GIUSEPPE TERRANOVA

Soft Power and the Legacy of Humanism

Italy in the Cultural Geopolitical Arena

Foreword by

MICHEL KORINMAN

IL Sileno Edizioni

Geographies of the Anthropocene

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Cover: The cover was created by the artificial intelligence (ChatGPT-5) following an in-depth conversation with the author. The cover encapsulates Italy's projection as a gentle power rooted in a millennial humanistic and civilizational legacy. The golden circle evokes the diffusion of Italian soft power beyond its territorial boundaries, suggesting a field of diplomatic and geocultural influence that expands through dialogue rather than dominance. At its core, Sicily lies near the geometrical heart of the Mediterranean, functioning as the natural anchor of this geopolitical configuration.

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The book series "Geographies of the Anthropocene" edited by the Scientific International Publisher "Il Sileno" (Il Sileno Edizioni) will discuss the new processes of the Anthropocene epoch through the various worldviews of geoscientists and humanists, intersecting disciplines of Geosciences, Geography, Geoethics, Philosophy, Socio-Anthropology, Sociology of Environment and Territory, Psychology, Economics, Environmental Humanities and cognate disciplines.

Geoethics focuses on how scientists (natural and social), arts and humanities scholars working in tandem can become more aware of their ethical responsibilities to guide society on matters related to public safety in the face of natural hazards, sustainable use of resources, climate change and protection of the environment. Furthermore, the integrated and multiple perspectives of the Environmental Humanities, can help to more fully understand the cultures of, and the cultures which frame the Anthropocene. Indeed, the focus of Geoethics and Environmental Humanities research, that is, the analysis of the way humans think and act for the purpose of advising and suggesting appropriate behaviors where human activities interact with the geosphere, is dialectically linked to the complex concept of Anthropocene.

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Abstract

This book investigates the geopolitical significance of soft power in an era of global fragmentation, reinterpreting Joseph Nye's theoretical framework through the Italian case. In a world increasingly shaped by systemic crises, protracted conflicts, and new geographies of interdependence, cultural attraction is conceptualized as a strategic resource and as an alternative to coercive paradigms of power. Italy projects influence through a centuries-old reservoir of cultural capital rooted in the legacy of Roman civilization, the Renaissance, and contemporary diasporic networks. Italian soft power operates across transnational educational, symbolic, and diasporic circuits, sustained by a decentralized and reticular model of cultural diplomacy that strengthens Italy's agency within the international system. The study advances an interpretation of Italian civilization as a *geocultural actor*, the living embodiment of a diffuse humanism capable of generating symbolic proximity and cooperative engagement within a post-national order. Italy thus emerges as a form of *gentle power*: a credible mediator in an increasingly polarized and fluid geopolitical landscape.

Keywords:

Ancient Roman legacy, Cultural diplomacy, Cultural geopolitics, Soft power, Diffuse humanism.

Indice

Foreword

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In the long history of geopolitical thought, every generation inherits not only the task of interpreting power but the deeper obligation of redefining its meanings. Since Yves Lacoste reminded us that geography is not an innocent science but a field of strategic knowledge - *La géographie, ça sert, d'abord, à faire la guerre* - the scope of the discipline has extended beyond territory, to the immaterial dimensions where culture, imagination, and representation themselves become instruments of influence. The book you now hold belongs to this intellectual renewal. It does not merely revisit Joseph Nye's notion of soft power; it rethinks it through a continental lens, restoring to it the historical density and spatial depth that too often disappear in the abstractions of geopolitical theory.

In this sense, the author's project is less an application of Nye's framework to the Italian case than a re-anchoring of the debate in the geography of civilizations. By situating Italy within the longue durée of Mediterranean history, he reveals how cultural attraction functions not as an accessory to power but as one of its original forms. From Rome's cosmopolitan idea of citizenship to the Renaissance's *diffused humanism*, Italy exemplifies a civilizational continuity that anticipates what Nye later theorized. The result is a subtle meditation on what the author calls *gentle power*: a relational mode of influence grounded in dialogue, trust, and symbolic proximity.

Yet this book's contribution lies also in its epistemological courage. It brings geopolitics back to its foundational premise: that power is inseparable from space, and that this discipline is grounded in the study of conflicts as they take shape within specific territorial and symbolic configurations, as well as in the interpretive effort to comprehend the sentiments and ideas that move their protagonists. The genealogy it reconstructs, from Ratzel to Foucault, from Weber to Gottman, reminds us that domination and communication are not antithetical but coextensive processes.

The reflection extends, implicitly, beyond the Italian horizon. One might recall here the French experience of soft power, the *francophonie*, the Alliance Française, the cultural diplomacy that for decades has sustained France's moral presence in the world. These forms of influence, like Italy's, do not rest on coercion but on prestige, on the authority of culture as a shared language. Fernand Braudel would have recognized in them the slow structures of *géohistoire*: a power of continuity that operates through time as much as through space. Pierre Bourdieu would have seen the accumulation of symbolic capital as the invisible infrastructure of influence, a thesis perfectly illustrated by the Italian case in these pages.

What distinguishes this study, however, is its refusal to reduce soft power to communication or branding. The author insists, rightly, that attraction must be understood as a political geometry, an architecture of meanings embedded in places, institutions, and memories. In that sense, soft power is nothing less than the geopolitics of the imaginary. The Italian *civiltà italica* - revived in recent years through the reflections of President Sergio Mattarella and elaborated by internationally renowned scholars - appears here not as an abstract humanistic ideal but as a tangible geopolitical category. It designates a transnational network of affinities that extends well beyond citizenship, a cultural grammar through which Italy continues to mediate between continents and civilizations. The book's historical amplitude is matched by its geopolitical realism. It does not deny the persistence of hard power - of war, competition, and coercion - but shows that their efficacy is increasingly limited in a world of forever wars, as Lawrence Freedman has aptly described it. In such a context, the strategic value of persuasion and legitimacy acquires renewed urgency. Italy's posture as a mediator in the Mediterranean, its diplomacy of equilibrium from the Cold War to the present, all demonstrate a coherent model of middle-power behavior: neither hegemonic nor passive, but connective. This is geopolitics understood not as confrontation but as conversation.

It would be an error to read this book merely as an academic exercise. It is, rather, a reflection on Europe itself. For what Italy embodies here - an art of balance, a diplomacy of respect, a humanism of mediation - evokes nothing less than a possible European vocation. Raymond Aron once observed that Europe's strength lies in its capacity for self-limitation, while Hannah Arendt reminded us that political greatness resides in the creation of worlds of meaning. The author's argument brings these two intuitions together: by conceiving power as relation rather than domination, he sketches a vision

of Europe grounded in restraint and animated by meaning, a geopolitics of balance sustained by an ethics of presence without arrogance.

This is not to idealize Italy, nor to mythologize its past. It is, instead, to recognize in its civilizational trajectory the contours of a future geopolitics, one capable of reconciling culture with strategy, memory with modernity. The Italian *gentle power* that emerges from these pages is at once specific and exemplary: it invites us to think of influence as care, of diplomacy as pedagogy, of geography as responsibility.

The scholarly precision of this work, its depth of documentation, and its capacity to weave together theory and narrative deserve to be acknowledged. It stands as both an intellectual contribution and a civic gesture: a reminder that the true function of geopolitics is not to justify domination but to render the world intelligible. In doing so, the author extends the legacy of Lacoste into the twenty-first century, offering a landscape of hope in an age of fragmentation.

1. Introduction

The passing of Joseph Nye, the eminent American scholar of international relations, on May 6, 2025, offers a timely occasion to reconsider the contemporary geopolitical significance of the concept he famously introduced: soft power (Nye, 2005). First articulated in the early 1990s, the notion emerged within a broader scholarly reappraisal of power as a multidimensional category. In contrast to *hard power*, grounded in military force and economic coercion, soft power designates the capacity of a state, or more generally, of a political actor, to shape the preferences and behavior of others through cultural attraction, normative legitimacy, and institutional credibility. Nye succinctly defined it as the art of achieving desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment.

The concept of power has always occupied a central position in the study of political geography and geopolitics. Within the classical tradition developed by figures such as Friedrich Ratzel (1897) and Halford Mackinder (1904), power was conceptualized above all in territorial and coercive terms: the strength of a state was measured by its control over territory, natural resources, and strategic communication routes. This perspective, marked by a pronounced geographical determinism, decisively shaped the geopolitical doctrines of the early twentieth century. The works of Karl Haushofer exemplify this intellectual lineage, in which geography was inextricably linked to strategic calculation and military planning (Haushofer, 1924).

At the same time, classical sociology made a decisive contribution to the theorization of power. Max Weber (1922) defined it as the capacity of an actor to impose his or her will even in the face of resistance, thereby underscoring the inherently relational and conflictual character of power relations. Building on this foundation, Steven Lukes (1974) elaborated a more articulated framework, distinguishing three dimensions of power, decisional, non-decisional, and ideological. The latter, linked to the ability to shape values, norms, and preferences, anticipated contemporary debates on non-coercive forms of influence and offered a crucial conceptual bridge to the notion of soft power.

A conceptual turning point was marked by Michel Foucault (1975), who argued that power is not a possession held by individual actors but a diffuse and capillary network of relations permeating bodies, discourses, and institutions.

From this perspective, power operates less through coercion than through the production of norms, regimes of knowledge, and forms of subjectivity, and it is inseparable from the spatial configurations within which it is enacted. Critical geography drew extensively on this insight, highlighting how maps, borders, and territorial categories function as instruments of power no less than armies or economic resources (Harley, 1989; Ó Tuathail, 1996).

Within political geography, Jean Gottmann offered a fundamental contribution in *The Significance of Territory* (1973), where he demonstrated that territory functions simultaneously as a material and symbolic resource, located at the intersection of iconography - symbols and representations that legitimize political authority - and circulation, the flows of people, goods, and ideas that incessantly reshape its contours. Similarly, Giacomo Corna Pellegrini (1959) underscored the need to conceptualize power in broader and more complex terms, resisting any deterministic reduction of the relationship between space and politics.

A decisive contribution was also provided by Claude Raffestin, who in *Pour une géographie du pouvoir* (1980) elaborated an explicitly geographical theory of power. For Raffestin, power is not a substance to be owned but a relation continuously mediated by resources, techniques, and representations. It is generated and enacted spatially through networks of relations, thereby anticipating the later networked interpretations of globalization. To know and inhabit a lived reality, in his view, requires recognizing that every element is situated within a relational system through which power circulates. This applies equally to interpersonal dynamics, since, for Raffestin, power is neither reducible to a spatial nor a temporal category but is inherent in every relation inscribed in space and time.

Paul Claval (1994) emphasized the cultural dimension of power, underscoring the fact that conflicts and geopolitical strategies cannot be adequately understood without accounting for the values, identities, and narratives that structure societies. For Claval, no territory is ever merely marginal within a social system; rather, each spatial context facilitates and regulates the modalities of distribution through which authority and influence are exercised (Pagnini, Sanguin, 2015). In this sense, the circulation of information and the architecture of communicative networks directly shape individual freedoms. The geography of decision-making power has a distinct spatial localization, which can be analyzed through the conceptual lens of center-periphery

dynamics and, more broadly, through debates on global economic development. Space itself emerges as both a facilitator and an obstacle to communication, conditioning the flows of power that traverse it. From this perspective, the administrative boundaries of a territory - often criticized by regional geography for their disjunction with socio-economic and ethnic realities - appear less arbitrary when examined as instruments of state power, designed or imposed to secure control over populations and, by extension, the territories they inhabit. From the 1970s onward, geopolitics underwent a profound theoretical renewal, due in no small part to the work of Yves Lacoste. His seminal volume *La géographie, ça sert, d'abord, à faire la guerre* (1976) redirected attention to the inherently political and strategic character of geography. Lacoste demonstrated that the production of geographical knowledge is itself a crucial instrument of power, indispensable not only to states but also to international institutions. Following in this vein, Michel Korinman further redefined contemporary geopolitics by emphasizing the role of representations, media, and collective identities in shaping global power relations (Korinman, 1990).

