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**ITALY'S POLICY TOWARDS  
THE MEDITERRANEAN MIDDLE EAST AREA  
AN OVERVIEW**

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## **1. Introduction**

Italy's foreign policy well represents the "medium power typology", as defined by theorists of international relations: Italy's plays its role mainly within the limits of its own region and influences the international system only because changes in its basic alignments may indirectly affect the overall balance of power.

Within the limits of this paradigm, the profile of Italy's foreign policy was enhanced in the last decade and the Mediterranean - Middle East region has been among its favorite areas of action.

Contrary to some (domestic) perceptions, Italy's main geopolitical area of influence is *not* the Mediterranean. In fact, in modern times Italy's foreign policy has been firmly anchored in modern times to alliances which -from the "Tripartite Alliance" of 1882 to NATO and the EC- have relegated the Mediterranean dimension to a marginal position, given their geopolitical center of gravity in continental Europe.

This relative lack of emphasis on the Mediterranean on the part of the "anchors" of Italian foreign policy has been the source of a potential political contradiction, as most of the areas of interest proximate to Italy are in the Mediterranean basin: the littoral countries of the Adriatic, the Strait of Sicily and the maritime regions extending west to the Balearic islands and east to Crete.

During the postwar period, in an effort to minimize this potential contradiction, Italy's foreign policy had the dual objective of consolidation of NATO and the EC, and the achievement of full integration of Italy within these alliances. The attainment of these objectives was appropriately identified as the essential (but not the only) condition for involving the allies in the Mediterranean dimension which was marginal to the center of gravity of these alliances, but geopolitically indispensable for Italy.

In other words, in the postwar period the pursuit of good economic and political relations with the countries of the Mediterranean area has been a secondary -although significant-goal in Italy's foreign policy. As a consequence, contrary to current beliefs, the existence of a prominent and relatively coherent Mediterranean chapter in Italy's foreign policy is a recent phenomenon dating back not earlier than the mid 1970s.

## **2. The development of Italy's Mediterranean policy**

In the immediate postwar period Italy had many disincentives to active involvement in the region: first, the country's economic and political fabric was in shambles and its freedom of maneuver was limited *de facto* and *de jure* (its admission to the UN did not come until 1956); secondly, after Italy joined NATO in 1949 and the left parties were ousted from government, the alignment with US foreign policy directives was total; thirdly the notion of a national Mediterranean policy was too reminiscent of Fascist imperial ambitions to be palatable.

Even the development of a national economic foreign policy in the key sector of energy supplies proved to be ahead of times, as shown by the case of Mattei, the president of the State oil agency (ENI), killed in 1962 in a mysterious plane crash when on the verge of signing an agreement with neo-independent Algeria.

Although Italy actively contributed to the development of the so called EC Mediterranean policy launched at the beginning of the 1970's, it was not until after the first oil shock (1973) that the Italian government sought a reappraisal of its relations with the countries of the Mediterranean basin, whose results were on the whole more impressive in economic than in political terms.

It was at this stage that in most Italian political forces emerged a trend favorable to the political discourse of the Arab countries. In this evolution, that contrasted with the previous record, economic opportunism - arising out of the need to acquire and keep an adequate share of the Arab market to counterbalance the booming oil bill - was the prominent, but not only reason.

However, regardless of the imperative to increase economic relations with the Arab oil producing countries and of the ensuing relative pro-Arab tilt, a coherent Mediterranean chapter was still lacking in the dormant Italian foreign policy.

### **3. From the late 1970's to present**

The picture changed significantly from the late seventies, when Italy ceased to be little more than a spectator of international events. The reasons for the change in Italy's international status are too complex to be analyzed here, but can be summarized as the result of the convergence of domestic and international developments that mitigated the fragility of the Italian political and economic system and gave more weight to the whole Western Europe in the international system.

By 1980 Italy had become the biggest provider of export credit for the Mediterranean countries among all OECD countries, had signed a treaty guaranteeing Malta's neutrality after the British withdrawal, and chaired the EC presidency that issued the Venice declaration offering an active European support for a diplomatic solution of Arab-Israeli conflict.

By 1990, relations with the countries of the Mediterranean region have long ceased to be considered in narrow economic terms (raw materials in exchange of export markets) and are mainly considered as a facet of the overall national security policy.

Actually, in accordance with the general pattern of international commercial relations (which shows a heavy volume of trade within the main developed areas and a low level of inter-area exchanges), the share of trade with the Mediterranean-Middle East countries in the global Italian external trade is less and less significant (it accounted for 9,8% in 1987, while Italy accounted for 17,2% in their global trade); even the dependence from the region for energy supplies, while maintaining its strategic significance, could be diminished (Middle Eastern oil accounted for 39% of total imports in 1983 and 27% in 1989).

The importance presently attributed to the Mediterranean region in Italy's foreign policy must therefore be regarded in political terms.

