

Re-Discovering Italy's Mediterranean Vocation

by Alessandro Berti



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E S S A Y P R I Z E

Twenty-five years since the launch of the Barcelona Process,¹ the Mediterranean still lacks a credible structure of intergovernmental relations or a system of permanent dialogue. EU policies failed to develop

more genuine forms of cooperation and the Mediterranean is today more fragmented politically than in the 1990s.

As noted by EU High Representative Josep Borrell in February 2021, "a strengthened Mediterranean partnership remains a strategic imperative for the European Union".² For Italy, the development of stronger intra-Mediterranean cooperation is of crucial importance. Considering Italy's historical experience and

¹ The Barcelona Process was launched in 1995 by the members of EU and 12 countries of MENA, with the aim to strengthen relations between Europe and Southern Mediterranean countries. The main goals can be summarised in three dimensions: establishing a common area of peace, security and stability; creating an area of shared prosperity, with the medium-term objective of establishing a free trade area; promoting understanding between cultures and exchanges between civil societies while respecting mutual differences. See, *Barcelona Declaration* adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference, 27-28 November 1995, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/mad4_en.htm.

² European Commission, *Southern Neighbourhood: EU Proposes New Agenda for the Mediterranean*, 9 February 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_426.

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extensive exposure in the enlarged Mediterranean, Italy should seek to promote new forms of outreach in terms of Euro-Mediterranean relations, leveraging its positioning within the European Union to play a leading role in the development of more genuine EU cooperative frameworks with Mediterranean Basin countries.

Re-discovering the Mediterranean

Despite its history and geographical location, Italy at times seems to perceive itself as “sea-less”, positioning its strategic barycentre on the European continent. In other words, Italy has turned its back on the sea to look north.³

Italy's geopolitical orientation has for many decades now been centred on Europe, a vocation that originates from Italy's northern regions – the central economic motor of the country – as Rome's key role in promoting European integration. No doubt positive for Italian interests, this has also translated into a weakening of Italy's maritime dimension, which has gradually been overshadowed by Italy's Atlanticist and European orientations. In this, the country has rather proudly embraced a “mitteleuropean” identity,⁴ distancing itself from the Mediterranean and aspiring to be part of the allegedly superior economic and cultural models of Central Europe.

³ Dario Fabbri, “Italia, penisola senza mare”, in *Limes*, No. 10/2020, p. 47-56.

⁴ Lucio Caracciolo, “Prefazione”, in Virgilio Ilari (ed.), *Italy on the Rimland. Storia militare di una Penisola eurasiatica. Vol. I: Intermarium*, Roma, Nadir Media, 2019, p. 11-14.

This mindset derives from a wide repertoire of narratives that, over the years, have depicted the Mediterranean as divided into two complementary yet distinct worlds.⁵ The European Union and its member states describe themselves as the northern, liberal, democratic and “modern” side of the basin, as compared to the states and societies of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), generally regarded as the southern “others”.⁶

The Mediterranean, therefore, has become something of a geo-symbolic frontier that preserves the “orderland” from the alleged backwardness of the “chaosland”,⁷ thus reproducing the post-colonial north-south binomial.⁸ Indeed, geography is an expression of power that hides itself behind scientific neutrality; cartographic representations are often political tools, aimed at tracing power hierarchies and

⁵ See for instance, Alessandro Berti, “The Mediterranean Narration between Past Legacies and Future Alternatives”, in Alessandro Colombo (ed.), *Geopolitiche del Mediterraneo. Schiavitù contemporanee, giustizia, riconoscimento*, Palermo, Palermo University Press, 2021, p. 15-30; Deborah Paci, Paolo Perri and Francesca Zantedeschi, (eds), *Paesaggi mediterranei. Storie, rappresentazioni, narrazioni*, Roma, Aracne, 2018.

⁶ Salvatore Bono, “Il Mediterraneo della storia”, in *Mediterranea - Ricerche storiche*, Vol. 11, No. 31 (August 2014), p. 243-258, <https://www.storiamediterranea.it/wp-content/uploads/mediterranea/p4125/Salvatore%20Bono.pdf>; Franco Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano*, New ed., Roma/Bari, Laterza, 2005.

⁷ “Caoslandia versus Ordolandia”, in *Limes*, No. 2/2020, <https://www.limesonline.com/carta-ordolandia-caoslandia-usa-russia-cina-mediterraneo-intermarium/117160>.

