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Istituto Affari Internazionali

## France, Italy and the Reawakening of Historical Rivalries

by Jean Pierre Darnis

The leaders of France, Italy, Spain and Germany met in Paris on 28 August for a summit hosted by President Emmanuel Macron in the latest indication of France's efforts to assume a key leadership role in the post-Brexit EU. Yet, the event is also an occasion for the French president to smooth ruffled feathers among EU partners, particularly in Rome, after a series of diplomatic spats led to a plummeting of relations and the resurrection of old grievances between the two countries. A second, and arguably more important bilateral summit between France and Italy is also scheduled for 27 September in Lyon, another indication of the need to patch up relations and promote an outward image of cooperation between the two EU neighbours.

Tensions between France and Italy soared in July following the French government's decision to nationalize shipbuilder Stx/Chantier de l'Atlantique rather than give Italy's Fincantieri a

majority stake, thus reneging on an agreement between Italy and France's previous government. Diplomatic relations had already been tested earlier that week when President Macron organized a peace conference on Libya without inviting the Italian government that considers itself a key player on the Libyan dossier. The two events, which are unrelated, created a perfect storm among Italians, resulting in some public spats and a queue of French ministers flying to Rome to patch up relations. Joint declarations and photo ops have not healed the wound, however, and tensions persist.

Current Franco-Italian disagreements recall the events of 2011, when France and the United Kingdom took the lead in a military intervention in Libya. The Italian government at the time was hampered by political troubles at home and a weak Berlusconi presidency that was unable to build upon good relations with the Gaddafi regime to fulfil what

*Jean Pierre Darnis is Head of the Security, Defence and Space Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).*

could have been a “natural” mediating role for Italy.

Another factor contributing to Italian frustration is a lack of understanding of the true dynamics behind French interventionism in Libya. Italy has always seen the 2011 intervention as a French attempt to take Italy’s place in Libya, both economically and diplomatically. This view does not sufficiently take into account former French President Nicolas Sarkozy’s belated reaction to the Arab Spring and his missing the train of Tunisia’s revolution. His intervention in Libya was therefore an attempt to catch up to the Libyan Arab Spring, jumping on the winning side to oppose authoritarianism and corrupt regimes.

This error of judgement regarding French logic reveals the extreme sensitivity of Italy towards anything regarding Libya, a factor that finds its roots in the country’s tortuous colonial past. From the French standpoint, Italy also appears difficult to understand and handle, with its alternate phases of weak leadership and repeated domestic political troubles.

The same year as the Libya intervention, French investment in Italy – such as Lactalis’s takeover of dairy company Parmalat or LVMH’s acquisition of jewellery maker Bulgari – also contributed to the perception of a French conquest of the peninsula. Tensions go back as far as 2002, with Electricité de France’s takeover attempt of Italy’s energy company Edison, which resulted in high diplomatic tensions that were not resolved until the full takeover happened in 2012.

Such investments are entirely normal within an integrated EU market and should not raise eyebrows if it were not for the impression among Italians that France is not as willing to welcome investments on its own shores.

Well before the present Fincantieri spat, the Italian state-controlled energy company ENEL sought a 2006 takeover of the French-based utility company Suez. The attempt was blocked by the French government, which instead created the state controlled GDF-Suez group in order to keep the company in French hands. Tensions over Fincantieri are therefore reopening old wounds among Italians who see the French state as protectionist and nationalist.

The 2011 military intervention in Libya also created a rift between France and Italy in terms of military policy. From the 1990’s onwards, France and Italy have often been involved in the same multilateral military interventions, from the Balkans to Afghanistan. The 2006 reshuffle of the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon, co-lead at the time by France and Italy, might represent the highest point of military and diplomatic convergence between the two countries. NATO’s 2011 intervention in Libya was badly perceived by Italy even if Rome was part of the coalition and conducted an impressive bombing effort in Libya. The growing instability in the area that followed the overthrow of Gaddafi is seen by Italy as a direct consequence of the military intervention.

The 2013 French operation in Mali further confirmed this strategic divergence. In order to avoid the

seizing of the capital Bamako by northern militias and jihadists, France militarily intervened in Mali with a UN mandate. Paris asked for help but was not backed by its European partners. The Italian government led by Mario Monti even vetoed limited logistical air support that had been asked by the French. A few years later, after the 2015 terror attacks in Paris, France triggered the solidarity clause of European Union treaty. Paris again asked for help on its missions abroad in order to relieve military forces needed for domestic terrorism prevention. Countries such as Germany and Ireland replied positively, whereas Italy did not. While Germany has increased its military capabilities in Africa within a cooperative framework with France, Italy's absence is a clear indicator of the strategic divergence that has taken place since 2011.

Today, France continues to develop a vision of regional stabilization and anti-terrorism for the entire Sahel area, whereas Italy tends to focus mainly on Libya. There are obvious potential convergences between the two approaches but a positive process of added value seems difficult to define at present.

Macron has a clear European strategy with Germany. Furthermore, one can observe Macron's activism towards central Europe, a rather original and interesting approach. Taking Brexit into account, this "continentalization" of Europe means Italy has to turn back to its relations with France and Germany, an uneasy alternative that also has complex historical implications given Italy's 19th century history.

Macron's tendency for proactive policies can result in difficulties with partners. For example, during June and July 2017, the freshly elected French president saw Italy pushing hard for a common solution to the migration challenge from Libya. During the 14th of July celebrations, Macron announced in an interview that a "diplomatic initiative for Libya" would be taken rapidly.<sup>1</sup> A few days later, the Libya summit in Paris seemed to catch many Italians by surprise. These had apparently not paid enough attention to Macron's public declaration and failed to understand that the pressure they had put on France about putting Libya on the agenda had resulted in this "Macron-style" reaction.

The result of all these tensions is an explosive environment between France and Italy, with a compromise on Fincantieri/Stx, a deal that many analysts said made perfect industrial sense, nowhere in sight.

Macron is certainly the symbol of a strong evolution of French politics with a reformist agenda for Europe at the centre of his initiatives. It is paradoxical to observe that while Macron's proactive stance seems to be positively affecting relations in Europe, this new political cycle in France is becoming a black hole of ill feelings for Italy which is uncomfortable with an activist France and its aspirations to gain a new form

<sup>1</sup> Michel Urvoy, François-Xavier Lefran and Michaël Backfisch, "Exclusif Macron: 'Je veux conforter la confiance des Français et des investisseurs'" in *Ouest-France*, 13 July 2017, <http://www.ouest-france.fr/politique/emmanuel-macron/exclusif-emmanuel-macron-l-europe-et-la-france-indispensables-l-un-l-autre-5130477>.

of leadership in Europe. This difficult moment for bilateral relations can also be seen as a turning point. France is on the move after decades of maintaining a relatively low profile, the UK is out of the EU and all political partners have to reconfigure themselves to the new European game, an acceleration which calls for a more incisive Italy. It is a complex situation for Italy with political elections coming up next spring, but it also represents an important wake up call.

After the German elections in September there will be a window of opportunity to further advance European integration but this also requires an effort between key member states such as France and Italy, which need to define common strategic interests while balancing their internal constituencies and international projection. All this will be needed to create a stronger Europe while avoiding to stir up too many ghosts from the past.

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Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

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