

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Birth of a Nuclear Base

The US, Italy, and the Cold War Path to La Maddalena

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#### Abstract

This article reconstructs the path that led the US and Italy to negotiate and eventually agree on the homeporting of a US submarine tender in La Maddalena, Sardinia, which became the de-facto main US nuclear submarine base in the Cold War Mediterranean. Unlike what has been claimed by anti-base authors, according to the records of the Department of State the opening of a US base in La Maddalena in 1972 was not an achievement of a long-term US foreign policy goal, but a compromise. Indeed, the Department of Defense aimed to homeport a submarine tender in the much more strategical Augusta Bay, Sicily, while the remote La Maddalena was proposed by Italy, whose government (unsurprisingly) negotiated with the US pursuing its own national interest.

**Keywords:** US Navy Base La Maddalena; US-Italian Relations; US Bases in Italy; US Nuclear Submarines in Italy; Cold War Mediterranean

#### Introduction

The US military presence in Italy has been highly controversial since the end of the Second World War, and especially since 1954, when the US and Italy signed the Bilateral Infrastructure Agreement (BIA), a still-classified framework agreement disciplining US military facilities and activities in Italy that paved the way to the deployment of sizeable US forces in this NATO country (Duke, 1989, pp. 195-214; Nuti, 1993, pp. 261-272; Saiu, 2014). Over the decades since, a number of military facilities and basing rights in Italy have been agreed to the US under the BIA and its amendments, which as in many other countries hosting US military bases (Yeo, 2011) has led to bitter debates, intense criticism, and strong anti-base movements (Ronzitti et al., 1990; Cooley, 2008, pp. 195-212; Di Ernesto, 2010; Yeo, 2011, pp. 101-116; Bedini, 2013). One of the most famous cases is that of La Maddalena, an archipelago located between Sardinia and Corsica that from 1972 to 2008 hosted a US Navy base where a submarine tender was homeported, which entailed routine visits by US submarines, say nuclear submarines, one of the most powerful weapons ever produced by mankind.

Since 1972 activists and scholars have been addressing the issues posed by the US naval base in La Maddalena, such as the reasons for the opening of this military facility and its eventual impact on the local environment and civil society. As far as the humanities are concerned, many valuable contributions have been made available in fields such as ethnology (Orsini, 2022) and sociology (Esu, 2020). With regard to history, all the contributions have faced the obstacle posed by the fact that most civilian and military official sources on the US naval presence in La Maddalena were and still are classified, which has made several historical reconstructions incomplete if not inaccurate despite their

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sometimes praiseworthy heuristic effort. This is especially the case of the historical works published by anti-base activists and authors, who generally depicted the US presence in La Maddalena as the achievement of a long-term goal of the US foreign policy dating back to the XIX century Barbary Wars finally made possible during the Cold War by an Italian government unwilling or unable to protect its own national interests from the political, economic, and environmental point of view (Dessy, 1978; Sanna, 1994; Dore, 2005; Di Ernesto, 2010, pp. 51-53). These reconstructions dealing with some of the most sensitive politico-military aspects of the history of the US Navy base in La Maddalena have had a wide resonance in public opinion but reflect little more than the mere political orientation of their authors, who have argued such theses without any documentary evidence. On the contrary, this article aims to fill some of the many historiographical gaps on the US base in La Maddalena by providing a first reconstruction of the politico-military path that led the US Navy to La Maddalena entirely based on official sources, specifically the first relevant US diplomatic files on this subject that have been made available to researchers to date.

### The Cold War Mediterranean Context

The set of politico-military events that led to the opening of a US Navy base in La Maddalena can be traced back to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and to its two most immediate naval outcomes: the Soviet show of weakness concerning blue-water capability, and the deployment in the Mediterranean Sea of US Polaris-class submarines armed with submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) to compensate the removal of the US Jupiter medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBM) from Italy and Turkey (Goldstein & Zhukov, 2004, pp. 28-33). For these reasons, in 1963 the Soviet Union started to deploy warships in the Mediterranean, which up to that time had been left with no permanent Soviet naval presence. In the following years, the number of vessels deployed by the Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean kept growing, eventually reaching a turning point in the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War with the creation of a permanent Mediterranean naval squadron, the 5<sup>th</sup> *Eskadra* (Amme, 1969; Lewis, 1976, pp. 55-59; Goldstein & Zhukov, 2004, pp. 38-42).