These years also witnessed the emergence of so-called popular geography, within the broader renewal of cultural geography, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world. The term refers to the set of everyday, spontaneous, and non-institutionalized representations of space and territory through which ordinary social actors construct, narrate, and symbolize places and power relations (Tuan, 1990; Cosgrove, Daniels, 1988). This perspective developed as a critical reaction against traditional geography - regarded as excessively rooted in objective and cartographic descriptions - and found greater resonance with the interdisciplinary approaches of cultural studies. The principal domains of inquiry within popular geography concern spatial imaginaries and mental maps (Jackson, 1989; Lowenthal, 1985), demonstrating that the ways in which social actors construct and communicate representations of space are never neutral but actively shape collective perceptions that influence the legitimation of territorial powers. In this sense, mental maps and collective memories function as instruments of soft power, guiding the interpretation and symbolic appropriation of places. A further domain encompasses media, cultural narratives, and grassroots geographies, where texts, images, songs, films, and other media products convey narratives that generate non-academic geographies. These representations operate as channels of cultural soft power, shaping identities, values, and geopolitical perceptions far beyond institutional or scholarly settings. Another strand focuses on lived space and vernacular geography: attention to perceived and everyday space, in continuity with

the tradition of perceptual geography, reveals how even micro-narratives and local practices may influence the construction of territorial images. Such processes act as subtle forms of influence which, through soft power, consolidate attachments, affective bonds, and modes of cultural resistance. Finally, collective identities, nationalisms, and cultural affiliations constitute a specialized field for examining how everyday discourses and representations sustain identity and national narratives (Tuan, 1977). These processes, often supported by symbolic and cultural resources, function as devices of soft power, reinforcing the cultural and geopolitical hegemony of specific actors.

In the 1990s, particularly within the field of Anglo-Saxon critical geopolitics, the notion of *popular geopolitics* emerged, distinct from, yet closely related to, the tradition of popular geography. Popular geopolitics directs attention to the ways in which geopolitics is represented, narrated, consumed, and circulated within mass culture, thereby shaping the worldviews of ordinary actors. Whereas classical geopolitics prioritized the strategic decisions of elites, popular geopolitics demonstrates how cinema, comics, newspapers, and, more recently, digital platforms and social media exert a profound influence on the collective geopolitical imagination (Dalby, 1991; Ó Tuathail, 1996; Dittmer, 2012; Dodds, 2019). Within this framework, a particularly salient field of inquiry concerns the role of cultural products, cinema, television, comics, or video games, as vehicles for the diffusion and consolidation of geopolitical imaginaries (Dell'Agnese, 2009). War films, superhero franchises, or television series addressing terrorism not only provide entertainment but also function as interpretive frameworks that delineate heroes and enemies, demarcate territories of civilization and barbarism, and prescribe values to be defended.

In this sense, popular culture constitutes a specific medium of soft power, shaping geopolitical imaginaries well beyond institutional and academic arenas by infiltrating the sphere of everyday life through familiar and affectively charged language. Traditional media likewise play a decisive role in producing polarized representations of peoples and states, reinforcing friend–enemy dichotomies that sustain trust or mistrust toward international actors. Their capacity to assign labels, amplify selected events, or silence others reveals their function as devices of soft power capable of influencing global public opinion and indirectly constraining the choices of state policy. Popular representations of key concepts such as terrorism, the West, the East, globalization, or borders thus constitute a critical field of analysis: terms that appear neutral are in fact

saturated with symbolic content through their reproduction in popular culture. Films that portray the Middle East as a space of chaos, comics that celebrate the national hero as defender of the West, or video games that reproduce the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism, all exemplify this process. Precisely because such narratives are disseminated in accessible and everyday forms, they operate as powerful instruments of soft power, naturalizing geopolitical hierarchies and reinforcing cultural hegemony.

Finally, a pivotal dimension of popular geopolitics lies in the critical interrogation of how audiences absorb, reinterpret, and re-circulate geopolitical discourses. The public cannot be reduced to a passive recipient: through practices of consumption, appropriation, and contestation, citizens contribute to reinforcing or subverting dominant narratives. In an era characterized by the global diffusion of digital and social media, this bottom-up circulation of geopolitical discourses constitutes a structural element of soft power, underscoring that power operates not only through military or diplomatic instruments but also through the control and dissemination of languages, images, and symbols within the public sphere.

This theoretical evolution - from power conceived as territorial domination to power understood as a relational network of symbolic devices, discursive practices, and grassroots initiatives - provides the conceptual backdrop against which Joseph Nye introduced the notion of soft power in the 1990s. Soft power defines the capacity to shape preferences and behaviors not through coercion or material inducement, but through cultural attraction, normative legitimacy, diplomacy, and symbolic representation. From a geographical standpoint, this entails acknowledging that power is also exercised through places and their representations: global cities, mega-events, cultural heritage, and landscapes emerge as strategic assets of influence, comparable to military bases and energy reserves.

From a geopolitical perspective, soft power has gained heightened significance in a context marked by the decline of rigid bipolarity and the emergence of a fluid and fragmented international order, what some scholars have aptly described as a multipolar disorder. In this environment, the projection of influence transcends traditional military or economic domains and increasingly extends into immaterial arenas such as cultural diplomacy, technological innovation, global communication, and norm entrepreneurship within multilateral institutions. A critical geopolitics of soft power thus emphasizes its contingent effectiveness, which resides in its articulation with other modalities

of power, what Nye (2012) later termed *smart power*, namely the calibrated synthesis of coercive and persuasive instruments. Within academic debate, two questions remain central: the problem of measurability, that is, whether and how the effects of soft power can be quantified in international relations; and the extent to which it produces concrete outcomes in the dynamics of geopolitical competition.

Against this backdrop, soft power should not be understood merely as a descriptive category, but rather as a strategic resource that complements the classical tradition of geopolitics - anchored in the control of territory, resources, and communication routes - with the immaterial dimensions of consensus, imaginaries, and international legitimacy. In a world characterized by systemic tensions and processes of multipolar fragmentation, soft power emerges as a critical geopolitical asset, particularly for middle powers such as Italy, which lack overwhelming coercive capabilities but project influence through a dense reservoir of cultural capital.

At the same time, the international system appears increasingly dominated by manifestations of hard power. It is a disorderly world (Pagnini, Terranova, 2020), aptly captured by Pope Francis's evocative expression of 2014: a "third world war fought piecemeal" (Pope Francis, 2014). This formulation highlights two structural traits of our age: the propensity for conflict to escalate into direct confrontation, and the tendency of systemic instability to reverberate across both regional and global arenas.

Such an interpretation resonates with Lawrence Freedman's most recent strategic assessment, which designates our era as *The Age of Forever Wars* (Freedman, 2025). In this condition, war has lost its conventional markers of beginning, course, and conclusion, becoming instead a diffuse and persistent state of instability. For Freedman, the inability of military strategy to deliver decisive outcomes demonstrates that armed conflict no longer functions as a tool of geopolitical stabilization but rather accelerates its erosion. Within such a scenario, soft power acquires growing significance as a vehicle for cultivating consensus, dialogue, and trust in international relations.

It is precisely in this perspective that Italian soft power may assume a specific geopolitical relevance, even while constrained by the structural limitations inherent to its status as a middle power.
Among the most profound roots of Italy's soft power lies the enduring centrality

of ancient Rome in shaping Mediterranean and European civilization. The Roman Empire was not only an administrative and military structure but also a lasting cultural matrix that transformed the Mediterranean into *Mare Nostrum*, producing legal codes, infrastructures, historical narratives, and a cosmopolitan conception of citizenship (Beard, 2016). Rome functioned simultaneously as a locus of coercive authority and as a vehicle of cultural transmission, projecting a political and symbolic model that continued to exert fascination and emulation for centuries. The resonance of Roman heritage remains visible today in institutional languages, in enduring symbols, such as the eagle or the very idea of the Senate, and in the architectural iconography of major powers, notably the United States.

This reservoir of cultural capital survived the collapse of ancient Rome, as demonstrated by the origins and evolution of the Renaissance. In this epoch, Italy emerged as a territorial laboratory of cultural revolution, grounded in 'the rediscovery of the human being', in aesthetic experimentation, and in the autonomy and proliferation of knowledge across multiple scales. As Marco Pellegrini (2019) observes, the Renaissance was not merely an artistic season but an anthropological and spatial transformation that projected into the world a novel way of conceiving and inhabiting time and space. From this crucible emerged what Pellegrini defines as a *diffused humanism*: a cultural system rooted in territorial specificities, ingrained in urban and architectural forms, embedded in local skills, and sustained by values of memory and custodianship of place, yet endowed with a remarkable capacity for projection onto the global stage.

Italian diffused humanism emerged from the outset as a decentralized and polycentric cultural formation, lacking rigid hierarchies yet articulated through a fluid web of relations. Along the principal Mediterranean and continental corridors of mobility - mercantile routes, intellectual exchanges, university networks and pilgrimages - Italy positioned itself as a strategic hub of a transnational geoculture, serving as a laboratory of proto-globalization. As emphasized by Peter Burke (1999) and Fernand Braudel (2017), the influence of the Italian Renaissance did not occur through the mere imitation or export of fixed models, but rather through a dynamic mechanism of cultural contamination: one capable of adapting to diverse local contexts while at the same time contributing to the construction of a shared transnational imaginary.

It is within this stratified cultural infrastructure - consolidated over centuries

through both material networks (roads, aqueducts, libraries) and immaterial ones (knowledge, religions, intellectual exchanges) - that the Risorgimento must be placed. Far from being a merely national process of unification, it represented the culmination of a longue durée trajectory in which Italy's symbolic capital, accumulated over centuries, acquired a new political form. The annexation of Rome in 1870 was not only a territorial act but a geopolitical gesture of profound resonance: it established within the emerging nation-state the geographical, spiritual, and cultural fulcrum of the peninsula, while simultaneously reactivating Rome's enduring role as the center of Italian civilization. International recognition of Italian unification, secured through Cavour's diplomatic acumen, reflected a structural perception within European elites: Italy was not simply a new state, but the custodian of a cultural tradition that pre-existed and exceeded its national boundaries.

In this sense, the Risorgimento can be interpreted as a symbol of international legitimation, whereby centuries of cultural influence and symbolic authority were converted into political sovereignty. The stratified landscapes and the continuity of historical traces underscore Italy's geo-cultural centrality, providing the deep foundations of a soft power that transcends state borders, functioning as a mechanism of identity cohesion and symbolic proximity across the Euro-Mediterranean sphere.

This perspective resonates with the historiographical interpretation advanced by Giuseppe Prezzolini who, already in the postwar period during his academic activity at Columbia University, urged a distinction between the structural weakness of the Italian state and the profound historical roots of Italian civilization. In his essay *The Legacy of Italy*, he emphasized how Italian identity is rooted in a longue durée of cultural history that far predates the political unification of the peninsula (Prezzolini, 1948).

Today, the material and immaterial cultural heritage of Italy radiates globally as both a diplomatic instrument and a lever of attraction within the international system. It is what the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella (Breda, 2023), has defined as *civiltà italica*, a concept that, as Piero Bassetti (2015) has emphasized, signals the projection of Italian cultural capital beyond the territorial boundaries of the state.

The notion of the Italics - a term originally referring to the ancient populations inhabiting Italy prior to Roman unification - has been re-semanticized to

define those individuals and communities who identify themselves with Italy, even in the absence of citizenship or familial ties. Such recognition confirms Italy's geo-cultural function within the international system, positioning it not merely as a state actor but as a strategic node within a global network of civilizations (Khanna, 2016). It is precisely the origins, trajectories, and prospective implications of Italic soft power on the international chessboard that the present contribution seeks to analyze through a geopolitical lens.

