthened diplomatic relations with the United States, and the Navy could have played a role in a potential nuclear military capability entrusted to Italy. However, this project did not come to fruition, and the Polaris missiles were not delivered. Nonetheless, the Navy, as mentioned, demonstrated significant capabilities for technological innovation<sup>53</sup>.

Speaking of armament, it's worth noting that during those years, the development of high-rate-of-fire cannons commenced, becoming a source of pride for national production. Notably, the high-speed 76/62 Oto Melara, which is still in use today by numerous navies, both NATO members and others, was a significant achievement of this period.

During these years, the decision was made to establish naval aviation, with the full support of American allies. In fact, the U.S. advocated for the creation of a naval aviation branch in Italy to

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibi*, p. 623. For a deepening on the cruiser *Giuseppe Garibaldi* and the evolution of the other units of the fleet: M. Cosentino, M. Brescia, *La Marina Italiana 1945-2015*, in "Storia Militare" Dossier, n. 15 (Settembre-Ottobre) e n. 16 (Novembre-Dicembre), Parma, 2014.

<sup>52</sup> M. de Leonardis, *Ultima Ratio Regum*, Milano, 2013, p. 157-158.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

enhance its antisubmarine capabilities<sup>54</sup>. Indeed, in 1956, the first naval flight group equipped with helicopters was established<sup>55</sup>.

Another significant structural innovation on the ships was the introduction of a helicopter landing platform. Given the absence of a carrier at that time, there was a need to find a method to extend the range and reconnaissance capabilities of naval units, particularly considering the antisubmarine role that the Navy had to fulfil within the Alliance. The first operational trial took place in July 1953, involving the take-off of a helicopter from the cruiser *Garibaldi*<sup>56</sup>.

The technical solutions implemented enabled the fleet to equip smaller units with helicopters, thereby expanding the operational capabilities of the naval squadron. This approach allowed the squadron to efficiently fulfil its role within NATO. Notably, in 1958-59, the frigates of the *Carlo Bergamini* class began to be commissioned. These frigates were the first ships with the capability to embark helicopters with anti-submarine capacities<sup>57</sup>.

The architect of this new concept of helicopter carriers and missile launchers was Admiral Alessandro Michelagnoli, who later served as Chief of Staff between '65 and '68. He envisioned that vessels integrating anti-aircraft and anti-submarine capabilities could provide coverage for larger formations with aircraft carriers at the centre. This approach allowed the Navy to surpass the limited tasks assigned to it under NATO<sup>58</sup>.

The innovations and the introduction of new ships that enabled the Italian Navy to reclaim a leading role in the Mediterranean came at an opportune time. Events related to the Suez Crisis in 1956, the gradual reduction of British presence in the Mediterranean (although the UK still maintained naval bases in Malta and Cyprus),

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<sup>54</sup> The US gave to the Italian Navy their first helicopters and planes. About the institution and the legislation for the institution of a naval aviation: MARISEGREGE, "Istituzione dell'Aviazione Navale", 1954, b. 130, f. 1, AUSMM. There was a huge and harsh discussion between the Italian institutions about the creation of an aerial component within the navy, in particular the Italian Aviation opposed to the creation of such Navy's autonomous branch.

<sup>55</sup> G. Giorgerini, *op. cit.*, p. 625.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibi*, p. 623.

<sup>57</sup> P. Rapalino, *Dalle Alpi all'alto mare. Il ruolo della Marina Militare Italiana nella tutela degli interessi nazionali (1861-2013)*, Vicenza, 2014, p. 307. Do not confuse this class of frigates with the latest FREMM *Bergamini*.

<sup>58</sup> G. Giorgerini, *op. cit.*, p. 623.



and France's exit from the NATO integrated command in 1966 meant that Italy, alongside the US Navy, was the sole Western naval power in the Mediterranean Sea.

With the absence of other allies in the Central Sea and a well-established program of innovation and production of modern and capable ships, Italy was prepared to take on a greater burden within the Alliance. Simultaneously, it was on a trajectory to ensure industrial credibility on an international level. These achievements, realized just fifteen to twenty years after the defeat in the Second World War, provided Italy with the opportunity to have a robust naval instrument for foreign policy.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be stated that the decade between 1945 and 1955 marked a turning point in the history of the Italian Navy. Having endured a world war and confronted some of the most powerful fleets globally, the former Regia Marina underwent a significant transformation. It transitioned from being one of the most formidable navies in the world to facing drastic reductions and controls imposed by the victorious powers. Additionally, as per the peace treaties, the country was prohibited from acquiring specific naval units, classes of ships that were now considered fundamental for maritime security.

Italy appeared to be condemned to remain excluded from the possibility of asserting any relevance at sea, thus facing the prospect of international irrelevance.

The geographical position, with Italy as a peninsula in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea, coupled with the immediate dynamics of the Cold War, compelled the country to avoid isolation from international conflicts. Italy recognized the imperative to swiftly rebuild a fleet capable of safeguarding national interests. Given the new international landscape and Italy's decision to join Atlantic Alliance, this fleet needed to be integrated within the NATO, particularly aligning with the new dominant naval power in the Mediterranean Sea, the U.S. Navy.

The endeavour to achieve what was deemed necessary for the protection of Italian security and interests was an exceptionally challenging one, both politically and economically. Considering

the state of the country after the Second World War and the constraints imposed by the peace treaties, Italian ambitions faced formidable obstacles.

From a political standpoint, the credit for Italy's entry into the Western alliance certainly goes to the commitment of the Italian government. Equally fundamental, however, was the contribution made by the figures of the Navy Chiefs of Staff in preserving what had survived the conflict. Moreover, they achieved several significant results. Due to the esteem they enjoyed among the former enemy navies, Admirals de Courten and Maugeri successfully maintained the operational core of the fleet, ensuring its continued functionality. This not only provided continuity but also served as a foundation upon which to build the new Italian Navy.

Thanks to their efforts, a part of the fleet was not relinquished to the victorious powers. More importantly, they initiated the rebuilding of the infrastructure system necessary for the operation of the fleet, including ports and shipyards.

Building on this foundation, the successors to the office of Chief of Staff, notably Ferreri and Pecori Giraldi (with the support of various members of the new Italian political leadership), successfully constructed a new fleet. Although it would no longer match the size of the Regia Marina, this new fleet could boast ships equipped with the most advanced technologies. Supported by an efficient and innovative industrial plant, it was capable of undertaking complex tasks in an era where military confrontation was increasingly characterized by technological competition. The Italian Navy, backed by the Italian government, was reconstructed to a new standard: a high technological level, initially focused on anti-aircraft and anti-submarine capabilities, forming the basis for creating a highly versatile fleet.

Indeed, taking advantage of the benefits of participating in the Atlantic Alliance, these years laid the foundations for the creation of an armed force with significant technological capabilities and the ability to integrate with allied forces. In the subsequent years, this not only led to the affirmation of Italian shipbuilding in international markets but also resulted in the establishment of a fleet with autonomous capabilities, capable of projecting and safeguarding Italian interests.





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