This steady expansion of the Soviet Navy's capability in the Mediterranean caused some concern in NATO countries, including Italy, a country in the middle of the Mediterranean located only a few hours' sail from Libya, which had been often hosting calls by the 5<sup>th</sup> *Eskadra* (Goldstein & Zhukov, 2004, pp. 38-40), and Malta, a non-aligned country on its way to get rid of any British military presence (La Nave, 2019, pp. 369-429). By January 1971 Italy's concerns had been made clear to the US by the Head of the NATO Office of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Eric Da Rin<sup>1</sup>. As reported by the US Ambassador to Italy Graham A. Martin, senior Italian military officers and political leaders felt that "the whole Southern flank of NATO" had been "neglected in NATO's preoccupation with the Central front" and feared that this might eventually lead the Soviet Union to "exploit the tensions of the post-Tito period in an attempt to extend the Brezhnev doctrine to the Adriatic"<sup>2</sup>. Once again, the main security concern for Italy was the border with Yugoslavia, whose then 78-year-old president Tito had cancelled his visit to Rome just a few days before Da Rin's comments because of some minor but still ongoing Italian-Yugoslav border disputes (Bucarelli, 2008, p. 40; Mišić, 2018, pp. 148-149). As noted by Martin, the outcome was that despite its concern

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<sup>1</sup> Graham A. Martin (US Ambassador to Italy) to US Mission NATO, Secret Telegram no. 219, Jan 14, 1971, in National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (NARA), Record Group 59 – General Records of the Department of State (RG 59), Subject Numerical Files 1970-1973 (A1 1613-D), box no. (b.) 1751, folder (f.) DEF IT 1/1/70.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

for the Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean Italy was diverting its defense resources to Northern Italy, preventing any “desirable expansion of [the] Italian role in [the] Mediterranean”<sup>3</sup>.

### The New US Navy Homeporting Policy

Italy’s unwillingness to further invest in its Navy, coupled with the ongoing withdrawal of the British Royal Navy from the Mediterranean and the 1966 withdrawal of De Gaulle’s France from NATO’s military command structure, made once again the defense of NATO’s Southern Flank largely an American task (Kaplan & Clawson, 1985, pp. 10-12). This, combined with the steady expansion of the 5<sup>th</sup> *Eskadra* and the overall Mediterranean politico-military scenario could not but entail an increase in the US 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet capability. This led the US Navy to change its policy concerning homeporting in the Mediterranean<sup>4</sup>. Up to that time, all vessels assigned to the 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet had been homeported in the East Coast of the United States and rotated periodically. By contrast, under the new US naval policy, a number of vessels assigned to the 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet were to be homeported in the Mediterranean<sup>5</sup>, “in the general area of planned operations and not subjected to long, hazardous transits associated with rotational deployments of [Continental US] homeported ships”<sup>6</sup>.

For the US homeporting 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet vessels in the Mediterranean meant of course the need to find suitable homeports and to agree on their use with the relevant Mediterranean allies. As a result, the US started negotiations with Greece, Italy, and Spain<sup>7</sup>. Among the three, Italy could be seen as the best location for homeporting US vessels for a number of reasons that went beyond its geographical position in the middle of the Mediterranean and the fact that it was both a member of the NATO and of its military command structure. Indeed, Italy was the only democratic country of the three and its economy and standard of living were much more developed compared to Franco’s Spain or the Colonels’ Greece, which meant a better standard of living for the dependent families that were to follow the US Navy servicemen to their new duty stations. In addition, it must be finally outlined that the headquarters of the Allied Forces Southern Europe (AFSOUTH) were based in Naples, where the US Navy already had several facilities constituting the US Naval Support Activity (NSA) Naples, including a naval hospital.

The city of Naples was the site asked for by the US in January 1971 when they filed the first request for homeporting 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet vessels in Italy, two patrol gunboats and a destroyer tender<sup>8</sup>. Besides the geographical location of the city, the reasons that made the US opt for Italy and specifically for Naples were of course its adequate harbor and dependent facilities, but also the estimate that its urban area and the existing extensive support facilities could easily absorb the housing demand produced by the relocation of some 300 families. Rome welcomed this request, and in February 1971 Italy and the US signed an amendment to the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> US Department of State (DoS) & US Department of Defense (DoD) to United States Embassy Rome (USER), Secret Telegram no. 077336, May 3, 1972, in NARA, RG 59, A1 1613-D, b. 1751, f. DEF IT-US 1/1/70.

<sup>5</sup> “Overseas Homeporting of U.S. Navy Units”, Confidential Memorandum attached to Marshall Wright (DoS Acting Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations) to James W. Fulbright (US Senator Chairman Committee on Senate Foreign Relations), Confidential Letter, Jan 26, 1973, in Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> DoS & DoD to Rome, Secret Telegram no. 077336, May 3, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Martin to William P. Rogers (US Secretary of State) & Melvin R. Laird (US Secretary of Defense), Confidential Telegram no. 4586, Aug 11, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Rogers to USER, Secret Telegram no. 001276, Jan 5, 1971, in Ibid.

