



Italian Foreign Policy: The More Things Change, The More They Stay The Same.

By Maria Elena Gutierrez

For a long time, Italy struggled with a fundamental discrepancy between its ambition to be considered one of the great powers of Europe and its quite meager capabilities. Victory in World War I seemed for a brief time to give it status as a major player, but fascism proved to be the ultimate example of the tragic contradiction between goals and resources.

Having learned the hard way, post-1945 Italy has been a fundamentally peaceful, constructive actor in Europe and the world – a strong advocate of multilateralism, the UN system, NATO, and the European project. At the same time, it was never the perfect Atlanticist, preferring to develop its own version of Ostpolitik with a Mediterranean flavor. Thus, Italy emerged as a vocal supporter of détente in the Cold war, while leaving ample space for industrial partnerships with the communist bloc. It was ready to entertain a friendly relationship with Israel while flirting with the Arab countries to the point of reaching informal agreements with the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

In a way, like Rudyard Kipling’s Kim, Italy could well have been described as “the little friend of all the world.” It has proved faithful to this profile also in more recent years, as its governments performed complex balancing acts whenever fundamental choices had to be made. For example, during the “Euromissile crisis” of 1983, Italy played a crucial role in supporting the U.S. position, thus making

it possible for Germany to accept the deployment of the Pershing II missiles. But, a few months later, the “Sigonella incident”, during which Italian and U.S. forces were engaged in a dangerous confrontation in the Sicilian airbase, underlined Italy’s friendly relations with Arab powers despite an implied misalignment with the United States. Similarly, Italy joined the “coalition of the willing” during the Iraq War, but its forces were strictly confined to peacekeeping roles. More recently, in 2014 it joined the other EU countries in approving sanctions against Russia over the Ukraine crisis, but in 2016 started objecting to their continuation.

In the end, however, while “running with the hare and hunting with the hounds” has never been alien to Italian politics (there is even a unique, non-translatable expression, *cerchiobottismo*, to describe this political style), the country’s fundamental foreign policy options (EU and NATO) were never challenged because these pendulum swings never reached extremes. Its balancing acts also took place in a context of consensus on most foreign policy issues. From the mid-1970s onward even the Communist Party, then the largest in the West accepted NATO and EU membership. And in the Berlusconi era, all international missions and treaties were approved by the center-right and center-left major parties.

Some basic elements, however, seem to have changed after the 2018 elections. The new governing coalition,



between the two parties that had most visibly distanced themselves from the consensus on foreign policy, has appeared to challenge the fundamental loyalties that no one had dared to discuss in the previous half-century.

The Lega was an outlier within the center-right coalition when it voted against the Italian intervention in Kosovo in 1999, and when it openly flirted with the idea of an “Italexit” all the while developing ties with the European extreme right. As for the Five Star Movement (M5S), its platform was openly critical of NATO and the EU, and its ideological refusal of the “liberal order” and globalization included strong criticism of the euro system

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Does this mean that we are about to see fundamental shifts in Italy’s foreign policy? Will the prevalent neo-sovereignist rhetoric of the current majority translate into fundamental changes? Or, will it only be lip-service to the benefit of the domestic political market?

Looking at the behavior of the government led by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte suggests that there will not be a major disruption.

The first important step towards moderation and continuity was the choice as foreign minister of Enzo Moavero Milanesi, an establishment figure and former EU official who served as a minister in earlier governments. This choice was clearly the result of strong pressure from President Sergio Mattarella, whose role in shaping Italy’s international profile (as in the case of his predecessor, Giorgio Napolitano) should not be underestimated. If anything, a clear lesson from the last 20 years is that the presidency, far from being a merely ceremonial institution, is a feature of the constitutional order that plays a powerful political role.

Moreover, there has been a toning down of the inflamed discourses that shaped the initial profile of the governing coalition. As a result, the behavior of the current government in the international arena shows remarkable continuity with the recent past, including the constant recourse to balancing acts among conflicting loyalties and diverging priorities. Among these is the recurrent idea that developing a small-scale “special relationship” with the United States may help Italy balance the dominant Franco-German core of EU politics. This was the case with Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi’s attempt in the 2000s to position Italy as part of the pro-U.S. “new Europe” and not of the Franco-German “old Europe.” During the presidency of Barack Obama, Italy’s center-left governments constantly relied on his administration’s criticism of the EU austerity policies favored by Germany to advocate more growth-focused approaches in the EU. So, even taking into account its neo-populist flavor, there is nothing unusual in the current sympathy between the administration of President Donald Trump and the M5S-Lega government, which was evident during the visit of Moavero to the United States last month.

