

Can Italy Make it into the First Division?

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Con gli occhi degli altri. Pregi e difetti del proprio paese nell'esperienza di un inviato speciale / by Dino Frescobaldi. – Florence: Casa Editrice Le Lettere, 2000. - 266 p. - ISBN 88 7166 518 X

L'interesse nazionale. Dieci storie dell'Italia nel mondo / Maurizio Molinari. - Bari: Laterza, 2000. – 129 p. - ISBN 88 420 6063 1

The then British Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, once said in a fit of post-imperial rhetoric that Britain “punched above its weight”. He meant that even though Britain is now a second or even third line country in terms of size, population, economy and military, it still sat on the top table (or fought in the heavyweight class to maintain the boxing metaphor). Hurd may or may not be right but it is certainly true that “Italy’s weight in international affairs is less than its real value”. as Romano Prodi pointed out in 1999.

For more than 40 years after World War Two, Italy hardly even had an independent foreign policy. It was a medium-sized country which became increasingly wealthy over the period but was almost completely absent from the international stage. Its official position followed NATO and the United States and sallies into the international arena were usually more for domestic consumption than for anyone abroad. Interfactions were more important than some rather vague idea of the “national interest”. Unofficially, successive Italian foreign ministers tried to maintain independent initiatives outside the Atlantic framework. It was a foreign policy based on ambiguity: “the anxiety to take part and the desire to avoid the rules of participation” as Sergio Romano put it almost ten years ago.¹

¹ S. Romano, *Guida alla politica estera italiana. dal crollo del fascismo al crollo del comunismo* (Milan: Rizzoli; 1993) repeated in various interviews and presentations, see for example *La Stampa* 29

At the same time, Romano argued that Italian foreign policy was by then dead, killed by the end of the Cold War. He himself has frequently shown since then that his conclusions were overstated and that, if anything, Italy's foreign policy has matured and its influence grown precisely because of the end of the Cold War. Now two books by experienced foreign affairs journalists describe how Italy does have explicit interests abroad and, despite setbacks, is actually developing a foreign policy.

The two are very different in style. Frscobaldi has written a memoir of a foreign correspondent which mixes a self-portrait and pictures of the great and not-so-great he has encountered with accounts and analyses of more than 40 years of Italian foreign policy. In contrast, Molinari's book is a short and tight chronicle of ten episodes of Italy's international relations during not even an entire legislature: the governments of Prodi and D'Alema between 1996 and 2000.

In different ways, they both agree that Italy's foreign policy was muddled and equivocal and not particularly successful despite the presumption of an innate Machiavellian superiority over other foreign ministers and chancellories. They also agree that the end of the "first republic" has signalled a major potential for change which has only been partly realised.

For Molinari, this change is the whole subject of his book as he argues that both Prodi and D'Alema tried and often succeeded in imposing a pragmatic position over the "ideological" or just plain slippery. He maintains that the "national interest" has actually explicitly become the basis of Italian foreign policy though not without considerable difficulties and setbacks for both prime ministers. Frscobaldi is more concerned with what he considers Italy's poor showing abroad and the work that a foreign correspondent has to do as an unofficial ambassador. Nonetheless, he too maintains that Italy's position has changed for the better and should continue to do so, though he does not put the change in the context of either the end of the Cold War or the subsequent changes in Italy itself.

Italy's overall geopolitical constraints are clear so it is not surprising that both books deal mainly with the Balkans and relations with the Arab world. The other two major conditioning factors, European institutions and the US, are only considered when they impinge on the first two areas.

It is organic in any system for there to be differences between the politicians and the diplomats: the British Foreign Secretary often finds it difficult to make the Foreign Office change course. In the US, there are frequently tensions between the Secretary of State and the State Department (or between individual politically appointed ambassadors and professional diplomats). France has a potentially in-built tension between the president and the prime minister which has once or twice become open conflict between Chirac and Jospin. But in Italy there is a much wider set of possible tensions which render its foreign policy extremely difficult to

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formulate and to implement.

