

Italy's Foreign Policy in the 'Super-election Year' 2024

by Leo Goretti and Filippo Simonelli

ABSTRACT

This document provides an English summary of the 2024 edition of IAI's annual report on Italian foreign policy titled: "L'Italia nell'anno delle grandi elezioni", developed with the support of the Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo. The 2024 edition of the report, edited by Ferdinando Nelli Feroci and Leo Goretti, features the contributions of a group of IAI researchers coordinated by the Institute's Italian Foreign Policy programme. The report covers all the core areas of Italian foreign policy, beginning with the relations with the European Union and European allies and those with the US at the dawn of Donald Trump's second term. Specific attention is paid to the two major crises in the closest neighbourhood of the country, analysing Italy's commitment to supporting Ukraine and its position vis-à-vis the Israel-Gaza conflict. An in-depth focus is devoted to the government's pivot to Africa under the umbrella of the so-called "Mattei Plan", as well as the relations with the People's Republic of China and the Indo-Pacific region at large. Structural policies are then addressed, from the defence and aerospace policy to the government's approach to the energy and climate crises to migration policy. Finally, some considerations are made on the 2024 Italian G7 Presidency and the overall Italian involvement in multilateral fora.

Italian foreign policy

keywords

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The pillars of Italian foreign policy at a test: The Euro-Atlantic bond and the Ukraine war

Major elections on both sides of the Atlantic took place in 2024, having a direct impact on Rome's foreign policy. In the EU, they eventually led to the re-election of Ursula von der Leyen as President of the European Commission despite a shift to the right in the European Parliament's (EP) composition. For their part, US citizens voted for Donald Trump's second term in office.

Against this backdrop, the Italian government had to balance between holding true to its European obligations and bolstering its transatlantic credentials. Despite Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's positive interlocution with von der Leyen since 2022, Rome-Brussels relations suffered a temporary setback after the EP election, when Meloni's party Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) – part of the European Conservatives and Reformists group – voted against von der Leyen's second term in July. Nonetheless, this decision did not prevent von der Leyen's re-election, nor did it confine FdI behind the so-called *cordon sanitaire* against the radical right in the EU institutions. Indeed, Raffaele Fitto, previously Minister for European Affairs in the Meloni government, was eventually appointed as Executive Vice President of the European Commission for Cohesion and Reforms.

From a policy point of view, Italy maintained a positive dialogue with Brussels on economic and budget issues, which is quintessential for a highly indebted country like Italy; in parallel, Rome obtained another two instalments of the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan, with the overall amount of financing already received by Italy totalling 122 billion euros at the end of 2024. As far as migration policies are concerned, the government supported the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and advocated for a greater emphasis on externalisation policies, such as those enshrined in the treaties between the EU Commission and

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Tunisia (July 2023) and Egypt (June 2024), and the Italian bilateral protocol with Albania (November 2023).

With regard to Russia's war of choice against Ukraine, Rome maintained a steady commitment to the transatlantic bloc's support for Ukraine's defensive effort. Despite some different nuances on the matter within the governing coalition, Prime Minister Meloni reiterated her firm and full support for Ukraine on several occasions, stating in November that as long as there is a war in Ukraine, Rome will stand with Kyiv. The Italian government signed an agreement on security cooperation with the Ukrainian government in February and secured the hosting of the 2025 Ukraine recovery conference in Rome. The only relevant decision that bucked the trend was the choice not to support the use of Italian-supplied weapons against military targets on Russian territory.

Italy's relations with the United States were constantly positive throughout the year, despite the ongoing US presidential campaign. They also benefitted from the Italian Presidency of the G7, within which the Italian government attempted to build common ground on issues such as support for Ukraine, the US mediation attempts in the Middle East and freedom of navigation in the South and East China Seas, as well trying to enhance cooperation on infrastructure and energy projects as well as the control of migration flows. Although the results on these latter issues were mixed, the Italian government, and Giorgia Meloni in particular, gained further credit both in the Democratic administration led by Joe Biden and in the Republican Party of former and incoming President Donald Trump.

Looking at the economic partnership between Italy and the US, in 2023, the two countries hit a record high of 92 billion euros in trade, with Italian export over the Atlantic exceeding 67 billion euros. In turn, the stock of US foreign direct investment in Italy remained rather low at about 26 billion dollars in 2022, a trend that the Italian government is actively trying to revert by opening an active dialogue with some of the US tech giants.