2. Cultural networks versus geopolitical blocs: soft power in the age of fragmentation

In the contemporary vocabulary of global crises, the term *permacrisis* - selected by the *Collins Dictionary* as Word of the Year in 2022 (Bushby, 2022) - succinctly captures the widespread perception of an epoch characterized by protracted instability, structural vulnerabilities, and recurring systemic shocks. The war in Ukraine, compounded by the enduring repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic and by mounting tensions between regional blocs, has marked a critical juncture. In this context, geopolitics has reasserted its centrality on the international chessboard, after decades of relative marginalization within the public discourse of liberal democracies.

This resurgence of geopolitics has unsettled many of the assumptions that, since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, had underpinned. at least within the Western world, a reassuring narrative of global order. In that context, Francis Fukuyama's influential thesis (1992) gained traction, proclaiming the triumph of the liberal-democratic model over communism as *the end of history*: the end of ideological struggles and the dawn of a post-historical era governed by the principles of market economy and multilateral governance.

Over the past three decades, Western political priorities were thus oriented primarily toward economic agendas, growth, globalization, and the reduction of inequalities between the Global North and South. The market was elevated to the status of the principal driver of progress, while geopolitical configurations were treated as relatively stable background factors. This paradigm found its most emblematic expression in the slogan popularized during Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign, *It's the economy, stupid*, created by his strategist James Carville, which epitomized the subordination of geopolitical concerns to economic imperatives.

Within this intellectual climate, Thomas L. Friedman's influential thesis (2005) also emerged, envisioning a globally interconnected system in which the *flattening* of geographical and economic distances - mediated by technological innovation and the logics of the global market - would foster cooperation, peace, and shared development. According to Friedman, deep interdependence

among global actors would render war increasingly irrational and prohibitively costly, since no nation fully integrated into the circuits of globalization could derive strategic advantage from armed conflict.

Yet the acceleration of global crises and the reassertion of competing spheres of influence have exposed the structural fragility of this *flat world* paradigm. The illusion of orderly globalization has given way to a fragmented mosaic of asymmetric powers, marked by the resurgence of bloc politics, the erosion of multilateral institutions, and the progressive disarticulation of the liberal order. These dynamics compel a critical rethinking of contemporary power relations, beginning with the spatial dimensions of conflict and the geographies of fragmentation (Walther et al., 2023).

On the contemporary international chessboard, both the incidence and the complexity of armed conflicts are intensifying. According to the Conflict Intensity Index published by Verisk Maplecroft, the extent of active war zones worldwide increased by 65% between 2021 and 2024, encompassing 4.6% of the earth's surface, nearly double the 2.8% recorded in 2021 (Maplecroft, 2024). This quantitative expansion is matched by a dramatic escalation in human costs: a report by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) estimates that 2023 registered 122,000 conflict-related fatalities, concentrated above all in Ukraine, Gaza, and the Horn of Africa (Rustad, 2024). In 2024, 61 inter-state armed conflicts were recorded across 36 countries, the highest figure since the aftermath of the Second World War. In total, more than 150 armed conflicts are active globally each year. The trend line indicates an accelerating deterioration: in 2024, the incidence of armed conflict rose by 25% compared to 2023, with projections for 2025 estimating nearly 20,000 conflict-related deaths per month. Meanwhile, recourse to mediation and negotiation as recognized mechanisms of dispute resolution continues to decline, underscoring the structural weakening of the normative and institutional frameworks that once constrained warfare.

Equally significant is the growing prevalence of so-called protracted conflicts (Bolaffi, Terranova, 2019), namely conflicts extended over time, often characterized by cyclical violence and the absence of viable political settlements. As theorized by Edward Azar (1990), these conflicts are sustained by structural factors (political marginalization, economic exclusion, and identity-based tensions) that produce chronic instability across entire regions. Azar's framework underscores that protracted conflicts are not reducible to

territorial disputes or geopolitical rivalries; rather, they stem from unmet fundamental human needs such as identity, security, recognition, and development. In the absence of efforts to address these underlying drivers, any negotiated settlement is destined to remain fragile, provisional, and ultimately unsustainable.

In the current global geopolitical landscape, numerous cases illustrate the persistence of protracted conflicts. The Israeli-Palestinian dispute, reignited with dramatic intensity in 2023, remains among the most emblematic. The Libyan crisis, ongoing since 2011, demonstrates the incapacity of both regional and international actors to stabilize a territory of strategic significance for the control of migration routes and energy resources. More than a decade after the outbreak of civil war, Syria continues to exemplify a frozen conflict whose reverberations destabilize the wider region and weigh heavily on the security dynamics of the Eastern Mediterranean. Equally intractable is the Yemeni conflict, unresolved since 2014 and responsible for more than 150,000 deaths, while Somalia has endured a civil war since 1991, when the collapse of Siad Barre's regime triggered state disintegration and endemic factional violence. These examples are symptomatic of the global proliferation of wars for which no peaceful resolution has been achieved.

Against this backdrop, the American scholar Ian Bremmer has argued that the international order has entered what he terms *G-Zero*, a configuration in which multilateral institutions and forums, such as the G20, are progressively weakened by systemic disorder. In this view, many powers confront one another, yet for the first time since the Second World War no single actor, nor coalition of actors, is capable of exercising global leadership (Bremmer, 2022).

The implications are profound: the erosion of fundamental human rights, mass displacement, protracted humanitarian emergencies, disruptions of value chains, and the deepening vulnerability of regional economies. Addressing these dynamics requires a multilevel geopolitical approach that moves beyond the immediate manifestations of war to interrogate the deeper structures and geographies of fragility that render such tensions persistently enduring over time.

2.1 The geopolitics of connection: soft power as a post-state strategic lever

Geopolitical instability, exacerbated by global phenomena such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the proliferation of unresolved conflicts, has laid bare the structural limits of the nation-state in addressing transnational challenges (Agnew, 1994; Köchler, 2020). Many states increasingly struggle to assert effective control over their own territories in the face of recurrent systemic shocks. Simultaneously, confidence has eroded in the multilateral institutions established after the Second World War, which have proven inadequate in confronting health crises, migratory emergencies, and the fragmentation of the global economic order. What is currently unfolding is less the end of globalization than its structural transformation (Sen, 2008). Globalization has entered a new evolutionary phase that may be described as *glocal*: a condition in which the global and the local no longer operate as antithetical poles but instead hybridize, giving rise to novel and increasingly complex relational geographies (Robertson, 1995; Roudometof, 2015). In this context, global cities (Sassen, 2010), diasporic networks, and transnational communities emerge as influential geopolitical actors, capable of generating forms of legitimacy and consensus that transcend state borders. It is as though a *globalization from below*, driven by individuals and networks, is not replacing but rather accompanying a state-centered globalization now weakened by the confrontation between declining and rising powers and by the reassertion of spheres of influence.

Spatial relations today can no longer be understood exclusively in terms of geographical proximity; rather, they are increasingly reconfigured through cultural, functional, and symbolic affinities (Khanna, 2016). The rise of digital platforms has radically transformed conventional notions of space and time, intensifying interaction among distant actors and giving rise to networked communities organized around shared interests, common languages, and synchronized cultural practices on a planetary scale (Terranova, 2021).

This shift delineates what may be described as a *geography of connection* (Castells, 2009; Khanna, 2016), in which territories are structured less by contiguity than by flows, of data, images, affects, and values. A paradigmatic illustration lies in video games and streaming platforms such as Twitch, where young people inhabit digital environments that transcend physical location. Within these spaces, authentic global communities of meaning emerge,

articulated through common semiotic codes, performative practices, and ritualized interactions. Such phenomena point to the consolidation of novel post-territorial forms of sociality, in which symbolic exchange and cultural participation become the primary vectors of cohesion (Russo, 2021).

Within this reconfiguration of power and space, the nation-state appears increasingly decentered, while new forms of cultural and political influence are asserted by sub-state actors, civic networks, technological platforms, and translocal identities. In this shifting landscape, soft power - conceived as the capacity for attraction, communication, and symbolic construction - regains strategic centrality as an instrument for exercising influence that is effective yet non-coercive in an interdependent and fragmented order.

As global equilibria undergo profound transformation, with dynamics of influence migrating from territorial domains to symbolic and cultural spheres, it becomes imperative to examine the conceptual apparatus through which such changes are analyzed and navigated. It is in this regard that the theoretical contribution of Joseph Nye acquires renewed salience, and his recent passing provides a good opportunity to reassess the contemporary relevance of the soft power paradigm.

The elaboration of Joseph Nye's concept of soft power must be situated within the geopolitical realignments marking the transition from the Cold War to the post-bipolar order. In the 1980s and 1990s, the progressive erosion of the Soviet bloc and the subsequent implosion of the Soviet Union initiated a configuration of unipolar hegemony centered on the United States. Yet Nye recognized that military supremacy and technological dominance, though decisive, were insufficient to guarantee the consolidation of global leadership within an increasingly interdependent and deterritorialized international system. The economic and cultural rise of Japan in particular exemplified how power could not be reduced to coercive or material capabilities alone but had to be reconceptualized as the ability to structure preferences and shape norms through the symbolic and cultural capital of attraction. It was in this intellectual and political milieu that Nye introduced the notion of soft power in *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990), later elaborated in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004). Within this theoretical architecture, Nye identifies three constitutive sources of soft power: culture, insofar as it is perceived as attractive and desirable; political values, when coherently affirmed both domestically and in the international arena;

and foreign policy, when regarded as legitimate and normatively grounded. Far from representing a secondary or ornamental resource, soft power emerges in Nye's reading as a structural dimension of power in the post-industrial age, indispensable for the construction of international legitimacy and for the stabilization of hegemony beyond the limits of coercion.

Nye's theorization significantly reconfigured the geopolitical debate by embedding within the very conception of power a relational and symbolic dimension often overlooked by classical traditions. Whereas traditional geopolitics concentrated primarily on the material control of territory, resources, and routes, cultural geopolitics foregrounds the constitutive role of narratives, imaginaries, identities, and spatial representations as instruments of influence. Within this interpretative framework, soft power is inseparable from the paradigms of cultural diplomacy and geoculture (Claval, 2012; Cosgrove, Jackson, 2012; Sauer, 1925; Wallerstein, 1991). The former highlights the deliberate deployment of culture as a strategic medium of interaction, dialogue, and cooperation across polities, while the latter emphasizes the cultural infrastructures underpinning geopolitical space, spaces conceived less as rigidly demarcated frontiers than as dynamic assemblages of networks, circulations, and symbolic affinities.

Amid the present conjuncture of asymmetric interdependencies (Held, McGrew, 2007), protracted conflicts, and systemic dislocations, the production of symbolic legitimacy and geocultural affinity emerges not as a peripheral supplement but as a constitutive axis of power in world politics. At stake is the recognition of cultural capital as both an epistemic foundation and a strategic infrastructure, indispensable to the reproduction of geopolitical influence in an era in which material coercion alone has lost much of its efficacy. States and political communities capable of mobilizing their tangible and intangible inheritances, of scripting shared identity narratives, and of sustaining transnational circuits of meaning are able to project forms of influence that operate less through direct imposition than through the naturalization of belonging and authority. Italy, in this regard, constitutes a paradigmatic locus: its extraordinary cultural repertoire, its sedimented tradition of diffuse humanism, and its historical aptitude for radiating knowledge and lifeworlds across boundaries provide the scaffolding for a distinctly Italic modality of soft power. Such a modality, far from representing a residual or ancillary category, ought to be reconceptualized as a strategic resource for international actors who, lacking hegemonic coercive capacities, aspire instead to cultivate

consent, relational density, and legitimacy within an order at once fragmented and interdependent.