A coalition government can make for differences between the component parties as well as simply between ministers. The president can and sometimes does make foreign policy statements when he is abroad which are not in tune with the government. Then Italy has the peculiar difficulty of having a parallel diplomatic service sharing the same condominium as it were. In theory, the Vatican is a separate state with its own agenda and interests but, in practice, it has a special role within Italy. To complicate matters further, the Sant'Egidio community in Rome runs yet another parallel and unofficial diplomatic service. In the past, with a subdued and largely underground foreign policy, these differences rarely mattered. Today, they are crucial and are the biggest single obstacle to Italy reaching its true weight in international affairs

Molinari describes the many divergences between the different elements of Italian foreign policy. In 1996, the Prodi government tried to establish a positive relationship with Israel after the long pro-Arab season of the Christian Democrats-Socialist Party. Massimo D'Alema as leader of the biggest government party undertook the first visit and made the changes in his own party and the Italian government clear. The Democratic Party of the Left is not the Italian Communist Party and is able to have a constructive dialogue with Israel was the message. This position was promptly countered when the supposedly conservative Foreign Minister Lamberto Dini won applause from the Italian left by maintaining the Farnesina's traditional position and criticising the Israeli government's peace policies. President Scalfaro added his voice to the confusion when he made a public statement exhorting Israel to withdraw from Lebanon. Since then there have been many other moments when the foreign minister and prime minister were not singing from the same sheet.

There are other examples of divergences in both books. As for the rival diplomats, Frescobaldi mentions the Sant'Egidio community,² but neither consider the role of the Vatican in Italian foreign affairs although the Pope's presence in Rome has frequently influenced Italian diplomacy positively and negatively.

Despite the very real changes, Italy abroad is still weaker than its potential. The sleight of hand used during the Kosovo war to show Italy's allies abroad that Italy was an active fighting collaborator while pretending to the government's coalition partners at home that it was being merely defensive did not enhance the country's reputation, as both authors point out. And then, three episodes in October 2000 showed how diplomatic and political shortcomings hamstringing the country's efforts. All three involved the UN. In the first, Italy failed to win a seat on the Security Council. It was not the losing that damaged Italy's reputation as much as the inept campaigning beforehand. Then they failed to win the post as head of the UNHCR; again it was not the losing as much as having put up two candidates from

² For a recent comment on Sant'Egidio, see P. Leymarie, "God's own United Nations", *Le Monde Diplomatique* (English Edition), September 2000, pp. 10-11.

opposing political sides, Emma Bonino and Giangiacomo Migone, which made Italy look foolish. Finally, the UN ambassador, Sergio Vento, made a number of very undiplomatic remarks about Israel.³ Until this type of mistake is avoided, Italy's foreign policy will continue to be weak. In the meantime, however, the two books are useful additions to a field which is thinly covered, largely because there was little interest in what was a dull subject for most.

The books themselves are the result of the changing circumstances. Italians themselves are becoming more conscious that they actually have a foreign policy and politicians and businessmen are beginning to realise that they can influence it. There will presumably be an increasing number of books for the general public by journalists, academics, diplomats and politicians. Massimo D'Alema's instant book on the Kosovo war is an example.⁴

Molinari's is an excellent, synthetic and detailed account of recent Italian foreign affairs. He has a point which he makes consistently and forcefully, which is that the Prodi and D'Alema governments tried to shift foreign policy from the ideological and devious to the pragmatic ("practical based on principle" would perhaps be better as it avoids the negative connotations of "pragmatism" in Italian). They succeeded on occasions and Molinari applauds the success, not surprisingly for a commentator who on previous occasions strongly criticised the Italian left for its equivocal approach to Israel.⁵ It is a pity, though, that he did not allow himself to draw conclusions from the episodes he describes. Frescobaldi gives an interesting picture of the Italian foreign correspondent and the country's strengths and weaknesses though a closer attention to detail of dates, people and places would have made it more informative.

3 *Corriere della Sera*, 20 October 2000, p. 7.

4 *Kosovo. Gli italiani e la guerra* (Milan: Mondadori, 1999).

5 *La sinistra e gli ebrei in Italia 1967-93* (Milan: Corbaccio, 1995).