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ITALY AND THE RELATIONS BETWEEN WEU AND EU

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The history of Italian attitude and of its evolution towards WEU, albeit of secondary importance, represents a good case study for the understanding of some of the more significant elements of the Italian foreign and security policy in the context of the process of European integration. It can be of use also for the analysis of the today European role of Italy, both of its fundamentals and contradictions.

If we look, in fact, to the history of our participation to WEU, we can fix some of the basic characteristics of this interplay between continuity and contradictions:

- Italy's picture emerges as the one of a medium size power having played the role of "founder" for all European Institutions (including the WEU), but at the same time with a clear fear of remaining "excluded" from any new initiative launched by the Franco-German duo;
- Italy in the defence and security field is a strong and convinced advocate of an European autonomous initiative in building a defence Community, but at the same time it is more than others dependent from the American influence on the Continent;
- Italy advances a specific security interest in the Mediterranean and plays occasionally a rather important role in it, but at the same time it hasn't the strength of convincing its European partners to provide the necessary cover to its action in the Region, where it remains compressed between the conflicting American and French national interests.

If these are the contradictions of the past, there is also no doubt that, today, the future of Europe in the field of security and defense is destined to play even a more significant role in Italy because of the past few years profound changes affecting the country's geopolitical and geostrategic situation. With the end of the Cold War, Italy has rapidly become a complete frontier country, due to the addition of the Eastern front to the traditional Southern one. Italy stands at the crossroads of two of the most crucial crisis areas in Europe: the Balkans and the Mediterranean.

At the same time, Italy has also recently recognized in the Albanian case the diminished security coverage offered by the traditional international organizations: the UN, NATO, OSCE and the European Union (EU).

The greater external security exposure, accompanied by a weaker multilateral coverage, has forced Italy to revise its security policy options in both the domestic and European perspective. The search for a more credible and effective alternative in military terms, whether it be NATO,

CFSP (the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union) or the WEU, is becoming a vital political concern.

1. Italy, the Maastricht Treaty and WEU/EU Relationship

The support accorded the WEU was expressed in every phase of the negotiations which preceded the opening of the Conference on the Treaty of Maastricht (1990-91). Some few months before, the Italian position underwent an apparent change of course from its habitual Community orthodoxy: leading Italian politicians and diplomats, in fact, did approach the United Kingdom at the climax of the debate on the place of the WEU within the nascent European Union.

It is widely known that this still open question regards relations between WEU and EU on one side and WEU and NATO on the other. More precisely, the question revolves around whether the WEU should become part of the EU or occupy an autonomous position with respect to it. It is just as widely known that the British have taken a stand in favor of the latter option. On 4 October 1991, on the eve of the IGC of Maastricht, Italy and the United Kingdom signed a joint declaration founded on recognition of the special relationship between Western Europe and North America, a relationship which found its true expression in the Atlantic Alliance as the "key element of European identity". The reform of NATO and the development of a European defense identity were termed "complementary". The WEU was to be assigned the task of developing the European dimension in the field of defense, in other words, the "defense" component of the political Union, as well as the European pillar of the Alliance. The WEU would have to take into account the decisions of both the European Council and the Alliance. In short, the WEU was to act as a "bridge".

In opposition to the Anglo-Italian stance, a letter signed by Mitterand and Kohl on 14 October 1991 reiterated the vocation of the WEU to become part of the EU. The Franco-German letter called for creation of an organic linkage between the European Union and the WEU through close cooperation and, in certain areas, a merger of the two institutions. With regard to cooperation between the Atlantic Alliance and the WEU, this was to be developed on the basis of the statement issued by the Atlantic Council in June 1991 in Copenhagen and of the dual principle of transparency and complementarity.

The Italian move took its Community partners somewhat by surprise, since it contrasted with Italy's oft-expressed integrationist policy. The actual scope of the Italian move was to win the British over to the formulation expressed in the Treaty of Maastricht, in which both positions are present, although, in terms of wording, the Franco-German formulation of the WEU as an "integral part of the EU" prevails. The truth is that the WEU has continued to live autonomously even after ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht, and at the eve of Amsterdam Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) the problem has re-emerged in its entirety.

The reasons behind the Italian position can be traced back to the old fear of once more being crushed by Franco-German dominance. This suspicion was fanned by the decision of Bonn and

Paris to transform the bilateral Brigade into a Corps, to be called the "Eurocorps", to signify its openness to accepting other members, but whose bilateral character remained preeminent.

Logically speaking, Italy should have remained true to its longstanding philosophy, which was to "communitarize" the bilateral agreement between Germany and France and stand as a link for a broad coalition of states anxious to achieve the same objective. From this standpoint, agreement with the British, notoriously opposed to any form of "communitarization", caused this type of reasoning to lose all credibility. So the Italian move was actually governed more by the fear of Franco-German dominance than by Community logic. So much so that, in the following months, the Italian government refused the invitations of France and Germany to join the Eurocorps. In numerous circles, particularly those close to Italy's defense establishment, the greatest apprehension was over French dominance: the demand to create a "star-shaped structure" in the defense sector, with France always at its center.

