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**ITALY AND THE MEDITERRANEAN  
POLICIES AND GOALS AFTER WORLD WAR II**

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# ITALY AND THE MEDITERRANEAN POLICIES AND GOALS AFTER WORLD WAR II

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## **The post-World War II**

After the end of the Second World War and the enforcement of the Peace Treaty in 1947, it is a common place to point out that Italy's foreign policy during the Cold War was almost solely conducted along the lines and within the framework of the Atlantic Alliance and the European Community.

The Mediterranean was regarded by much of the new democratic ruling class as a symbol of the aggressive nationalism of the Fascist regime. There were interests towards the Mediterranean, but they were playing a very marginal role in giving shape to the foreign policy of the emerging republican Italian state: (a) some former colonial interest related to Libya; (b) the interest of Italian Catholics and the Vatican towards the Palestine and Jerusalem; (c) the interest of many leaders and figures in the Liberal-democratic, Socialist and Communist parties towards Israel

## **Catholic ambitions in the fifties**

The Mediterranean re-emerged as a significant goal in the Italian foreign policy only in the fifties:

- The Italian oil company ENI, under the leadership of Mr. Enrico Mattei, initiated a policy intended to support Arab and Iranian economic and political aspirations with the aim of weakening American and Western domination in the international oil market.

- This oil-inspired "Mediterranean" policy was not consciously connected but proved very consistent with the so-called "neo-Atlanticist" approach developed in the second part of the fifties by leftwing leaders of the Christian Democratic party (DC) such as Mr. Gronchi and Mr. Fanfani (the same political and cultural area Mr. Mattei belonged to). After the failure of the 1956 Suez expedition and De Gaulle's rise to power in France in 1958, Italy's Catholic leftists thought that by increasing their role in the Atlantic Alliance they could convince the US to grant Italy -- a non-neocolonialist country with good relations with Arabs -- a special role in the Mediterranean.

This strange and naive combination of neo-nationalism and anti-Americanism came to nothing and didn't change the mainstream of Italy's foreign policy. However, it is important to recall it for it marked the re-emergence of "Mediterraneanism" in Italian politics. The resurgent interest towards the Mediterranean reflected Italian feelings and reactions with respect to the decolonization process and other changes taking place in the Mediterranean and the Middle East at that time. Though differently inspired, the anti-Americanism of the leftwing Catholics coalesced with that of the Socialists and Communists in a common support to people struggling for independence and non-alignment against imperialism. This shared Mediterranean platform was to become a dimension of the wider political convergence between Communists and Catholics which played such an important role in the Cold-War-era Italian domestic politics. Because of this role in domestic politics, the Mediterranean acquired in Italy's political rhetoric more importance than its real place in the country's foreign policy would have deserved.

## **Secular parties' assertiveness in the eighties**

In the rise of the left-centrist Socialist party in the seventies, particularly under Mr Craxi's leadership, the adoption of a more "militant" and assertive attitude towards the Mediterranean played a role. Like in many other fields, Mr. Craxi understood that the traditional unilateral stand of the Italian Socialists in favour of Israel warranted Communists and Catholics filo-Arab politics an important influence on the new generations of Italian voters. Since the 1967 war, the Socialist party shifted more and more towards supporting the Arabs and most of all the Palestinians.

After the "Neo-Atlanticists", the Socialist governments in the eighties constitutes the second notable - and much more articulated - attempt at including a significant Mediterranean dimension in Italy's foreign policy. Beside domestic political reasons, the Socialist Mediterranean policy came up as part of a wider effort of the center-left political parties to respond to newly emerging demands and objectives in the Atlantic and European alliances and contribute more resources and responsibility than Italy had done in the past. The Mediterranean and Middle Eastern areas provided the opportunity for such effort to be deployed.

After a few contributions to international peace operations -- like the one in the Sinai MFOs -- it was in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, with the 1979 intervention in Lebanon, that the Italian government started to contribute military forces in a more systematic way to the international and multinational peace-related missions set up by the UN, the WEU and groups of governments.

Interventions in the Mediterranean and the Middle East were connected to the reshuffling of the main national defense missions of the Italian armed forces. The 1985 "White Paper", commissioned by Mr. Spadolini as minister of Defence, advocated the need to give more weight to Italy's defence efforts towards the Alliance's Mediterranean southern flank with respect to the focus traditionally kept on the southeastern section of the Alliance's central front.