⁸ Francesca Saffioti, “Il ‘Sud’ come frontiera geosimbolica”, in *California Italian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.5070/C311008845>.

underlining a value-driven distinction.⁹

Such a narrative lead to a conceptualisation of the Mediterranean as a stiff cultural barrier, increasingly regarded as an arena of threats and differences. This in turn constrains understandings of our shared history and prevents critical acknowledgements of interdependencies and the MENA's and Mediterranean's crucial importance for Italian and European security and prosperity.

A successful Italian foreign policy in the Mediterranean should critically re-assess this paradigm, abandoning Eurocentric approaches or north-south forms of subordination. Since spaces are mere constructs, the Mediterranean is what we decide it to be; in this sense, it is politically determined.¹⁰ It is necessary to accept Mediterranean complexity, without subduing it under a homogeneous ideology, celebrating its multi-faceted nature while giving up on the erroneous idea that everything begins in Europe.¹¹

In this regard, Italy should actively engage with the Mediterranean,

⁹ Iain Chambers and Marta Cariello, *La questione mediterranea*, Milano, Mondadori, 2019.

¹⁰ Claudio Minca, "Mediterranea", in Claudio Minca (ed.), *Orizzonte mediterraneo*, Padova, CEDAM, 2004, p. 1-41; see also, Maricío Janué i Miret and Marcela Lucci, "Culturas mediterráneas y usos políticos de las representaciones nacionales en el siglo XX", in *RiMe. Rivista dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Europa Mediterranea*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (December 2020), p. 5-13, <https://rime.cnr.it/index.php/rime/article/view/483>.

¹¹ Iain Chambers and Marta Cariello, *La questione mediterranea*, cit.

presenting itself as an equal partner and labouring within Europe and the transatlantic alliance to improve cooperative frameworks to promote more genuine forms of engagement and understanding among Mediterranean states.

Look south

Without breaking with Italy's traditional Atlanticist and pro-European posture, Italy should work within the EU to promote new approaches towards Europe's so-called southern neighbourhood. It is today not conceivable for any country to promote a fully independent foreign policy towards the MENA or other regions, but, within Europe, Italy can indeed work to maximize its leverage and interests, connecting these within a broader European framework.¹²

Despite the US's progressive disengagement from the MENA, Washington's military and political presence remains strong in this area. As a result, the Mediterranean is inevitably subject to NATO and Atlanticist rationales, not least since European states have for decades been used to outsourcing key security tasks in their neighbourhood to Washington.

In this regard, changing international circumstance and the US's increased focus on Asia, will imply new challenges for Italy and Europe in the Mediterranean, but also possible

¹² Alessandro Isoni, "Da Barcellona a Marsiglia. Le politiche dell'Unione europea nel Mediterraneo", in *Rivista di studi politici internazionali*, Vol. 79, No. 2 (April-June 2012), p. 223-241.

opportunities to develop new European modalities of interaction. Italian foreign policy is traditionally structured around three pillars: Atlanticism, European integration and the Mediterranean. The first two pillars have historically received more emphasis than the third, also due to their representation as Italy's primary alliance frameworks with the US, NATO and Europe. Today, Italy could exploit the opportunity of a retrenching US and an increased European emphasis on the southern neighbourhood, to re-discover its Mediterranean vocation, labouring to emerge as a lead actor in promoting new and more autonomous European approaches towards the MENA.

Yet, geopolitical realities have frustrated efforts by Mediterranean Basin countries to develop genuine cooperative frameworks in an effective intergovernmental platform. The Barcelona Process and its subsequent 2008 reiteration as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) – two EU attempts to create a system of stable and long-lasting relations among Mediterranean Basin states – have suffered from a lack of ownership by southern Mediterranean states and the EU's predominant role in agenda-setting.¹³

North-south interactions within the Barcelona Process and the UfM have been characterised by profound asymmetry as the partnership implicitly

¹³ See for instance, Maria Eleonora Guasconi, "La politica mediterranea dell'Unione Europea: l'occasione perduta del partenariato euro-mediterraneo", in Sante Cruciani and Maurizio Ridolfi (eds), *L'Unione Europea e il Mediterraneo. Relazioni internazionali, crisi politiche e regionali (1947-2016)*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2017, p. 199-212.