2. Italian Domestic Difficulties and Political Change

The period between the coming into effect of the Treaty of Maastricht and preparation of the new Intergovernmental Conference, which opened the 16th of June 1997 in Amsterdam, has been distinguished by a series of extraordinary events for Italian foreign policy and equally sweeping consequences for the way security issues are dealt with.

Compared to the past, the most relevant aspect certainly involves the experimentation with a period of partial marginalization of Italy from the European and international scene. The first signs of difficulty were manifested over monetary issues, with Italy's withdrawal from the EMS in the summer of 1992 and the belated discovery of a huge public debt which moved Italy farther away from respect of the Maastricht macroeconomic convergence criteria necessary to participate in the Euro. But unexpected consequences of exclusion or self-exclusion also emerged in other sectors. In the soft security sector, with the difficulties of entering into the border agreement signed in Schengen in 1990 by Italy's principal historical partners in Europe (the matter will be finally solved in October 1997). In the political security sector, with Italy's exclusion from the Contact Group on Bosnia in early 1994. And, finally, the isolated position Italy found itself occupying vis-à-vis the Americans and the Germans on the question of reforming the Security Council (Germans being partners of vital importance both for the Euro and for development of the political pillar of European Union, including the security aspects).

The feeling of being less indispensable than in the past was confirmed by the facts and led Italy to pursue, at times alone or even in contrast with its European partners (like in the case of the reforming of the Security Council), solutions that would protect it from further harm in the foreign policy and security arena. Once again, the "principle of non-exclusion" was triggered as Italy sought to keep from being ostracized from further initiatives, particularly those on the European chessboard. This is the key to understanding the current government's obsession with participating in the Euro, whatever the cost, seeing this as a credit card to permit participation in other European initiatives in sectors beyond the economic arena.

These external difficulties were accompanied by a period of profound transformation in domestic politics. In only a few years' time, the government shifted from center-right (Berlusconi) to center-left (Prodi, D'Alema). Fluctuations and revisions in foreign and security policy were a consequence. Above all, the tangible risk of marginalization combined with the domestic political disquiet led some of the basic assumptions of our foreign policy to be questioned.

In fact, if the multilateral framework continues to be considered the best way of serving Italian national interests, the perception of a certain marginalization could foster the emergence of unilateral positions. In the near future we might witness the emergence of demands which contrast with both Italy's original integrationist motives in the EU and the firm preference for a multilateral approach in foreign policy. The combination of European and Italian internal crises has, in fact, helped midwife the birth of new kinds of political tendencies.

a) neo-mercantilist. Proponents of this approach still have in mind the relative advantage for a trade policy with the competitive devaluation of the lira. They continue to oppose Maastricht's macroeconomic convergence criteria. Supporters of this tendency cut across political lines and numerous sectors of small- and medium-size enterprises.

b) neo-nationalist. This approach emphasizes the geopolitical interests of Italy and re-opens some of the disputed issues of the past, for example, that of the Italian minorities in Slovenia and Croatia. Proponents of this tendency include right-wing political forces and certain prominent intellectual circles.

c) neo-neutralist. Advocates of this approach would like to see a minor engagement of Italy in the Western camp, favoring, instead, a full assignment of authority to the UN. Supporters of this idea belong to the Refounded Communist Party.

The common elements of these three approaches include a policy for Italy's progressive disengagement from Europe and support for greater autonomy in international affairs, including the security field. For the time being, these positions do not represent real alternatives to Italy's traditional attachment to the EU, but if European interests were perceived to clash with Italy's vital interests, they could gain strength.

The European option was also weakened by the WEU's scant success in managing the crisis in the former Yugoslavia. The operation got off to a good start following speedy approval of the WEU's operational tasks in Petersberg in the fall of 1992, combined with hopes for an effective revival of the WEU as the armed division of an EU able to impart political directives. But the degeneration of the Bosnian conflict (as the today Kosovo crisis) soon revealed the limits of the WEU, which lacked the power to achieve more than the naval control of the Adriatic and the Danube and the reorganization of the police forces in Mostar.

Once again the question of the WEU's place within either NATO or the EU was opened, to the progressive detriment of the latter hypothesis. The 1996 agreement on the CJTF signed in Berlin did nothing to increase the chances for the WEU's integration into the EU. Interpretations of this

agreement are widely divergent. Some consider it the starting point for a more autonomous role for Europe; others, on the contrary, see it marking the end of Europe's role, since every decision on the responsibility to be assigned to Europe in the security field depends on the political will of the Atlantic Alliance.

Recently, Italy has directly experienced the disappointments growing out of the scant operational effectiveness of the WEU. In meeting the challenge of the Albanian crisis and deciding the peacekeeping intervention, the WEU option rapidly dissolved as a tangible possibility. The hostile stand of Germany to military engagement in Albania has removed almost entirely the European coverage of the military mission. Paradoxically, Italy was forced to turn to France, utilizing Eurofor and Euromar, the two initiatives parallel to the Eurocorps that were conceived in 1995.