BIA allowing the homeporting of two patrol gunboats and a destroyer tender in Naples, where the three US units arrived that very same month<sup>9</sup>.

During the following months, the patrol gunboats homeported in Naples proved very useful in patrolling Mediterranean waters and surveilling Soviet naval units, for the benefit of the NATO's Southern flank and especially for that of their homeport country, Italy<sup>10</sup>. However, homeporting two patrol gunboats and a destroyer tender was not enough to face the increasing tasks of the US Navy in the Mediterranean, whose scenario was changing quickly, as the 5<sup>th</sup> *Eskadra* was constantly intensifying its operations in the Mediterranean, Libya had gotten rid of US and British military presence since 1970 and had started to be supplied by the Soviet Union, and after the comeback of Domenico "Dom" Mintoff to power in June 1971 Valletta decided to re-negotiate the settlement on NATO bases in Malta and declared *persona non grata* the Italian commander of the NATO Allied Naval Forces Southern Europe (COMNAVSOUTH) Gino Birindelli, which resulted in the relocation of COMNAVSOUTH to Naples (La Nave, 2022, pp. 410-435).

### The Submarine Issue

Before the 1971 Maltese elections, the US Navy had already planned to strengthen the 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet and therefore "NATO effectiveness in the Mediterranean" (Scott Thompson, 1977, p. 71) by increasing its own submarine capability<sup>11</sup>. Unlike other vessels, such as patrol gunboats, the solution designed by the US Navy to achieve this goal was not homeporting its submarines in the Mediterranean: these special warships, often nuclear-powered and armed with submarine-launched ballistic missiles, were to stay homeported in the US. Therefore, after the new US Navy planning a larger 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet submarine capability was to be achieved through an increase in both the number of the submarines rotated to the Mediterranean and the length of their deployment thanks to the homeporting of a submarine tender in the area. This of course entailed finding a suitable site for homeporting a submarine tender to repair and refill US-homeported submarines rotated to the 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet, as well as negotiating the homeporting of this vessel with the hosting country, which according to the US Navy would ideally be Italy. After the Department of State and the US Embassy in Rome approved this project<sup>12</sup> the US Navy conducted a survey of Italian ports and by November 1971 identified what was deemed to be the most suitable site: Augusta Bay, Sicily<sup>13</sup>.

The reasons behind the US Navy's choice were manifold<sup>14</sup>. The first self-evident one was the location: Augusta Bay is a natural port close to two choke points separating the Mediterranean Sea into the Western and Eastern Seas, the Strait of Sicily and the Strait of Messina, and lies just a few hours of navigation from Malta and Libya. Furthermore, Augusta lies less than 30 miles off the Airport of Sigonella where the US Navy had a Naval Air Facility (NAF) under the BIA and the Italians stationed their 41<sup>st</sup> Antisubmarine Warfare Wing. In addition, since World War II Augusta Bay naval facilities had already been used by the US Navy, whose warships – including submarines – already called to this port frequently and had already obtained a clearance for visit by nuclear-powered warships. Moreover, the size

<sup>9</sup> Wells Stabler (USER Deputy Chief of Mission) to DoS, Secret Telegram no. A-131, Feb 24, 1971, in Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> DoS & DoD to Rome, Secret Telegram no. 077336, May 3, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Rogers to USER, Secret Telegram no. 024179, Feb 10, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Laird, Memorandum for John L. H. Chafee (US Secretary of the Navy), Apr 8, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Laird to Rogers, Secret Letter, Apr 8, 1972, in Ibid.; Ronald I. Spiers (DoS Director Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs) & Martin J. Hillenbrand (US Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs) to Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson (US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs), DoS Action Memorandum, May 19, 1972, in Ibid.

of Augusta, a town with a population of about 35,000 inhabitants, was appraised to have the potential to easily absorb the housing demand produced by the 920 US servicemembers that would relocate there with some 300 dependent families<sup>15</sup>.

However, the desire of the US Navy to homeport a submarine tender in Augusta Bay, though backed by many good technical reasons, soon clashed with the will of the Italians. Indeed, since the very first contacts between the US Chief of Naval Operation Elmo R. Zumwalt and the Italian Ministry of Defense and the Italian Chief of Naval Operations, the US were recommended to opt for La Maddalena, Sardinia, or at least to also examine the ports of Trapani, Sicily, and Brindisi, Apulia, before making their final decision<sup>16</sup>.

To this day no Italian available archival source can explain the reasons for Italy's unwillingness to host a submarine tender in Augusta Bay. However, making some hypotheses is possible: at that time the town of Augusta and its port were facing an unprecedented economic and demographic expansion, mainly due to the large petrochemical complex that had been established in the area in 1949 and had attracted a number of investments ever since (Adorno et al., 2008). Therefore, from the point of view of the Italian political and military authorities, the homeporting of a large US naval unit such as a submarine tender might have posed a threat to the further economic growth of the area.