These moves on the multilateral side were coupled by the strengthening of bilateral policies. There was a substantial increase in bilateral development aid. Between 1980 and 1990 Italy's official development aid (ODA) increased from US \$683 to 2,615 million at current prices (from 1,043 to 2,764 at constant 1989 prices), the most important increase ever in Italy's development cooperation resources. In the same period, while sub-Saharan Africa continued to enjoy absolute priority as the destination of Italian aid, the Mediterranean area and Latin America competed for second and third place. Regardless of priorities and percentages, the sheer amount of disbursements permitted by the overall aid increase turned aid to the Mediterranean into an important support for Italy's foreign policy (and economic penetration) in that area.

At the same time, bilateral political relations with the most important countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean were expanded and upgraded. Italy made the decision in 1980 to unilaterally guarantee Malta's neutral status and provide regular financial support to the island. Also, bilateral political relations and consultations with North African and Middle Eastern countries received an unprecedented boost by all leaders, from Mr. Andreotti through to Mr. Spadolini and Mr. Craxi.

## **Socialists' activism**

Inspired by Mr. Craxi, the Socialists envisaged a most ambitious project. The upgrading of relations with the most important countries of the Southern Mediterranean was aimed at establishing a kind of regional group with the task of securing stability and security in the area.

The group was intended to act in tune with non-Mediterranean interests and powers, especially the US, but without being overly dependent on them. Much of the course Mr. Craxi decided to pursue during the "Achille Lauro"-Sigonella crisis - in particular, the strong understanding the Italian government wished to maintain with Egypt - can be explained as an attempt to reinforce the grouping policy that was so central to Mr. Craxi's political strategy towards the Mediterranean.

Such a reinforcement of bilateral ties in the area made it possible for Mr. Gianni De Michelis, who became foreign minister in 1989, to envisage a foreign policy characterized by a particularly proactive and dynamic combination of bilateral policies inspired by national interests and multilateralism. Drawing on the experience Italy had accumulated in the eighties, he tried to make the country something more than a staunch and passive -- sometime even oblique -- supporter of the Western and European alliances by bringing stronger Italian commitments and more constructive contributions into the framework of these alliances.

Under Mr. De Michelis' guidance, Italy contributed to promoting two main initiatives in the Mediterranean, the Western Mediterranean Group, which was set up in Rome in October 1990, and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean (CSCM), which was presented by Italy and Spain in Palma de Mallorca in September 1990 on the occasion of a meeting of the CSCE.

The efforts and projects just mentioned marked the apogee of Italy's Mediterranean policy. Thereafter, the changes brought about by the end of the Cold War and the Gulf War triggered the swift decline of this policy and made it come to nothing. Whereas the Western Mediterranean Group came to a standstill because of the sanctions on Libya and the beginning of the crisis in Algeria, the CSCM and the potential for a European initiative towards southern areas were overwhelmed by the Gulf War and subsequently replaced by the US role in the Madrid process.

## **Post-Cold War trends**

After the end of East-West confrontation, Italy had to withstand the consequences of the financial mismanagement of the eighties and the collapse of its by now eroded domestic political system (a system in many ways related to the Cold War situation and Italy's role in it). Intertwined with the financial and economic restructuring of the country, EU and European policies have become the almost all-absorbing focus of both domestic and foreign policy, but foreign policy as a whole - including Mediterranean policy - has been neglected and sacrificed. Just to give an example, ODA went down from 3,354 billion Lire in 1990 to 1,110 in 1994 and this trend has continued.

In this new framework, Italy's interest in the Mediterranean has been strongly challenged by re-emerging trends of (mild) nationalism. Two main arguments have been developed by non-governmental actors: first, that the Mediterranean is no more than a second-rank option within the range of Italy's national interests (and that Italy's geopolitical focus has to become the European East as well as the global economy); second, that, to the extent to which an interest in the Mediterranean survives, Italy should concentrate on a few countries, like Egypt and Libya, rather than dwell on comprehensive multilateral schemes of regional or inter-regional relations. A broader argument is that since the interest of the most important EU members in the Mediterranean is marginal, concentrating Italy's efforts on this area would not pay off in terms of European influence and status.

The Italian governments of the nineties - despite some confused attempts by Mr. Berlusconi's cabinet to work out a more "national-interest-based" approach - have lent a deaf ear to these arguments and, in tune with both traditional Italian policy and rhetoric, are pursuing an essentially multilaterally-based Mediterranean policy in the frameworks of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership the WEU and NATO.

The present debate about the Mediterranean is not limited, however, to that between nationalist tendencies and the more balanced multilateralism of the governmental circles. There are cultural and political changes in the domestic arena worth mentioning. One can indicate three such fresh trends.

First, the civil society that is emerging from the collapse of the international Communism and the subsequent profound transformations in Italy's leftist parties, trade unions and associations, has lost the anti-imperialist and non-aligned rationale that underpinned policies towards the Mediterranean. The strong solidarity and support provided by the Italian left to trends like Arab nationalism or the Palestinian struggle has faded away or --as in the case of Palestine-- has assumed a different perspective. With the exception of the old-fashioned Communists gathering in the small Party for the Restructuring of Communism, Italy's left today is certainly most attracted by the European and trans-Atlantic circle and look at the Mediterranean from a standard European vantagepoint, both politically and ideologically.