3. Origins and evolution of Italic soft power: a geoculture of attraction

In an era characterized by the erosion of traditional geopolitical hierarchies and the reassertion of multipolar logics, Italy distinguishes itself through a mode of cultural influence that is diffuse, resilient, and globally resonant. As outlined in the introduction, this influence does not rely on territorial command or military preeminence but manifests itself in the form of soft power. Geographically, its trajectories are not traced along the lines of coercion but rather through cultural proximities, historical entanglements, and linguistic affinities. In this sense, Italic soft power takes shape as a geoculture of attraction: a spatial dispositif that reconfigures global order less through the rigidity of political boundaries than through symbolic flows, affective bonds, and circuits of meaning.

Within this framework, the theoretical and political contribution of Piero Bassetti is crucial, as he advanced the notion of *italicità*, a form of transnational, fluid, and reticular cultural belonging. Far removed from ethnic essentialism or limited national logics, *italicità* delineates a global cultural community that identifies with the values, practices, and lifestyles of Italic civilization, irrespective of formal citizenship or place of birth (Bassetti, Corna Pellegrini, 1959; Bassetti, 2015). In this context, the category of Italic soft power introduces a conceptual distinction between juridical *italianità* and cultural *italicità* (Salvini, 2015). The latter is rooted in a transnational identity forged through symbolic affinities and through adherence to the aesthetic, relational, and projectual values of Italianness, even among foreign citizens lacking familial or national ties. This Italic space, unbounded by state frontiers, is configured as a relational geography disseminated through media, universities, fashion, design, tourism, and entrepreneurial ventures.

From a geographical standpoint, Italic soft power operates through reticular cultural landscapes and diasporic circles of influence that unsettle the ontological premises of sovereign territoriality, reconfiguring them within post-national and relational logics. In this sense, *italicità* may be conceived as a geocultural formation characterized by epistemic fluidity - mobile, cosmopolitan, and dialogical - whose distinctive strength lies in its capacity to foster forms of post-hegemonic proximity. Rather than reproducing the antagonistic grammars of coercion, this modality of power stimulates cooperation, symbolic

resonance, and dialogical coexistence. In an age of accelerating geopolitical polarization, it thus contributes to the ontological rearticulation of international order, suggesting pathways of influence based less on domination than on the cultivation of relational densities and shared horizons of meaning.

The diffusion of the Italian language - today still among the most studied globally, less for reasons of pragmatic utility than for its aesthetic resonance and symbolic heritage - constitutes an important indicator of Italic soft power. Its vitality persists in highly codified domains such as archaeology, opera, fashion, and automotive design, where linguistic practice operates as both medium of knowledge and marker of distinction. The allure of Italian is evident in examples such as that of Pulitzer Prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri, who relocated to Rome in 2011 out of a real passion for the language, or in the intellectual dissemination of Italian civilization by foreign scholars such as Mary Beard, whose *S.P.Q.R.* (2016) has become a global point of reference. Equally revealing is the use of Renaissance architecture in post-revolutionary America: following independence, the United States cultivated a marked affinity for the Palladian style of Andrea Palladio (1508-1580), constructing villas and public buildings, among them the White House itself, within a symbolic genealogy that linked the new republic to Renaissance Italy. Such examples testify to how linguistic and cultural capital function as vehicles of enduring transnational projection, embedding Italy's heritage within wider circuits of global meaning.

From this perspective, Italic soft power is not the exclusive patrimony of the Italian state but the living legacy of a civilization whose normative and symbolic repertoires have been projected across centuries, through Ancient Rome, Roman Christianity, the Renaissance, the Risorgimento, and the great modern and contemporary migrations (Lanzone, 2018). Among these matrices, the Roman Empire stands out as a paradigmatic source of italicità: far from being reducible to a political apparatus, it functioned as an early prototype of global governance, integrating heterogeneous territories by means of administrative rationalities, juridical codifications, and infrastructural networks. By transforming the Mediterranean into *Mare Nostrum*, Rome converted a geographical basin into a geocultural system, a proto-multipolar arena in which flows of power, commerce, and knowledge were not simply exchanged but orchestrated. In so doing, the Empire established the Mediterranean as the gravitational axis of ancient geohistory, prefiguring later modalities of maritime projection and the geopolitics of connectivity

that continue to reverberate within the contemporary international order.

Ancient Rome was not merely a locus of imperial domination but a *dispositif* of cultural transmission and a political-symbolic paradigm whose fascination extended across subsequent centuries. Its enduring legacy constitutes the foundational nucleus of what, drawing on Piero Bassetti's idea, can be conceptualized as Italic soft power: a historically ingrained capacity for attraction that has transformed Italy into a planetary cultural icon. This civilizational matrix did not vanish with the collapse of the Roman Empire but was profoundly re-elaborated and valorized during the Renaissance, a phenomenon that was far more than a cultural season, but rather a systemic transformation of European society embedded in the cultural and urban geography of Italy. As Marco Pellegrini argues in *Nella terra del genio. Il Rinascimento un fenomeno italiano*, the Renaissance amounted to an anthropological and territorial revolution, catalyzed by the political fragmentation of the peninsula. This institutional disunity, instead of constituting an obstacle, proved to be an enabling condition for the proliferation of multiple autonomous centers of cultural production. Courts, city-states, religious institutions, and secular patrons generated a dense network of competition, emulation, and intellectual exchange. The Italian Renaissance thereby crystallized as a polycentric form of modernity, capable of producing innovations not only in the visual arts but also in architecture, science, technology, and political-legal thought (Burke, 1999)

Renaissance Italy constituted not merely a *milieu* of artistic efflorescence but a geopolitical and symbolic epicenter of European civilization, a cultural platform and proto-globalizing laboratory capable of orienting tastes, codifying models, and generating paradigms of reference across the continent. The peninsula was transfigured into a diffuse experimental matrix of the human, wherein the interplay of urban morphologies, artisanal mastery, and emergent scientific epistemologies engendered a novel conception of humanity, knowledge, and landscape. Within this crucible emerged what Pellegrini terms a diffused humanism: a cultural formation anchored in territorial specificities, ingrained in built environments and architectural forms, embedded in local skills, and sustained by values of memory and custodianship of place.

This humanism was neither centralized nor subordinated to rigid hierarchies; rather, it unfolded as a relational, mobile, and polycentric geoculture. Along the principal Mediterranean and continental corridors of mobility -mercantile routes, intellectual exchanges, university networks, and pilgrimages - Italy

asserted itself as a nodal hinge within a trans-European cultural topology. The irradiating force of the Renaissance, as emphasized by Peter Burke (1999) and Fernand Braudel (2017), was not reducible to mere imitation or unilateral transfer. It operated instead as a dispositif of cultural re-elaboration and symbolic translation, at once adaptive to local contingencies and productive of shared imaginaries on a continental scale.

The Renaissance must thus be interpreted not as a circumscribed national phenomenon but as a longue durée infrastructural matrix that reconfigured the geography of Italian cultural influence within the Euro-Mediterranean arena and projected its symbolic capital well beyond.

3.1 *From the Risorgimento to contemporary diasporas: Italy as a rhizomatic actor in cultural globalization*

This long-standing cultural infrastructure provided the substratum upon which a modern narrative of national identity could be articulated. Within this stratified legacy, the Risorgimento represents a pivotal juncture in the consolidation of Italian cultural influence. While 1861 formally inaugurated the political unification of the peninsula under the aegis of the Kingdom of Piedmont, it was only with the annexation of Rome in 1870 that the Italian state attained its full symbolic realization. This moment carried not merely political significance but profound geopolitical and cultural resonance: Rome functioned simultaneously as the geographical fulcrum of the peninsula, the institutional seat of the Papacy, and, above all, a space of cultural mediation through which heterogeneous local identities could be reframed within a shared civilizational perspective. In this sense, Rome emerged not simply as the administrative capital of a newly unified state but as the material and symbolic epicenter of an Italy that sought to translate its fragmented historical genealogies into a coherent project of national modernity. The Risorgimento thus became both a nationalizing process and a transnational phenomenon, grounded in centuries of Italian cultural projection across Europe, and projected as a geo-cultural consolidation of Italy's position within the international system.

Fig.1 *An uncommon and extremely attractive 1852 map of Italy by the geographer Alexandre Aimè Vuillemin (1812-1880). Covers the pre-Garibaldi Italy split into numerous small duchies and states from Venetian Lombardy south to Sicily and Malta. Also includes the islands of Sardinia and Corsica. Through out, the map identifies various cities, towns, rivers and assortment of additional topographical details. At this time in history, the peninsula was undergoing the Risorgimento , Italy's march toward national solidarity. Following the defeat of Napoleon and the merging of Sicily and Naples in the Two Sicilies, the island of Sicily witnessed revolts against the Bourbon rule in 1820 and 1848. The final revolution in 1848 resulted in the island gaining independence from Bourbon control for 16 months. The map features a beautiful frame style border. Prepared by A. Vuillemin for publication ad plate no. 16 in the 1852 edition Maison Basset of Atlas illustre destine à l'enseignement de la Geographie elementaire.*

Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Cartes et plans, GE DL 1842-150.

The designation of Rome as the national capital was anything but random: it embodied the *arche* of Italic civilization and the principal axis of its historical projection into the Mediterranean and European spheres. To reassert *italicità* as a shared cultural matrix, Rome was indispensable (Garofalo, 2024): not merely a capital, but a civilizational palimpsest, a symbolic fulcrum, and a locus densely engraved with geopolitical significance.

Yet the consolidation of unification cannot be understood merely as an exclusively endogenous achievement. It was also a product of the international order, where the tacit acquiescence of the European powers proved decisive. A polity as modest as Piedmont could scarcely have effected unification without the tolerance, or strategic calculation, of the hegemonic actors composing the European concert. Within this horizon, Cavour's vision and his pragmatically multilayered diplomacy proved pivotal, rendering the Italian unification not an anomaly, but a process integrated into the continental equilibrium (Lemoine, 2001).

This European openness to the rebirth of an Italian polity did not stem from purely conjunctural considerations, but was deeply rooted in the enduring potency of Italic soft power. Over the preceding centuries, the entire continent had been permeated by an Italic cultural web: an immaterial yet powerfully tangible network composed of knowledge, the arts, artisanal excellence, diplomatic acumen, and intellectual exchanges that linked distant urban centres, universities, and communities of thought.

It constituted a relational, rhizomatic geography - non-hierarchical and devoid of a single central authority - sustained instead by impulses emerging organically from territories, religious currents, heterodox movements, itinerant scholars and students, and even the actions of armies, both regular and mercenary. Such networks anticipated, in embryonic form, the very logic of cultural globalization: diffuse, decentered, and trans-scalar, oriented less toward domination than toward circulation and translation. In this light, the recognition of Italy by the European concert was not merely an act of geopolitical convenience but the acknowledgment of a longue durée *civilizational infrastructure*, embedded in practices and imaginaries, that positioned Italy as a cultural interlocutor indispensable to the European balance. What resurfaced with unification, therefore, was less the invention of a new nation than the reactivation of a deeply rooted geocultural dispositif, capable of legitimizing Italy's symbolic centrality even before its political consolidation.

This consolidated cultural infrastructure became engraved in the materiality of places and practices: from Roman consular roads to aqueducts, from libraries preserved in convents and abbeys to major pilgrimage routes such as the Via Francigena - recognized as a Cultural Route by the Council of Europe in 1994 - and the Via Romea. Collectively, these elements constitute a stratified historical geography that preserves tangible traces of monuments, settlements, customs, dialects, and systems of local knowledge. Within this dense cultural palimpsest reside the deep foundations of Italic soft powe: an infrastructure of transnational cohesion that not only long precedes the advent of modern statehood but also transcends its very boundaries.