By contrast, it is quite easy to make some hypotheses on Italy's suggestion of La Maddalena, an archipelago between Northeastern Sardinia and Southeastern Corsica made up of the homonymous main island and dozens of minor and often unpopulated islands. The whole archipelago, then numbering some 11,000 residents, was a scarcely populated area facing a demographic decline with an economy mainly based on the local Italian naval base. For almost two centuries La Maddalena had been hosting a naval facility, and most of its population had either come from Corsica to escape service for the French or from other parts of Sardinia and Italy for service reasons, something which had shaped a community strongly bound to the Italian Navy both culturally and economically (Orsini, 2022). Therefore, it is very likely that from the Italian point of view, the homeporting of a submarine tender as well as the establishment of any other military facility in La Maddalena was seen as an asset for the local economy, as well as a guarantee of better reception from the local population. In this respect, it has to be highlighted that already in the early 1950s, when the US and Italy were negotiating the BIA and the US Navy planned to build a large naval facility in Porto Conte, Northeastern Sardinia (Saiu, 2014), a civilian area close to Sardinia's second and third largest cities, Sassari and Alghero, Italy had opposed the development of the project in Porto Conte, and proposed to divert it to La Maddalena<sup>17</sup>.

### From Augusta to La Maddalena

The official on-site survey for the homeporting of a US submarine tender in Italy was conducted by personnel of the US Navy and of the US Embassy in Rome in March 1972<sup>18</sup>. From

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<sup>15</sup> Rogers to USER, Secret Telegram no. 024179, Feb 10, 1972, in Ibid.; Spiers & Hillenbrand to Johnson, DoS Action Memorandum, May 19, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Rogers to USER, Secret Telegram no. 024179, Feb 10, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "Meeting on 10 February, in the Ministry of Defense, Rome, Italy, between the Italian General Staff and members of their military services and U.S. military representatives, regarding the proposed U.S. facility requirements in Italy and its possessions", Top Secret Memorandum, Feb 10, 1953, in NARA, RG 59, Miscellaneous Lot of Files, Lot File no. 58 D 357, Subject Files Related to Italian Affairs, 1944-1956 (A1 1285), b. 10, f. 430.01 Italy – Status of Forces and Base Rights 1949-1954.

<sup>18</sup> Martin to Rogers, Secret Telegram no. 0867, Feb 11, 1972, in NARA, RG 59, A1 1613-D, b. 1751, f. DEF IT-US 1/1/70; DoS & DoD to USER, Secret Telegram no. 040482, Apr 7, 1972, in Ibid.



the technical point of view, the results did not change the mind of the US Navy, which confirmed its strong preference for Augusta “Because of its central location, dependent support potential, nearby US Navy airfield and current clearance for visits by nuclear-powered warships”<sup>19</sup>. The Department of Defense communicated its preference for Augusta to the Department of State, asking the authorization to open official negotiations with Italy for the “immediate use of Augusta Bay, Sicily, or a mutually acceptable port, as an attack submarine upkeep site and ultimate homeport of an attack submarine tender”<sup>20</sup>.

During the following weeks, the Department of State and the Department of Defense drafted the instructions to be sent to the US Embassy in Rome. It had to be considered the fact that during the March survey in Augusta and La Maddalena the Italian Navy officers had informally communicated to their counterparts that the Italian Navy strongly recommended La Maddalena instead of Augusta, and furthermore that the Italian Navy “would not oppose a request for homeporting at Augusta Bay, but neither would they support it on the political side. On the other hand, they indicated that a request for homeporting at La Maddalena would receive their active support”<sup>21</sup>.

The instructions finally sent to Martin on April 24, 1972, highlighted both the strong, motivated preference of the US Navy for Augusta and what had been communicated by the Italian Navy. For these reasons, the cable proposed a solution aimed at providing “flexibility in negotiations” through the request for hosting the submarine tender that was to be rotated in the Mediterranean between July and December 1972 “at both Augusta Bay and La Maddalena during its deployment to assist in further evaluating the capabilities and limitations of each location *vis-à-vis* ultimate homeporting”<sup>22</sup>. In any case, by that time the most important factor seemed to be promptness, as the Department of State and the Department of Defense wished to move as rapidly as deemed by Martin into discussions with the Italian government. For this reason, on one hand, it was asked that a US Embassy officer who was to be in charge of dealing with this subject would return to Washington for consultations with State and Defense officials, and on the other one the US Navy had to be authorized as soon as possible by the Italian authorities to “commence radiological environmental monitoring surveys at each potential tender site”. These surveys were to start at least three months before the arrival of the submarine tender and – as explained in the cable – were ideally to be made jointly with the Italian authorities, also because they were mainly aimed at providing the means to demonstrate to the Italian government that the US nuclear-powered warships have had no effect on the environment.