### **4. The security dimension of Italy's Mediterranean policy**

Since the late 1970's the Mediterranean area experienced a transformation of its strategic conditions as a result of the combination of three main factors: political instability and socio-economic dislocation, diffusion of power to Southern countries (most visibly represented by arms

proliferation), the linkage with the so called Southern 'arc of crisis' that stretches from Afghanistan to Morocco. This transformation of the strategic conditions in the Mediterranean-Middle East area resulted in an increase in the risks for Western security emanating from the area South of Western Europe.

Since the end of the Seventies, Italy experienced the actualization of direct security threats from the Mediterranean area, deriving from crisis in the South and Western response to them: a stream of terrorist attacks linked to Middle Eastern conflicts were carried out on Italian territory; Italian armed forces took part in all multinational operations in the Mediterranean-Middle East area since 1981, being attacked in several occasions (Beirut 1983, Gulf 1987-88, Iraq 1991); the Italian territory came under direct military attack in 1986, when two Libyan Scuds were fired against the island Lampedusa.

The experience of increased security risks arising from the Mediterranean basin evolved for Italy against the background of growing Italian activism in foreign policy mentioned above, and interlaced with the (re)-emergence of the 'out of area' question as an issue in Euro-American and intra-European relations.

Since the perception of increased security risks from the South intervened at a relatively early stage of the formulation of Italy's Mediterranean policy it is not surprising that it influenced it significantly.

## **5. Bilateral and multilateral policies (1)**

The Italian response to the increased threats from the South perceived during the 1980s has been the formulation, of a series of micro and macro policies in two main fields: foreign policy and defence policy, economic policy directions having been linked to these two areas only sporadically.

In the diplomatic sphere, Italy concentrated its bilateral action on three groups of countries that can be categorized as "the key actors", "the old friends" and "the problem" countries.

The first category comprises the countries playing a central role in their respective subregional environment: Morocco and Algeria in the Maghreb; Egypt, Israel and Jordan in the Mashreq. In the second category fall only two countries: Tunisia and Egypt. Finally, the third group comprises Libya, Syria and Iran.

Italian bilateral relations with the "key players" are for most aspects just implementation of policies decided at the pan-Western or EC level (e.g. aid priority, associate status, special support or sanctions decided in connection with special conjunctures).

On the contrary, relations with "the old friends" and "the problem countries" have more to do with specifically Italian policies.

Italy's special attention to Tunisia reflects ties born out of territorial proximity, but also supports Tunisia traditional search for an alternative to French influence and its efforts to promote true regional integration in the Maghreb.

Relations with Egypt are built on the mutual interest in strengthening the role of regional countries in ensuring regional stability. Egyptian-Italian cooperation in security related fields like anti-terrorist surveillance (a bilateral accord to that effect exists since 1986, and it is the first stipulated by Italy with a non European Mediterranean country) is complementary to pan-Western and namely US policy in the region, but can at times diverge (an example being the 1985 *Achille Lauro* affair, when Italian and Egyptian interest coincided in defusing the crisis within the PLO,

while the US insisted on bringing the hijackers to trial).

Italy's relatively good relations with Libya, Syria and, less successfully, Iran, have -in addition to special economic interests (as in the case of Libya)- two main reasons: one is the already mentioned desire to avoid that politico-economic isolation contribute to the further radicalization of the regimes of these countries, the other is the effort to design a specific political role for Italy as the mediator between these "problem" countries and the West.

To conclude this overview of bilateral diplomacy in the Mediterranean as a facet of Italy's security policy, it remains to be noticed that Italian relations with the Gulf countries are globally weak and mostly confined to the commercial sphere. This is due to the absence of any traditional cultural or political tie, but also to the perception by the Gulf countries of Italy's marginality in the two fields most vital to them: the oil market and regional security.

In fact, security cooperation, in the form of direct or indirect military assistance and arms sales is the less developed facet of Italy's diplomacy in the Mediterranean-Middle East area. Formal military cooperation agreements exist only with Malta and Morocco, while post-sale assistance extended to Libya and Iraq by private defense industries were formally halted by the arms trade embargoes imposed on these countries.

Another dimension of Italy's diplomacy in the Mediterranean remains to be stressed: it is the "multi-bilateral" and subregional level of action, a networking that tries to create an intermediate space of coordination, able to compensate for the deficiencies of purely national or pan-Western security policies.

To this end, Italy has coordinated its action more or less formally with the other Southern European countries in order to contain the security risks coming from the South. In the economic sphere this has taken the form of a sort of Southern lobby in the EC, supporting the enhancement of aid policies in the framework of the Mediterranean policy of the Community. In the political sphere, this reflects in the attention paid to the political discourse of the Southern countries and, more concretely, in the efforts developed throughout the Eighties to develop a Mediterranean "monitoring group"; these efforts have finally materialized in 1990 -thanks to an Italian-Spanish initiative- in the constitution of a "Group of Nine" (comprising the four South-Western EC members plus the five countries of the Union of the Arab Maghreb), pledging to work for the calling of a Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean (CSCM).