Italian diplomacy beyond the West

Meanwhile, the relationship between Italy and African countries evolved, with the focus shifting from the migration-energy nexus towards a more comprehensive approach. Part of this change was triggered by the launch of the Mattei Plan for Africa in early 2024. The Mattei Plan is the strategy through which the Italian government is trying to reframe its relationship with the continent on an "equal-to-equal" basis. In 2024, it took the form of a series of partnerships with nine African countries that involve the Italian government, public agencies and the private sector. The Plan revolves around five pillars – education, agriculture, healthcare, energy and water – to which a sixth one, physical and digital infrastructures, was later added. The main question surrounding the Plan pertained to its financial endowment, initially 5.5 billion euros, which seems inadequate to develop a comprehensive strategy towards an entire continent.

Compared to Italy's activism towards Africa, the lack of Italian initiatives towards the war in Gaza was conspicuous. In principle, the Meloni government supported a humanitarian ceasefire and reaffirmed its commitment to a two-state solution; it also contributed to multilateral missions such as EUNAVFOR Aspides and UNIFIL II, which came under fire also from the Israeli military in October. However, in terms of diplomacy and mediation, Rome refrained from playing an active part. Unlike France, which sought a role by mediating a ceasefire in Lebanon, Italy abstained from engaging its counterparts in the Arab world on the Israel-Palestine question. To be sure, remaining on the sidelines of regional diplomacy helped not to ignite polarisation on the Israel-Gaza war on the domestic front. At the same time, however, it remains to be seen if the low-key approach adopted by the Italian government to the Middle East crisis is going to pay off in the long run, as escalating tensions and instability in the region may be detrimental to Rome's interests – first and foremost in terms of trade via the shipping lanes through the Red Sea.

Moving from the Red Sea to the Indo-Pacific region, Italy had once again to find a balance between relaunching its partnership (especially in terms of trade and economic cooperation) with China after Rome's withdrawal from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on the one hand, and reaffirming its Euro-Atlantic commitment on the other. One of Giorgia Meloni's most relevant international travels in 2024 was to China in July, during which she met President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Li Qiang. The dialogue between Rome and Beijing resulted in a 2024-2027 "Action Plan" to bolster the strategic partnership between the two countries that encompasses sectors such as trade and investment, finance, science, technology and education, sustainable development, healthcare, and cultural relations, without instead covering controversial areas such as logistics, connectivity, infrastructure and regulatory standards, which had been part of the BRI memorandum. Italy's presence in the Indo-Pacific was also reinforced by its naval diplomacy efforts, an attempt to signal the country's commitment to its allies in the region, while also showcasing the products of the Italian defence industry.

Structural policies: Aerospace and defence, energy and climate, migration

The year 2024 was marked by global instability that impacted some of Italy's choices over defence matters. In the vision of the Meloni government, Italian defence policy and the Italian military play an increasingly prominent role in protecting the national interest. This reflects a renewed focus on state security and defence, inaugurated following the outbreak of the Ukraine war, which complements the traditional use of the Italian military to contribute to multilateral missions.

The Italian participation in the EUNAVFOR Aspides mission, launched to protect European vessels from the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, is a prime example of this approach. The mission, approved under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, operates under a defensive mandate, with the assets deployed to neutralise missiles, drones and other threats to maritime traffic in the area of the operations. By contributing to Aspides, as well as through its role in UN-mandated missions such as UNIFIL II in Lebanon, Italy confirms its commitment to a European and

multilateral framework for both the stabilisation of the enlarged Mediterranean and the protection of its national interests. This combination of international partnerships and national priorities also applies to the government's policy for the defence industry, especially as manifested in very ambitious cooperation projects, first and foremost the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) with the United Kingdom and Japan.

As far as NATO is concerned, Italy maintained its contribution to the protection of the Eastern flank through its deployments in Eastern Europe as part of the Enhanced Vigilance Activity and Enhanced Forward Presence. Politically, Italy also advocated for greater attention to the Southern flank within the Alliance, although Rome was not able to secure the newly established post as NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for the Southern Neighbourhood for an Italian candidate.

Finally, Italy's defence expenditure increased from 27.75 billion euros in 2023 to 29.18 billion in 2024, which corresponds to 1.54 per cent of Italy's GDP, and is set to further grow in the coming years, up to 1.61 per cent in 2027. This, however, is still far from the 2 per cent threshold established at the NATO level in 2014 and expected to be revised upwards by the new Trump administration.