At first, these instructions were not extensively commented on by Martin, who just announced that an Embassy officer was to come to Washington and explain the Embassy’s orientation on this subject and pointed out that no approach to the Italian government on radiological environmental monitoring surveys had to be done before the forthcoming Italian general elections on May 7 and 8 in order to prevent any possibility that the Italian Communist Party (PCI) would exploit the issue during the election campaign<sup>23</sup>. However, the fact remained that the negotiation policy initially conceived by the Department of State and the Department of Defense was plainly aimed at taking time and putting the Italians before the evidence of the better suitability of Augusta. This alone meant trying to obtain something that the Italians had already informally communicated they were unwilling to concede and would be more likely to irritate them than speeding up the negotiations on the

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<sup>19</sup> Laird to Rogers, Secret Letter, Apr 8, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> DoS & DoD to USER, Secret Telegram no. 040482, Apr 7, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Martin to Rogers, Secret Telegram no. 2420, Apr 27, 1972, in Ibid.

homeporting of a submarine tender. In addition, the forthcoming negotiations with Italy on homeporting were further complicated by the fact that on April 25, 1972, the Department of State received from the Department of Defense the request to homeport two additional patrol gunboats and a patrol craft tender in Naples, which of course entailed an amendment to the BIA and specific negotiations with Italy<sup>24</sup>. Also in this case the instructions received from Washington by the US Embassy in Rome stated that promptness was deemed the most important target to be achieved, as it was desired “the earliest possible” approval of the Italian government and therefore actual deployment of the vessels<sup>25</sup>.

During the following days, the Department of State and the Department of Defense discussed the submarine tender homeporting issue with the officer of the US Embassy to Italy who had specifically returned to Washington, James B. Devine, who pointed out Ambassador Martin’s “reservations in seeking homeporting rights in Augusta Bay”<sup>26</sup>. The outcome of these consultations was communicated to the US Embassy in Rome on May 8, 1972, final day of the Italian general elections. The new final instructions for Ambassador Martin were to file to the Italian government “the request to homeport of an attack submarine tender in La Maddalena and for use of La Maddalena by a rotationally deployed tender commencing in July 1972”<sup>27</sup>. The instructions anyhow went further, specifying that the Italian government was to “be appraised that, should further study of La Maddalena reveal it to be unsuitable for homeporting”, the US wanted to “leave open the option for consideration of Augusta Bay or other mutually agreeable ports as an alternative homeporting site”. However, promptness remained the most important aspect of the action, as much as the cable stated that “If homeporting, per se, becomes an issue which portends delay, rotational deployment should be separated from the issue and sought as the most urgent matter”.

As the US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Alexis Johnson would acknowledge a few days later, despite declaring the will to “leave open” other options these instructions were basically aimed at requesting “homeporting rights for the submarine tender at La Maddalena”, since this proposal would “probably be better received by the Italians and perhaps result in an expedited reply on their part” than the request of Augusta Bay desired by the US Navy<sup>28</sup>.

### The Official Negotiations on Homeporting

The two linked aspects of promptness and Italy’s orientation proved therefore to be the most important aspects for the US, whose ambassador in Rome quickly approached the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to seek the Italian government’s “approval” for homeporting a submarine tender in La Maddalena and two patrol gunboats and a patrol craft tender in Naples, as well as “permission to carry out radiological survey at La Maddalena as soon as possible”<sup>29</sup>. Ambassador Martin’s action was fully backed by the Department of State, whose officers agreed with the head of mission in Rome that the US had “a much better chance of obtaining homeporting rights in La Maddalena” and pressing

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.; G. Warren Nutter (DoD Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs) to Spiers, Secret Letter no. I-23480/72, Apr 25, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> DoS & DoD to USER, Secret Telegram no. 077336, May 3, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Johnson to Laird, Secret Letter no. 7206535, May 20, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> DoS & DoD to USER, Secret Telegram no. 079956, May 8, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Johnson to Laird, Secret Letter no. 7206535, May 20, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Martin to Rogers, Secret Telegram no. 2784, May 16, 1972, in Ibid.

for Augusta Bay “could jeopardize the present good relations” with the Italians with respect to the visits to Italy of nuclear-powered warships<sup>30</sup>.

On June 1, 1972, the US Embassy received the first, informal feedback by the Italian Ministry of Defense, who reported that the Italian Navy would shortly authorize the radiological survey at La Maddalena<sup>31</sup>. However, several weeks had passed since the official homeporting request, so the US Embassy, whose one of the two main goals was promptness, decided to check with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs whether “substantial problems had been encountered”<sup>32</sup>. The latter replied that no substantial problems had been encountered so far and the request had been transmitted to Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti for review, emphasizing that the delay in responding to the US request was mainly due to “absence from Rome of high-ranking Ministry officers who have been attending various NATO meetings and preoccupation of other government leaders with forming of new government”<sup>33</sup>.