These moments of cultural expansion have produced a mobile and connective geography of Italic presence across the globe. Roman cities, Benedictine monasteries, medieval universities, Renaissance masterpieces, artisanal districts, migrant communities, and digital networks do not represent isolated historical episodes; rather, they constitute fragments of a broader geocultural assemblage. This assemblage functions as a transnational infrastructure of memory, practice, and meaning, through which Italic civilization continues to inhabit global space. It is a stratified and relational formation, materialized in museums, gastronomic traditions, schools, cathedrals, consular roads, reconstructed Italian squares in extra-European contexts, cultural festivals, and globally diffused family enterprises. In this sense, Italic soft power does not operate through territorial domination but through the dissemination of symbolic capital that incessantly reconfigures imaginaries and spatialities within global modernity.

This interpretive horizon converges with the historical opinion articulated by Giuseppe Prezzolini who, already in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, underscored the analytical necessity of disentangling the structural fragility and relatively recent constitution of the Italian nation-state from the longue durée continuity of Italian civilization. In *The Legacy of Italy* (1948), Prezzolini contended that Italy's enduring strength does not lie in the apparatus of political sovereignty but in the deep cultural roots created by centuries of encounters, hybridizations, and contaminations. Situated in the Mediterranean as a hinge between North and South, the Italian peninsula has historically functioned as a crucible of cultural hybridization, generating a layered, porous, and constantly evolving identity. Successive civilizations - from the Greeks and Arabs to the Swabians and Spaniards - have inscribed their legacies onto Italian territory, forging a relational culture whose radiance extended far

beyond its borders, disseminated through the Renaissance diaspora, the mass migrations of the nineteenth century, and the contemporary circulation of new expatriate networks.

Within this framework, Italic civilization emerges as a paradigmatic *geocultural formation of longue durée*, transcending both the bounded temporality of modernity and the rigid territoriality of the state. Italian President Sergio Mattarella has encapsulated this dimension by describing the *Italici* as *aspiring Italians*: subjects of a transnational constellation whose belonging is shaped not by the rigidity of national identity but by *italianità* as a civilizational ethos. This ethos - articulated through beauty, proportion, erudition, dialogical openness, and moderation - finds material expression in artistic production, gastronomy, fashion, design, and cultural practices of sociability. In this sense, the *Italic civilization* embodies a novel form of global subjectivity, one that destabilizes the hard boundaries of methodological nationalism and projects an inclusive, plural, and civilizationally inflected vision of belonging within the fractured architecture of contemporary globalization (Breda, 2023).

3.2 *Reconceptualizing Italic belonging: emerging geographies of citizenship and cultural soft power*

Within this interpretative perspective, the notion of italicity acquires an innovative geopolitical value reconfiguring the very syntax of political and cultural belonging. It displaces Italianness from the narrow matrix of statehood and territorial sovereignty, projecting it as a transnational, reticular, and rhizomatic cultural identity. Italicity thus functions as a surplus of identity, a form of hyper-Italianness that articulates symbolic repertoires, linguistic affinities, and shared practices into a connective tissue binding millions across the globe. Italy, in this sense, manifests itself less as a bounded nation-state than as a diffuse cultural civilization.

The Italics may thus be conceptualized as a strategic resource of the emerging international order: less a nostalgic evocation of heritage or an essentialist recovery of origins than a forward-oriented infrastructure of influence. They function as nodal articulations within a global cultural assemblage, animated by collective memories and imaginaries that amplify Italy's soft power on

the world stage. To recognize, mobilize, and institutionalize this diffuse community is to invest in a post-national geopolitics of culture, one grounded in exchange, mutual recognition, and symbolic convergence (Terranova, 2023).

Within this framework, the promotion and valorization of Italy's tangible and intangible cultural heritage must be understood not merely as a civic duty or an economic asset, but as a geopolitical imperative inscribed within the logics of cultural power. Italy's function is less to impose than to position itself as a locus of recognition and symbolic mediation, a space where cultural identity is reframed as a form of cosmopolitan citizenship. Rooted in a millennia-long palimpsest of crossings, hybridizations, and mobilities, the Italic value system emerges today as a deeply rooted civilizational formation - more than 2,500 years in the making - whose resonance extends worldwide. Yet this latent potential remains insufficiently theorized and underexploited. What is required is a reflexive awareness of transnational cultural capital as a strategic resource for recalibrating Italy's position within an increasingly competitive and polycentric global order. This further entails recognizing a novel, post-territorial modality of citizenship, one capable of engaging in the arena of global civilizations not through hegemonic assertion but through dialogical and cooperative projection.

Italian cultural heritage must therefore be conceived as encompassing not only monuments, traditions, and artistic legacies, but also a vast and heterogeneous community of Italics who operate as de facto ambassadors of the country's soft power (Barbieri, 2023). The great migratory waves that reshaped Italy between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries constitute the demographic foundation of a global Italic diaspora. The Americas, particularly in the nineteenth century, and, subsequently, Europe and Australia in the twentieth, became the principal destinations for millions of Italians escaping economic precarity, famine, and the structural absence of opportunity. These movements were not isolated journeys made by individuals but collective mobilities that frequently involved entire families and communities, engendering stable and culturally cohesive settlements.

From the late 1990s into the new millennium, Italian migration acquired new characteristics: no longer defined exclusively as an emigration of necessity, but increasingly as a selective and highly qualified mobility. Today, nearly 60% of new emigrants are high-school graduates or university degree holders. This shift signals a profound transformation in Italian mobility, now

oriented toward a global geography of skills, expertise, and opportunity.

To complete the map of the Italic human geography, at least three further phenomena must be considered, each of which contributes to delineating the scope and complexity of this transnational people.

The first concerns the historic Italophone communities, embedded in territories that, while no longer under the sovereignty of the Italian Republic, continue to embody enduring linguistic and cultural affiliations with it. These communities - ranging from the Dalmatians and the Niçois to the Corsicans, the Levantines of the Pera quarter in Istanbul, the inhabitants of Canton Ticino, Vatican City, and the Republic of San Marino - constitute not merely linguistic enclaves but living nodes of geocultural continuity. They exemplify the persistence of Italic influence across shifting political boundaries, underscoring the resilience of cultural identities beyond the framework of the nation-state (Lanzone, 2018).

The second phenomenon is represented by the growing constituency of Italophiles, or Italian lovers: individuals who, irrespective of genealogical ties, cultivate associations with Italian culture through passions for music, gastronomy, football, art, language, fashion, design, opera, and beyond. Far from being marginal, these choices represent a form of post-national cultural citizenship, wherein symbolic attachment and aesthetic affinity translate into durable examples of soft power. In this perspective, Italophilia operates as a mechanism of horizontal diffusion, expanding Italy's influence through affective bonds and cultural imaginaries rather than coercive instruments of statecraft.

The third domain concerns the new migratory flows directed towards Italy. Migrants from heterogeneous contexts now settle permanently within the national territory for a number of reasons - international protection, labour opportunities, education, and family reunification - thereby entering into a complex relationship with the Italian cultural system. These modes of integration do not merely reproduce classical models of assimilation, but actively contribute to redefining Italic identity as an inclusive, dynamic, and post-national construct.

Of particular significance are the new, school-educated generations: the children and grandchildren of immigrants who have established lasting roots in Italy. These young actors embody the contemporary process of cultural

hybridization, articulated through what has been described as diffused *italicità*: an evolving identity that integrates values, language, and symbolic repertoires associated with Italian civilization. According to data from the Ministry of Education and Merit (2024), updated to the 2022/2023 academic year, approximately 865,388 students of non-Italian citizenship were enrolled in Italian schools (compared to 59,000 in 1996/1997), more than 66% of whom were born in Italy. The largest national communities represented are Romanian, Albanian, and Moroccan, followed by Chinese, Egyptian, and Indian. These figures reveal the emergence of a structurally embedded and territorially based immigration, concentrated above all in the central and northern regions of the country (Terranova, 2019). In these contexts, migrant communities are woven into consolidated family networks and specific productive chains - including agriculture, logistics, catering, and care services - thus contributing to the reconfiguration of Italy's demographic and cultural fabric. In this sense, contemporary migratory phenomena not only transform the socio-economic structures of the host society but also operate as laboratories of post-territorial belonging, where new forms of diasporic agency and intercultural negotiation redefine the profile of Italic soft power in the global arena.

This school population constitutes not merely a pedagogical challenge but also a profound opportunity to reconceptualize Italy's cultural influence within the global arena. These students have the potential to become active agents of a symbolic Italic citizenship, functioning as liminal actors capable of mediating between Italy, their parents' countries of origin, and the broader international system. Their dual cultural connection may thus be theorized as a form of advanced, hybrid italicity - dynamic, polycentric, and irreducible to rigid categories of nationality - constituting a laboratory for the emergence of new transnational subjectivities.

Italy, as a relatively recent country of immigration, benefits from the possibility of drawing lessons from the missteps of other European states in managing the integration of second generations (Sen, 2006). Investing in these young populations entails more than fostering social inclusion; it means mobilizing a strategic reservoir of human capital endowed with the ability to operate as cultural, commercial, and geopolitical mediators across multiple scales. Empirical evidence substantiates this claim: research conducted in Sweden shows that each foreign-born worker employed in manufacturing contributes, on average, to an annual export increase exceeding $300,000 to their country of origin. Such findings suggest that the cultivation of second-generation

migrants should be understood not merely as a matter of social policy, but as a vector of geoeconomic strategy and transnational connectivity (Efendic, Anderson, Wennberg, 2016).

Their bilingualism, intercultural competencies, and diasporic networks position them as pivotal actors in the expansion of Italian soft power. Within this nexus of education, identity, and symbolic attraction, the concept of italicity demonstrates its geopolitical efficacy. Schools and universities emerge as dispositifs of geoculture, arenas in which Italy deposits its imaginaries and cultural capital into the global sphere. The *new Italics*, raised in plural and globalized environments, may thus be conceived as cultural ambassadors of a distinct kind, disseminating not only the *Made in Italy* and the Italian way of life, but more crucially Italy's symbolic values, narratives, and aesthetic registers. These intangible resources, once strategically mobilized, can become decisive instruments in shaping international negotiations and recalibrating the evolving dynamics of global geopolitics.

3.3 *The geopolitics of Italic culture within the contemporary international conjuncture*

Italian cultural heritage and the global Italic community function as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that operates simultaneously across multiple domains: diplomacy, university internationalization, tourism, and national branding. Italy hosts the largest number of UNESCO World Heritage sites worldwide (UNESCO, 2023), while the Italian language ranks among the most studied, valued not only for pragmatic utility but for its cultural, historical, and aesthetic resonance (Accademia Europea di Firenze, 2023).

This symbolic capital is reinforced by what may be conceptualized as a *diffused humanism*: a polycentric dispositif of practices, spaces, and semiotic forms that render Italian culture materially and sensorially present within everyday life. It is inscribed in historic centres and public squares, in civic and religious rituals, in artisanal manufacture, in rural landscapes, and in dietary traditions. Such soft power, simultaneously discreet and pervasive, operates not through coercion but through the daily lifestyles, modes of interaction, and shared narratives. In this respect, diffused humanism constitutes not merely a

cultural inheritance but also a strategic geocultural infrastructure for shaping relational, open, and dialogical identities within the contemporary world order.

The recognition of Italic civilisation derives from a number of interrelated factors: the extraordinary artistic and cultural prestige accumulated over centuries; the global diffusion of Italophone and Italophile communities; and its enduring role as custodian and interpreter of a cultural patrimony which, according to UNESCO, comprises nearly 70% of the world's heritage assets (UNESCO, 2023). This symbolic consolidation situates Italy not merely as a nation-state but as a geocultural actor, embedded within - and simultaneously constitutive of - a global network of civilisations (Khanna, 2016).

As President Sergio Mattarella has underscored, Italic civilisation exerts its power of attraction not through hegemonic imposition, but through what can be conceptualised as relational geopolitics: a dynamic of symbolic proximity and cultural empathy that reconfigures influence as recognition rather than domination (Breda, 2023).

