

## In Defence of the Country

From conscripts to military professionals:  
How is the new model  
of the Italian Armed Forces working?

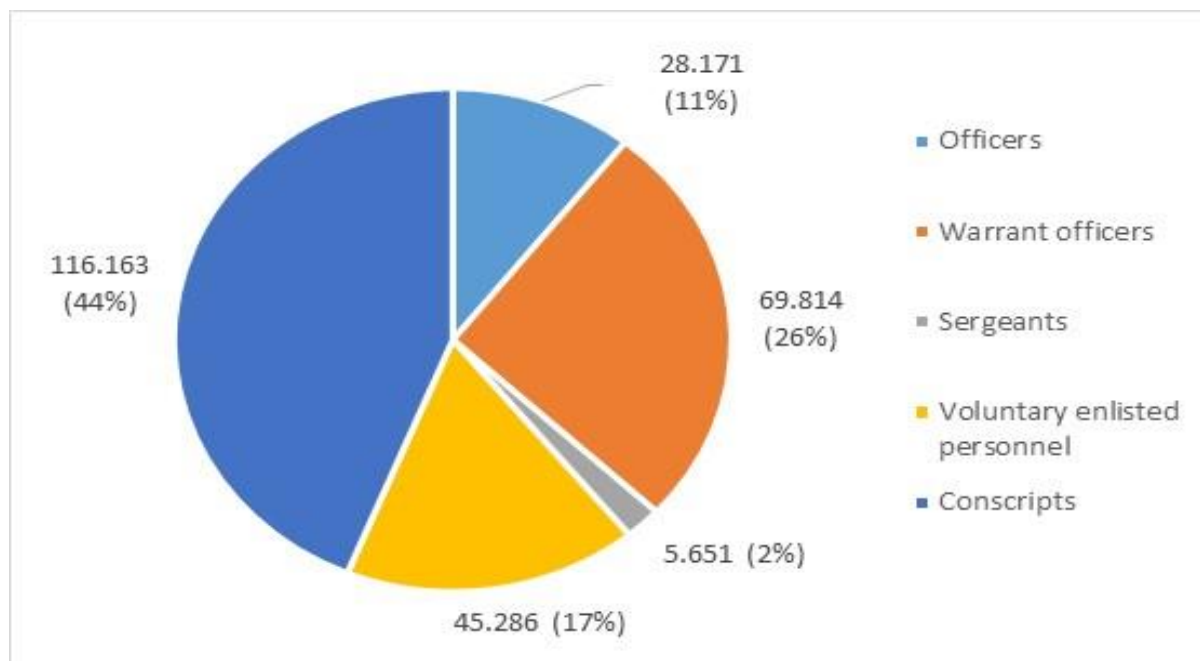
July 2018

*In 2018 Italy is taking part in 35 operations in 22 nations on three continents, with a maximum deployment of 8,000 troops and an average of 6,400, including police forces. Alongside the **defence of national borders**, the 2001 New Forces for a New Century strategic paper made of **international peace-keeping and peace-enforcing missions** the core task of the Italian armed forces.*

*A change foreshadowed, in 2000, by the choice to **abandon compulsory conscription and migrate, after 144 years, to a leaner military model (from 265.000 men and women to 190,000) entirely composed of professionals.** But has the farewell to conscript soldiers worked? The **crisis** that exploded in 2008 has significantly affected the implementation of the reform. And between **reductions in personnel** (expected to number no more than 150,000 by 2024), the **ageing** of the volunteers in service and **severe cuts in spending and investment**, even the commitment of troops abroad seems destined no longer to reach the levels of the early 2000.*

### The Starting Point

Law no. 331 of 2000 redrew the Armed Forces, marking the move to a professional model. From 1 January 2005 compulsory military service, established in 1861 with the Unification of Italy and confirmed by Article 52 of the Constitution ("the sacred duty of the citizen") was suspended.

**Figure 1. Composition of military personnel (total: Army, Navy, Air Force) in 2000**

Source: Ministry of Defence – Additional Notes on Forecasts

## Analysis

**In 2000**, the year the law on the suspension of compulsory military service and the transition to a professional model was approved, the **Italian armed forces consisted of about 265,000 men, 44% of whom were conscripts.**

In addition to the officers (85 per cent of them in effective permanent service-SPE), and the non-commissioned officers (all of whom were professionals), the enlisted troops already included a large number of volunteers (men and women): 13,658 for an indefinite period and 31,628 who had signed on for shorter periods.

