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NUCLEAR POLITICS IN ITALY: EVENTS IN 1986-1987

by Marco Carnovale

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

This paper will briefly outline the major developments in the political debate over nuclear issues in Italy in the last two years, beginning around the time of the NPT review conference of 1985. The main observation which emerges from the review which follows is that, as a result of both domestic and international events, nuclear issues in general have gained considerable, and perhaps unprecedented, political attention in the country. The crucial domestic event has been the initiation of the constitutional process for the calling of a popular referendum over whether the country should pursue further nuclear power plant construction.

The referendum, scheduled for the early summer of 1987, has been temporarily scrapped because of the governmental crisis which intervened in March 1987 and of the consequent early elections. It however marked a high tide of national divisiveness over the issue, and its aftershocks may rekindle the debate anew in the coming months if the referendum is rescheduled in the new legislature, as seems probable.

The major international event has been the accident of Chernobyl. Perhaps in no other country in the world the accident, coming at a crucial juncture in the national decision-making process over nuclear energy, has had as much of a deleterious effect on domestic nuclear power development as in Italy.

The second conclusion which emerges from this paper is that the new political saliency of things nuclear has been concentrated primarily on the pros and cons of the national nuclear energy program, and much less on nuclear weapons issues and policies. The long-drawn negotiations over the possible elimination of U.S. and Soviet intermediate-range nuclear missiles from Europe, for example, has not provoked much political excitement in the country, much as past debates over the deployment of U.S. weapons in Europe had failed to arouse a level of political excitement comparable to that of Italy's Northern European allies.

Within the nuclear weapon debate, the nonproliferation policy of Italy as a nuclear supplier has remained very much in the background; it has been a politically rather uncontroversial matter in the country in recent years, and it is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. Recent events in the Middle East, involving several potential proliferators such as Iran, Iraq and Libya, have only contributed to reaffirm the desirability that these countries should not gain access to nuclear weapons.

However, there has been a resurgence of interest, on the part of some military and civilians alike, in increasing the nuclear role of Italy for its own defence. This new interest must be placed in the context of a certain latent nationalism has gained new strength with the heightened

international political stature that Italy has acquired in recent years. This nationalism has manifested itself in many ways, one of which has been a push toward increased military responsibilities for Italy both within the alliance and regionally in the Mediterranean and Near Eastern region--in the latter cases not necessarily in concert with the alliance.

Specifically in the nuclear field, no important political forces or national figures have yet advocated that Italy withdraw the NPT and acquire its own independent nuclear capability, but a notable section among the most authoritative civilian and military experts believe that, somehow, Italy's nuclear role within the alliance and in its bilateral arrangements vis-a-vis the U.S. should increase--even though exactly how this could be done has yet to be articulated clearly.

I. THE DOMESTIC SETTING

I.1 Nuclear Energy

Nuclear energy has been one of the major national issues in Italy in the period examined in this paper. The politically highly charged debate, which is not yet over, was one of the major issues which contributed to the fall of the Craxi government in March of 1987. While the causes of the political crisis were certainly deeper, nuclear energy was certainly a precipitating factor, as the various parties in the government coalition found themselves on opposite sides of the debate, with the Socialists and the Social Democrats opposing nuclear energy, the Republicans supporting it, and the Christian Democrats and the Liberals supporting it but with reservations and internal divisions.

A National Energy Conference was called by the government in 1986 and then repeatedly postponed until it was finally held in late February 1987. The conference, whose avowed aim was to provide a technical and unbiased forum for the discussion of future options for Italy's energy plans, witnessed the presentation of several reports on the technical, economic and legal aspect of the problem. But the positions of the participating political and social forces were to a large extent already predetermined politically and the conference failed to yield concrete technical results, let alone definitive recommendations. The climate was made worse by the impending political crisis which brought about the fall of the Craxi government a few days after the conclusion of the conference, whose works were accelerated to an end as all prominent political participants were distracted by a hard-fought political campaign. With most attention diverted away, it was hardly surprising that the long-awaited conference failed even in its minimal purpose of providing a forum for frank and high-level discussion.

As of 1987, there are only three operational power plants in Italy, located, respectively, at Latina (Latium), Trino Vercellese (Piedmont) and Caorso (Emilia-Romagna). They provide only 1% of Italy's primary energy. None of them has incurred into noteworthy operational problems, and in the wake of Chernobyl all underwent extraordinary checks in late 1986. Italy has not yet solved the problem of the low-level radioactive waste coming from these reactors.