The forecast that no substantial problems would be encountered proved soon to be correct, as on June 21, 1972, Da Rin communicated that the Italian Prime Minister had approved the US “request to deploy a rotational submarine tender to La Maddalena, Sardinia, beginning in July 1972 and to homeport a tender there commencing in March 1973”<sup>34</sup>. Da Rin underlined that this was just an unofficial notification, and that the official permission would be issued only when the “paperwork” was completed, but also informed Martin that the US Navy could “start the wheels in motion”. The US Ambassador to Italy recognized that this meant that several details had to be worked out both in Rome and in La Maddalena prior to the actual deployment of any US submarine tender in the Sardinian archipelago. However, Martin appreciated that Andreotti had agreed to the US request despite the “severe criticism” that would follow from the political left and the “acute sensitivity inherent in a continuous nuclear submarine presence in Italian water”. According to the US diplomat this was a demonstration of Italy’s attachment to “allied efforts to bolster NATO’s posture on the Southern flank”, as well of the “political courage” of a government that viewed “the concept of burden-sharing in a broader framework than just defense expenditures”<sup>35</sup>.

Rome’s will to cooperate to the defense of NATO’s Southern flank through the homeporting of 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet vessels in Italian ports was to be pointed out two days later, when the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs informally communicated that the request for homeporting two additional patrol gunboat and a patrol craft tender in Naples had been approved by the Italian government<sup>36</sup>. The official approval would eventually be issued only a few days later, on July 11, 1972<sup>37</sup>. Two more days later the Italian government also formally approved the request for the rotational deployment of a submarine tender at La Maddalena and the eventual homeport of a submarine tender at the same location<sup>38</sup>. However, as reported by Ambassador Martin, Da Rin had indicated that the use of La Maddalena by nuclear submarines had to await the completion of all the paperwork. With respect to the latter, the Italian government had specified that the formal documentation had to take into

<sup>30</sup> Spiers & Martin to Johnson, DoS Action Memorandum no. 7206535, May 19, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Martin to Rogers, Secret Telegram no. 3167, Jun 1, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Martin to Rogers, Secret Telegram no. 3272, Jun 7, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Martin to Rogers & Laird, Secret Telegram no. 3598, Jun 21, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Martin to Rogers & Laird, Secret Telegram no. 3622, Jun 12, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Martin to Rogers & Laird, Secret Telegram no. 4031, Jul 12, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Martin to Rogers & Laird, Secret Telegram no. 4055, Jul 13, 1972, in Ibid.



consideration the “particular functions” that the tender would be performing and “spell out in some fashion” the US “assurances regarding safety precautions”<sup>39</sup>.

To comply with the requests of the Italian government Ambassador Martin suggested to incorporate in a separate note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the “Statement by the US Government on Operation of US Nuclear-Powered Warships in Foreign Ports”, a document also called “Standard Statement” that listed the responsibilities acquired by the US “to salvage or otherwise make safe any United States warship which might be incapacitated in a foreign port”<sup>40</sup>. On July 18, 1972, the Department of State approved this proposal and forwarded to the Embassy in Rome the text of the “Standard Statement”, whose language specified among others that: the US vessels could not discharge any effluent or other waste “which would cause a measurable increase in the general background radioactivity of the environment”; the host government could “take surveys at his desires, in the vicinity of the warship to assure itself that the visiting ship” was not “creating a radioactive contamination hazard”; the host government would be notified immediately in the event of any “accident involving the reactor of the warship during a visit”; the host government would be informed with some 24 hours in advance of any visits of US nuclear-powered warship<sup>41</sup>. However, at the same time, the Department of State asked that after the completion of the paperwork concerning the use of La Maddalena the Embassy would seek from the Italian Government a blanket clearance for routine visits to La Maddalena by US submarines<sup>42</sup>. The cable explained that this clearance was deemed necessary to give the US Navy the flexibility needed to use La Maddalena as a submarine upkeep site, since under the then existing agreements the US were required to agree by naval or military *attachés* for each routine visit made by US vessels. However, as also stated in the “Standard Statement” the US would in any case notify the Italian Navy of the names of the US submarines to be tendered in La Maddalena, and for “purpose of harbor safety local Italian Navy authorities” would be “informed in advance of submarine movements at La Maddalena”.