In 2001 Legislative Decree no. 215 established the goal to be achieved by 2021: total **military personnel of 190,000** made up of

- 22,250 officers
- 63,947 non-commissioned officers (7,578 adjutants, 17,637 warrant officers and 38,532 sergeants)
- 103,803 enlisted troops (about 70% in permanent service and 30% for fixed terms).

**In 2012**, the model began to undergo significant revisions in order to contain expenditure. The 2014 reform, by way of Legislative Decree no. 8, set a new target to be achieved in 2024: **150,000 personnel**, made up as follows:

- 18,300 officers
- 40,670 non-commissioned officers (18,500 warrant officers and 22,170 sergeants)
- 91,030 enlisted troops (62% of whom in effective permanent service).

### In Defence of the Republic

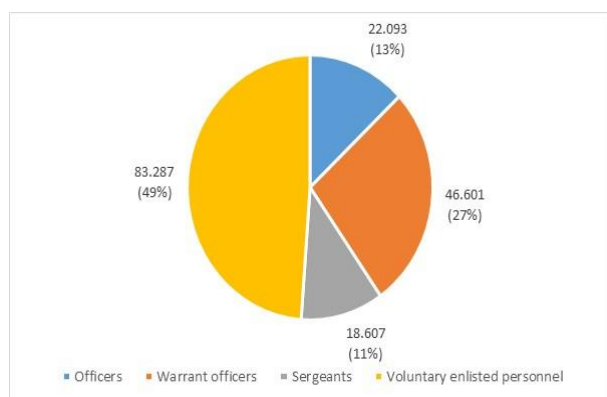
**1946-1994** - Model based on **compulsory conscription** with the progressive introduction of extended re-enlistment, essentially professional as far as officers and non-commissioned officers were concerned.

**1995-2005 - Mixed model**, the result of international experience in the eighties and nineties: a conscripted component alongside a professional core and, since 1999, also open to women.

**2005-2012 - Professional model**: the human element is entirely made up of professionals. The figure of the volunteer in permanent service is seen as "the backbone of the force".

**2013-today - Revised professional model**, both as to numbers (from 190,000 to 150,000) and in the proportion of volunteers in effective permanent service and fixed-term volunteers.