International rankings such as the *Country Brand Index*, the *Soft Power 30 Index*, and the *Global Soft Power Index 2023* consistently place Italy among the world's leading nations in terms of cultural prestige and touristic appeal (Jagodzinski, 2025).

Equally significant is the establishment in 2023 of the *Group of Friends of Culture* at the United Nations, an initiative spearheaded by Italy to reaffirm culture as a strategic instrument for peace, sustainable development, and intercultural dialogue (OnuItalia, 2025). This multilateral platform, which has rapidly attracted the endorsement of numerous member states, exemplifies how culture can operate as a non-coercive yet geopolitically consequential instrument of mediation.

Within the broader mosaic of Italic presence, educational and cultural institutions emerge as geocultural infrastructures of soft power. Far from being simple sites of transmission, they function as dispositifs of symbolic institutionalization: embedding language, values, and imaginaries into transnational circuits of exchange, and thereby consolidating Italy's structural capacity for attraction and influence in the global system.

3.3.1 Geoculture as diffuse power: Italy's educational, economic, and symbolic strategies in the global arena

A primary strategic axis of Italy's global cultural projection is constituted by the network of Italian schools abroad, which currently comprises 144 institutions formally accredited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI, 2025). These schools should not be interpreted merely as instruments of linguistic instruction, but as extraterritorial articulations of the Italian state, cultural bastions and symbolic infrastructures of influence. They embody a form of dispersed sovereignty that operates through language, curricula, and the creation of cultural affinities, thereby consolidating the relational geographies of italicity within heterogeneous international contexts.

Complementing this institutional framework is the vast constellation of educational institutions inspired by the pedagogical philosophy of Maria Montessori. Grounded in a holistic and individualized vision of childhood development, the Montessori method has achieved extraordinary global dissemination, with nearly 65,000 schools active in at least 147 countries (Acernese, 2021). More than a pedagogical model, this transnational network constitutes a paradigmatic instance of cultural geopolitics: an immaterial infrastructure that translates Italian intellectual traditions into globally recognized practices of governance over learning and subject-formation. In this sense, Montessori education exemplifies an *educational soft power*, a dispositif that projects Italy both as a laboratory of human-centered pedagogy and as a symbolic actor in the negotiation of cultural hegemony within the international system of knowledge circulation.

Equally emblematic is the legacy of Loris Malaguzzi and the pedagogical experiment of Reggio Emilia, internationally renowned as *Reggio Children*. This educational paradigm, premised on the conception of the child as a competent and participatory subject, has inspired a vast global network of early childhood institutions, thereby consolidating Italy's profile as a pedagogical laboratory of worldwide significance (Edwards, Gandini, Forman, 2011).

Within this broader infrastructure of cultural diplomacy, a pivotal role has historically been played by the *Società Dante Alighieri*, founded in 1889 with the explicit mission of promoting the Italian language and its culture across the globe. With a structured presence in more than 250 cities spanning 80 countries, the organization functions as an instrument of linguistic and

symbolic soft power, activating courses, conferences, cultural circuits, and transnational exchange networks that reinforce Italian identity among heterogeneous publics. Today, the *Società Dante Alighieri* may be seen as a strategic node of Italic geoculture, contributing to the consolidation of a transnational community bound by cultural affinities, linguistic identities, and shared civilizational values (Società Dante Alighieri, 2019).

No less illustrative is the case of Catholic schools, numbering over 250,000 worldwide and enrolling approximately 42 million students (OIEC, 2021). Within this vast array, the Salesian technical schools stand out for their decades-long commitment across Latin America, Africa, and Asia, where they provide both professional training and education often in areas of social marginalization. Similarly, Jesuit educational institutions - heirs to the model of the *Collegio Romano*, from which the very notion of the *college* in the Anglo-Saxon world derives - constitute a global pedagogical network. Hundreds of secondary schools, many associated with the *Fe y Alegría* network, currently operate in more than 25 countries, specifically addressing the needs of the most vulnerable sectors of the population (Fe y Alegría, 2025).

Situated within this broader constellation of cultural infrastructures, the system of Catholic universities worldwide, organized within the SACRU network (*Strategic Alliance of Catholic Research Universities*), fosters international academic cooperation on issues ranging from sustainable development to human rights and social justice (SACRU, 2025). These institutions, while formally embedded within religious traditions, operate as pivotal nodes of an Italic geoculture in which humanistic knowledge, pluralism, and intercultural dialogue function as structuring principles of global engagement.

An important vehicle for the global dissemination of Italic culture is represented by Italian culinary schools, foremost among them ALMA, the International School of Italian Cuisine, founded by Gualtiero Marchesi and headquartered in the ducal palace of Colorno. With training programmes active in over twenty countries, ALMA exemplifies how gastronomy can be mobilized as a form of complex, transmissible knowledge, one that fuses technical mastery, aesthetic sensibility, conviviality, and principles of sustainability.

Equally significant is the number of initiatives linked to the Slow Food movement and its Terra Madre network, which express a counter-hegemonic vision of globalization by defending biodiversity, safeguarding culinary

traditions, and advancing an ethic of taste rooted in locality and cultural memory (Petrini, 2017). In the same field, *Eataly*, the commercial project conceived by Oscar Farinetti, has redefined the act of consuming Italian food into a global cultural experience. By transforming gastronomy into a symbolic platform of recognition, *Eataly* strengthens Italy's image as the homeland of *il buon vivere*, situating Italian foodways at the intersection of cultural diplomacy, market dynamics, and lifestyle geopolitics (Farinetti, 2023).

This extraordinary transnational reservoir of cultural and human capital available to Italy can and should be strategically harnessed as a structural foundation of the country's geopolitical agency. A crucial dimension of such a project lies in the reconfiguration and strengthening of the Italian Chambers of Commerce Abroad. No longer conceived merely as instruments of national economic promotion, these entities could be reconceptualized as platforms of Italic geoeconomic diplomacy. By broadening their constituency to include not only Italian nationals but also Italic entrepreneurs (economic actors who embody and reproduce a shared cultural matrix irrespective of citizenship) these institutions could become infrastructures of cultural-economic power.

Through advanced digital tools, global networking platforms, and high-value services, they would operate as connective nodes within a planetary network, capable of generating flows of knowledge, practices, and capital. In this way, the Chambers would transcend their traditional role, transforming into catalysts of distributed influence, fostering horizontal cooperation, co-designed initiatives, and the emergence of variable-geometry production systems that both reflect and amplify the relational logic of Italic civilization.

An important illustration of this approach is the project *Making in Italy – Making in the USA: Artisanship, Technology and Design. Innovating with Beauty*, launched in 2013 (Bondi, 2013) by the Giannino Bassetti Foundation in partnership with the Consulate General of Italy and the Italian Cultural Institute in San Francisco, with support from global actors such as Deutsche Bank, Poltrona Frau, FCA, and Autogrill. This initiative forges a connection between California's technological vanguard, an incubator of new digital and manufacturing frontiers, and Italy's artisanal and creative heritage, effectively configuring a Leonardesque *workshop 4.0* in which manual skill, design, and technical ingenuity are hybridized into a single geocultural dispositif of innovation.

Building on this logic, one can envisage the creation of an *Italian Digital Piazza,* a transnational virtual space reinterpreting the aggregative function of Renaissance squares on a global scale. More than a mere communications tool, it would operate as an infrastructural commons capable of convening Italian citizens, Italics, Italophones, and Italophiles within a perspective of shared participation, where belonging is defined not by residence but by one's decision to identify with the values of Italic civilization and to contribute to their transmission.

Such a global piazza would function as an open hub of hybridity, multilingualism, and distributed creativity, promoting a geoculture of attraction that addresses the world through the universal languages of taste, beauty, and knowledge. In this perspective, the Italics emerge as a new-generation geopolitical and cultural lever: not bearers of a nostalgic past, but strategic actors of a polycentric and interdependent present. They constitute nodal points within a worldwide cultural network, bound by stratified memory and shared imaginaries that sustain Italy's reputation, trust, and influence in the international system. Recognizing, valorizing, and organizing this diffuse community is to invest in a distinctive geopolitical resource, capable of contributing to a cooperative post-national order in which culture becomes the principal terrain of exchange, recognition, and convergence.

4. Soft power and demographic ageing: on the path to a pax geriatrica?

The demographic aging process that places Italy almost at the global epicenter of lowest fertility rate and highest life expectancy should not be interpreted solely as a structural liability, but rather as a potential element for the reconfiguration, and even reinforcement, of national soft power. Recent scholarship by Prof. Mark L. Haas of Duquesne University, published in *Foreign Affairs* (Haas, 2025a; 2025b), contends that the twenty-first century may, in the medium to long term, mark a more peaceful geopolitical period than the turbulent one of the past twenty-five years. While it is widely acknowledged that demographic ageing depresses economic dynamism and compels states to redirect substantial resources toward the welfare of their ageing populations, Haas highlights an underexplored yet geopolitically consequential dimension: demographic transition engenders systemic disincentives to interstate militarised conflict, thereby recalibrating the structural conditions of international order.

A particularly significant fact emerges when one considers that not only Italy but the overwhelming majority of contemporary states are undergoing a profound demographic transformation: a process of population ageing that is both rapid and structurally entrenched. The combination of persistently low fertility rates and rising life expectancy has produced a marked increase in the proportion of individuals aged sixty-five and above, accompanied by a steady elevation of the median age within societies. In 1950, approximately five percent of the world's population was over sixty-five; by 2021, that figure had nearly doubled. Even if fertility rates were to stabilize at their 2022 levels, a scenario widely deemed improbable, United Nations projections indicate that by 2050 this proportion will have more than tripled. Increasingly, states are confronted with a dual dynamic: an ageing demographic and the contraction of their populations. At present, more than forty countries are experiencing demographic decline, owing to fertility levels that have fallen below the threshold of generational replacement; by 2050, nearly ninety nations are expected to register annual population reductions.

This global demographic realignment, while posing significant economic and social challenges, simultaneously reshapes the very grammar of international politics. The prevalence of ageing societies may attenuate incentives for military

adventurism and interstate aggression, while amplifying the salience of soft power strategies. In such a context, cultural capital, historical prestige, and symbolic legitimacy become increasingly decisive instruments of influence. For Italy, at the forefront of this demographic transition, the capacity to translate its long-standing geocultural resources into strategic leverage offers not only a means of compensating for diminished demographic dynamism but also a potential laboratory for what might be termed a *pax geriatrica:* an emergent order in which attraction supplants coercion as the primary currency of global power.

The proposition that international conflicts may diminish in the coming decades might appear counterintuitive, given the high number of wars that have afflicted Africa, Europe, and the Middle East in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Yet, as populations age, governments will be compelled to devote increasing resources and political attention to the needs of the elderly, within contexts of progressively diminishing economic and social capacity. At the same time, the rising median age of both leaders and citizens, as demonstrated by a range of empirical studies, correlates with a stronger inclination toward peace rather than conflict (Haas, 2025b). The interplay of these dynamics is likely to foster societies that are structurally less capable of, and less tolerant toward war. While inevitable exceptions exist - Russia and Ukraine, for instance, remain embroiled in prolonged hostilities despite experiencing profound and accelerating demographic ageing - the propensity for violent conflict is demonstrably greater in states with younger populations. The forthcoming wave of countries affected simultaneously by demographic ageing and population contraction will therefore reshape the global geopolitical landscape, producing, at least in part, stabilizing and pacifying effects (Haas, 2025a).

