

Italy between the Draghi and Meloni Governments

by Leo Goretti and Irene D'Antimo

ABSTRACT

This document provides an English summary of the 2022 edition of IAI's annual report on Italian foreign policy entitled: "L'Italia dal governo Draghi al governo Meloni", developed within the framework of the strategic partnership with the Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo. The 2022 edition of the Report, featuring the contributions of a group of IAI researchers coordinated by the Italian Foreign Policy programme of the Institute, examines the main challenges that emerged during the year – the war against Ukraine and the energy crisis – and their implications for the traditional pillars of Italy's foreign policy – the European, Mediterranean and transatlantic dimensions. Specific attention is paid to the Italian contribution to the European and Atlantic security system, Italy's strategy towards Sub-Saharan Africa, the renewed attention to the issue of migration, Italy's relations with China and the Italian role in multilateral organisations and development cooperation. Underlying themes are the elements of continuity and rupture in the foreign policy of the governments led by Mario Draghi and Giorgia Meloni, as well as the possible scenarios and choices facing the Italian government in 2023.

Italian foreign policy

keywords

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In Italy, the year 2022 was marked by the transition from the government led by Mario Draghi, who resigned in July, to that of Giorgia Meloni, who emerged as the clear winner in the general election held in September. The former government was led by a statesman of international reputation and supported by a very broad coalition of political parties; the latter, instead, is an openly political government based on a conservative coalition formed by Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy), Lega (League), Forza Italia (Forward Italy) and Noi Moderati (Us Moderates).

The different nature of the two governments, however, did not result in a significant change in Italy's foreign policy. Overall, the Meloni government followed the steps of its predecessor on the two main issues that marked 2022 – that is, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the energy crisis. In parallel, both governments reaffirmed Italy's traditional commitment to NATO and the US alliance.

At the European level, in the first part of the year, Italy undoubtedly benefited from Mario Draghi's prestige. His government made a significant contribution to the definition of the EU's strategy on key issues, first and foremost on energy. Since the beginning of its mandate, the new Prime Minister has shown a desire for constructive dialogue with Brussels within the framework of EU rules. Nonetheless, there have been instances of friction on issues central to the conservative agenda, such as migration.

Italy and the war against Ukraine

After the outbreak of the war against Ukraine, Italy's position has been characterised by a firm condemnation of the Russian aggression as well by the decision to provide political, humanitarian and financial support for Kyiv. Italian assistance to Ukraine included the supply of weapons to the Ukrainian army and the adoption of sanctions against the Russian establishment and economy, all agreed with the European partners. Italy's firm stance took Moscow by surprise, as Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov himself admitted several times.

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This report summarises the research and findings of a larger report, co-authored by IAI researchers on Italian foreign policy in 2022 and published in Italian. The full report in Italian is available at: <https://www.iai.it/it/node/16471>.

In late spring, moreover, the Draghi government played a leading role in supporting Ukraine's bid for admission to the European Union: the key moment was Draghi's trip to Kyiv along with French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

