istituto affari internazionali
88, viale mazzini • 00195 roma
tel. 315892-354456 • cable: intaffari-roma

ITALIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND THE MIDDLE EAST

by

Stefano Silvestri

January 1983

IAI/8/83

Paper presented at the Colloquium "European Foreign Policy-Making and the Arab-Israeli Conflict", Amsterdam, 3-4 February 1983.

In the first half of July 1979 Italy sent, for the first time since the Second World War, its soldiers to the Middle East. It was not a big commitment: it amounted to 34 soldiers, with 4 helicopters and 20 tons of logistical support, substituting a group of Norwegians in the UN force based in Lebanon, at the military base of Nakura, near the Israeli-Lebanese border.

Since then, however, the direct Italian military involvement in the Middle East has been growing. Italy now has three military vessels (mine-sweepers) in the Gulf of Aqaba (Sharmel-Sheik) as part of the Sinai international peace-keeping force, and about a thousand soldiers (paratroops, bersaglieri and carabinieri) with the multinational peace-keeping force in Lebanon (Beirut).

Furthermore, at the last Atlantic Council Meeting, together with other members of the Atlantic Alliance, the Italian government agreed, in principle, to provide logistical support for the operations of the US Rapid Deployment Force, if necessary. Even if the support will not follow automatically upon an American request, and will require an ad hoc decision by the Italian government, it will be possible, in the meantime, to step up and exercise the required organization, facilities, etc.

In line with this growing involvement in Middle-Eastern security affairs, Italy has also intensified its political and economic relations with the countries of the region. With some countries, like Somalia or even Ethiopia, these relations stem from (and are heavily influenced by) old colonial ties. Rome is trying to balance its relations with those two countries in order to avoid, as far as possible, being caught in the middle of their struggle for the Ogaden territory. Thus 1981 was a pro-Ethiopian year, while 1982 turned out to be a pro-Somali year. In 1981 the Italian Foreign Minister, Emilio Colombo, met in Addis Abeba with Colonel Mengistu, the Ethiopian leader. The Somali government was very upset, and spoke of "distress and regret", of a heavy blow to the good relationship between Italy and Somalia.

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Last year the entire game went the other way, following the visit of the Italian Defence Minister, Lelio Lagorio, to Mogadishu. Together with the visit came some military gifts: 25 M-47 tanks, originally given to Italy by the US, now transferred, with American assent, to Somalia. They will eventually grow up to 100. According to Lagorio, the European powers "should not become the Soviet knife's butter": that is why Italy would be prepared to give Somalia "any kind of defensive military assistance" it might need.

The trip to Somalia was reinforced and prepared by the previous visits made by Colombo and Lagorio to Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Egypt. In this last country, Lagorio and the Egyptian War Minister, General Mohamad Abu Ghazali, had signed a joint memorandum defining future cooperation between the two countries in the field of training, technical-military cooperation and military procurements.

The political framework for these new engagements has been found in the "Mediterranean role" which Italy has decided to play, with the consent of the Atlantic Alliance and the European Community. That does not mean that the new Italian policy has been agreed upon, in advance, in the multilateral institutions. When consultations occur they are much more likely to be in a bilateral context, and especially with the United States. There is in Italy, however, a widespread conviction that some kinf of "division of labor" is taking place between the allies, and that there is de facto a greater demand for a more energetic and activist Italian foreign and security policy.

This issue is somewhat blurred in the confused magma of Italy's internal politics. The Socialist party (PSI) is generally identified with a greater emphasis on national autonomy and initiative, while the Catholic Party (DC) is depicted as more prudent and keen to follow the US lead. This difference in approach can also be found scrutinizing the actions and public declarations of the Defence Minister (a Socialist) versus the posture of the Foreign Minister (a Catholic). Strangely enough the former is the more outspoken anti-Soviet, while the latter identifies himself with a soafter "West European

line", very similar to the West German one. The Italian Middle Eastern policy is not always easy-going. There are problems stemming both from local turbulences and from internal Italian contrasts.

At the end of 1979, for example, the relations between Iraq and Italy were rapidly growing in importance, as a result of the Iraqi desire to dilute its relations with the USSR. Italy bought more and more oil (up to 10 million tons in 1980) and Iraq ordered Italian weapons for a total of 1,500 billion lire (more than 1.3 billion US dollars). In the same period Italy sold Iraq some nuclear technology (and was accused of favoring military nuclear proliferation). However, these contracts are now forzen, ~~thanks~~ due to the Iranian-Iraqi war.