The only other nuclear power plant at an advanced stage of construction is the one at Montalto di Castro, near Rome, with 2000 MW of power; it is about 60% completed, and is expected to be operational in the early 1990s. Amidst the controversy which followed Chernobyl, there have

been proposals to transform even this residual and rather thin hope for national nuclear energy in a gas plant, but such proposals never made much headway in light of the technical problems involved, and of the tremendous cost that such transformation would have involved.

One other plant is under construction at Trino Vercellese, in Piedmont, but it is still at a very early stage and it will not be ready, if it will ever be completed at all, before the late 1990s. Also included in the national energy plan (PEN) are 5 additional plants, each for 2000 MW; two are to be located at sites chosen in the regions of Lombardy and Apulia, and the other three in either Venetia, Basilicata, Sicily or Campania. The prospects for the realization of these plants are however slim at best.

In sum, as of 1987, the future of civil nuclear power in Italy is highly uncertain, and it is extremely unlikely that any further development beyond the plant at Montalto di Castro and possibly the second one at Trino Vercellese will be completed. The main reason is that there does not seem to be much of a probability to get a consensus within the governing majority about it. The fall of the socialist-led government of Prime Minister Craxi was followed by elections and the reconstitution of a new government, under the chairmanship of the Christian Democrat Giovanni Goria but supported by the same five party coalition as its predecessor. The positions of the individual coalition parties over nuclear power are highly divergent and, at this time, irreconcilable. They can be briefly summarized as follows. Christian Democracy (DC) is overall in favor, though its eternal internal inconsistencies owed to the factional struggles make its support somewhat less than unequivocal.

The Socialists (PSI) took a clear anti-nuclear energy position in September 1986, well before the national energy conference and before the government had taken any position.¹ Authoritative Socialist spokesmen have pointed out that Italy could and should do more with indigenous and imported methane and also, less convincingly, that the country should increase its contributions to fusion research to accelerate its development and commercialization.² A frequent Socialist argument against nuclear power has also been that low oil prices and the high costs of the necessary safety and precautionary measures make nuclear generation uncompetitive.³

The Republican Party (PRI) has been the only one to wholeheartedly support nuclear power. It has emphasized the need for international cooperation in risk control, since the risks inherent in nuclear power plants are obviously international--as shown by Chernobyl. They also argued for the need for a safety control body separate from the National Commission for Nuclear and Alternative Energy (ENEA)--formerly National Atomic Energy Commission (CNEN); and for the centralization of energy policy decision-making in one body. Finally, the PRI would like to centralize the nuclear crisis management process in the office of the President of the Council of Ministers.⁴

The Liberal Party (PLI) has taken a position in favor of nuclear

¹ La Repubblica, 2 September 1986, p.3.

² La Repubblica, 4 September 1986, p.4.

³ Corriere della Sera, 7 September 1986, p.4.

⁴ La Voce Repubblicana, 16 September 1986, p.2.

power but only if accompanied by the strictest security measures. The PLI notes how the Italian high population density and the high seismic risks of the country's territory would not allow for more than the few plants programmed in the national energy plan at the most in any case.⁵

The Social Democrats (PSDI), the last of the five parties in the current and former government coalitions, has taken a stand in favor of a nuclear moratorium. More generally, the PSDI has been working toward achieving political positions closer to the PSI, and it is to be expected that they will continue to follow this course at least in the near future.⁶

The Communist Party (PCI), the main opposition force in the Italian parliament, has considerably shifted its position in the last few years and especially after Chernobyl. It used to be rather open to the prospect of a substantial nuclear power program in the country, but is now highly negative about its continuation.

The Radical Party (PR) has always been opposed to nuclear power, and it had been instrumental in the gathering of the necessary signatures for the initiation of anti-nuclear referendum--later postponed by the intervening political elections. It has contributed to mobilizing public opinion and thus contributed to build the wave of anti-nuclearism which has gained strength in Italy since 1985-6. In early 1987, however, their leader Pannella took the unexpected position that a few nuclear power plants might be acceptable if approved in the context of long-term energy plan which should include a definitive transition away from nuclear energy.