**Figure 2. Composition of total military personnel (Army, Navy, Air Force) in 2017**



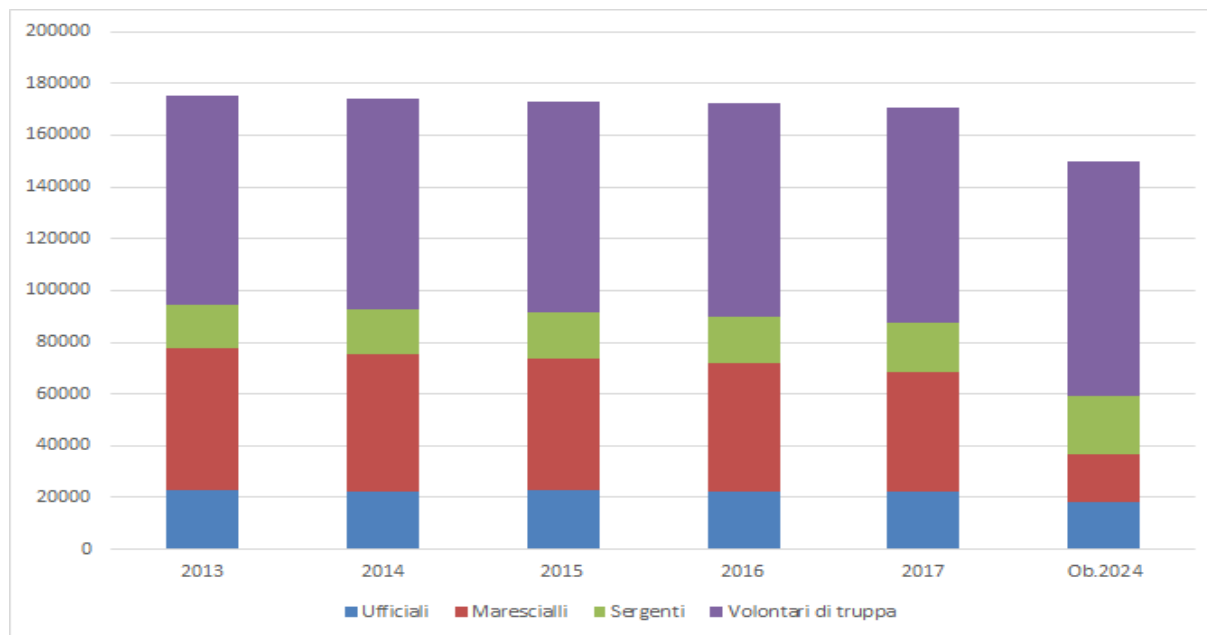
Source: Ministry of Defence

In **2017** the Italian Armed Forces were made up of **170,588 personnel**. The **non-commissioned officers** (warrant officers and sergeants) continued to represent **38% of the active force** (target set for 2024: 27%).

The number of warrant officers (almost 37,000) was still far from forecasts in all the armed forces, while **the number of officers was already in line with the objectives**.

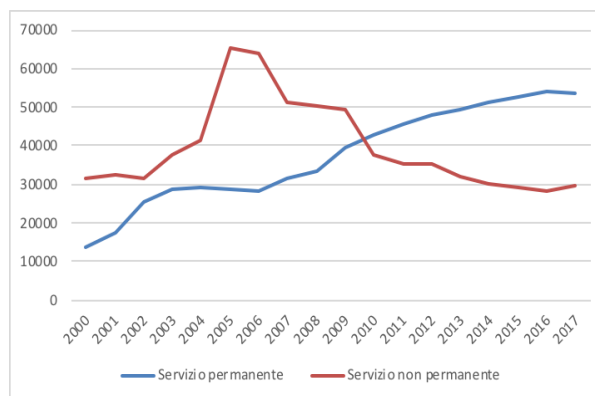
**Enlisted personnel did not even account for half of overall personnel**, far from the 61% target set for 2024.

**Figure 3. Breakdown of military personnel (2013-2017) compared to the 2024 objectives**



Source: Ministry of Defence. Blue: Officers. Red: Warrant officers. Green: Sergeants. Violet: Voluntary enlisted personnel

**Figure 4. Fixed-term and open-ended enlisted volunteers. 2000-2017**



Source: Ministry of Defence

In 2010, **open-ended volunteers** (i.e. those

on permanent active service, the blue line in the graph) **exceeded fixed-term volunteers** (those on renewable one- or four-year enlistment terms). The relationship between the two figures, initially intended to be 70:30, was corrected in 2012 to **62:38**. The 2015 Defence *White Paper*

went even further, proposing a 50-50 split. The government proposal - resulting from the need to encourage personnel turnover - has never become law but, paradoxically, would have got close to the starting point: in 2000, 70% of troops were in non-permanent service.

### The (Complicated) Price of Defence

**The resources that the Italian State spends on defence do not correspond to the budget of the Ministry of that name** (a budget which, in 2017, amounted to **€20.2 billion** and also included expenses for other purposes): **investments are in fact partially financed by MISE**, the Ministry of Economic Development (to the tune of **€2.7 billion** in 2017), while **international missions use funds from the MEF**, the Ministry of the Economy and Finance (about **€1 billion**).

About a third of the Ministry of Defence budget (€6 billion) goes to the **Carabinieri**, who normally carry out police functions. The term "defence function" therefore means the budget of the Ministry of Defence less the Carabinieri component and other inappropriate items. This explains the difficulties and differences in figures that are sometimes found on the subject.

### In detail. The decline in resources.

Total Italian defence spending includes MISE and MEF funds (see box) and does not show significant changes until 2005. With the economic crisis of 2008 a downward trend began and the Armed Forces were faced:

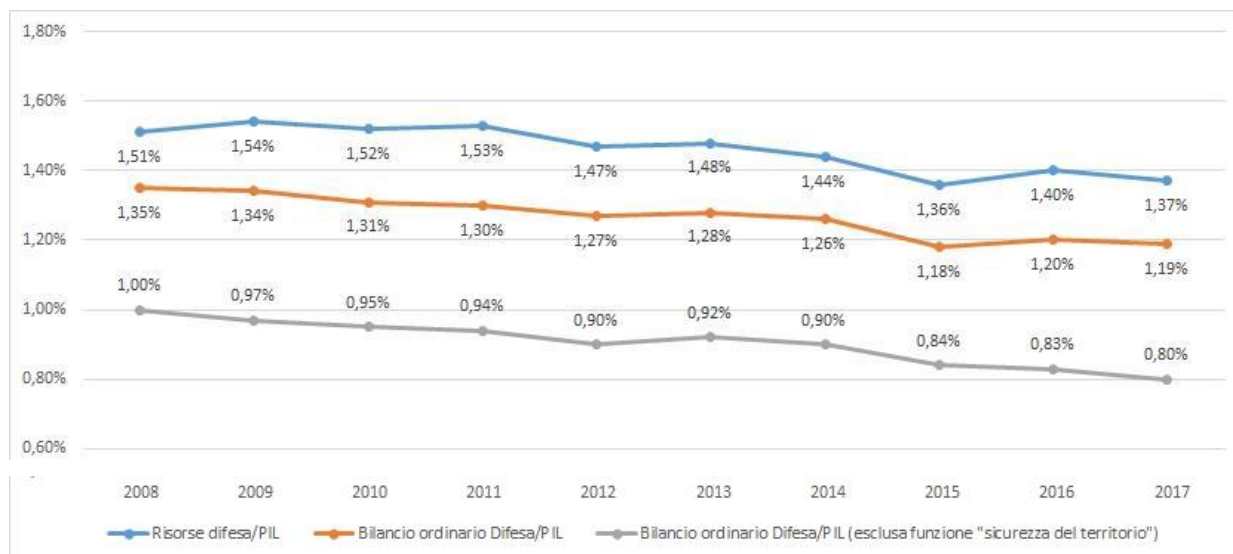
- **the absence of substantial change in total economic resources** in real terms **in the medium-long term** (from €23.6 billion in 2008 to €23.5 billion in 2017)
- a substantial **increase in personnel spending**, as against the **decline of the other two components**, investment and, mostly, running costs.

**Figure 5. Trend in Defence Spending from 2008 to 2017**



Source: Multi-Year Planning Document of the Ministry of Defence 2017-2019. The blue line shows total resources, the red one Ministry of Defence alone.

**Figure 6. Trend of defence spending from 2008 to 2017 as a percentage of GDP**



Source: Multi-Year Planning Document of the Ministry of Defence 2017-2019. The blue line shows total resources, the red one Ministry of Defence alone, the grey one the Ministry but without the Carabinieri.

**Figure 7. Total expenditure for the "defence function" 1996-2017 (in Euro)**

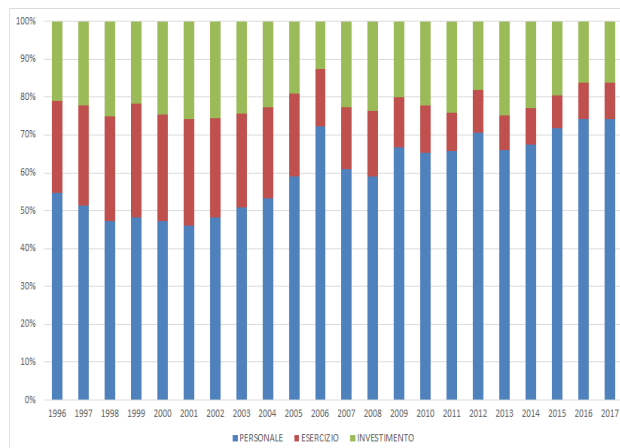


Source: Ministry of Defence - Additional notes to the estimates. "Defence function" means the budget of the Ministry of Defence less the Carabinieri and other inappropriate items.