Relations between Italy and Saudi Arabia appeared quite good in July 1979, when a new contract was signed between Petromin (the Saudi oil company) and Agip (a subsidiary of the Italian state-owned energy con-gomerate, ENI) for the supply of 7.8 million tons of Saudi oil over 3 years. Unfortunately, a scandal broke out in which a number of Italian politicians began accusing each other of accepting graft money for the deal, involving their Saudi counterparts in the charges. Riyad immediately blocked the deal, and the bilateral Italo-Saudi relationship suffered a severe setback, until 1982 when the mess created by the scandal was (more or less) patched over, and the agreement was resumed.

Italy's relations with Israel are not easy. The Italian government has got its usual (and unfair) share of accusations from the Begin government of Israel, for allegedly favoring anti-semitism, helping Palestinian killers, disregarding the basic security problem of Israel. It should not, however be assumed that these accusations are taken or made seriously, not even by the Israeli officials themselves. For instance, the Italian contribution to both the Sinai and the Beirut peace-keeping forces is still considered acceptable by Jerusalme.

More serious are the problems linked with the peace talks and per-spectives. Italy signed the EEC Venice communiqué, and has criticized Israeli military initiatives, from the bombing of the Baghdad nuclear reactor to the

invasion of Lebanon. At the same time, although constantly reiterating Israel's right to live in peace and security within international recognized borders, Italy has refused to accept the annexation of Jerusalem and Begin's colonization policy in Judea and Samaria. Meanwhile it has also stepped up relations with the PLO: official meetings between Faruk Kaddumi (head of the PLO political bureau) and Italian foreign ministers have been held since 1977 (starting with the meeting with Arnaldo Forlani). Formal recognition of the PLO as the only legal representative of the "Palestinian nation" is still lacking, but Yasser Arafat came to Rome recently and was received, albeit in a private capacity, by the Foreign Minister and the President of the Republic. Only the Prime Minister (Hon. Giovanni Spadolini, of the small and pro-Israeli Republica party, PRI) avoided the meeting.

Generally speaking, Italy has an obvious and vested interested in better relations with the Middle East. Historically, prosperity and peace in the Middle East have always had a positive spill-over on Italian development. Strategically, Italy is at the crossroad between two military balances: one between the Warsaw Pact and Nato, in Europe, and the other between the West and the South, in the Mediterranean. Thus, it participates in both the Mediterranean and the continental defence. A difficult position that has led the Defence Minister to say that "Italy is no longer simply the southern flank of NATO. It would be wrong even to say that the Mediterranean constitutes the southern flank, because the geostrategic situation has changed. The Mediterranean has become a part of the central front of the Alliance, while the potential southern front stretches today from the Horn of Africa to the Gulf".

This perception is not widely shared in the Atlantic Alliance or in the European Community, at the political or the military level. The difference existing between the Italian perception of the Mediterranean and southern flank problems and the perception held by its allies complicates and delays the formation of multilateral policies and, in the long term, might alienate Italy from them.

The idea of an indipendent Italian foreign policy in the Mediterranean is not new.During the fifties and the sixties a Mediterranean policy was considered by a coalition of various political and economic forces (including the state oil industry and the then Foreign Minister,today's Prime Minister, Amintore Fanfani) the only acceptable alternative to the pro-European and pro-American policies followed by the Government. At the end of the seventies after the Venice European Council it was possible to envisage a melting together of the European and Mediterranean policies in a single European policy for the Mediterranean.Unfortunately,the formation of a common European consensus on the Mediterranean seems to be a long and painful process,while the events are requiring rapid and decisive answers and commitments.

The difficulties of the European and Atlantic multilateral decision-making processes have given rise to various theories,trying to combine the absence of joint action and the need to preserve the common multilateral framework. The idea of a kind of "multi-tier" Community (or Alliance),in which each country is practically free to put a "European label" on its national engagements,is certainly in existence. For example,in his last report to the political committee of the North Atlantic Assembly,the rapporteur, Ton Frinking (of Netherlands),says : "These indications of a dynamic foreign and security policy (of Italy) are not prejudicial to Italian efforts in NATO. On the contrary,they strenghten the Italian envolvement in NATO and strenghten NATO's capabilities and security". The question is: how far can we all go in this direction without destroying the possibility of common perceptions ?

It is already possible to find sgnificant dèfferences between the foreign and security policies pursued by the last two Italian governments (led by Spadolini) and the present government (led by Fanfani). The former was accused of being too strongly pro-American,too ready to comply with all the requests coming from Washington. The latter has watered down (at least verbally) the pro-American declarations,especially when dealing with the Middle East (Fanfani is no keen on Camp David and on the Reagan peace plan) and wit the Euromissiles (even if the

Italian position is not likely to change drastically). According to many observers,Fanfani's differentiations from Spadolini's pro-Americanism has much more to do with internal political maneuvering (the willingness to find a bridge for the inclusion of the Communists in the government's majority) than with foreign policy choices. We have to remember,however,that the distance between internal and foreign policy is not enormous.