The comparative analysis of demographic indicators and armed conflicts between 2012 and 2023 demonstrates that the average proportion of individuals over the age of sixty-five in states initiating violent conflicts stood at approximately 5%, barely half the global mean recorded in 2024. This demographic asymmetry points to a structural correlation of considerable significance: polities with an elevated median age show a considerably lower inclination toward belligerence, whereas those with younger populations display a marked predisposition for interstate violence. From this perspective, demography assumes the status of a strategic determinant of global order: a form of demographic security whose influence extends beyond socioeconomic lines to encompass the very

topology of conflict risk and the emerging geographies of war and peace.

Empirical evidence confirms that states with mature demographic structures consistently exhibit a markedly lower propensity to resort to armed violence. Statistical analyses corroborate this trend, indicating that such countries are significantly less likely to engage in military hostilities than those with predominantly youthful populations. What might superficially appear as a generalized inclination toward warfare thus emerges, upon closer examination, as the specific outcome of demographic dynamics concentrated in younger societies, where instability, surpluses of military-age cohorts, and structural deficits in socio-economic opportunities converge. This demographic factor helps explain the high frequency of armed conflicts across the African continent, whose demographic profile remains among the youngest in the world.

One of the most consequential effects of demographic ageing - with immediate repercussions for the architecture of international security - lies in the progressive erosion of states' geoeconomic capacity. The contraction of the working-age population curtails the productive base, decelerates systemic growth, and constrains domestic consumption, thereby eroding both fiscal revenues and the financial latitude necessary to sustain expansive military infrastructures. In this light, demographic ageing is not merely a macroeconomic variable but must be understood as a structural geoeconomic constraint, one that recalibrates the strategic calculus of states by circumscribing their ability to project force and to sustain prolonged warfare. Far from being a neutral demographic trend, ageing thus functions as a systemic limitation on conflict capacity, redirecting state priorities from external aggression toward the internal management of welfare imperatives (Haas, 2025a).

Demographic ageing exerts a profound impact on the structure and productivity of the labour force, as it entails a gradual rise in the median age of workers. An ageing workforce, in general, tends to be less dynamic and innovative. Empirical analyses consistently demonstrate that individual productivity peaks around the age of forty, a phase in which individuals are best positioned to capitalize on an optimal equilibrium between accumulated knowledge, professional experience, material resources, and psychophysical conditions. Within this age bracket, moreover, the willingness to acquire new skills, to undertake entrepreneurial risks, and to embrace geographical mobility is at its highest, thereby functioning as a decisive multiplier for the overall competitiveness of economic systems. Comparative studies conducted on an international scale

have shown that the relative weight of this group, individuals aged forty to forty-nine, constitutes a critical determinant of national productivity growth: when its proportion increases, the economy benefits accordingly; when it declines, the productive potential of a country contracts in equal measure.

From a geopolitical standpoint, however, the very same demographic shift that constrains economic dynamism also alters the strategic posture of states within the international arena. As ageing diminishes the capacity for sustained innovation and rapid economic expansion, it simultaneously reinforces the structural incentives for peace, stability, and the exercise of soft power. In this sense, demographic ageing does not merely reshape national economies; it redefines the modalities through which states project influence globally, prioritizing cultural diplomacy, symbolic capital, and relational forms of power over coercive force.

A large-scale technological breakthrough, such as the widespread diffusion of artificial intelligence (AI), could in principle offset the economic slowdown associated with demographic ageing. Yet there is no guarantee that even a technological revolution of such magnitude will suffice to neutralize the structural effects of demographic decline. The Japanese experience during the so-called *lost decade* stands as a paradigmatic case: despite the global boom in information technologies in the mid-1990s, boosts that, in several advanced economies, generated productivity gains comparable to those that some economists now attribute to the forthcoming AI revolution, Japan remained largely excluded from these benefits.

The country's total factor productivity (TFP), a key indicator of the capacity of an economy to create value through innovation and technological progress, expanded by only 1% between 1995 and 2005, a mere quarter of the increase recorded in the preceding decade. A decisive factor lay in the acceleration of its demographic crisis. The highly productive cohort of workers aged 40-49, whose contribution significantly exceeded that of the 30-39 and 50-64 brackets, had reached its apex in 1991, only to contract by 29% between 1995 and 2005. This contraction underscores how demographic structures may, under certain conditions, decisively constrain the capacity of technological innovation to translate into systemic productivity gains.

The information revolution thus enabled Japan to preserve a minimal level of productivity, yet its imbalanced demographic structure prevented this

from evolving into a renewed trajectory of overall economic dynamism. This historical precedent establishes a critical interpretative framework for the present: states undergoing analogous processes of demographic aging are likely to encounter comparable obstacles in the unfolding revolution of artificial intelligence. The Japanese lesson therefore underscores a central point in the debate on technological modernity: innovation, however transformative, cannot by itself offset the structural constraints imposed by an ageing labor force (Haas, 2025a).

4.1 *Demographic ageing and cultural capital: the rise of geriatric diplomacy*

In addition, demographic ageing constrains not only the supply side of the economy but also exerts a profound influence on aggregate demand, thereby undermining the capacity of national systems to sustain elevated growth rates. In high-income countries, domestic consumption accounts for nearly two-thirds of overall economic activity, making the demographic composition of the active population a critical determinant of performance. The challenge for ageing states lies precisely in this structural shift: the contraction of the age group most inclined to consumption, those around 40 years of age, coincides with the rapid expansion of the over-65 category, whose spending patterns are considerably more restrained. This dual transformation reveals the limits of any purely technological remedy, highlighting instead the decisive role of demographic variables in shaping long-term economic and geopolitical trajectories.

The consequences of this demographic trend are particularly visible in the case of China. Since 2020, the contraction of the group most inclined to invest in real estate, namely individuals in their early thirties, has reached approximately 30%. This demographic shock has precipitated a collapse in housing demand, generating cascading effects: the erosion of household wealth, the compression of state fiscal revenues, and, more broadly, a slowdown of national economic growth.

This case illustrates with clarity how demographic ageing, acting through the mechanism of domestic demand, not only undermines the economic

resilience of states but also destabilizes their social cohesion and diminishes their capacity to sustain an assertive role in the international system.

As Mark Harrison and Nikolaus Wolf have demonstrated, there exists a historical correlation between economic expansion and the incidence of militarized interstate disputes (Harrison, Wolf, 2012). Geopolitically, this relationship may be explained by the fact that national and per capita GDP growth reduces the relative cost of achieving strategic objectives, rendering recourse to war more feasible as an instrument for pursuing costly revisions of the international order. In other words, economic expansion amplifies the potential of hard power, enabling more assertive or revisionist strategies.

Conversely, stagnation or economic slowdown, frequently induced by demographic ageing and labor force contraction, diminishes the propensity of states to initiate conflict by narrowing the fiscal and political margins necessary to sustain it (Harrison, Wolf, 2012). This dynamic compels ageing states to recalibrate their power strategies towards less costly and less risky modalities, prioritizing instruments of non-military influence. In such contexts, the deployment of soft power through diplomacy, cultural capital, and symbolic influence, emerges as a strategic alternative for international projection.

The emerging scenario suggests that demographic aging functions as a structural brake on state aggressiveness, fostering a reconfiguration of geopolitical equilibria along less conflictual lines and more oriented towards logics of cooperation and interdependence. The steady expansion of elderly cohorts has triggered an unprecedented enlargement of state welfare obligations, particularly in the domains of pensions, healthcare, and long-term care. This dynamic, while reshaping the internal priorities of public policy, simultaneously constrains the allocation of resources to the instruments of hard power, thereby exerting a structural pressure towards the progressive contraction of military expenditure.

On the geopolitical plane, the implications of demographic aging can be interpreted along two principal trajectories. On the one hand, the crowding-out effect generated by the expansion of social expenditure involves a reallocation of public resources that diminishes the capacity of states to sustain the coercive projection of power. This dynamic resonates with the insights of power transition theory, which emphasizes the decisive role of the distribution of economic resources in shaping security strategies and international hierarchies.

On the other hand, the growing centrality of collective welfare and social protection contributes to reinforcing the international legitimacy of states experiencing demographic ageing, fostering forms of *welfare geopolitics* and soft power rooted in the attractiveness of the social model and in the symbolic and social capital it generates (Marklund, 2015).

States today deploy substantial resources not merely to address the consequences of demographic ageing, but also in an effort to mitigate its structural determinants. It is telling, for instance, that member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) allocate on average 2.3% of their GDP to childhood and family programmes whose declared objective is to incentivise fertility, yet the effectiveness of such measures has thus far proved limited (Terranova, 2011).

The implications of demographic aging, however, extend far beyond the domain of family policy, reverberating across sectors seemingly remote from demographic trends, such as internal security and social policies directed at younger and working-age groups. Demographic transformations act as deep structural drivers of many of the principal effects of instability in advanced societies: protracted economic stagnation, austerity measures, the intensification of ethnic tensions, and the resurgence of anti-immigrant sentiment. Such sentiments are frequently rooted in the perception among majority groups of an impending numerical and cultural decline, which translates demographic anxiety into political volatility (Bolaffi, Terranova, 2014).

Against this backdrop, state responses oscillate between repressive strategies, designed to contain radicalised movements, and redistributive measures intended to alleviate popular discontent. What emerges is a geopolitical configuration in which demographic variables function not only as economic constraints, but also as catalysts of novel social and political fault lines, reshaping the contours of stability and legitimacy within ageing polities.

As expenditure linked to addressing both the causes and the consequences of demographic aging expands, other areas of state budgets, including military allocations, come under increasing pressure and risk reduction. While governments are not compelled to reallocate defence funds toward welfare provisions for the elderly, the incentives to do so become progressively stronger. Military spending, in theory, can stimulate the economy by absorbing underutilized labour, sustaining aggregate demand, and financing research

with potential civilian spillovers. Yet, as demonstrated by the studies of J. Paul Dunne and Nan Tian, such expenditures more frequently act as a brake on long-term growth, diverting resources away from more productive investments and contributing to the expansion of public debt (Dunne, Tian, 2016).

Statistical analyses conducted across both democratic and authoritarian regimes further demonstrate that when public expenditure on welfare, particularly that directed toward the elderly population, exceeds 25 percent of the overall budget, the likelihood of a state engaging in militarized conflict decreases significantly. Many countries undergoing advanced demographic aging are already approaching this critical threshold. In 2021, for instance, within OECD member states, expenditures on old-age support, unemployment, and income maintenance averaged nearly 21 percent of total public spending. Given that such costs are projected to rise inexorably in the coming decades, states will have increasingly powerful structural incentives to eschew the path to armed hostilities.

An additional mechanism through which demographic ageing may contribute to a more peaceful international environment concerns the decline in numbers of those of prime military age. From a geopolitical standpoint, this implies that states with rapidly ageing populations will face increasing difficulties in sustaining the manpower required to wage prolonged, high-intensity conflicts.

Confronted with a shrinking pool of potential recruits, armed forces will be compelled to make difficult strategic trade-offs between the quantitative dimension of their forces and the qualitative standards of their personnel. An insufficient rate of enlistment would undermine the attainment of personnel targets; conversely, any attempt to compensate by lowering criteria related to age, health, or physical and cognitive capacity would compromise the operational effectiveness of military units.

A third option, already used by Russia in the war in Ukraine, has been the increase of wages and benefits to attract new recruits. These measures, however, were insufficient to prevent the Russian government from requesting manpower support from North Korea. So in the absence of a proportional increase in overall defense budgets, the rising cost of military labor risks compressing other crucial areas of defense expenditure, such as research, procurement, and the maintenance of weapon systems.

Therefore, within an international system increasingly characterized by armed forces that are numerically reduced and operationally less effective, states will not only be less capable of prevailing in protracted wars but also less inclined to initiate them, thereby lowering the overall probability of armed conflict.

Military establishments may attempt to offset the contraction of draft-age cohorts by substituting personnel with advanced technological systems. The revolution in artificial intelligence, the development of autonomous drone swarms, and the emerging prospects of employing killer robots feed the vision of a large-scale replacement of military manpower with technological capabilities. Nevertheless, the margins for such substitution remain structurally limited, since numerous operations - ranging from counterinsurgency campaigns to wars requiring the direct occupation of enemy territory - will continue to necessitate substantial troop deployments.