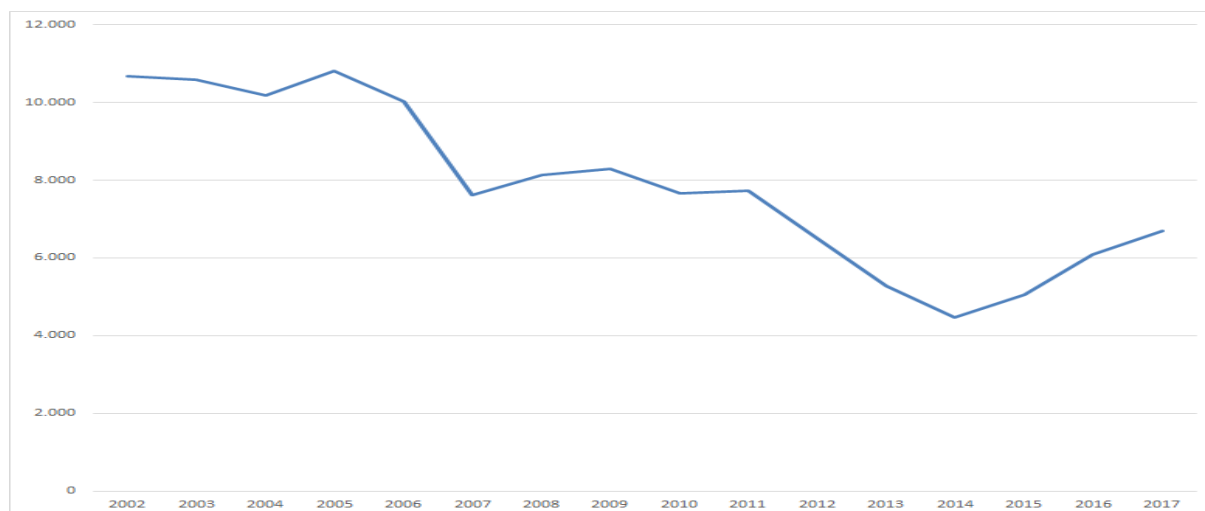
Until the year 2000, when the mixed model was still in operation, the distribution of expenses considered optimal by law no. 244 of 2012 was basically adhered to: 50% for personnel, 25% for operating expenses and the remaining 25% for investments.

Since 2005, with the transition to the new military model, **there has been a stunning increase in personnel costs**: the enlisted component receives a salary and no longer the symbolic daily allowance once paid to conscripts (just over Lire 5,000 per day, less than Euro 3). Salaries (in blue in Figure 8) now represent 75% of the Ministry's budget.

**Figure 8. Percentage breakdown of expenses among personnel, operations and investment. 1996-2017**



Source: Ministry of Defence

**Figure 9. Average numbers of Italian military in operations abroad from 2002 to 2017**

Source: Ministry of Defence

### Missions Abroad

In 2018 Italy is participating in **35 operations in 22 nations on three continents, with a maximum deployment of 8,000 troops and an average of 6,400** (in 2017 the average was 6,700), including police forces.

**The main task of the Italian Armed Forces**, according to the guidelines given in the 2001-2002 programming papers, **has shifted from defence of the national borders to the projection of force outside the local area as part of international peacekeeping and peace-enforcing missions.** Between 2002 and 2005, coinciding with the transition to the new professional model, extraordinary efforts were expended, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq, with an average presence in the field of 10,000 men and women and a maximum commitment that approached 12,000 in 2003.

Since then, **the presence of Italian troops abroad has decreased**, no longer reaching the levels of the first half of the 2000s.

In fact, since 2006 there has been **a gradual downsizing**, coinciding with **the withdrawal from Iraq** and a government majority that included strongly anti-militarist positions: whereas in the period 2006-2011 there were still about 8,000 troops active on missions abroad, starting from 2012, partly as a result of the **economic crisis**, there was a further reduction (just over 4,000 in 2013). A resumption of the commitment occurred in the 17th Legislature, starting in 2014.

### In detail. The charge of the over 30s...

The Italian armed forces are growing older. According to the then Defence Minister, Roberta Pinotti, in an address to the Senate Defence Committee on 18 July 2017, **the average age of the military operative today is 37.9 years.** In the Army, in particular, only 25% of personnel are between 20 and 30 years of age and 40% are between 31 and 40.

The continuing increase in the average age, according to what emerged from the numerous hearings held in Parliament, if not corrected will create ever more significant **problems of management and deployment** in positions with a strong operational connotation, such as missions abroad.

### ... and of the South (including the islands)

The composition of the Armed Forces no

longer represents the Italian regions proportionately. With the transition to the professional model, in fact, the Army, Navy and Air Force have become providers of jobs - moreover these tend to be of a permanent nature - and therefore have attracted and attract **more and more young people from the areas of the country with the highest rates of unemployment.**

Already in 2012, 84% of the short-term volunteers in the Army came from southern Italy and the islands, and for enlisted volunteers in the Navy and Air Force the picture was not very different. The same goes for the Carabinieri: about 68 volunteers out of 100 from the South or islands, as against 22 from Central Italy and 9 from

the North.

The trend in recruitment in the following years has confirmed the substantial **role of the new professional model of the Armed Forces as a social shock absorber**: from 2010 to 2017 in the geographical distribution of would-be Army recruits the first three places have always been occupied by Campania, Sicily and Puglia.