The prospect of a greater Italian initiative in Foreign policy seem nonetheless unavoidable. It is not necessarily a negative prospect or a risky one: its consequences may be different,depending on the frame of reference in which Italy will act.

There are three different possibilities (not mutually exclusive,at least in the short run) : a) the Atlantic (and more precisely the American) framework; b) the common European (EEC) framework; c) the nationalistic free-drive.

The American point of reference is probably the stronger and the less likely to be challenged,even if we are now witnessing the re-birth of anti-Americanism (mainly anti-Reaganism). Nothwistanding his verbal subtleties,Fanfani is certainly convinced of the need to maintain Italy under the American umbrella, not only in the nuclear field. But it is more and more difficult to combine the permanence of the basic alliance with the US and the growing differences over tactics and local choices,especially in the Middle East. This combination was quite easy when Italy had no responsabilities,no military presence in the region,no political ambitions,no economic dependencies. All that has changed. It is not by chance that some Socialist leaders (like the party secretary, Hon. Bettino Craxi, and the Defence Minister,Lagorio) are trying a kind of "dual approach", at the same time reaffirming the need for a strong alliance with the US and claiming that the time is ripe for goign "beyond Yalta",quoting both François Mitterrand and Pope Wojtila. It is not yet clear what that means. Possibly nothing much,or nothing at all. But it should be taken seriously,as a signal of potential crisis,as the basis of future misperceptions between

Italy and the United States.

The European framework is potentially more capable of reabsorbing this kind of criticism.Europe is potentially certainly based on the Yalta agreements, but it is also capable of overcoming them,by the sheer fact of its existence as a political entity.

The current divisions among the Europeans,however,are likely to jeopardize any kind of autonomous role of a United Europe. The foreign policy cooperation between the Ten has survived various difficult moments,from the Falklands War to the Polish sanctions,but it has shown its force more in the passive (reactive) than in the active roles. Europe has proved capable of resisting pressures,but not of exercising them. Furthermore,when a country is involved in a show of force,like the UK in the Southern Atlantic,she is likely to receive only limited backing. This unfortunate situation is entrenched in the structural limitations of the European Union : the persistence of the indipendent nation-state is in contradiction with the formation of a common European consensus.

The Italian government is aware of the problem.One could cite,for example, the proposal by Foreign Minister Colombo for an American-European friendship act,or,more to the point,the Gensher-Colombo plan for increased European cooperation in the field of international security policy as well. These indications, however,are not strong enough (or are not pursued with enough determination),to overcome the structural limitations of the Common European policy.

In fact,Italy has accepted the "division of labor" theory,acting by herself (or,more precisely,by herself in agreement with the United States). In the long term these initiatives could damage European cooperation in policy-making. Italy has already been singled out as the most pro-American country of Europe. The military involvement in the Middle East,moreover,will increase Italian dependence on the US: the only Western power capable of ensuring a credible degree of protection and aid,if need be.

The absence of a common European policy on these issues is increasing the internal political divisions between the Italian parties, the Government and the opposition. The PCI, for instance, would like to see the withdrawal of the Italian troops from Lebanon, unless a "more balanced military presence" is assured, i.e. the troops of some neutral or non-aligned state such as Sweden or India.

Without European backing and cover, the Italian government has two main possibilities. The first is to accentuate its identification with the Americans (but we have already seen the political limits of this identification: the difficulty of adopting Reagan's stance on many issues, especially on the Middle East). Moreover, whiele a European reference is more or less shared by the great majority of all Italian political parties, from the right to the left, the American reference is conducive to growing internal divisions. The second possibility is to accentuate its autonomous national identity, creating problems with respect to European cooperation in particular.

In discussing the possibility of Italian nationalism one should not* adopt mechanically the French or the British models. Italy is not an indipendent nuclear power, and it is not likely to become one in the foreseeable future. The current Italian nationalistic tendencies coexist with the alliance with the United States. Indeed, they could not afford these ambitions without some backing from the United States. Italy has no illusions on her capacity to defend herself autonomously. On the other hand, Italy could very well survive in a looser European community, provided that a greater internal conensus is reached between the two main parties, the DC and the PCI.

The difficulty of the nationalistic position is in the contradiction between internal and external requirements: internally, a more isolated Italy would need a greater consensus and an alliance between government and opposition; externally, the need for continuous US protection would be in contrast with a greater Communist role in government.

The most likely scenario,in conclusion,seems to be one of continuation of the present trends,without big changes. The more pronounced Italian role in the Middle East will not necessarily develop into a more autonomous foreign policy. But the absence of a concrete European follow-up to the Venice declarations is already diminishing the solidarity between Europeans and the effectiveness of the Ten's foreign policy cooperation. The remedies proposed so far (i.e., the Gensher-Colombo proposals) are weak. In the future Italy will probably act more and more on the basis of bilateral consultations (especially with the Americans).

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