The newest force in the Italian political arena, and since June 1987 in the Italian Parliament, is the Green party, which makes its environmental and anti-nuclear position its main, and almost the only, *raison d'etre*. The anti-nuclear stand of the Greens is in any case what gave them the necessary popular appeal and electoral strength to gain national prominence and access to Parliament. The Greens essentially refuse any dialogue with the government on the development of nuclear power, did not participate in the national energy conference of February 1987, and vow to continue to oppose uncompromisingly any energy plan which should nevisage anything less than the total abandonment of nuclear power. With such platform, the Greens, who were never represented in the national parliament before, and only began to run in administrative elections in 1985, received a surprising 2.6% of the vote, and are expected to build a vocal and articulated opposition to nuclear power in the current legislature.

Public opinion in the country at large remains rather negative on nuclear energy: recent polls have shown that 72% of the Italians are wholly against it, 21% are in favor, and the rest are undecided. While Italians had never been strongly inclined to develop nuclear energy, all agree that the effect of Chernobyl inflicted a powerful blow to whatever support could be marshalled earlier, and possibly a definitive coup de grace to Italian nuclear energy. To a lesser extent, the accident occurred to the Soviet Yankee-class submarine which sank in October 1986 also contributed to convince more skeptics that nuclear power should not be pursued.⁷

The results of the political elections of June 1987, which came in

⁵ Corriere della Sera, 2 September 1986, p.2.

⁶ L'Umanità, 17 January 1987, p.1.

⁷ Corriere della Sera, 10 January 1987, p.2.

the wake of intense national debate over nuclear energy, seemed to confirm the growing anti-nuclear mood of the country, though it is obviously impossible to trace electoral flows to a single issue. Within the governing coalition, the anti-nuclear Socialists gained considerably--+ 2.9%--while the pro-nuclear Republicans and Liberals were penalized the most. In the opposition, the greatest gains were scored by the Greens, as noted, and by the anti-nuclear Radicals and Proletarian Democrats--an extreme left-wing splinter party.

One final word about two other Italian nuclear energy projects which are sadly sagging behind schedule and desperately trying to survive among cost overruns and ever more tenuous technical rationales: both are incomplete and both are unlikely to be completed, but neither has yet been officially scrapped. One is the Prova Elementi Combustibile (PEC), an Italian effort in fast reactors which is unlikely to contribute anything that the Italian participation in the Superphoenix can not yield. The other is the CIRENE heavy-water reactor, which seems rather futile in light of the fact that the only type of reactors included in the national energy plan, and the only one, if any, to be constructed in Italy, in the PWR; some proponents cite the export potential as one rationale to keep CIRENE going, but the chances that Italy would export heavy-water reactors that it does not use in today's nuclear reactor market seem extremely remote.

I.2 Nuclear Proliferation

No new element has appeared in the period considered here in the national debate over the problem of nuclear proliferation or of Italian nonproliferation policy. The salience of the issue remains low. Essentially all political forces, except possibly a few segments of the right and in the military, agree that the current nonproliferation regime should be maintained, at least as concerns third countries, including all the so-called threshold countries.

A gradual move from an originally rather apathetic, when not outright hostile, attitude, toward one of active support of the nonproliferation regime has taken place over the last twelve years or so, and it has now solidly stabilized. Italy signed the NPT in 1968, and ratified it in 1975 in order to participate in the 1st review conference. Like in many other signatory countries, it had reservations at the time, and the arguments were the same put forward by other reluctant signatories: the NPT was recognized as discriminatory, there was a somewhat unarticulated fear that it could create problems of access to civil nuclear technology, there was a more defined fear for the country's own security, which would indefinitely become dependent on the nuclear forces of its allies, and particularly of an extracontinental power, i.e. the U.S.

Nonetheless, Italy has never considered the national nuclear weapon route as a serious possibility after 1975, and it has participated actively in the works of both the NSG and the IAEA--where it is now represented in the Board of Governors.

However, in the last two or three years, there has appeared a growing interests on the part of some resurgent nationalist sectors in augmenting Italy's own nuclear role, though no official position has been taken by any government member. At the risk of oversimplifying, one could say that the cause of this resurgent nationalism stems from the fact that Italy's international political and economic stature has undoubtedly increased in

recent years, and many nationalists believe that it is now the turn of the country's military stature to rise to a commensurate level of prestige and capabilities.^e

In particular, nationalists tend to push for increased conventional, and particularly maritime, forces to improve Italy's capabilities to intervene in the Mediterranean Sea and in the Near Eastern region, including the Gulf from which so much of our crude oil is shipped. In part, this is a mild resurgence of old-standing, and often frustrated, Italian ambitions in the area.