The prevalence of young people from the South and the islands, however, contrasts with the available places, as evidenced by the 2017 *Army Report*: 49% of personnel come from Southern Italy where only 17% of positions are located.

### The Return of National Service

After the end of the Cold War, the majority of European countries progressively abandoned the model of armed forces based on compulsory conscription to move towards a professional-type system. This model is now predominant in NATO and the EU, although **some States have recently reintroduced conscription or are preparing to do so.**

While in **Estonia** compulsory military service has been in force since the 1991 constitution, **Lithuania**, in the spring of 2015, introduced a nine-month national service, both for geopolitical reasons and to address the scarcity of volunteers. For similar reasons, in **Sweden** in March 2017 the Government announced it would draft, starting from January 2018, 4000 18-year-olds each year. And even in **France**, where the suspension of national service was introduced at the end of the last century, President Emmanuel Macron in an interview (February 2018) aired the hypothesis of reintroducing compulsory conscription, extended to both sexes.

## Conclusions

The Italian Armed Forces have been entirely professional since 2005 but **the process of transformation, almost twenty years after its start, is still under way.** The deadline for the achievement of a definitive structure, initially set for 2021, has been postponed to 2024. A final evaluation can only be carried out after that time.

It can already be noted, however, as follows:

**Manpower.** The professional model has met its objectives, from the starting point down to 190,000 troops (even achieving this early). Even the new target of 150,000 does not seem difficult to achieve. This also applies to the three branches of the armed forces viewed individually.

**Careers.** Officers are already aligned with the objectives set by the reform. Among non-commissioned officers, instead, warrant officers remain in chronic oversupply and sergeants are understrength. Without changes in personnel policies, the 2024 deadline may not be met.

**Ageing.** The new model, based on the figure of the permanent professional, has shown itself vulnerable on the (predictable) front of the progressive increase in the average age. To avoid an "army of temporary workers", volunteers were hired on a permanent basis but, for enlisted troops, at a relatively mature age: access to permanent active service comes after an annual renewable service commitment and a similarly renewable four-year service commitment. The cut in new recruitment has further aggravated the

situation. It is no coincidence that the 2015 Defence *White Paper* aimed at increasing fixed-term positions and lowering the maximum age for new recruits. The need remains to help with external career options after discharge.

**Regionalisation.** Due to the prevalence of volunteers coming from the South, the representativeness of the Armed Forces with respect to the Italian regions is unbalanced. This poses problems of family reunification, too.

**Budget.** It's the great critical issue of the reform. The professional model, based on more expensive permanent personnel on active duty, has proved to be incompatible with a policy of fundamentally stable, if not reduced, budgets in real terms. The 2000 reform was aimed not so much at savings as the rationalisation of expenditure: fewer troops but better trained and more experienced ones, greater efficiency. Given the need to guarantee the payment of salaries, the decline in resources has imposed significant cuts to investments and operational expenditure, i.e. precisely those expenditures that are necessary to keep the Armed Forces operational (training included).

**Theatres of Operations.** The main declared objective of the 2000 reform was to increase the quality and quantity of the external projection of the Italian Armed Forces; that commitment has always continued in various theatres of operations. As numbers go, the peak reached during the transition from one system to the other has never again been equalled, unless the military involved in the *Safe Roads* operation are also included. It should be noted, however, that at home in Italy this task is carried out by volunteers on annual contracts, the figure most similar to the old conscript.

## Remarks

**The implementation of the professional model has suffered, and continues to suffer, from critical issues** such as the imbalance of long-term personnel and the (evidently too optimistic) aim of remodelling the corps of non-commissioned officers.

Some changes that have occurred, such as the downward revision of manpower and the need to contain expenditure, have introduced **new difficulties**.

Considering these objective limitations, one might have expected a level of achievement of the aims that was lower than has been the case. The data, on the other hand, bear witness to the **considerable ability of the Armed Forces to adapt to major changes**.

## The Dossier

This is an examination of the transformation of the military - in terms of budget, personnel and operations - in the light of the objectives set by the 2000 reform and its revision starting in 2012.

The analysis concerns the Army, Navy and Air Force.

It excludes the Carabinieri which, while organisationally within the Ministry of Defence, never relied on a great conscripted component, and the Guardia di Finanza [Fiscal Police], a military-type body not included in the Armed Forces.

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