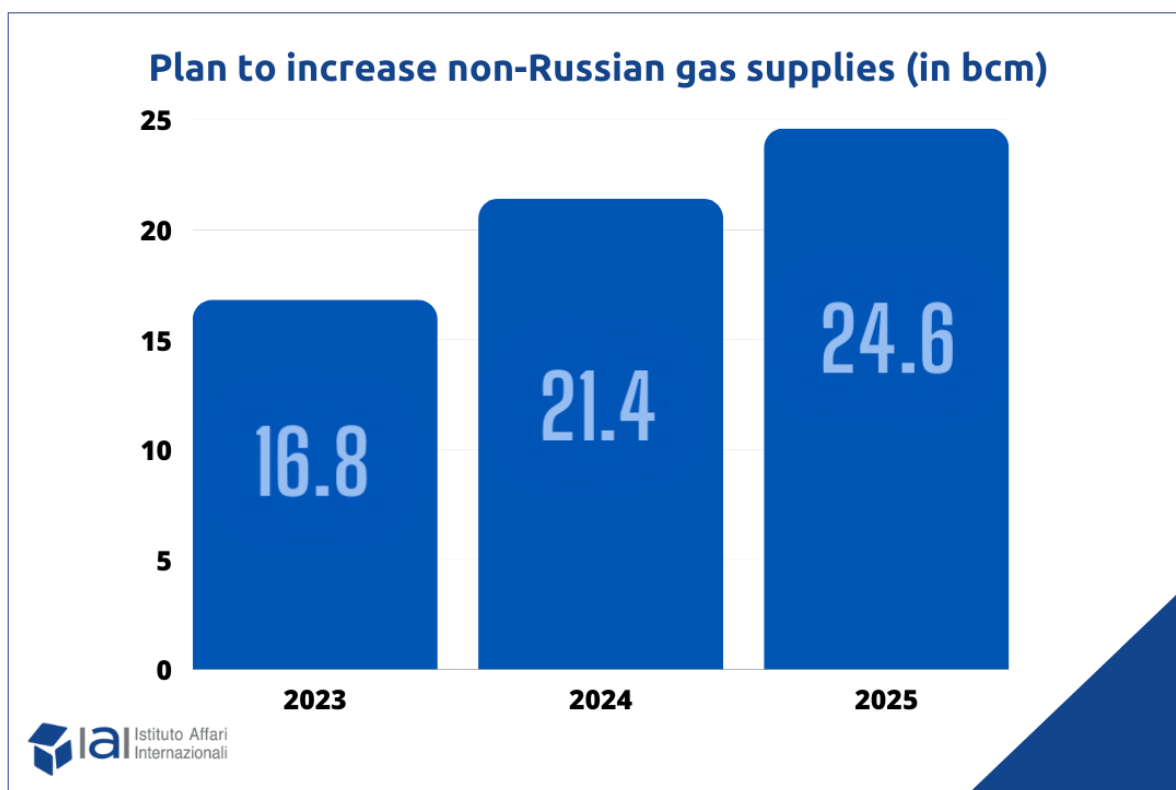
The fall of the Draghi government raised alarms about the presence of pro-Russian political forces in the country and within the conservative coalition itself. These concerns, however, were promptly dispelled: Giorgia Meloni's words and deeds before and after her government took office showed the new Prime Minister's unwavering commitment to the military, economic and political support for Kyiv. This was recently confirmed by the extension of the authorisation to provide military aid to Ukraine through 2023.

Italy and the energy crisis

The other key issue for Italian foreign policy in 2022 was energy. Also in this policy area there was substantial continuity between the two governments. In the first half of the year, Draghi and his cabinet were particularly active in seeking alternative gas suppliers to reduce dependence on Moscow. In fact, the agreements signed with Algeria, Qatar, Congo and Angola, among others, defined a roadmap toward independence from Russia centred especially on strengthening relations with African partners. This approach was confirmed by Giorgia Meloni during her official visits to Algiers and Tripoli in early 2023.

Overall, Italy pursued its diversification efforts with success: already in the first ten months of 2022, missing gas supplies from Russia were compensated so as to have the same volumes of gas imported as in the corresponding period of 2021. Instead, initiatives to curb demand and increase renewable energy production in Italy have been less central to the two governments' agendas: the installation of new renewable capacity in 2022, although higher than in 2021, was still insufficient.

Increasing renewable production is framed by the new government primarily as a matter of energy security, while considerations related to the objective of contrasting climate emergency are less central. In line with this marginal attention to environmental policy in the new government's agenda, Prime Minister Meloni did not play a very active role at COP27 in Sharm-el-Sheik in November.



Relations with Europe

In terms of relations with Europe, the Draghi government played a leading role in major debates, pushing for a revision of the Stability and Growth Pact, the introduction of the qualified majority rule in fiscal and foreign policy, and a cap on gas prices in response to the energy crisis, as well as creating a common front with France and Germany for granting candidate country status to Ukraine and Moldova. Of utmost importance was the beginning of the implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan and related reforms.

In the aftermath of the general election, Prime Minister Meloni had to address concerns about previous Eurosceptic positions expressed by representatives of political parties supporting the new government. To this end, she immediately sought a dialogue with EU institutions, choosing Brussels as her first visit abroad. Overall, the Prime Minister seems to have embraced a narrative centred on asserting Italy's national interest within the European framework, seeking a difficult balance between pragmatism and nationalist tones. If the former has so far prevailed in economic policies – above all, the 2023 budget law – it is to be tested whether the Meloni government can maintain a spirit of cooperation with Brussels in the face of possible discontent within the governing coalition on issues such as the ratification of the European Stability Mechanism and migration policy.

Relations with the US

In 2022, relations with Washington proved solid under both governments. Despite Italy's caution in managing relations with Moscow prior to the attack against Ukraine, after the outbreak of the war, the Draghi government promptly took a stand on Kyiv's side. Furthermore, Italy proactively contributed to the development of one of the harshest measures against Russia: the freezing of the euro and dollar reserves of Russia's Central Bank.

