

An Autonomous Foreign Policy for a Changing Italy

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L'Italia e la politica internazionale / a cura di Roberto Aliboni, Franco Bruni, Alessandro Colombo e Ettore Greco ; Istituto Affari Internazionali, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale - Ed. 2000. - Bologna : il Mulino, c2000. - 492p. - ISBN 88-15-07734-0

This book is a joint project by the IAI, which used to publish a yearbook on Italy's role in international politics, and ISPI, which also brought one out in the past that gave precedence, however, to international politics in its European and global ramifications. The result is an excellent yearbook which sets Italian foreign policy in the context of world events. It is not possible to fuse two very different subjects to everyone's satisfaction and it is the reviewer's sacred duty to quibble that there is too much on Italy and not enough on the world, or vice-versa.

Thus the two chapters on the birth of the euro, both written by Franco Bruni, deal well with the various methods the European countries use to run their new currency and make the useful point that the European Central Bank does not operate like the Bundesbank. But, while Bruni's analysis of Italy's manoeuvres to follow – and to be seen to be following – the requirements of the Stability Pact is very knowledgeable, one would have welcomed his judgement on the vital question of whether in 1999 the Italian economy was not still suffering from the Prodi government's willingness to cut public spending in order to convince its neighbours of its European vocation. Did Italy not pay too much for monetary union?

Having dutifully quibbled, the reviewer is now free to mention several of the many merits of this book. One of them is the treatment of Kosovo, the most important European foreign policy issue of 1999, and especially Ettore Greco's essay on the Italian role in the complex crisis.

The key factor was perhaps that so many Italians, whether directly involved or onlookers, were convinced that this was a test where the new Italy that had

emerged from *Mani Pulite*, the ex-Communists and then Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema, the first former communist head of government, must demonstrate to the US and in a lesser way to the other Europeans, that they were efficient, trustworthy allies who could be relied on in a crisis. Certainly D'Alema saw it in this light and he did his utmost to behave loyally towards the US. The trouble is that once put on trial, it is hard to be done with the trial. Another trouble is that one is offering excellent, often unmerited publicity to those people and parties who see nothing to be gained by American or even European approval.

In the case of Kosovo, the Vatican did not actively support anti-war feeling among Catholics, while D'Alema mostly kept his own party in line. He thus drew a step closer to his ideal of an Italy whose opinions counted in the world. Not that Kosovo was a complete success for Italy. Greco notes that in the strictly military sphere Italy was held back by antiquated equipment and by a parliamentary vote that its forces were to be used only for defence purposes. Moreover, the Allies thought his was the same old Italy and paid scant attention to interesting Italian initiatives such as maintaining dialogue with Belgrade and drawing Russia into an active diplomatic role.

This last theme is in our opinion important: Russia will one day be a great power again and its geography and history dictate it will be a European power. This does not mean the EU should appease Russia, but it should not exclude it either.

The wounded but still mighty Russian bear is part of the era through which we are living. We tend to describe it as an age of transition – the post-Cold War years – but a lively introduction to the volume by Alessandro Colombo invites us to see autonomous features of the era that are neither left over from Stalin and his successors nor mere harbingers of what is to come. One of them is the end of *prevedibilità* or “the foreseeable”. It is a normal state to have difficulty anticipating the forms a threat or any other political problem might take. The Cold War imposed on things a bipolar framework but that is historically an exception. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, the failure of the Rambouillet talks and massive immigration are not inevitable, but they are genuine problems we must face. For young Europeans, the great historical issue may well be learning to live with Islam. Colombo suggests that all these issues stem from a specific trait of our period: the economic has outstripped the political. Today we are rediscovering what belongs in the international arena: the nation states linger on, regions may flatter to deceive and who or what legitimises an international organisation?

This is the world in which contemporary Italy, which has accomplished much economic, but little political modernisation, has to devise a foreign and security policy for itself. Antonio Missiroli, in his chapter on European policies, thinks Europe is where the future lies and sees Romano Prodi gaining power for Italy at the Commission. But within the EU, the Commission has never been as strong as the nation states grouped in the Council of Ministers. There, Italy's power depends on whether it manages to reform its own state.

Then there is the other side of the Mediterranean and the Middle East where Italy, sometimes in alliance with France and Spain as in the Barcelona agreement, sometimes using its own contacts as in Libya, can fill a void left by American partisanship. One might take warning, however, from an excellent article by Roberto Aliboni and Daniela Pioppi on the Öcalan affair.¹ All the shortcomings of Italian foreign policy unfold before our eyes: when Öcalan gets off the plane in Rome, a representative of the Communist Refoundation Party just happens to get off with him; D'Alema, in power barely a month, has been given a pre-Christmas present; he and many others on the Italian left overestimate European support for the Kurds; the Germans will not take Öcalan and the US wants him extradited; Turkey launches a highly promising boycott of Italian goods. To make the obligatory reference to football, Juventus has to play a match in Turkey without the supporters who had intended to cheer it on. Belatedly, the D'Alema government begins the process of distancing itself from Öcalan, but Italy has displayed to a cynical world its foreign policy weaknesses: the competing ideologies and irresponsibility of the political class, the priority given to domestic politics, and the tendency to believe that all is theatre. Nevertheless, the Öcalan affair and Kosovo are the two poles of this book which shows that, whatever its weaknesses, Italy has no lack of expertise in foreign policy.

But then Christian Democrat-led governments pursued irresponsible economic policies despite Italy's plethora of good economists. Similarly, the distinguished group of institutional scholars has not been able to bring about electoral reform. The real problem in Italy is the political class. With perhaps some collateral hopes of bringing about change, the IAI and ISPI have produced this yearbook which looks into the merits and deficiencies of Italian politics and deals at some depth with the whole range of issues facing the partially-reformed Italy.

¹ See English translation in this issue, p. 37.