

The Political Rollercoaster of Italian-French Relations

by Jean-Pierre Darnis

The French government's decision on 7 February to recall its ambassador from Rome was the last and most dramatic episode in the growing tensions between France and Italy. The diplomatic crisis has been fuelled by differences over a number of bilateral European dossiers with a mixture of internal and external policy motivations.

The two countries have an intense and problematic history. Since the French revolution and Napoleon's campaign in Italy in the late 18th century, bilateral relations have witnessed many ups and downs.

For example, the 1859 Treaty between Frances' Napoleon III and the kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia provided crucial military support from France to Piedmont during Italy's second war of independence against Austria. Yet, the separate armistice between France and Austria which ended the war was

perceived in Italy as a French betrayal because it stopped, albeit temporarily, Piedmont's plans for the unification of Italy. In the following years, Napoleon III's France protected the Pope and the Vatican state with its troops, preventing the new kingdom of Italy from conquering Rome until 1870.

In 1881, in what was dubbed in Italy the "Slap of Tunis", France took power over Tunisia without taking into consideration Italian interests in the country. In 1940, Italy declared war on an already defeated France, a move denounced as a "stab in the back" by Paris.

Between these crises long periods of friendly and cooperative relations have ensued. In the 20th century, particularly after World War II, a significant number of Italians immigrated to France. The post-war period was characterised by a steady increase in economic exchanges, leading France and Italy

Jean-Pierre Darnis, Associate Professor at the University of Nice Sophia-Antipolis, is Scientific Advisor and Head of the Tech-IR Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

to become each other's second largest trading partner.

The 2011 military intervention in Libya spearheaded by France led to a new rift. The Italian government led by Silvio Berlusconi at the time was initially opposed to the intervention fearing that it might have destabilising effects, but then it reluctantly agreed to partake in the military operation on condition that leadership be given to NATO.¹

Since then, France has been widely depicted in Italy as the main culprit for the ensuing chaos in Libya. France's critics tend to forget that the civil war was already underway before the intervention and that military action was conducted by a NATO-led coalition which also included the US, the UK and Italy itself, as well as other 11 Western allies.

With increased migration pressure on Italy since 2014 in part due to the worsening situation in Libya, accusatory charges against France have periodically re-emerged in the Italian public debate.

Yet, the migrant challenge is also an important political issue in France. It figures prominently on the agenda of the anti-migrant right. Internal constituencies in both countries are pushing for tough anti-migration measures, which leaves very limited space for bilateral or European migration deals.

¹ Alessandro Colombo and Arturo Varvelli, "L'Italia e la crisi libica", in Alessandro Colombo and Ettore Greco, eds, *La politica estera dell'Italia. Edizione 2012*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2012, p. 73-96.

Emmanuel Macron's election in 2017 added new complications in the bilateral relationship. Macron ran on a pro-Europe platform, raising high expectations in the broadly pro-EU Italian centre-left governing coalition led by Paolo Gentiloni. However, one of the first decisions taken by Macron was to block the planned merger between Italy's state-owned ship maker Fincantieri and France's STX Shipyard.²

This move had domestic motivations in France, but Rome saw it as an infringement of a negotiated deal. This sentiment stemmed in part from Italy's acceptance of multiple takeovers of Italian companies by French counterparts, notably in the fashion and agri-food industries.

In a bid to promote constructive dialogue, French ministers paid several visits to Rome over the following months, but failed to make progress on the stalled merger. The negative atmosphere deepened when in the summer of 2017 France organised a conference on Libya at La Celle Saint-Cloud with the participation of the two rival leaders, Fayez al-Sarraj, head of the Libyan Government of National Accord, and Khalifa Haftar, leader of the Libyan Armed Forces loyal to the House of Representatives in the Eastern city of Tobruk.