Notwithstanding initial concerns about Giorgia Meloni's past nationalist positions and sympathies with the Trump Administration, the transition between the two Italian governments proceeded without transatlantic trouble. In addition to Meloni's reassertion of Italian support for Ukraine, two other stances of the new government are worth mentioning from a transatlantic perspective: first, the Prime Minister's opposition to the renewal of the Memorandum of Understanding with China on the Belt and Road Initiative; second, Italy's vote at the United Nations against the request of an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice over the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory.

In terms of trade, the first nine months of 2022 saw a very marked increase in both Italian exports to the US (+33.1 per cent compared to the same period in 2021, totalling 47.091 billion euro) and, to an even greater extent, Italian imports from the US (+59.8 per cent, total 18.696 billion euro). In contrast, both inbound and outbound investments remained low.




Defence and the Italian role in NATO

The outbreak of the war against Ukraine brought the core task of collective defence and deterrence, especially against Russia, back to the centre of the Atlantic Alliance's agenda. Accordingly, Italy participated in the strengthening of the NATO presence on the Alliance's Eastern flank, especially in Hungary and Bulgaria. Italy's total contribution amounted to 2,193 personnel, 519 ground assets and 15 air assets; additionally, 1,350 Italian personnel and 77 ground assets contribute to the Very High Joint Readiness Task Force (VJTF). In parallel, Rome confirmed its commitment to leading high-profile peacekeeping and capacity-building missions, such as KFOR in Kosovo, NATO Training Mission in Iraq and UNIFIL in Lebanon. Considering the renewed centrality for NATO of the Eastern flank and – from a medium- to long-term perspective – the Indo-Pacific, it will be crucial for Rome to keep the focus alive also on the Southern flank, which is of primary strategic importance for Italy.

Both the Draghi and the Meloni governments saw the Atlantic Alliance and European defence as complementary. As part of European defence, Rome participated in the development of joint initiatives and proactively contributed to the drafting of the EU Strategic Compass. Indeed, the enlarged Mediterranean received strong attention in the Compass, in line with Italy's strategic vision.

To give full substance to intentions, however, the crucial issue of investment must be addressed: the 1.54 per cent of GDP budgeted for defence in 2022 remains far from the 2 per cent target agreed upon in NATO in 2014. The Draghi government proposed a plan for a gradual increase in spending, in which the achievement of the 2 per cent threshold was postponed until 2028: this roadmap has so far not been updated by the Meloni administration.

Italian contribution to NATO

Units	Eastern Flank	VJTF
	2,193	1,350
	519	77
	15	5

The enlarged Mediterranean

The enlarged Mediterranean has traditionally been one of the primary areas of foreign policy concern for Italy. In 2022, the defining features of the approach of the two Italian governments toward the region were a marked focus on energy supplies and, more generally, trade relations, as well as the management of migration flows. In contrast, issues pertaining to regional stability and politics remained in the background. Overall, a long-term trend was confirmed, with Italian foreign policy increasingly focusing on countries on the southern shores of the Mediterranean and in Africa, while Italy's engagement with the Middle East decreased or remained stable at best.

Relations intensified especially with Algeria, which replaced Russia as Italy's main gas supplier through 2022. This raised concerns in neighbouring Morocco, due to the diplomatic conflict between the two countries over Western Sahara. Rome, therefore, promptly reassured Rabat that the new agreements with Algiers would not lead to a change in Italy's position on the matter, which remains focused on

finding a compromise between the parties and supporting the UN process. Despite the alarming state of human rights in the country and the lack of progress on the cases of Patrick Zaki and Giulio Regeni, energy was the central issue also in relations with Egypt.

A Mattei Plan for Africa?

In 2022, Italy's policy toward sub-Saharan Africa found a new impetus. This took shape first and foremost in the gas supply agreements signed by the Draghi government, especially with southern African countries (namely, Congo, Angola and Mozambique). In parallel, Italy kept a focus on the Horn region and the Sahel. In the Horn, Rome reaffirmed its political support for Ethiopia, just as relations between Addis Ababa and the EU were hitting an all-time low. In the Sahel, still profoundly destabilised by jihadist violence, coups, humanitarian crises and increasing attempts of Russian penetration, the Draghi government maintained its commitment to multilateral military missions.

Since her inaugural speech as Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni has put forward the idea of a "Mattei Plan for Africa": in the new government's intentions, the plan should strengthen cooperation ties with African countries on an equal footing, turning Italy into the gateway for African energy supplies to Europe. The plan would also aim at strengthened cooperation in the fight against terrorism and the management of migration flows. However, it remains to be seen how these intentions will concretely translate into Italy's relations with African countries.

