



Italy Opposes EU Defense Spending Plan, Stalling the Bloc's Momentum

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ROME — Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has opposed the European Union's plans to raise 800 billion euros (\$870 billion) for defense spending, undermining the bloc's show of strength in the face of Russian aggression and Donald Trump's indifference.

The European windfall was proposed by EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who supports plans for 150 billion euros in loans for member states' defense spending.

A second proposal would allow member states to exclude defense spending up to 1.5 percent of their national GDP from EU debt rules, which are designed to prevent states from accumulating excessive deficits.

If all states took advantage of the exemption, EU defense spending could increase by 650 billion euros, adding to the loans to reach a total of 800 billion euros.

But Italian Prime Minister Meloni gave a negative assessment of the debt rules plan when she met Von der Leyen in Brussels on Thursday, ahead of an EU summit to discuss the plan.

She stated she preferred to incentivize private investors to invest in defense programs, or direct EU funding that "does not directly impact state debts."

Meloni's lack of enthusiasm will have surprised defense officials in Europe, given that her government has repeatedly called for excluding defense spending from EU deficit spending limits.

This move, her defense minister Guido Crosetto previously stated, was the only way for Italy to hope to increase its spending, which is about 1.5 percent of GDP.

Now that the EU has said Italy can do what it has pushed to do for years, Meloni has refused to accept the offer.

One reason is that, regardless of whether the EU allows new debt spending, markets might be less forgiving.

Another reason is that Meloni remains skeptical about the idea of Europe becoming a defense superpower without strong US support.

This month she refused to join plans devised by the UK and France to deploy peacekeeping forces in Ukraine in the event of a ceasefire.

In a letter to the Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera on Thursday, Meloni's defense minister, Crosetto, wrote that only NATO, not the EU, offers a guarantee of military assistance among members.

"The only concrete and viable defense model, here and now, is NATO," he wrote.

Meloni's caution on rearmament also reflects Italian voters' opposition to spending on weapons rather than healthcare.

A poll this month revealed that 54.6% of Italians oppose the 800 billion euro spending plan.

Meloni's deputy prime minister, Matteo Salvini, a long-time eurosceptic soft on Russia, also opposed the additional defense spending this week, arguing that the greatest threat to Italy is Islamic terrorism, not Vladimir Putin.

Asked on Thursday about a possible European army, he replied, "What would a European army led by France and Germany do today: go to war?"

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