

Italian Foreign Policy: A Message in the Bottle to the Next Italian Government

by Nathalie Tocci

Foreign policy has been the great absentee from the Italian electoral campaign. With the notable exception of Emma Bonino's *Più Europa*, all other political forces have expressed incoherent, ill-informed, or no foreign policy strategies at all.

Europe, when mentioned, emerged as an austere and thankless force, handcuffing Italy's economic recovery while turning its back on the country's welcoming of migrants. Meanwhile, hardly one word was spent on China's unstoppable rise, Trump's unpredictable America, Russia's cynical assertiveness and the proliferation of crises in East Asia and the Middle East, not to mention the global challenges of climate, energy and cyber.

Yet, foreign policy matters. It increasingly affects our daily lives as the boundaries between the internal and external have become blurred. Be it climate or migration, energy, jobs or terrorism, none of the questions that

affect us, and our children's existence, can be tackled exclusively through domestic policies. Foreign policy has come home.

Against this backdrop, and in the somewhat naïve hope that the governing forces emerging from the 4 March vote will mark a break from the unedifying election campaign that preceded it, how should a new Italian government position itself in the international realm?

Italy has traditionally articulated its foreign policy priorities around three pillars: Europe, the Mediterranean and the transatlantic partnership. Today, all three remain relevant, but require substantial revision or reinterpretation.

The Mediterranean is in many ways a far more pressing priority than it once was. Italy's concern about migration, its energy security, the imperative of countering terrorism and organized crime, as well as its broader interest in

Nathalie Tocci is Director of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Honorary Professor at the University of Tübingen, and Special Adviser to EU HRVP Federica Mogherini.

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a peaceful, prosperous and secure *Mare Nostrum*, all point to the heightened relevance of the Mediterranean in Italy's foreign policy map. Yet the Mediterranean is no longer what it once was.

The Mediterranean is fact not region in and of itself. North and sub-Saharan Africa are intertwined through the areas of limited statehood across the Sahelian belt, accelerating the regular and irregular flows of people, arms, goods and intoxicating ideas. Nowhere is this clearer than in the structural phenomenon of migration, with us for decades to come. Likewise, the growing interlinkages between the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa point to the absence of hard lines separating the Middle East from Africa, with money, trade and people travelling across the Gulf. In short, caring about the Mediterranean means zooming out to invest far more resources and attention to the Middle East and Africa combined.

Zooming out is equally pertinent when revisiting the transatlantic relationship. The Italian-US partnership remains critically important – Trump notwithstanding – lubricated by the NATO alliance and traditionally strong cultural, political and economic relations between the two countries. Yet the world we are moving into is one in which the US will no longer be the global hegemon, matched and eventually overtaken by China as Graham Allison's powerful *Destined for War* explains.¹ Fostering the transatlantic relationship

¹ Graham Allison, *Destined for War. Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

while cultivating ties with other global players will be key to the protection and promotion of Italian interests and values in the world.

However, Italy, as a mid-sized power at its very best, is simply too small to deal effectively with a global Mediterranean and a complex and conflictual multipolar world. In such a world, only continental-sized powers can realistically strive to achieve their strategic objectives. Here is where the third and most important pillar of Italian foreign policy comes into play: the European Union.

A Union whose logic once was the consolidation of peace on the continent coupled with the seizing of economic opportunity through integration, today is driven by a profound external rationale too: the realisation that all Member States, including the largest ones such as Italy, are pigmies in the 21st century world.

It is therefore in Italy's existential interest to contribute to a Union which through differentiated forms of integration succeeds at the same time in deepening significantly its federal elements in core areas of the economy, migration and defence, while completing its widening notably to the Western Balkans. As the Franco-German couple restarts the engine of the European project, Italy's contribution – both through its bilateral relations with France and Germany as well as its role as bridge builder to other Member States – is key to the country's future in Europe, in the world and thus at home.

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All this requires Italy to put money where its mouth is. As a country at the heart of EurAfrican continent/s, so dramatically exposed to external trends and flows, devoting well below 1.5 per cent of GDP to development, defence and diplomacy combined is short-sighted if not outright irresponsible. As suggested by former German President Gauck with respect to Germany,² aiming for a total 3 per cent GDP divided into 2 per cent to defence as warranted by Italy's NATO commitments, 0.7 per cent to development as warranted by EU commitments and 0.3 per cent to diplomacy, may appear farfetched in the Italian foreign policy debate today.

However, unless the journey towards such parameters is embarked upon now, Italy will continue to remain an observer of its own history, rattled by the pushing and pulling of external forces outside its control.

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² Wolfgang Ischinger, "Big League. No German foreign policy interest is more vital than fortifying a stable Europe", in *The Security Times*, 14 February 2017, p. 3, https://www.securityconference.de/fileadmin/MSC_/2017/Sonstiges/ST_Feb2017_double_page.pdf; *Speech read on behalf of Federal President Joachim Gauck by State Secretary David Gill, Head of the Office of the Federal President, on the presentation of the Ewald von Kleist Award by the Munich Security Conference, Munich, 18 February 2017*, <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2017/02/170218-Ewald-von-Kleist-Preis-Englisch.pdf>.

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Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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