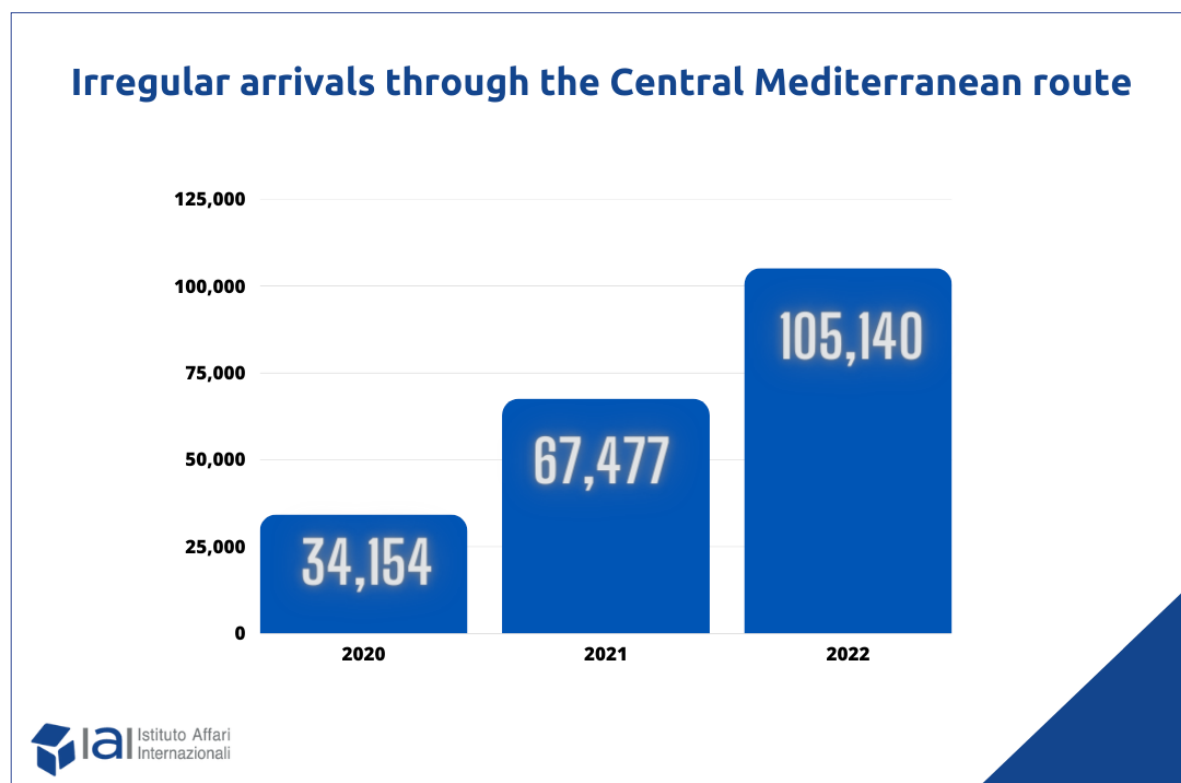
Migration

The management of migration flows regained centrality in the government's narrative after Giorgia Meloni took office. In continuity with the Draghi government, the new administration confirmed Italy's commitment to Ukraine through the Temporary Protection Directive, which grants temporary protection to people fleeing the war in Ukraine: through this measure, from March to December 2022, Italy hosted nearly 168,000 Ukrainian refugees.

At the same time, through 2022, the number of irregular migrants arriving in Italy via the Central Mediterranean route grew significantly, exceeding 105,000 at the end of 2022, compared to about 34,000 in 2020 and 67,000 in 2021. The main countries of origin are in North Africa (Egypt, Tunisia), Asia and the Middle East (Bangladesh, Syria and Afghanistan).

However, toward these migrants, the new government has not shown the same openness as toward Ukrainian refugees. On the contrary, in November, a landing ban on foreign-flagged NGO vessels engaged in search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean created tensions with some European partners, which was soon mitigated by the European Commission's introduction of an Action Plan for Central Mediterranean. In 2023, the government will be called upon to carefully deal with the issue: Italian calls for greater European solidarity in sharing the

burden will have to acknowledge the concerns of countries such as France and Germany about “secondary movements”; furthermore, the government will have to manage possible radicalisation on the issue within the ruling coalition.



Relations with China

The Draghi government took a firm but pragmatic line toward China, which has been followed by the Meloni government as well. The respective positions on the Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative signed in 2019 by the then-Conte I government are emblematic. During the election campaign, Giorgia Meloni called the agreement a “big mistake” and seemed sceptical about a possible renewal. Such a view is in full continuity with that of Mario Draghi, who expressed doubts about the value of the Memorandum, which in his opinion should be carefully re-examined.