The Gentiloni government saw this as a further attempt by France to sideline Italy on a dossier with key relevance to the Italian national interest. While the

² Jean-Pierre Darnis, "Bilaterale Francia-Italia: Stx/Fincantieri, torna il sereno", in *AffarInternazionali*, 26 September 2017, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=66388>.

meeting did not produce any tangible progress in the ongoing attempts to bring stability and political unity to Libya, the French summit added a new dose of acrimony to the bilateral relationship.

Yet, the new French presidency became aware that relations with Italy had become a problem and began to back-pedal: in September 2017, during a bilateral summit in Lyon, a renewed and more complex deal was reached between Fincantieri and the French companies STX and Naval Group.³

Moreover, and following Macron's initiative, a plan for a bilateral treaty – a "Quirinale Treaty" after the name of the residence of Italy's President of the Republic – modelled on the successful 1963 Franco-German Élysée treaty – was announced in early 2018 during the French president's visit to Rome.⁴

The move came too late, however, as Italy was entering its political campaign for the 2018 general elections which resulted in the victory of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (*MoVimento 5 Stelle* – M5S) led by Luigi Di Maio and the right-wing League party led by Matteo Salvini. The two winning parties, which formed a coalition government headed by current Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, are very critical of Europe and favour a broadly nationalist agenda.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Emanuele Cuda, "Francia-Italia: destinazione 'Trattato del Quirinale'", in *L'Indro*, 11 January 2018, <https://www.lindro.it/francia-italia-destinazione-trattato-del-quirinale>.

Salvini's League party, which presents itself as the champion of the struggle against migration, has indeed assumed an antagonistic stance towards Macron, harshly criticising his European vision. Macron and several French ministers, in turn, have not spared criticism of Salvini's anti-EU and anti-migration tirades.

Macron has thus become the bogeyman of the Italian governing coalition. As a result, the already widespread distrust towards the French President has deepened in Italy. Some of the French ministers reciprocated, accusing the new Italian leaders of "populist leprosy".⁵

These developments may be the first political volleys in the upcoming campaign for European parliamentary elections scheduled for 26 May. The acrimonious relations between the leaders and governing parties in France and Italy have indeed seeped into the broader bilateral relations between Paris and Rome.

It is worth noting that France's ambassador in Rome, Christian Masset, was twice summoned by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2018. The first happened on 30 March due to an incident in which French customs officers performed checks on a Nigerian for possible possession of drugs in the Bardonecchia train station without an Italian officer present. The second came in June, to protest against Macron's statement about "Italy's cynicism and irresponsibility" on the migration issue

⁵ Nicolas Barotte, "Macron dénonce 'la lépre' populiste en Europe", in *Le Figaro*, 21 June 2018.

following Salvini's refusal to allow the Aquarius vessel carrying migrants rescued in the Mediterranean to dock in Italian ports, unless an agreement was first reached among European countries on the national distribution of these migrants.

Then, in early 2019, bilateral tensions took a further hit. On 21 January France summoned the Italian ambassador in Paris and on 7 February moved to recall its ambassador from Rome.

The action was taken following yet another accusatory statement by Luigi Di Maio, Italy's Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Economic Development, Labour and Social Policies – as well as the formal head of the M5S party –, who accused France of "colonialism" in Africa.⁶ To make matters worse, Di Maio subsequently travelled to France and met a controversial leader of the French "yellow vests" movement, Christophe Chalençon, who had called for a military coup to overthrow Macron.⁷

Tensions have also grown within Italy's government coalition because of divergences between the M5S and the League over a number of domestic and international issues. Each party needs to differentiate itself from its coalition partner ahead of a series of

local elections in Italy and the 26 May European election. In this context, each has been competing, among other things, in attacking the French presidency to gain popular support.

Di Maio, in particular, has intensified his criticism of France and vowed to support the yellow jacket movement. These moves, which triggered the strong French diplomatic reaction, eventually played into the hands of electoral rival and coalition partner Matteo Salvini, Italy's other Deputy Prime Minister, and Interior Minister. The latter was indeed quicker in softening his anti-French rhetoric when the crisis reached its climax with the recalling of the French ambassador, which made him appear more moderate and statesmanlike compared to Di Maio.