3. Italy, the Treaty of Amsterdam and beyond

One might have thought that the emergence of greater skepticism in Italy on the WEU's capacity to shoulder the burden of European military operations should have shifted the country farther away from its past integrationist attitudes and, in view of Amsterdam, made it more prudent on the subject of strengthening this institution

In reality, with a government fully engaged to regain Country's lost credibility and process of marginalisation from Europe, the chances for a less pro-integrationist policy in the security field were rather unexistent. The poor performance of WEU and its institutional inconsistency did not represent a good argument to be used against its reinforcement.

On the contrary, in view of the Intergovernmental Conference in Amsterdam, the combination of these mutually contradictory factors has led Italy once again to follow tradition in favor of strengthening European defense institutions, backing, in this case, the strongest option.

Italy had therefore decided to support a joint document of the six founding states of the European Community, together with Spain. This document, presented at the ministerial meeting in Rome on 25 March 1997, was calling for a three-phases plan for the progressive absorption of the WEU into the EU and had to be approved by the other European partners in Amsterdam. The key passage for the credibility of this plan was that of deciding the final date for its implementation. But in order to avoid a crossfire on it from the very beginning, the duration of the entire transition phase was left blank in the document. Only at the eve of Amsterdam the Presidency, with the agreement of the other proponents, suggested to fix at least the deadline for the first phase, five year, as foreseen by art.N on Treaties revision.

Having Italy adopted this advanced position, it is clear that, unlike on the eve of Maastricht, there was no margin nor temptation for any kind of mediation or compromise with the United Kingdom. The only viable road was that of endorsing wholeheartedly the desire expressed, until then, of France and Germany to absorb the WEU into the Union. In addition, Italy called for a

certain measure of "communitarization" of European defense policy. The proposal to have the WEU "disappear" might have furthered a gradual shift in this direction.

Unfortunately in Amsterdam the worst possible scenario took place. A weak Dutch Presidency willing to close at any cost the IGC in time and an ambiguous German position on the real necessity to reinforce the political pillar of the Union (as Germany was declaring in the previous months) left Italy completely isolated in fighting the battle for the institutional upgrading of WEU and the Defence Pillar of the Union. Not even the mention to the five year deadline for the revision of art. J.7 on the Defence tasks of the Union appeared in the final text, nor any suggestion to further "communitarise" European security policy was accepted.

The collapse of the "European spirit" in Amsterdam and the defeat of the strong institutional option has created a degree of embarrassment in the political and diplomatic circles of Italy. The temptation to move away from the traditional path of Europe regained again some support inside the government and in the opposition. But a nationalistic option is not yet there.

Italy still senses acutely the real risk that the absence of strong European institutions might generate trends towards new "directories" to meet the proliferation of local crises in Europe and the Mediterranean. The fact of belonging to a "directory" of Southern European countries in the Mediterranean to deal, even if successfully, with the Albanian crisis is not an attractive prospect for Italy, since it could spell Italy's exclusion from the "directories" that might be established in Central Europe. This would also leave France completely free to advance the "stellar" policy Italy has so often opposed (only to contradict itself by agreeing to participate in Eurofor and Euromar, thereby making them operative for the military campaign in Albania, as noted above).

In addition, antagonism with France persists over the NATO Afsouth command. Italy is, at least tactically, in contrast with its own pro-Europe policy, since it has sided more with the American positions than with those of France and Germany.

At the same time, it is certainly inopportune for Italy to act in concert with the United States in the Mediterranean, since Italy has no chance at all of being able to influence the design or control of American policies and actions in the region.

For a country like Italy, which had experienced a period of humiliating marginalisation, the persistence of a strong multilateral system represents still the only real guarantee against the risk of exclusion. We know also very well how much disruptive the exclusion from Europe can be internally. An equation between exclusion and secession (or internal disruption), as proposed by the Northern League, is easy to be drawn. Therefore the only credible option remains the old strategy towards Europe. The effort to be part of the Euro was certainly in line with that strategy. It represents the only way out from the past marginalisation at European and international level and responds a deep Italian national interest.

Once again, it seems that the only foreign policy strategy for Italy is to bank on the EU's option rather than face the situation of uncertainty and crisis it has had to experience the past few years in regard to its foreign and security policy. The WEU is certainly not, for the time being, the

primary objective of this action but, rather, a European Union in full control of its common security and defense policy. Even before the outbreak of the Kosovo crisis, this line of thought was clearly reaffirmed by the Italian government, through the proposal of relaunching the pre-Amsterdam three phase plan for the progressive absorption of the WEU into the Second Pillar of CFSP. Today, in presence of a war close to its border, Italy is asking its European partners to accelerate the process of integrating WEU into the EU and to reaffirm at the Atlantic Summit in Washington, that the EU, and not the WEU, has to be the American counterpart inside NATO.

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