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# Italy's Hobbled Search for a Better Place in the Sun

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*Fra Casa Bianca e Botteghe Oscure : fatti e retroscena di una stagione alla Farnesina* / Lamberto Dini; intervista di Maurizio Molinari. – Milano : Guerini e Associati, c2001. – 139 p. – ISBN 88-8335-185-1

This book contains an exceptionally lucid recital of Italy's recent and perhaps future place in the complex world of international affairs. And Lamberto Dini is extraordinarily well placed to speak to Italy's foreign policy priorities, to Italy's recent achievements in the international sphere, and to some of Italy's international aspirations for the not-too-distant future. Among other advantages, he has been that country's foreign minister for the last five years, a period during which three different men have occupied the Prime Minister's office.

Three major points about Dini's foreign policy thought, reflected in these pages, are of particular interest. Taken together, they highlight several problems that Italy must face and resolve as it moves to develop a more distinctive international posture and, equally important, as it strives to be recognised as exercising greater weight in world affairs.

First, and not surprisingly, Lamberto Dini is an Italian nationalist. Like other Italians, however, he deeply believes that Italy's best interests are served if and only if the European Union and its further political integration remains one of Italy's highest international priorities. Of particular interest here is Dini's belief that, as the European Union's political integration process proceeds, its member states do not lose national sovereignty but actually may acquire more of it.

This idea does not go down easy in France, and it is considered heretical in many English circles. But there is evidence that he is entirely correct. We have had a surfeit of simplistic claims that the future of the EU lies in the creation of a supranational power at Brussels and Strasbourg, and in the greater empowerment of Europe's sub-national regions. But this is not, in fact, what happens

in practice. As Brussels enacts more directives and regulations, national governments wind up exercising more, not fewer, powers. The game between Brussels and the capitals of the EU's member states, as Dini well argues, is therefore not necessarily zero-sum. The extremist European federalists and others who articulate the zero-sum view ill serve the purposes of further European integration itself.

Dini's comments about Italy's unflagging devotion to the EU and its further integration, however, lead Maurizio Molinari, the interviewer and editor of this book, to raise a nagging question. Is it possible, he wonders, that Italy's devotion, unmatched anywhere else in Europe, reflects the low esteem in which Italians hold their own government? Do most Italians believe, with Umberto Bossi, that any government, local or supranational, is better than the one located in Rome? Is Italy a prime example, where affect toward political institutions is concerned, of a zero-sum relationship between, say, an Italian's love of country and his or her love of the European Union?

The foreign minister is on good ground to doubt that this really is the case. Nevertheless, this is exactly the impression about Italians that derives from many surveys and much research on Italy of the postwar years. The prevailing image is one of very low Italian affect for indigenous national governmental institutions. Expressed levels of disaffection, including downright derision, are even higher toward elective officials.

Many Italians who travel or live abroad create this selfsame impression. The negative things they typically say about the Italian governmental system and about Italy's political leaders are often as startling as they are sweeping. The Italian mass media, and particularly the Italian press, seem to work very hard to reinforce these negative images. And, in recent years, Italian magistrates associated the so-called Clean Hands investigations into alleged corruption have also traveled the continents, placing the Italian political system and Italian office holders in the worst possible light. These are not ingredients designed to burnish Italy's image or status in world affairs.

A second aspect of Lamberto Dini's foreign policy thought is his claim that, in recent years, Italy has scored some noteworthy achievements in the international sphere. He points with satisfaction not just to the important role that Italy has played in the peacekeeping missions in the Balkans. In this book he also delineates, in striking detail, the creative leadership initiatives that Italy has undertaken in places like Libya, Iran, Algeria and, surprisingly, North Korea. In the case of NATO's military intervention in the Balkans, he provides a dramatic and arresting insight into the role that Fortuna plays in shifting the thrust of international relations in the direction of war or peace.

In view of such undeniable achievements, one wonders why Italy has failed to gain a seat on the UN Security Council, despite its concerted efforts of recent years toward exactly that goal. About this delicate issue, Lamberto Dini counsels patience. He anticipates that Italy will gain its seat in that high place when the number of states represented in the Security Council is eventually enlarged. In

effect, he judges of temporary duration the setback that Italy has experienced in this recent campaign.

One hopes that this will be so. But an Italian seat in an enlarged Security Council is far from self-evident. One possible hitch in this Italian aspiration is that, if and when this reform occurs, who is to say that Italy will be preferred to countries like China, India, Brazil, Mexico or even a re-unified Korea – all of which will be knocking at the same door? A waiting game of this kind, therefore, may not be the best, or the winning, strategy.