While the recent diplomatic scuffle is simply the last development in an ongoing disagreement it may be transformed, if managed properly, into an opportunity for an institutional reset.

Problematic dossiers and mutual misperceptions have piled-up between Italy and France, but no mechanism has been adopted to resolve those issues in a durable fashion. It is worth noting that the annual bilateral meeting between the two countries did not take place in 2018 and the promising initiative of a "Quirinale Treaty", which already had a bilateral committee working on it, disappeared from the radar just as France and Germany signed a renewed bilateral treaty in January this year.

Di Maio's naive "faux pas" into French political territory and the strong

⁶ Francesca Schianchi, "Di Maio accusa la Francia di colonialismo, ambasciatore d'Italia convocato a Parigi", in *La Stampa*, 21 January 2019, <https://www.lastampa.it/2019/01/21/esteri/di-maio-accusa-la-francia-di-colonialismo-ambasciatore-ditalia-convocato-a-parigi-CziWttPfsXVfbfA5QdP0GN/pagina.html>.

⁷ "Gilets jaunes: Christophe Chalençon et ses 'paramilitaires' prêts à 'un coup d'Etat'", in *FranceSoir*, 15 February 2019, <http://www.francesoir.fr/node/200271>.

diplomatic reaction from Paris has however resulted in a more balanced perception of the situation in Italian public opinion. Many have recognised Di Maio's behaviour as a mistake.

The gravity of the French government's diplomatic reaction has also alerted French public opinion to the existence of a problem, which had been festering in Italy for years but was rather unnoticed in France.

Tensions considerably eased following a phone conversation between Macron and the Italian President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella who reportedly reaffirmed the importance of bilateral relations. This led to the return of the French Ambassador to Italy with an invitation for a state visit by Mattarella to France. Di Maio also distanced himself from the more radical and violent wing of the "yellow vests" movement.

With awareness heightened on the French side, and Italians feeling less battered, a window of opportunity may emerge for a more comprehensive and systemic approach to the bilateral relationship and a wide range of dossiers.

The European election looms ahead and it may be difficult to make progress in that direction until the electoral campaign and associated political jousting are overcome. Yet, today there is at least greater awareness about the damaging implications such bilateral disputes have on each country and their many shared interests.

This awareness can hopefully lead to new and deeper forms of

institutional dialogue and cooperation, developments that could in turn revive, after a period of hibernation, the idea of a bilateral treaty reaffirming the deep roots of friendship that exist between the two countries.

20 February 2019

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), two book series (*Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

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

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì (a.dessi@iai.it)

- 19 | 14 Jean-Pierre Darnis, *The Political Rollercoaster of Italian-French Relations*
- 19 | 13 Silvia Ainio and Alessia Vittorangeli, *Enabling Energy: Access to Clean Energy Can Enhance Refugee Economic and Social Empowerment*
- 19 | 12 Carlo Trezza, *Italy's Lukewarm Approach to Arms Control*
- 19 | 11 Vincenzo Camporini, *Goals and Shortcomings of Italy's Peace Operations*
- 19 | 10 Tim Oliver, *Taking Back Control? The UK Parliament and the Brexit Withdrawal Negotiations*
- 19 | 09 Nicola Bilotta, *Venezuela's Crisis: Italy Clashes with the EU Common Approach*
- 19 | 08 Riccardo Alcaro, *Ideology, Not Russia or China, Explains US Pullout from the INF*
- 19 | 07 Riccardo Alcaro, *Crunch Time for Europe to Save the Iran Nuclear Deal*
- 19 | 06 Nathalie Tocci, *Navigating Complexity: The EU's Rationale in the 21st Century*
- 19 | 05 Lorenzo Colantoni, *China's Vision of an Ecological Civilisation: A Struggle for Environmental Leadership in the Era of Climate Change*