The decline in fertility, already evident across most advanced societies, further exacerbates this structural vulnerability. At the same time, the transition toward capital-intensive forms of warfare -intended to compensate for the shrinking pool of recruits - will increasingly require the availability of highly skilled personnel capable of managing and integrating ever more sophisticated weapons systems.

A 2022 report by the Congressional Research Service, for instance, observed that the unmanned aerial systems of the United States Armed Forces demand a workforce equal to, if not greater than, their manned counterparts (Hoehn, Kerr, 2022). In a world shaped by demographic aging and the reduction in the amount of available young recruits, the recruitment of such highly specialized personnel will constitute a major challenge, with far-reaching implications for strategic balances and for the effective capacity of states to sustain prolonged conflicts.

Moreover, societies undergoing progressive demographic aging tend to display an increasing reluctance to accept the sacrifice of human lives in war. Military casualties - and especially the deaths of young individuals who have not yet had children - heighten the perception that armed conflict may irreversibly jeopardize the survival and vitality of communities already marked by declining birth rates.

Far from being a merely social or health-related phenomenon, demographic

aging thus emerges as a geopolitical variable of the first order. The decrease in numbers of youthful cohorts, the mounting fiscal burdens of welfare, and the shifting preferences of aging societies combine to restrict both the capacity and the willingness of states to embark on large-scale armed conflicts. If demography delineates the outer boundaries of what is economically and militarily feasible, aging introduces structural constraints that favor dynamics of stabilization and indirectly reinforce the soft power of older nations.

Although the possibility of war cannot be categorically excluded - as recent cases demonstrate - the present demographic transition inaugurates an unprecedented historical phase in which peace may derive not only from political choices or balances of power, but also from the deeper transformations reshaping the very fabric of contemporary societies. Within this framework, the demographic *winter* that Italy is experiencing should not be read exclusively as a symptom of decline, but as a potential foundation for a renewed strategy of international projection. By transforming demographic vulnerability into cultural capital, Italy may position itself as a paradigmatic gentle power - a gentle power- capable of exerting influence not through coercion, but through the normative, aesthetic, and ethical appeal of its civilizational model. In this sense, demographic aging, often framed as a constraint, can paradoxically become the cornerstone of a post-national geopolitics of attraction, one in which Italy's historical legacies, cultural resources, and social habits converge to shape new forms of global governance and cooperation.

5. Conclusions: towards a strategy of gentle power

Within the prevailing landscape of *permacrisis* and multipolar fragmentation, soft power undertakes the role of a strategic instrument for the cultivation of legitimacy, the construction of symbolic proximity, and the creation of consent across and through the international system.

Joseph Nye has classically defined soft power as the capacity of attraction or seduction that a state exercises *vis-à-vis* others. Italy, endowed with a millennial cultural heritage and situated at a geographical crossroads between Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, exemplifies in paradigmatic fashion the notion of *gentle power*. Its influence, although reflective of a middle-power status, is anchored in a civilizational capital that predates by centuries the very emergence of the Italian nation-state, sustained by a pervasive humanistic ethos and by a globally recognized aptitude for diplomatic mediation.

The historical legacy of Italic civilization - from Ancient Rome to the Renaissance, and extending into the dynamics of the contemporary diaspora - has produced a transnational network of *Italics* who operate as ambassadors of a novel kind, consolidating and projecting Italy's reputation on the global stage. Within this framework, the category of *Italic soft power*, as underscored by the President of Italy Sergio Mattarella, delineates a crucial distinction between juridical italianness and cultural italicity. The latter is articulated as a transnational identity, predicated upon symbolic affinities and adherence to Italian aesthetic, relational, and design values, even among foreign citizens without genealogical or familial ties to Italy.

Within the geopolitical framework of the broader Mediterranean and the Middle East, Italy has consistently demonstrated an ability to merge soft power with pragmatic diplomacy, drawing upon a long-standing tradition of intercultural dialogue and an international posture widely perceived as moderate and inclusive. The absence of a direct colonial legacy in the Mashreq and the Gulf, coupled with a diplomatic narrative grounded in cooperation and respect for local identities, has given Italy a reputation of credibility and readiness for compromise.

During the Cold War, Italy often pursued a course that departed from rigid bipolar alignments. The initiatives of Enrico Mattei and the ENI are emblematic

in this regard: by establishing equitable economic partnerships with resource-producing countries of the Global South, Italy positioned itself in stark contrast to the neo-colonial framework imposed by the *Seven Sisters.* Similarly, in the 1970s and 1980s, Italian diplomacy developed parallel channels of engagement with the Arab world, sustaining dialogue even during periods of heightened international tension, such as the Israeli-Palestinian crises and the Gulf wars.

Italy is increasingly perceived within the international system as a neutral and reliable interlocutor, a positioning rooted not only in historical contingencies but also in a deliberate strategy of middle-power diplomacy. This status has been consolidated through a number of bilateral and multilateral initiatives that emphasize Italy's role as a convener of dialogue rather than a coercive actor. The 5+4 Summit held in Rome in December 1990, at the dawn of the post-Cold War order, exemplified Italy's attempt to anchor Mediterranean cooperation within broader processes of systemic realignment. Similarly, Italy's contribution to the Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Barcelona (1995), the Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation with Libya (2008), and the Rome Conference on Libya (2015) illustrate its persistent pursuit of niche diplomacy aimed at mediation, stabilization, and the management of regional complexities. This trajectory is equally evident in Italy's positioning vis-à-vis Iran, where its balanced stance enabled Rome to emerge as a credible venue for negotiations. The hosting of two rounds of US-Iran talks in 2025, mediated by Oman, not only reinforced Italy's neutral and authoritative diplomatic profile but also underscored the strategic value of its discreet channels of communication and its long-standing traditions of commercial and cultural exchange. In this sense, Italy projects an identity that blends credibility with flexibility, performing the role of a diplomatic hinge between Europe and the Middle East.

Italy's consistent abstention from unilateral military interventions in the region - resorting to the use of force only under UN or EU mandates - has strengthened its image as a stabilizing rather than revisionist power, prioritizing cooperative frameworks over coercive strategies. In this perspective, Italy's geopolitical weight appears to derive less from the projection of hard power than from the accumulation of symbolic capital and soft power. These assets allow Rome to act as a potential mediator, a source of legitimacy, and a channel for the diffusion of norms, sustaining a distinct role within an international system marked by fragmentation, volatility, and contested sovereignties.

From a geoeconomic standpoint, Italy's strategic interests remain firmly anchored in the dual imperatives of energy security and the safeguarding of Euro-Mediterranean trade routes. Algeria, Libya, Qatar, and Iraq emerge as pivotal partners in the diversification of Italy's energy supply, a strategy designed both to mitigate systemic vulnerabilities and to consolidate national resilience. In this framework, ENI operates less as a conventional energy conglomerate than as a para-diplomatic actor, simultaneously engaged in extractive industries, energy transition, and local development, particularly in fragile political situations such as post-Gaddafi Libya and post-ISIS Iraq. The Mattei Plan, launched in 2023, must be interpreted within this broader horizon: a renewed attempt by Rome to reposition itself on the African continent through a multilayered framework of cooperation. Drawing upon the symbolic and political legacy of Enrico Mattei, the plan articulates three interdependent pillars: sustainable development, shared energy security and egalitarian partnerships conceived as strategic co-dependence and mutual valorisation. Its overarching ambition is to recast Italy as a Euro-African platform: a mediator of interests, a stabiliser of flows, and a political bridge capable of linking European and African trajectories within an increasingly multipolar order.

Within the frameworks of NATO and the European Union, Italy has consistently affirmed its role through active participation in international missions aimed at safeguarding maritime security and countering terrorism. The EU-mandated Operation Irini, launched in 2020 to enforce the arms embargo on Libya, stands as a paradigmatic example of Italy's capacity to reconcile security imperatives with the principles of international legality. Equally significant is Italy's longstanding commitment to peacekeeping, most notably through its leadership role in UNIFIL in Lebanon, where it commands the Joint Task Force, Lebanon Sector West. In this environment, the traditional logic of hard security is complemented by a distinctly Italian model of crisis management, one that integrates soft power instruments by engaging local authorities, religious leaders, and civilian communities as active partners. This approach projects an alternative to coercive paradigms of intervention, positioning Italy as a proponent of stabilization strategies rooted in dialogue, legitimacy, and relational diplomacy.

At the same time, Italy has consolidated its position as one of the most active players in the field of cultural diplomacy. Its leadership within UNESCO heritage initiatives and its engagement in global educational programmes testify

to a strategic orientation that elevates culture to a primary level of international influence. Bilateral and multilateral initiatives - such as the Memorandum of Understanding with Jordan (2017-2021), the Tunis Declaration of 2022, and the cultural cooperation agreement with Lebanon - reveal a coherent diplomatic vision in which the human and cultural dimensions of foreign policy are not peripheral but constitutive of Italy's international identity.

In a global context increasingly defined by polarization and the erosion of multilateral frameworks, Italy's geocultural projection emerges as a critical political resource, capable of sustaining dialogical and polycentric forms of order. Italic soft power today stands as one of the few instruments able to weave transnational connections, create trust, and orient diplomacy toward cooperation rather than confrontation.

Valorizing this reservoir of cultural and human capital - rooted in the normative architecture of the Italian Constitution - and investing systematically in education and intercivilizational dialogue is, in effect, consolidating Italy's position as both a norm entrepreneur and a geopolitical mediator. In a global context where the efficacy of military force increasingly reveals its structural limits, intangible resources such as ideas, aesthetic forms, and relational practices acquire renewed strategic salience. While they cannot guarantee the definitive resolution of conflict, they can operate as instruments of mitigation, reframing, and symbolic stabilization within an international system fractured by fragmentation and intensifying rivalries.

Alongside these more traditional dimensions, demographic aging in Italy and across much of the Western world introduces a long-term strategic variable that further consolidates the country's position as a gentle power. The contraction in numbers of young recruits, the expansion of welfare expenditures, and the growing societal reluctance to tolerate human sacrifice in war fundamentally constrain the propensity to resort to armed force. These constraints, by narrowing the scope for coercive projection, simultaneously stimulate the development of non-military instruments of international influence. Italy is well positioned to transform this situation into a resource, consolidating its international legitimacy through the use of cultural, symbolic, and social capital.

From this perspective, the *pax geriatrica* evoked by Mark Haas and other scholars does not simply imply a reduction in global conflictuality. It also

reinforces Italy's trajectory towards a mode of soft power grounded as much in its civilizational tradition as in its demographic transformation. The dynamics of international power will, of course, continue to hinge upon material capabilities. Yet, as Joseph Nye famously observed, success depends not only on which army prevails, but also on which narrative endures.

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This book investigates the geopolitical significance of soft power in an era of global fragmentation, reinterpreting Joseph Nye's theoretical framework through the Italian case. In a world increasingly shaped by systemic crises, protracted conflicts, and new geographies of interdependence, cultural attraction is conceptualized as a strategic resource and as an alternative to coercive paradigms of power. Italy projects influence through a centuries-old reservoir of cultural capital rooted in the legacy of Roman civilization, the Renaissance, and contemporary diasporic networks. Italian soft power operates across transnational educational, symbolic, and diasporic circuits, sustained by a decentralized and reticular model of cultural diplomacy that strengthens Italy's agency within the international system. The study advances an interpretation of Italian civilization as a geocultural actor, the living embodiment of a diffuse humanism capable of generating symbolic proximity and cooperative engagement within a post-national order. Italy thus emerges as a form of gentle power: a credible mediator in an increasingly polarized and fluid geopolitical landscape.

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