However, there have also been recurring suggestions that Italy's nuclear role should increase, both as concerns the control of NATO nuclear weapons under bilateral agreement with the U.S. and in terms of an Italian independent nuclear force. Exactly how to increase Italian say in the "dual-key" control arrangements with the U.S. has never been clearly spelled out. Perhaps it never will be, since the ultimate question of control, namely, who holds the finger on the nuclear trigger, can not be answered but with a "yes" or with a "no": either the U.S. maintains control over the warheads, or Italy breaks out of the NPT--as well as of current NATO arrangements. It simply does not make sense to speak of increasing Italy's positive nuclear control of U.S. warheads--negative control is of course guaranteed for dual-key forces, while it too is debatable for U.S. controlled delivery vehicles on Italian soil, such as the GLCMs in Sicily.^e

This neo-nationalist current remains a minority. At this time, the political strength of those whom one may call the "integrationists"--who strive for ever greater cooperation and interdependence in the E.E.C. and in NATO--remains superior.

II. NUCLEAR TRADE AND NUCLEAR COOPERATION AGREEMENTS

In the period considered in this paper, Italy has not engaged in any nuclear export activity which may be significant from the point of view of nuclear weapon proliferation.

There has been no follow-on investigations, nor any other indications of new real or alleged deals, with respect to the 1984 alleged promises by a ring of arms smugglers to purported Iraqi intermediaries for nuclear weapon-grade fissile materials. Nor has there been any resumption of nuclear cooperation with Iraq--to which Italy had supplied an isotope separation laboratory that, while not usable to produce weapon material, had caused much political controversy in 1980-81.

Italy continues to maintain numerous bilateral cooperation agreements with many and diverse countries, several of whom belong to so-called threshold category. Two of these agreements are of the government-to-

^e For a sample of these views, see Santoro, Carlo M. and Luigi Caligaris: Obiettivo Difesa (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986); and the collective volume edited by Gen. Carlo Jean Sicurezza e Difesa (Roma: Franco Angeli, 1986).

^e Italy, like the U.K. and unlike West Germany, officially maintains that no U.S. controlled warheads or delivery vehicles would be launched from Italian territory without the consent of the Italian authorities, but no public sources or statements have said how whatever Italian authorities would exercise this de facto right of veto.

government type: one with Brazil, which however has now expired and had been in any case much scaled down since the fear arose in the late '70s that this country could use the technology provided by West Germany for weapon purposes. The other is with Indonesia, and it involves yellow cake conversion and fuel fabrication technology.

All other agreements are not entered in by the Italian government, but by ENEA--formerly CNEN, National Atomic Energy Commission, now with expanded responsibilities in the field of alternative and renewable energy sources--and its foreign equivalents. Some of these agreements do not present any reasonable cause of proliferation concern, either because they are with nuclear weapon states--U.S., U.S.S.R., France--or because the countries concerned do not present at this time a proliferation risk--Canada, Australia.

Some of the other countries with which Italy has concluded nuclear cooperation agreements however do present potential proliferation problems, though the limited nature of the agreements does not pose any cause for immediate concern. This second category of agreements includes one with Argentina, recently expired but whose revival has been considered since the inception of democracy in that country. One with China, in the fields of thermal reactors, fuel cycle and fusion.¹⁰ One with Egypt, tied to France's offer for a nuclear power plant. An old agreement with Yugoslavia, whose revival is now being considered. Finally, an agreement with Pakistan is limited to the application of radioactive isotopes in agriculture and medicine.

III. DIPLOMACY

III.1 Positions in EPC

Italy has taken a position which considers nuclear proliferation as a problem to be approached collectively at the European level. In this context, it has consistently promoted the multilateralization of nonproliferation measures in the EPC, at the Nonproliferation Subgroup level. In the latter forum the London suppliers' guidelines, previously only recommended to and then unilaterally adopted by each participating country, have been collectively accepted by the member countries.

III.2 Positions in International Organizations

In the IAEA, Italy has supported the Belgian-Spanish proposal which would charge an increasing share of new safeguard costs owed to more and better controls to the nuclear weapon states.¹¹ However, Italy has insisted

¹⁰ China is of course a nuclear weapon state, but it is a proliferation worry to the extent that it has been suspected to provide third countries, notably Pakistan, with nuclear weapon technology and other assistance--such as weapon design and facilities.

