

The Conte Government: Radical Change or Pragmatic Continuity in Italian Foreign and Defence Policy?

by Alessandro Marrone

The new Italian government headed by Giuseppe Conte relies on a parliamentary majority formed by the Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5S) and Lega parties. The governing coalition represents a significant novelty in Italian politics and some uncertainty remains regarding the trajectory of Italian foreign and defence policy. Caught between continuity and change, radicalism and pragmatism, the priorities of the government are well known, what is less clear is the strategy to carry these forth.

The key priorities for the government are twofold. On the one hand stands economic policy, particularly regarding fiscal deficits and the welfare system. It is no coincidence that Luigi Di Maio, the leader of the M5S and deputy prime minister, has taken over (and merged) the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Economic Development, assuming the post of Minister of Economic Development, Labour and Social Policies in the Conte government.

The second priority is the migration challenge, and the reduction of extraordinary flows that Italy has experienced since 2013, with 624,747 arrivals in four years.¹ Efforts to accelerate the repatriation of migrants tops the political agenda of the Lega, whose leader, Matteo Salvini, campaigned heavily on this issue and presently heads the Ministry of Interior as well as acting as the second deputy prime minister.

¹ In particular, 170,100 in 2014 and 153,842 in 2015, plus 181,436 in 2016 and 119,369 in 2017. See Italian Ministry of Interior. Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration, *Cruscotto statistico giornaliero*, 31 December 2016, http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_31_dicembre_2016.pdf; and the latest *Cruscotto statistico giornaliero* of 14 June 2018, <http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/node/1300>. See also "Migranti, la situazione in Italia", in *Corriere della Sera*, 14 January 2018, https://www.corriere.it/cronache/18_gennaio_14/migranti-situazione-italia-7dcf55e2-f96a-11e7-908c-5ec0ce9694cc.shtml.

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Against this backdrop, a toughening of Italy's negotiation stances with countries of origin and/or transit is to be expected. Aside from a recent spat with Tunisia, confrontational exchanges have also occurred with Malta, a country that has repeatedly been accused by Italy of preventing vessels carrying migrants from docking in its ports, instead directing them to the Italian coast.

Following two alleged episodes of such practices by Maltese authorities since the beginning of June, Salvini announced Italy's refusal to grant docking permission to the *Aquarius* vessel, a ship affiliated with the Franco-German charity SOS Méditerranée, and carrying 629 migrants rescued in the Mediterranean on 9 June. With the ship stranded between Maltese and Italian waters, the Italian government reiterated its request for European assistance in sharing the migration burden, leading by 11 June to an announcement by the Spanish government that it would accept the migrants.

When it comes to the EU dimension of the migration issue, many European partners are likely to support Italian efforts to reduce arrivals and increase repatriation. Italy's tough migration policies actually date back to the previous government and Salvini has declared his intention to continue this strategy. Praising the efforts of his predecessor, Marco Minniti,² he

² "Migranti, Salvini: o Ue ci aiuta o sceglieremo altre vie. Da Minniti buon lavoro", in *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 4 June 2018, <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2018-06-04/migranti-salvini-o-ue-ci-aiuta-o-sceglieremo-altre-vie--100310>.

pledged a strengthening of these policies, including the opening of new identification centres to process asylum requests and increased repatriations.

Tensions, however, are likely with Brussels and other European capitals on the relocation of asylum seekers and the related reform of the Dublin regulations. On 6 June Rome opposed the latest EU compromise proposal, as this was deemed insufficient to address the needs of first-arrival countries like Italy but also Spain, Greece, Malta and Cyprus.

It remains to be seen how new negotiations will unfold, as well as what proposal and alliances the Conte government will build within the Union to advance its priorities. The appointment of Enzo Moavero Milanesi, a former minister in the governments headed by Mario Monti and Enrico Letta, could serve as an important channel of communications with European interlocutors.

With regards to security and defence policy, the new Italian government has signalled its intention to prioritize the Mediterranean region at the recent NATO and G7 meetings, highlighting the twin tracks of migration and anti-terrorism. Italy's new Defence Minister Elisabetta Trenta – an expert of security and defence issues with both research and operational experience who ran for parliament with the M5S – has stressed that NATO should do more for the Southern flank, while reassuring

[shtml](#); Italian Senate, *Informativa del Ministro dell'interno sulla vicenda della nave Aquarius*, 13 June 2018, p. 6, <http://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/1067790.pdf>.

partners of Italy's intention to fulfil its commitments on the Eastern one.³

These steps are fully in line with the coalition agreement signed by the leaders of the M5S and Lega last May. The agreement – or “contract” – clearly identifies the Mediterranean region as the locus of threats, describing how “more factors of instability are gathered [in the Mediterranean], such as: Islamic extremism, uncontrolled migratory flows, with consequent tensions [among] regional powers”.⁴

The Euro-Mediterranean region was already identified as a priority area in the 2015 Italian White Paper for International Security and Defence. In recent years, Rome worked hard in both EU and NATO forums to increase multilateral efforts to address security challenges from the southern neighbourhood. Notable examples include the naval missions EUNAVFORMED Sophia and Sea Guardian, and the establishment of a NATO “hub for the South” in Naples that will become fully operational in July.⁵

³ Italian Ministry of Defence, *Nato: Minister Trenta Meets with Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg*, 11 June 2018, https://www.difesa.it/EN/Primo_Piano/Pagine/parcb.aspx; and NATO Defence Ministerial, 7 June 2018, https://www.difesa.it/EN/Primo_Piano/Pagine/trab.aspx.