On July 19, 1972, the day after receiving the said instructions from Washington, the US Embassy to Italy sent a *note verbale* with the language of the “Standard Statement” to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs<sup>43</sup>. The following day the submarine tender homeporting issue was once again faced by Da Rin, who reiterated that before the completion of formal paperwork, there were to be no tending operations or submarine visits to La Maddalena<sup>44</sup>. This was highlighted to the Commander in Chief of the US Naval Forces in Europe (CINCUSNAVEUR) William F. Bringle by Ambassador Martin, who outlined that up to that time, everything had gone “very smoothly” with the Italians, who had even approved the arrival of the submarine tender to La Maddalena before the final completion of the approval process. For this reason, the diplomat explained, for the US there was “a great deal to be gained by doing the first movements exactly right with the meticulous regard for Italian sensitivities about Italian sovereignty”, and any mistake at that stage could “seriously jeopardize vitally needed Italian cooperation in the months ahead”. According to Martin Italian cooperation was indeed soon going to be “vastly more important” than ever, since “It would be the height of folly to assume that the Soviets” would not respond to the expulsion of their military personnel

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> “Statement by the US Government on Operation of US Nuclear-Powered Warships in Foreign Ports”, quoted in DoS & DoD to USER, Confidential Telegram no. 129764, Jul 18, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> DoS to USER, Secret Telegram no. 129765, Jul 18, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> USER to Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Note Verbale no. 465, Jul 19, 1972, quoted in Martin to DoS & DoD, Confidential Airgram no. A-50, Jan 23, 1973, in Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Martin to William F. Bringle (Commander in Chief of the US Naval Forces in Europe), Confidential Telegram no. 4674, Jul 20, 1972.

from Egypt occurred a few weeks before (Badolato, 1984) differently than “they did to their humiliation at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, which resulted in a vast expansion of Soviet naval power”<sup>45</sup>.

Besides the growing strategic importance of the collaboration with Italy, Ambassador Martin’s sensitivity to maintaining the best possible relations with Italy in the naval field was also justified by the fact that many issues were not to be solved by the mere completion of the paperwork on the homeporting of a submarine tender in La Maddalena. Indeed, even though the US and Italy proceeded to an exchange of *note verbales* and eventually signed an Amendatory Protocol to the BIA on August 11, 1972, granting the homeporting of a US submarine tender in La Maddalena<sup>46</sup>, many problems were still unsolved. Above all, the Italian government had not commented the “Standard Statement”, and no blanket clearance had been obtained for the US submarines’ calls to La Maddalena. With respect to this last issue, the present archival state of the art does not allow to determine whether and when the US obtained by the Italian government the sought blanket clearance for US submarines’ visits to La Maddalena. It has very likely been the case, since the US would have been in any case required to forewarn the Italian Navy of any movement of US submarines, and therefore avoiding going through *attachés* for each single call to La Maddalena seems a reasonable request. However, to date it is impossible to confirm it and until further official records are made available to the researchers this will remain one of the many historiographical gaps in the history of the US Navy’s presence in La Maddalena.

### Guarantees and Normalization

On August 28, 1972, the issue of the guarantees for the calls of nuclear-powered warships in La Maddalena was once again raised by Da Rin, who informed the US Embassy in Rome that from the point of view of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the section of the Standard Statement dealing with the US “liability in the event of a nuclear accident” was too vague, and the Italian government desired “something more specific”<sup>47</sup>. In this respect, Da Rin referred to a 1964 agreement on the use of Italian ports by a US merchantman, the nuclear ship *Savannah*, where the US had agreed to pay compensation for any responsibility which might be found by an Italian court “according to Italian law, for any damage to people or goods deriving from a nuclear incident in Italian waters”<sup>48</sup>. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs communicated that fully realized “the need for different agreements covering merchant vessels and warships”, however, desired to devise a “new liability language” similar to that in the *Savannah* agreement. Da Rin underlined that this was a very important issue, since despite the homeporting of a submarine tender had been already approved and tending operations had begun, Italy would “not consider the matter formally closed until the question of guarantees had been settled”.

In September 1972, the Italian Navy finally released the news that the homeporting of a submarine tender in La Maddalena had been granted to the US Navy, and the Italian press and public opinion immediately focused on this new US military presence in Italy, quickly

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<sup>45</sup> Martin to Rogers, Confidential Telegram no. 4988, Sep 1, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> USER to MFA, Secret Note Verbale no. 540, Aug 8, 1972 & MFA to USER, Secret Note Verbale no. 540/471, Aug 9, 1972 & “Additional Protocol Modifying the List of Installations Agreed Upon In Principle in Connection With the Agreements Between the United States of America and Italy on Bilateral Infrastructure Signed on October 20, 1954”, enclosed to USER to DoS, Secret Airgram no. A-529, Aug 11, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Martin to Rogers & Laird, Confidential Telegram no. 4954, Aug 31, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> “Agreement Between the Government of the United States and the Government of Italy on the Use of Italian Ports by the N.S. Savannah”, quoted in Ibid.

seizing on the nuclear aspects<sup>49</sup> (Orsini, 2022). In this context, Da Rin raised once more the issue of the guarantees with the US Embassy, stating that from the point of view of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs it had not been resolved. In addition, the Italian diplomat complained that the vagueness of the Standard Statement would not help the Italian government handling the matter before the Parliament. However, commented Da Rin, Rome realized that no “agreement on new liability language” was likely to be reached before the Italian Parliament would debate the issue of the homeporting of a US submarine tender in La Maddalena on October 2, 1972, so the Italian government would be in the meantime satisfied if the US would submit a “definitive and detailed explanation” of how the US envisioned “the claims language of the Standard Statement operating in the case of Italy in the event of nuclear accident”.