Lamberto Dini also suggests, quite cogently, that Italy's weight in the international sphere will grow within the context of the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance and not outside either of these intergovernmental arrangements. Both of these bodies have for decades been crucibles in which Italy's loyalty to the West has been tested with great satisfaction all around. In addition, it is within these same crucibles that noteworthy Italian leadership qualities, as well as Italian leaders, have emerged.

In order for the aspirations for Italy expressed by Dini to materialise in these same crucibles, however, the balance of power and influence within the European Union would have to shift south, and that within NATO would have to shift away from Washington, more toward Europe. Pressures of this kind are already evident. Desirable though these shifts may be, however, they will be resisted in Paris, Berlin and London, and even more so in Washington. Matters are certain to heat up even more, as discussions proceed regarding the New Missile Defense program emerging in the US, and regarding an emergent European Defence Force and its relationship to NATO.

On missile defence, the Russians have recently spoken some reassuring words, as have the Chinese. And President Bush seems prepared to give real consideration to the view, also expressed by Dini, that a European Defence Force can and should be accommodated within NATO, and certainly not separated from it. Dini, who knows the United States better than most European statesmen, is also aware, and rightly fearful, that always looming in the background of these delicate issues are those in the US who would opt for a "Fortress America" approach to international relations. Even if this retrograde step remains unlikely at this time, it is a potential danger worth careful attention.

A third and last point about Dini's foreign policy thought, assuming that I have it right, relates to a question posed by Molinari late in this volume. He asks: "C'è una continuità fra la diplomazia di Andreotti e la sua?" To which Dini replies, "Più che continuità, c'è coincidenza."[1]

This way of putting it is probably correct. Like Giulio Andreotti, Lamberto Dini believes that Italy can and should express greater independence of mind regarding such problematic areas as the Balkans, the Mediterranean Basin, the Arab

1 ("Is there a continuity between [Giulio] Andreotti's approach to diplomacy and your own?" "More than continuity there are points of similarity.")

world, and the Middle East. Indeed, regarding all of these areas, which are obviously of great strategic importance to Italy, both of these men believe that, for many reasons, Italy has very special competencies to offer the rest of NATO or, indeed, the world.

Lamberto Dini, very much like Giulio Andreotti, also believes that friendship among nations should not be confused with subservience of one to another. In any alliance, both men know that it is sound international policy to avoid situations where every country marches lock- step with the strategies or wishes of any single nation.

For many reasons, impulses toward this type of foreign policy flexibility and autonomy remained muted during the years of the Cold War. Even today, however, the expression of more independence of mind and policy does not easily win approbation from one's allies. Misunderstandings will probably increase in the years ahead. When they emerge, they will require refined diplomatic skills of a kind that, as the foreign minister has shown, are not in short supply on Italian shores.

In the last few years, Italy's national government has moved more deliberately in the direction of taking initiatives of its own, many of which are reviewed in this book. The more delicate of these initiatives have proceeded on the basis of very careful coordination by Italy with interested parties in Europe and North America. Exactly how some of these moves and interventions have evolved is nicely delineated in these pages. Taken together, these accounts support the foreign minister's conclusion that Italy's diplomatic record of the last several years has been exemplary.

As the principal spokesman for the government where foreign policy is concerned, Lamberto Dini also understands that there is a diplomatic minefield out there. Potentially explosive situations require cautious and skillful navigation, of the kind that Dini provides. He manages to sparkle in a galaxy of highly talented Italians in international affairs that includes names like Giuliano Amato, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, Romano Prodi, Mario Monti, Renato Ruggerio and so many others.

There are additional structural problems, however, that continue to lie in the way of Italy's search for greater influence and recognition in world affairs, several of which would seem to require urgent attention.

First, the office of the Italian Prime Minister is too weak, and should be strengthened. The concept of "collective responsibility" of cabinet members, a *sine qua non* of strong parliamentary systems, does not exist in Italy. The prime minister is, at best, *primus inter pares*. He is not free to dismiss errant ministers. Ministers often speak their own minds in public, even in flat contradiction to established governmental policies. When this happens, they are under no obligation to resign. This is, to say the least, a pity.

The French solved this problem of government-by-assembly by creating the Fifth Republic. The Italians talk about a Second Republic, but the First Republic

remains very much alive. Even when Italian prime ministers are strong personalities and enjoy wide public appeal, they are compelled to wrest leadership away from parliament. Leadership in policy matters must thus be re-invented on a daily basis. This is often achieved through the instrumentality of delegated legislation (*legge delega*), in itself not a good idea either.