In the military sphere, the networking of the Southern Europeans has materialized in multi-bilateral naval and intelligence cooperation in the Western Mediterranean.

Finally, a Mediterranean dimension has emerged also in the Italian defense policy in the 1980s.

Stressing the increased security risks from the South, Socialist defense minister Lagorio (1980-83) was the first to underline the increasing strategic importance and complexity in the role of Italian armed forces in the defence of the Southern Flank of NATO, advocating as a consequence the need for a restructuring of the structure and missions of the armed forces.

This opened a lively but confused debate over Italy's need for a new "model of defense"(MOD), that was further stimulated by the Italian participation in the multinational force in Lebanon, and reflected in the *Defence White Paper* of 1985.

The 1985 White Paper acknowledged for the first time since World War II the existence of specific threats to national security interests distinct from those associated with Italian

commitments to NATO, -namely the defence of the Southern part of the territory, of the free flow of strategic supplies such as oil, the protection of nationals abroad.

The "new thinking" outlined in the 1985 document failed however to be translated into a new defence planning. The debate over the MOD, that had been simmering for long, was revamped once again by the new evidence of the security risks from the South: the 1990-91 crisis over Iraq's annexation of Kuwait.

In spring 1991 the Italian Parliament began discussing the requirements of the new MOD: if and when implemented, this new model of defense should equip Italy with a military instrument more suitable to perform missions of peace-keeping, peace enforcing, and intervention in out-of area conflicts.

## 6. Conclusions

At the heart of both the bilateral and multilateral dimensions of Italy's Mediterranean policies lies a comprehensive concept of security that regards political, cultural and economic factors as more important than purely military ones in determining instability and conflicts in the region.

According to this concept of comprehensive security developed by Italian policy makers in the last decade, what is at stake in the Mediterranean is a cultural and social balance that is definitely more complex than the military one.

From the Italian point of view security challenges like mass migration, terrorism and intercultural confrontation are equally and often more frightening than the conventional and unconventional arms proliferation in the region.

As a consequence, Italy's foreign policy strives at developing *a strategy of cooperation* with the countries of the region to contribute to the elimination of the social and economic causes of instability; to the reinforcement of democracy; and to the establishment of an intercultural dialogue.

This strategy has to include the implementation of an appropriate combination of policies related also to the military aspects of security (from regional arms control to power projection capabilities), in order to integrate the various dimensions of security.

Recognizing that national resources cannot suffice to develop this strategy of cooperation -that requires the mobilization of significant economic and political resources- Italy is seeking to have this strategy adopted and implemented by the European Community as a whole. This choice is motivated by the fact that the Community is the only multilateral framework that -after its transformation into a full fledged Economic and Political Union- will be able to integrate European economic, political and military policies vis-à-vis the Mediterranean.

## Notes

1) See Table 1 and 2 for data on Italy's energy dependency and Italian expatriates in the Mediterranean - Middle East region.

Tab.1. Italy's import of oil and natural gas (in million of TEPs)

|             |     | Middle East | North Africa | Subtotal | USSR | Other countries | Total |
|-------------|-----|-------------|--------------|----------|------|-----------------|-------|
| <b>1983</b> | TEP | 32          | 20           | 53       | 14   | 16              | 82    |
|             | %   | 39          | 25           | 64       | 17   | 19              | 100   |
| <b>1988</b> | TEP | 23          | 37           | 60       | 16   | 6               | 82    |
|             | %   | 28          | 45           | 73       | 20   | 7               | 100   |
| <b>1989</b> | TEP | 24          | 42           | 66       | 16   | 9               | 91    |
|             | %   | 27          | 46           | 73       | 17   | 10              | 100   |

Source: Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi, Rome , 1990.

Tab.2. Italian expatriates in Middle East and North Africa Countries (\*)

| <b>North Africa</b> |              |         |         |       |       |        |
|---------------------|--------------|---------|---------|-------|-------|--------|
| Morocco             | Mauritania   | Algeria | Tunisia | Libya | Egypt | Sudan  |
| 2,500               | 37           | 800     | 2,400   | 4,350 | 5,000 | 160    |
| <b>Near East</b>    |              |         |         |       |       |        |
| Turkey              |              | Lebanon |         | Syria |       | Jordan |
| 2,500               |              | 680     |         | 364   |       | 250    |
| <b>Gulf (**)</b>    |              |         |         |       |       |        |
| Iran                | Saudi Arabia | Bahrein | U.A.E   | Qatar | Oman  | Yemen  |
| 1,187               | 330          | 36      | 290     | 65    | 48    | 20     |

\* registered expatriate workers as of May 1991 (diplomatic personnel excluded)

\*\* no expatriate registered for Kuwait and Iraq

Source: Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.