Second, the fragmentation of the former Christian Democratic party into varying smaller Catholic parties and the weakening of the Catholic-Communist stream that undercut most of the Italian politics during the Cold War era are both factors that contribute to a radical change in the attitudes of the Italian civil society towards the Mediterranean. The Catholic-Communist stream used to promote a set of cultural and political myths of Mediterranean solidarity which were then translated into anti-Western, anti-European and anti-American attitudes. This second change contributes to consolidate a more relaxed and realistic view on the Mediterranean and, therefore, it coalesces with the new Europeanist look of the governmental left in giving the Mediterranean a more realistic size in the context of the Italian interests.

Third, the swift changes introduced in international economic relations by strong trends to globalization and relative modifications in the distribution of economic power among old and new industrial countries are affecting the share of the Mediterranean in Italy's economic interest abroad. Eastern and, even more so, Asian markets have attracted Italian products and capitals. However, the relative decrease of the Mediterranean's part in Italy's economic relations doesn't correspond to a reduced importance of this area for the Italian economy. Energy, for example, remains a primary factor in Italy's relations with the Mediterranean.

The combination of a durable economic importance with a more pragmatic and sober political role in Italy's Mediterranean policy may ultimately contribute to dismantle the Mediterranean rhetoric accumulated during the Cold War and make Italy's Mediterranean policy more effective. All in all, civil trends reinforce governmental policies.

### **A double-track Mediterranean policy**

All five governments of the post-Cold War era have more or less stressed their attachment to the Mediterranean direction in Italian foreign policy. Italy's government is promoting its Mediterranean initiative in two directions: in the Euro-Mediterranean sphere and in NATO.

Italy co-initiated and very firmly supported the Barcelona process. During its EU Presidency in the first semester of 1996, the Italian government took various initiatives particularly devoted to developing the cultural dialogue between Europe and the South Mediterranean partners in the EMP. Most importantly, Italy successfully steered the Senior Official Committee in its task of drawing up blueprints for the EMP's security policies.

The second basic idea that contributes to forming the backbone of Italy's Mediterranean policy in the nineties, is that NATO has to play a role in the relations with South Mediterranean countries. After the NATO Summit of January 1994, in which the idea was strongly promoted by the Italian government with French and Spanish support, at the beginning of 1995 the

Mediterranean Dialogue became an official initiative of the Alliance. Subsequently, at the informal October 1995 NATO meeting in Williamsburg, the Italian Minister of Defense, with some American backing, urged his colleagues to consider the launching of a "Partnership for the Mediterranean" (PfM) modelled on NATO's Partnership for Peace with Central European countries.

Italy's EU- and NATO-related Mediterranean initiatives underline the continuity of a kind of two-track policy that is not new in Italian post-Second World War foreign policy. It sheds light on Italy's lasting interest that the US be present in both the Mediterranean and the European arenas and, more broadly speaking, that the trans-Atlantic dimension merge with the European one.

This two-track policy is reflected in the policy conducted by Italy in the nineties with respect to the inclusion of a security and defense component in the European Union. Italy has always supported the strengthening of a European security and defense identity, but on the condition that it be closely related to NATO. Italy is perfectly at ease in strongly supporting the process that should bring about the drawing up of a European Defense Identity inside NATO. Meanwhile, the interest in NATO goes hand in hand with interest in European military integration, as reflected in Italy's participation in the WEU's Euromarfor and Eurofor, in cooperation with France, Spain and Portugal.

## **Conclusions and prospects**

As already pointed out, Italy's policy towards the Mediterranean in this decade is deeply affected by an adverse combination of international and domestic changes. It remains, however, deeply committed to Mediterranean by taking advantage and trying to reinforce multilateral policy frameworks.

In perspective, this posture poses two questions. The first question is that Italy should take care that its two-track policy does contribute to strengthening trans-Atlantic links without weakening European cohesion. Frustrations and tensions in the difficult intra-European negotiations ahead may push Italy to emphasise trans-Atlantic reassurances instead of supporting European cohesion and its French-German core. The successful integration of Italy in the first circle of the EU monetary and economic union would reassure Italy and help it conduct its two-track policy fairly and cooperatively.

The second question, which pertains more closely to the Mediterranean, is that the weakness of the bilateral policy component cannot last for long. Italy has to reinforce its bilateral policy towards the Mediterranean, as soon as this is possible, unless it wants to run the risk of jeopardizing its multilateral efforts.

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