Second, Italy's electoral law brings too many parties into the parliament, thus making coalition governments of three or more parties the norm, not the exception. Where multi-party majorities are as razor-thin as in recent years, any member of the coalition, especially small and extremist parties, can and will blackmail the executive about domestic or foreign policies. Dini offers us some arresting examples as to how this by now notorious form of political blackmail works. The Italian government's difficulties in the articulation of policies toward the Balkan crises are best understood within this framework of small parties wielding disproportionate powers, particularly at delicate and critical moments when the nation is called upon to act.

From the outside, these structural defects create the picture of an ineffectual and sometimes contradictory and chaotic national government. Scenarios such as one or two reviewed by Dini make Italy appear weak, irresolute, unable to act in the international sphere in a forceful and timely way. More often than not, it is these moments of indecision or of governmental paralysis that, in the international mass media, overshadow Italy's achievements, thereby obscuring them.

Other structural problems that influence Italy's place and behaviour in world affairs are parametric, and therefore not readily open to modification. Dini makes it abundantly clear, for example, that the seat of the Catholic Church is in Rome and not in Paris, Berlin, London or Washington. Similarly, the thousands of miles of shoreline that can be reached and breached by all manner of immigrants from the troubled spots of the Adriatic, Middle East and North Africa are mostly located on the Italian peninsula, not elsewhere in Europe. It goes without saying that such factors impinge on what Italy does or can do in the international sphere. And, given such parametric constraints, one can only admire the way in which Italy conducted "Operation Alba", involving Albania and Albanians.

Like it or not, Italy is also still living with the international residue of its post-war history, when it was the home of the strongest Communist Party in the free world. That party was for decades lined up with the other side, opposed to the West and, indeed, to Italy's pro-Western posture. Dini has worked hard in Washington to redress this image of Italy, particularly in view of the evidence that today's Democratic Party of the Left is a far cry from what the Communist Party was in yesteryear. But old images die hard, and progress remains slower here than one might desire.

A last structural problem worth mentioning involves globalisation. Not the globalisation of information and culture but, rather, of manufacturing and service enterprises. If armed conflict among advanced industrial countries is a thing of the past, economic warfare has already replaced it. And, as Francois Mitterrand once warned, this type of warfare is destined to intensify, especially when the

astonishing growth rates of recent years and decades slow down or reverse.

The major instruments of this benign warfare – or economic competition, if that term is preferred – is the international, multinational or global firm. Increasingly, it is through these organisations that a country's international presence and weight are measured. These are the organisations that are now widely recognised as the modern substitutes for the military forces of old. It is through them that the penetration of overseas geographic territories now proceeds.

This form of national competition or conflict is often papered over with the assertion that, after all, the multinational or global firm is increasingly "without nationality". Such assertions are largely myth. As the *Financial Times* (March 1) points out, these global firms maintain very strong national identities. Regardless of how they are organised, or over how much of the globe they are present, they remain quintessentially American, Japanese, English, German or whatever may be the nationality of the country in which the firms were founded and are headquartered.

Thus Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) by these firms would be one way of measuring the international influence and power of the countries from which they hail. Italy, it must be noted, is not doing very well in this regard. The total stock of FDI now exceeds 5 trillion dollars and has been growing at an annual rate of about 12 percent. Whereas Italy, especially in earlier decades, was a major recipient of in-coming FDI, its share of out-going FDI is miniscule, about the same as Sweden's. It is immensely smaller than the FDI of countries like France, Germany, Britain, Japan, Benelux or even little Switzerland. And there is very little evidence that the situation will be improved in the near term.

With only a handful of exceptions, Italian enterprises are not major players in the world of global firms operating and competing in the global economy. Whereas in recent years Italians have talked and written a great deal about the need to internationalise their business enterprises, very little of this has actually occurred. Indeed, it is now apparent that emerging-market countries like Brazil, Mexico, Taiwan and South Korea have either outdistanced Italy in FDI, or will shortly do so. These, along with China, are the same countries that will one day compete with Italy for more recognition within the halls of the United Nations.

To reach the status in world affairs that the events recited by Lamberto Dini in this interesting book would seem to justify, attention must be given this critical problem as well. As long as the direct Italian industrial and financial presence in global markets remains as anemic as it has been and is today, Italy's struggle for greater international prominence will remain steeply uphill and the goal itself frustratingly elusive. Lamberto Dini in this book may have provided a much needed wake-up call.