To meet the Italian government’s request the US Embassy forwarded to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on October 2, 1972, a memorandum on the guarantee in case of nuclear accident in which the US government assured “responsiveness in case of a nuclear incident”<sup>50</sup>. During the following weeks, the Italian government overcame the parliamentary debate on the homeporting rights in La Maddalena granted to the US Navy, an issue that would eventually be faced successfully by Prime Minister Andreotti also during his October 1972 visit to Moscow, when Soviet Prime Minister Alexei K. Kosygin confronted him on the matter<sup>51</sup>. By October 1972, the hardest time caused by the publicity given to the homeporting agreement was over, and on November 2, 1972, Da Rin authorized its notification to the NATO<sup>52</sup>.

In November 1972, the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Giuseppe Medici emphasized to the press that “radiological surveys conducted at La Maddalena confirmed that there had been no contamination”<sup>53</sup>. By the end of 1972, the political storm caused by the homeporting of a US submarine tender seemed to have calmed down, as could also be proven by the fact that at the beginning of January 1973 the US and Italy were envisaging handling the remaining aspects of the implementation of the tender homeporting through a military-to-military agreement<sup>54</sup>. In this context, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs presented to the US Embassy a *note verbale* stating that after an assessment of the “undertakings” assumed by the US government with respect to “both technical-operational safeguards and responsibilities for possible risks” the Italian government had judged these undertakings “to be in consonance with the requirement for the protection of [Italian] national interests”, and therefore took note of the assurances given by the US government “concerning the stationing of a support unit at La Maddalena, as well as to any other operation involving Italian territorial waters”<sup>55</sup>.

## Conclusions

By January 1973, the chapter of the US-Italian agreements on the homeporting of a US submarine tender in La Maddalena was closed. The negotiations that led to this result during almost a year of diplomatic talks could be appraised as overall satisfactory for both countries, even though they both had to concede something. Rome had conceded the

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<sup>49</sup> Stabler to Rogers & Laird, Secret Telegram no. 4954, Sep 20, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> USER to MFA, Memorandum, Oct 2, 1972, quoted in Martin to DoS & DoD, Confidential Airgram no. A-50, Jan 23, 1973, in Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Martin to Rogers & Laird, Telegram no. 6360, Oct 26, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Stabler to Rogers, Telegram no. 6545, Nov 2, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Stabler to Rogers & Lairs, Confidential Telegram no. 7359, Dec 1, 1972, in Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> DoS to USER, Confidential Telegram no. 004677, Jan 9, 1973, in Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> MFA to USER, Note Verbale no. 054/40, Jan 17, 1973, quoted in Martin to DoS & DoD, Confidential Airgram no. A-50, Jan 23, 1973, in Ibid.

homeporting of a US submarine tender in Italy and therefore accepted an almost continuous US nuclear submarine presence in its territorial waters, which had led to a domestic political storm and to the protests of the Soviet Union. However, Italy had secured a NATO capability in the Mediterranean that Rome wished for but was not willing to pay for. In addition, Italy had secured that the site of homeporting was La Maddalena, where the presence of a US naval facility could not but help to boost the already military-industrial oriented local economy; in the meantime, the port of Augusta had been left free to continue its ongoing expansion driven by civilian activities without the unavoidable interference caused by the continuous calls of US submarines. Finally, Rome had secured from the US some guarantees and undertakings in case of nuclear accidents that were considered adequate by the Italian government, who therefore deemed to have pursued the Italian national interests also with respect to this sensitive aspect. On the other hand, the US had promptly secured the homeporting of a US submarine tender in the Mediterranean and therefore extended the capability of the 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet, even though they had to accept to open a new naval base in the remote Tyrrhenian archipelago of La Maddalena instead of the location desired by the US Navy in Augusta Bay, and eventually provide to the Italian government explicit “responsiveness in case of a nuclear incident”. In any case, the two allies had secured an agreement that strengthened the defense of NATO’s Southern flank and of the Mediterranean, a sea that within months was to come back in the spotlight with the Yom Kippur War and the consequent reinforcement of the 5<sup>th</sup> *Eskadra*.

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