In terms of its space policy, in 2024, Italy buttressed its role as one of the leading players at the global level, which also benefits Rome's foreign policy at large. Among the most notable developments were the International Astronautical Congress held in Milan in October and the launch of the Vega C Vector – produced by the Italian Avio – in December. Space policy was also discussed within the G7, and Rome strengthened its space partnerships with a number of African countries, among them Kenya and Egypt. Building on these achievements, further investment and capabilities will be needed to foster the competitiveness of the Italian aerospace industry in the coming years.

In the area of climate and energy policy, the Meloni government, on the one hand, continued to work on enhancing Italy's energy security; on the other, it increasingly expressed its reservations about the current configuration of the Green Deal, in terms of its schedule and technological choices, advocating for a supposedly more 'realistic' approach aimed at protecting the national and European industrial competitiveness.

On the energy security side, the government's ambitions to make Italy an energy hub between Europe and Africa were hindered by the rising tensions in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, with key North African partners such as Libya, Algeria and Egypt facing political instability, infrastructure difficulties and growing internal demand, respectively. In parallel, Italy's renewable energy capacity increased by 6 GW in the first ten months of 2024; such growth, however, must be constantly sustained in the coming years to meet the forecast of a 39.4 per cent share of renewable energy sources in gross final energy consumption by 2030 outlined in Italy's National Energy and Climate Plan released in June.

With regards to the actions to tackle climate change, instead, the efforts of the government in terms of mitigation and adaptation measures were quite limited, both at the national level and as part of Italy's international partnerships, including those with African countries through the Mattei Plan.

Migration was another core issue linking the two sides of the Mediterranean. In 2024, the Italian government focused on consolidating the main lines of action already launched the previous year, such as the implementation of the EU memorandum with Tunisia and the finalisation of the European negotiations on the new Pact on Migration and Asylum. Furthermore, the first concrete steps were made towards the implementation of the Protocol signed with Albania in November 2023. The government sought a balance between pragmatism – accounting for the social and economic context – and the identity-driven approach outlined in the platform of at least two of the parties in the governing coalition (Fratelli d'Italia and Lega).

Overall, the number of migrants coming to Italy through the Central Mediterranean route decreased for the first time since Covid-19, from more than 157,000 in 2023 to 66,000 in 2024, with Libya replacing Tunisia as the first embarkation country. The decrease was vindicated by the government as the result of its cooperation – also involving the EU Commission – with Northern African counterparts, such as Tunisia. Finally, Italy's offshore detention facilities in Albania opened in October, but the asylum seekers hosted there had to be soon returned to Italy following a ruling by Italian judges, which cast doubts over the overall feasibility of the protocol.

The G7 and multilateral commitments

The Presidency of the G7 was one of the major international commitments of the Italian government in 2024. The government operated in continuity with the previous presidencies, particularly that of Japan in 2023, while also launching a number of new programmes and initiatives reflecting national priorities. The latter included relaunching relations with the African continent, in line with the ambitions of the Mattei Plan, and the development and governance of artificial intelligence. The most relevant decision taken under the Italian Presidency was nonetheless on the Ukraine war, as the G7 agreed to provide additional financial support to Kyiv worth approximately 50 billion US dollars funded by profits from Russian frozen assets.

This approach also informed the government's attitude towards the other multilateral commitments in 2024. During her yearly speech at the United Nations General Assembly in September, Prime Minister Meloni focused on the development of partnerships in Africa and the Mattei Plan, international coordination against human traffickers and the governance of artificial intelligence. On institutional matters, Italy reiterated its opposition to a reform of the UN Security Council based on an increase in its permanent members, as this would create 'new hierarchies'. As mentioned, Italy also maintained its commitment to the peacekeeping missions of the United Nations, to which Rome was the seventh largest financial contributor.

On development aid, according to the OECD preliminary data on official development assistance (ODA), Italian ODA amounted to 0.27 per cent of the country's gross national income (GNI) in 2023, less than in 2022 and far from the 0.7 per cent target set by the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that Italy has signed. Notably, this marked a reversal of the upward trend of the years 2020-2022, when ODA grew from 0.22 to 0.33 per cent of GNI – thus signalling a decreasing commitment that a country that wishes to strengthen its position in the Global South cannot afford in the long run.

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