

Italy, Atlanticism and the Biden Administration: Greater Convergence to Defuse Ambiguity on China

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STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION

In September 2019, the once anti-establishment Five Star Movement (*Movimento Cinque Stelle* – M5S) agreed to enter a ruling alliance with the Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico* – PD).¹ By establishing this “yellow-red” coalition government with what was considered its political nemesis, the M5S managed to preserve its presence in power and avoid early elections. However, its influence gradually weakened, as attested to by poor performances in local elections.

The M5S’s declining political fortunes and the changing composition of the government have a significant foreign policy dimension, especially if addressed through the lens of Italy–US relations.

¹ In the coalition there are also two smaller parties, the centrist *Italia Viva* and the leftist *Liberi e Uguali*.

The PD is a solidly pro-Atlanticist party in Italy. The M5S, despite its evolution towards greater pragmatism over the years, remains a source of concern, being still perceived as the most pro-China actor within the Italian political landscape.

In the previous coalition government, which saw the M5S partner with the right-wing and anti-migrant League party, foreign policy was posited to be one important area of discontinuity. While little concrete change was implemented during its 14-months in power, certain actions did give a number of Italian allies the impression that Rome’s policy was indeed shifting.²

² Ferdinando Nelli Feroci, “The ‘Yellow-Green’ Government’s Foreign Policy”, in *IAI Papers*, No. 19|10 (April 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10293>.

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The most significant – and, for many traditional allies, alarming – development came when Italy became the first G7 country to endorse China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) signing a controversial Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in March 2019.

US politicians and media did nothing to hide their concern. In Italy, the agreement was never seen as an attempt to shift traditional alliances but rather as a way to open a new channel with a major economic player such as China, in line with Rome's traditionally versatile approach to foreign policy.

The optics were different, however. China quickly began presenting the MoU as a ground-breaking deal, the beginning of a process of Italy's gradual detachment from its traditional alliances. The M5S – and especially the then deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economic Development Luigi Di Maio – were perceived as having been decisive in pushing through the MoU, thus exacerbating concerns that the M5S might indeed promote a shift in Italian foreign policy. As Di Maio was appointed new Foreign Affairs minister in the coalition government with the PD in September 2019, this ambiguity, and some contradictions, inevitably came into the spotlight.

The yellow-red coalition immediately faced an unprecedented number of foreign policy challenges: mounting tensions in Iraq and the broader Gulf area, deteriorating conditions in Libya and then the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The killing of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) major general Qasem Soleimani by a US drone strike in Baghdad on 3 January brought the region on the brink of war. For Italy, which had the most extensive Western troop presence in Iraq after that of the US, this development triggered a heated domestic debate.

Criticism from Lucia Annunziata, the former editor-in-chief of *Huffington Post Italia*, and a journalist with in-depth knowledge of the US, was particularly revealing. In highlighting how US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had phoned officials worldwide after the Soleimani killing, but not Italy, she called for the resignation of foreign minister Di Maio.³

The M5S responded harshly, stressing that Pompeo had only called the P5+1 countries (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and Germany) that had negotiated the Iran nuclear deal, which explained Rome's absence.⁴ However, Pompeo later also reached out to other countries: Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Qatar and India all received calls, but phone lines in Italy again remained silent.

The first, official contact between the two administrations over Iraq only happened on 7 January, when then US Secretary of Defence, Mark T. Esper, called his Italian homolog, Lorenzo

³ Lucia Annunziata, "Cercasi ministro degli Esteri a tempo pieno", in *Huffington Post*, 4 January 2020, https://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/it_5e10d21be4b0843d36131b7f.

⁴ MoVimento 5 Stelle, "Cercasi giornalista", in *Il Blog delle Stelle*, 5 January 2020, <https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/?p=62837>.

Guerini, from the PD.⁵ The dominant perception in Washington was that Esper's outreach to a minister from the PD conveyed a message that the US still lacked full trust in the M5S. A political "spite", someone caustically remarked in DC during those days.

The choice of Guerini as the first interlocutor was not casual. The US establishment rightly assumes the PD to be a reliable Atlanticist party within the Italian political landscape.

The PD's positions under the present coalition government did indeed live up to US expectations: from the push on tightening rules on 5G, driven by the PD-run defence ministry⁶ in contraposition to M5S views;⁷ to the commitment to international missions and F-35 acquisitions⁸ as well as vocal criticism of China's handling of the global pandemic.⁹

⁵ Pietro Salvatori, "Primo contatto con gli americani. Esper ringrazia Guerini", in *Huffington Post*, 7 January 2020, https://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/it_5e14c962c5b687c7eb5c85c3.

⁶ "La Cina e la tecnologia 5G Il ministro della Difesa Guerini mette in guardia dai rischi per la sicurezza del Paese", in *Il Messaggero*, 23 December 2019, https://www.ilmessaggero.it/politica/la_sicurezza_nazionale_e_la_banda_larga-4944770.html.

⁷ "5G, Patuanelli: Huawei offre soluzioni e prezzi migliori. Esplose la polemica", in *RaiNews*, 22 December 2019, <http://www.rainews.it/dl/rainews/articoli/amp/ContentItem-05e16ac6-4baf-4940-a705-d4b4d7b2ea50.html>.