The lifting of the EU sanctions against Russia looms large among the few foreign policy priorities evoked in the government’s official platform. There is nothing particularly new about this since the point was constantly raised by the center-left governments since 2016. On the other hand, the threat to use Italy’s veto power on this subject, often raised by Interior Minister and Lega leader Matteo Salvini, never materialized.

Regardless of his government portfolio, Salvini plays a major role in foreign policy through his style of communication. Among his utterances during a recent visit to Israel, mostly through social media, was one that qualified Hezbollah as a “terrorist entity.” This was in contrast with the usual Italian prudence on the subject and led some observers to conclude that the government may move closer to the U.S.-Israeli position. But a few days later, in contradiction to this Moavero confirmed that Italy is considering the re-establishment of full diplomatic

relations with the Assad regime, after having already substituted the administrative staff that had been left at the embassy in Syria after 2012 with diplomatic personnel.

The tense Italian relationship is now, paradoxically, with the EU, and in particular with its Franco-German core. Anti-Macronism has become recently more popular than Merkel-bashing and there have been divergences between the two countries over the Libyan crisis. But there are no major differences on traditional foreign policy themes in this, but rather another instance of the prevalence of domestic political concerns over purely international ones.

If there is a constant core to Italy's foreign policy, beyond its pendulum swings and apparent contradictions, it is to be found in this prevalence and especially in the subordination of foreign policy to economic policy.

The current situation may just be another case of "It's the economy, stupid." Many foreign observers tend to underestimate the economic hardships experienced by Italy in the last two decades. After a decade of sluggish growth starting in 1998, Italy suffered a double-dip recession between 2008 and 2014, lasting longer than in the rest of Europe (except Greece). The slow recovery between 2015 and 2017 was followed by a dismal 2018, whose second half will probably signal a new recession.

Not surprisingly, the major concerns of Italians have regularly to do with the economy, and in particular with unemployment. In a poll, last December, 55 percent of respondents said "the economic crisis" was the major challenge to Italy, with immigration a distant second (16 percent) and all security-related or international themes attracting very minor interest.

It is therefore clear that the Italian perception of the EU's predicaments, including the difficult relationship between Italian governments and the European Commission (a constant factor in the last years), have economic issues at their core, while any other issue pales in comparison. When asked about the possible use of the veto power within the EU

Council on the renewal of sanctions against Russia, Salvini said that this was an ultimate weapon that had to be used sparingly and that only fundamental economic policy matters would warrant this.

This priority of economic issues also represents a major limit to the emergence of any kind of Populist International that includes the current government. While it may flirt with Central and Eastern European governments on immigration issues, it is clearly not finding any solidarity among them in its fight against restrictive economic policies advocated by Germany and northern EU members.

In light of all this, a stalemate is the most likely outcome in the tug of war between the Italian government and the EU institutions. The costs of a major breakup with the EU would be only too clear to the Lega electorate, which is still predominantly based on the northern middle classes. In fact, increased trust in the euro has been detected by polls in recent months in contrast with the Europhobic rhetoric that was a trademark of the Lega and M5S during the 2018 elections campaign. According to a December 2018 survey, the share of respondents that considered the euro a positive factor reached 64 percent in Italy, the same level as in Germany.

Under the current conditions, Italy will no longer be a driving force toward further European integration, but it will not become a force for disintegration. The determinant of this is in its structural weakness much more than in its changing political climate.

When speaking of Italian politics, many observers have felt it appropriate in the past to quote the famous line from Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel, *The Leopard*: "For things to remain the same, everything must change." However, this was not originally intended as an analysis, but rather as the expression of a conservative political strategy of circumventing and preempting fundamental political changes through apparent concessions. To describe the continuity in Italian foreign policy, it is more appropriate to quote the skeptical phrase of Alphonse Karr, "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

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