⁴ M5S and Lega, *Contract for the government of change*, 18 May 2018, <https://m5s.international/contract-government-change#foreign>. Original version: *Contratto per il Governo di cambiamento*, p. 18, http://download.repubblica.it/pdf/2018/politica/contratto_governo.pdf.

⁵ Carolina Polito and Paola Sartori, “Italy, the North Atlantic Alliance and the 2018 NATO Summit”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 17|33 (December 2017), p. 2, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/8643>.

During a recent meeting with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Rome, Conte also reiterated much of what is in the M5S-Lega government agreement: Italy is a committed NATO member, with the US as its privileged ally, but is also keen to dialogue with Russia, considered an important interlocutor for Europe's security.⁶

With regards to Russia, Italy has traditionally sought to balance its commitments to Euro-Atlantic security with Rome's good economic relations with Moscow. It is no coincidence that the NATO-Russia Council was established under Italian auspices at an extraordinary NATO summit in the outskirts of Rome in 2002. After the 2014 Crimea crisis, Italy remained committed to Allied reassurances, defence and deterrence measures vis-à-vis Russia,⁷ while also arguing for a sustained and meaningful dialogue with Moscow to find a diplomatic solution for the crisis in Ukraine.

The new executive therefore seems to be largely in line with traditional Italian approaches to foreign and defence policy. During a speech at the senate just prior to the confidence vote, Conte noted his government's support for a revision of the existing

⁶ NATO, *Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte of Italy* (Audio), 11 June 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_155816.htm.

⁷ Francesca Bitondo, Alessandro Marrone and Paola Sartori, “Challenges to NATO and Italy's Role: Trump, Brexit, Collective Defence and Neighborhood Stability”, in *Documenti IAI*, No. 16|18E (January 2017), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/7060>.

sanctions against Russia.⁸ At the G7 meeting, the prime minister added that these sanctions are linked to the full implementation of the Minsk agreement and that Italy will not take unilateral decisions in this regard.

When it comes to Italian military operations abroad, both parties have shown scepticism regarding NATO's Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan, where Italy is presently engaged with about 900 troops. In contrast, the Lega did not oppose a decision to dispatch Italian military personnel to Niger in December 2017, due to its relevance to counter people traffickers and migrant flows. Both Trenta and Moavero Milanesi have also reassured allies that Italy will not renege on its commitments in ongoing military operations. Yet a future review and possible re-arrangement of Italian troop distributions from Central Asia to the Mediterranean region cannot be ruled out.

Finally, the M5S-Lega government contract does not envisage cuts or significant increases to the Italian defence budget, which in 2019 is likely to remain stable about 1.1 per cent of GDP. However, the agreement clearly notes how the "protection" of Italy's defence industry is "essential", and mentions the "design and [production] of ships, aircraft and high tech-systems" as key focus areas.⁹ Di Maio's

⁸ Italian Senate, *Comunicazioni del Presidente del Consiglio dei ministri*, 5 June 2018, p. 8-21, <http://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/1067706.pdf>.

⁹ M5S and Lega, *Contract for the government of change*, cit., <https://m5s.international/contract-government-change#defence>; *Contratto per il*

recent visit – the first since assuming the role of Minister of Economic Development – to a major Italian defence manufacturer, Leonardo, may also be indicative of the government's priorities in this domain. Noticeably, the Ministry of Economic Development is endowed with a yearly budget of about 2,7 million euro for investments in national military procurement, on top of those already envisaged in the defence budget.¹⁰

Ultimately, the Conte government can be expected to pursue more radical policies than its predecessor on the migration file, as this is a key priority for the Italian electorate. This will likely exacerbate tensions with European partners, particularly with regards to repatriation and the sharing of the migration burden. When it comes to NATO, Russia, military operations abroad, defence spending and industrial policy, pragmatism and a certain degree of continuity can instead be expected, particularly with regards to Italy's traditional allies and partners in Europe and the US. Obviously, all these policies are connected and tensions in one area, such as the migration dossier, may negatively impact other domains.

These underlining trends of pragmatism and radicalism reflect the mixed composition, and novelty, of the new Italian coalition government. Grounded in an uneasy and unprecedented alliance between the Lega and M5S, the government's priorities in foreign and defence policy

Governo di cambiamento, cit., p. 17-18.

¹⁰ Paola Sartori and Giovanni Finarelli Baldassarre, *Defence Budgets and Industry*, July 2017, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/702>.

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will need to trace a difficult balance between the radical change each coalition partner has promised its electorate, and the institutional (and budgetary) constraints of governance that have generally led Italian executives to embrace pragmatism in foreign and defence policy.

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