⁸ Alessandro Marrone, "Difesa: le scelte del ministro Guerini, quando il gioco si fa duro", in *AffarInternazionali*, 2 November 2019, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=76267>.

⁹ Valerio Valentini, "La Cina? L'Italia non si opporrà a un'indagine sull'origine del virus". Parla il ministro Amendola", in *Il Foglio*, 7 May 2020, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2020/05/07/news/316991>.

While it is undeniable that the M5S and its foreign policy have drastically evolved, in Washington many still perceived its approach as being characterized by a blanket of ambiguity with incoherent foreign policy statements, dependent more on personal views and ideas than on a structured, consistent and predictable approach. The BRI MoU represented, and still represents, a significant burden in this sense.

Moreover, during the past year, a number of Di Maio's positions raised eyebrows abroad: for instance the initial no-interference approach over Hong Kong,¹⁰ or stressing how, as the COVID-19 crisis was raging, Italy's decision to sign onto China's BRI choice had paid off.¹¹

The M5S's evolution, and the shifting stances and ideas held by the Italian foreign minister did not go unnoticed in Washington.¹² Yet, the perception is that this evolution is more personal than representative of the movement. US policymakers still perceive the M5S's Atlanticist commitment as questionable. The party's recent cacophony over Hong Kong and China, the fact that M5S deputies abstained

¹⁰ "Di Maio: Non interferiamo su Hong Kong", in *Ansa*, 5 November 2019, https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/topnews/2019/11/05/di-maio-non-interferiamo-su-hong-kong_4019d8ee-ebf1-4d3b-96dc-c19a16e7155f.html.

¹¹ Luigi Di Maio ospite a TG2 Post Rai 2, 24 March 2020, <https://youtu.be/0W7JRf6qaog>.

¹² Francesco Bechis and Valeria Covato, "From Coronavirus to Mediterranean Tensions, Italy Has Stepped up Its Diplomatic Game during Dramatic Year, Foreign Minister Says", in *New Atlanticist*, 10 September 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=295367>.

from a European Parliament resolution stigmatising the Russian government for its alleged involvement in the poisoning of dissident Alexei Navalny and the many shifting positions on other issues have not helped to counter this perception.

The positions of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, the other main government figure from the M5S, also did little to alleviate these broader concerns. Conte's pro-Atlanticist views have become more pronounced as of late. However, he has never been perceived to be fully representative of the M5S, even more so since his role has become more independent in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis.

In addition, Conte's evolution was also seen more as the result of his direct relationship with the outgoing US president, whose open Twitter endorsement reinforced Conte at the time of the governmental crisis in August 2019.¹³ Unsurprisingly, Italian media made a fuss about the fact that Conte was the last G7 leader to congratulate Joe Biden for his presidential win in November.¹⁴

Some observers openly noticed that the Biden staff "did not forget the endorsement" Conte received from

Trump.¹⁵ However, in Washington, the delayed contact was not seen as a major issue, and the relationship with the outgoing administration is not considered as something that can damage, at a strategic level, Italy's relations with the new administration. Yet, there will be some adjustments.

At a more immediate level, the PD will be even more central than it has been so far in shaping relations with the US, not only because of common views and a shared political culture, but also due to the intensity of the personal ties between it and US Democrats.

At the same time, however, even if toned down, the anti-establishment ethos of M5S that re-emerges every now and then is still seen as antithetical to the more traditionalist approach to foreign policy the incoming US administration is likely to adopt. This can represent an element of further friction and mistrust that needs to be addressed to avoid creating problems in the relationship moving forward.

As for the M5S, the perception in the US is that Di Maio and Conte are not actually representative of the movement. Their growing Atlanticist attitude is seen more as the outcome of personal choices rather than the result of a structured M5S shift. This convergence has defused fears of ambiguity in the short-term, but not the concerns regarding the broader

¹³ Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "Starting to look good for the highly respected Prime Minister of the Italian Republic, Giuseppe Conte. [...]", in *Twitter*, 27 August 2019, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1166358721875894272>

¹⁴ Valerio Valentini, "Conte e Biden, la lunga fatica di Giuseppe per parlare con Joe", in *Il Foglio*, 13 November 2020, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2020/11/13/news/1431146>.

¹⁵ Claudio Tito, "Il dopo Trump è una grana per Conte: con gli Usa di Biden parte in salita", in *La Repubblica*, 13 November 2020, https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/generale/2020/11/13/news/il_dopo_trump_e_una_grana_per_conte_con_gli_usa_di_biden_parte_in_salita-274297145.

M5S positions concerning China and other dossiers.

How Rome will handle its relations with Beijing will remain central in the US perception, even under a Democratic administration. The US will measure Italy's commitment to the alliance against the decisions that Rome – and its major political actors – will take vis-à-vis China.

For the US establishment, the MoU with China came as a shock. While its impact in deepening political and economic ties with Beijing has been limited so far, the issue remains a concern.

The US reaction to the BRI MoU and the assertive role that China played in Italy during the pandemic are rumblings of what Italy and its policymakers might expect in the future. Since the Biden administration is likely to be equally tough or even tougher than Trump on China, this issue will remain the crucial theme in shaping the bilateral Italy-US relationship under the new Biden administration as well.

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