¹¹ The proposal argues that a fixed budget of U.S. \$ 30.5 million should be divided 99% to 1% between, respectively, the 36 richest countries of the IAEA and the others. Anything above that budget should be assigned either to the repository countries of the NPT, or, alternatively, to those nuclear-weapon states which are members of the Security Council of the U.N.

that the current budget should be sufficient to cover additional safeguards since there is ample room for savings and waste reduction.

Overall Italy's stand has remained somewhat ambiguous: on the one hand it does not fully share the Spanish-Belgian argument that the NWS should bear the additional burden for better safeguards--because, according to the proposal, they are the ones which would benefit the most out of them. Instead, Italy believes that safeguards costs "beyond a certain limit" should be assigned on a voluntary basis. On the other hand it does support the Spanish-Belgian contention that should additional costs be incurred these should be born by the NWSs.¹²

A major preoccupation of Italy's at the IAEA in the last two years has been the retention of its seat in the Board of Governors. Italy held a permanent seat until last year, when it was moved to a rotational seat in light of its negligible progress in nuclear energy development. Italy's, thus far unsuccessful, arguments for retaining the seat have centered around its advanced nuclear technology development, its high financial contribution to the budget of the Agency and its role in nuclear aid to other countries, particularly through the Center for Theoretical Physics which it runs and substantially finances at Trieste, and where large numbers of visiting scholars from LDCs receive technical training.¹³ The argument is virtually certain to come up anew in future negotiations.

At the PUNE conference, held in Geneva in March of 1987, Italy reaffirmed its long-standing support for the Agency's role for the NPT regime and for the development of nuclear power in developing countries, though only in the (usual for such circumstances) rather vague terms, in its statement to the plenary session. More substantial the Italian contribution to the work of the II Committee, where it presented the results of its programs in the development of the Sterile Insect Technique (SIT), which has already resulted in the successful eradication of fruit

and have been uninterruptedly a member of the Board of Governors of the Agency.

¹² The safeguards budget of the Agency will likely be increased in light of additional plants which keep coming under its control and of better safeguarding hardware adopted. This is a measure of the Agency's success. The Spanish-Belgian position is therefore fundamentally flawed, in that by definition the non-nuclear members of the NPT benefit from the nonproliferation regime as much--and arguably more--than the nuclear weapon states. It is only logical therefore that all parties to the treaty should also bear a financial burden for the safeguarding of the regime. One could argue for a redistribution of the relative financial commitments of the Agency's members in light of their changing economic abilities to contribute; it is quite different to suggest, as the Belgian proposal which Italy supports does, that somehow the benefits which the regime yields to the nuclear weapon states have increased as compared with those for the non-nuclear weapon states. They have not, and therefore this can not be a justification for additional expenses in safeguards to be dumped on the nuclear weapon states.

¹³ This year the Italian government's contribution to the Center has been raised from U.S.\$ 3 million to over 6 million (Italian £ 9 billion) to which support for individual projects will be added on an ad hoc basis.

flies from large areas.¹⁴

III.3 Positions in arms control issues

As many other Western European governments, that of Italy has officially displayed satisfaction at the US-Soviet progress toward reductions and possibly the elimination of intermediate-range nuclear forces from Europe. However, again much like in the rest of Western Europe, many in and out of government have in many ways expressed uneasiness and concern about going too far on the slippery slope toward the denuclearization of Europe and the decoupling of the U.S. deterrent from the rest of NATO.

At the political level, Italy is generally in favor of a Comprehensive Test Ban, but it has been rather passive on this issue. Since it is not a nuclear weapon state, it has not officially taken positions on specific technicalities such as verification, thresholds, quotas, etc.

More in general, Italy does recognize the link between horizontal and vertical proliferation, but it does not consider the two problems to be on an equal level of importance. Italy continues to believe that horizontal proliferation is destabilizing and thus undesirable for both nuclear and no-nuclear weapon states, without qualifications. On the other hand, Italy holds that, while ultimate nuclear disarmament is a desirable goal to work toward, nuclear deterrence in the confrontation between the two superpowers and the two blocs in Europe is, for the foreseeable future, irreplaceable for its security.

III.4 Diplomatic Contacts

To the extent that this writer could ascertain from public sources and interviews, no diplomatic exchanges between Italy and any threshold country has taken place to deal with nuclear issues in the period considered.

¹⁴ The three papers presented were entitled as follows: Mutating Breeding for Crop Improvement, Food Irradiation as a New Storage Perspective, and Insect Pest Control Aided by Sterile Insect Technique.

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