For Italy–China bilateral relations, the issue of possible mergers and acquisitions of Italian companies by Chinese investors remains central: in this regard, the government has expressed its intention to strengthen the mechanisms for screening foreign direct investment, in continuity with its predecessors.

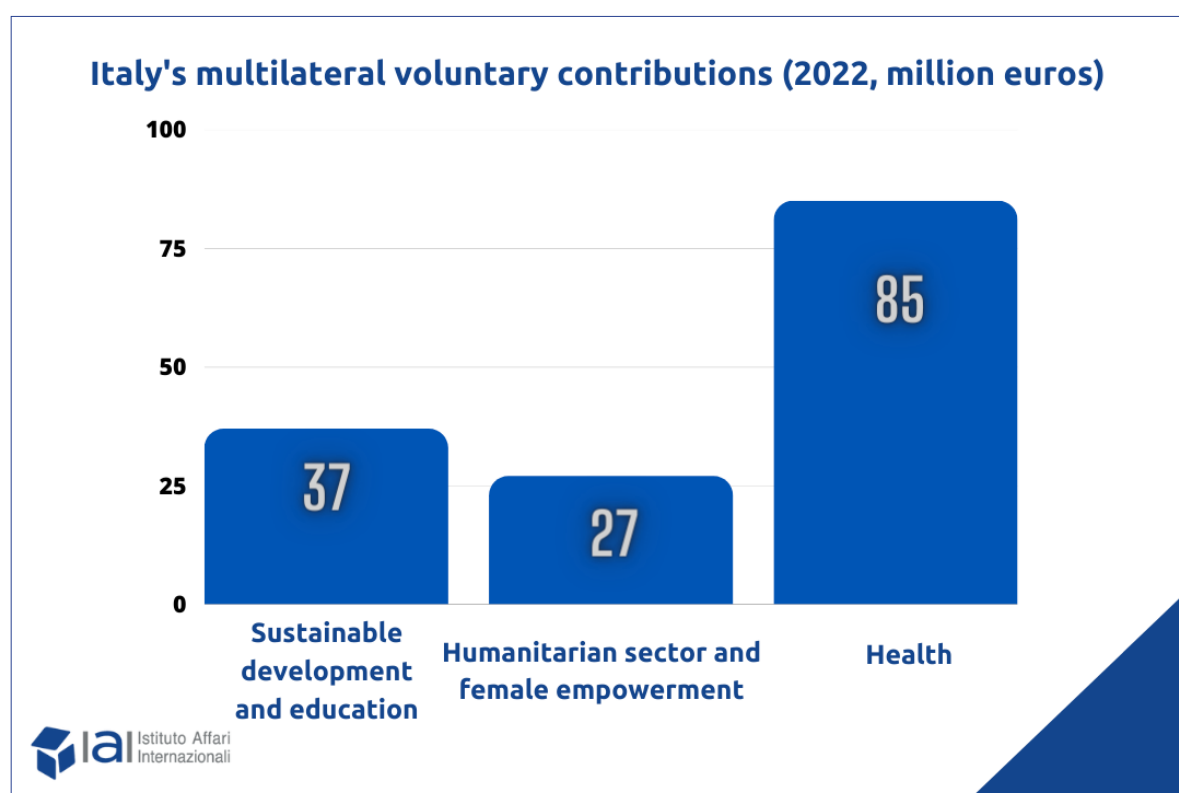
In general, the new government’s strongly Atlanticist orientation could lead to greater Italian assertiveness toward Beijing in the future, as the recent measures to monitor the Covid-19 epidemic among travellers arriving from China also suggest. Among the hot topics for the future could be relations with Taiwan, which Meloni said she wanted to strengthen during the election campaign.

Italy in multilateral organisations

Among Italy's contributions to multilateral organisations, notable is its role in peacekeeping missions (Lebanon, Cyprus, India/Pakistan, Mali and Western Sahara) and initiatives for global food security (including the "Matera Declaration" of 2021 and its refinancing of the World Food Programme). Furthermore, Italian commitment to a reform of the UN Security Council in the direction of expanding the number of non-permanent members and limiting the veto power of permanent members should also be mentioned. This commitment, which Italy has been pursuing since the early 1990s, takes shape through the Uniting for Consensus (UfC) group, created in 2005 and coordinated by Italy.

As far as development cooperation is concerned, Italy allocated, amongst others, 85 million euro to health as part of its multilateral voluntary contributions in 2022. Italy also contributed to the COVAX Facility through the donation of 100 million doses of vaccine.

In a "polycrisis" context such as the current one, the Meloni government's approach to development cooperation seems to be moving toward greater emphasis on highlighting the benefits of cooperation especially in terms of business opportunities and the prevention of immigration.



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