entails the need of southern countries to adopt decisions and objectives set by the EU. Indeed, the 2015 review of Europe's neighbourhood policy, clearly admitted that the "current practice and policy has been regarded by other partners as too prescriptive, and as not sufficiently reflecting their respective aspirations".¹⁴

Within EU institutions, Italy should act to improve the Union's strategic focus and engagements in the Mediterranean. In a 2007 report, the Italian foreign ministry stated that Italy should turn its overexposure to tensions arising from the Mediterranean into a claim of its strategic relevance in the EU geopolitical architecture.¹⁵ Italy – and Europe more broadly – is exposed to significant flows of instability and challenges from the Mediterranean, but these could also be transformed into opportunities if more genuine cooperation is developed.

For this, Italy should re-discover itself as a peninsula historically, culturally, politically and strategically embedded in the Mediterranean and utilise this knowledge and exposure to improve EU-wide policies towards the area.

¹⁴ European Commission and European External Action Service, *Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy*, JOIN/2015/50, 18 November 2015, p. 2-3, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:52015JC0050>.

¹⁵ Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Rapporto 2020. Le scelte di politica estera*, Rome, 2007, http://web.archive.org/web/20170131153200/https://www.esteri.it/mae/doc/rapporto2020_sceltepoliticaestera_090408.pdf.

A space for dialogue

The Mediterranean Sea is an unavoidable point of reference for those who live on its shores, a shared space that defines the possibilities and limits of action. Unlike the Atlantic and the Pacific which are "seas of distance", the Mediterranean is the sea of closeness.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the Mediterranean is today struggling with multiple overlapping fractures and mushrooming socio-economic grievances.

The history of the Mediterranean, marked by clashes and encounters, teaches us that at a time when there is no hegemonic force, the only way to achieve stability and security is through dialogue and mutual respect. For instance, since 2015, the Italian foreign ministry has been hosting the "Mediterranean Dialogues", an annual initiative aimed at rethinking traditional approaches to the area, promoting new perspectives and suggesting ideas for a new positive agenda.¹⁷ Previous experiences taught us that any Mediterranean integration project must guarantee shared ownership and responsibility. Today's challenge is to build a platform of multilateral dialogue based on a win-win logic.

The complexity of the Mediterranean requires shared solutions and the inclusion of all players at every stage of the cooperative process. Moreover, Italy must remember that despite the dangers, conflicts and divisions, the

¹⁶ Predrag Matvejević, *Mediterraneo. Un nuovo breviario*, 2nd ed., Milano, Garzanti, 1996.

¹⁷ See the initiative website: *Rome Med - Mediterranean Dialogues*, <https://med.ispionline.it/about>.

Mediterranean is above all an economic space with multiple opportunities for development and growth: 30 per cent of world trade, 20 per cent of maritime traffic and one third of world tourism pass through the Mediterranean.¹⁸

An effective Mediterranean policy should be built on genuine engagement, prioritising common goods beyond national and short-term self-interest. A new partnership should shed the top-down Eurocentric approaches of previous EU-led initiatives and move to respect the aspirations and independence of all actors, with no "hegemonic subjectivity" dictating goals and strategies.

The Mediterranean is in this sense a "pluriverse", a pluralist space that cannot be reduced to a single voice. European countries should embrace the polymorphous nature of this space as it generates invaluable opportunities and mutual benefits.¹⁹ In this respect, the 5+5 Dialogue format that predated the Barcelona Process and was first launched in Rome in 1990, does represent an example of more equal dialogue, where five southern Mediterranean countries and five of southern European countries promote cooperation in various fields.²⁰

¹⁸ ISPI, *The Italian Strategy in the Mediterranean. Stabilising the Crises and Building a Positive Agenda for the Region*, November 2017, p. 4, <https://t.co/bxChDu7Gs3>.

¹⁹ Michela Luzi, "Mediterraneo, oltre le paure per una nuova agorà", in *RiMe. Rivista dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Europa Mediterranea*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (June 2019), p. 195-212 at p. 202, <https://doi.org/10.7410/1384>.

²⁰ The 5+5 Dialogue is an informal sub-regional forum for dialogue between ten Western Mediterranean countries, promoting

More recently, and in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the EU has unveiled a New Agenda for the Mediterranean.²¹ This promises investments and cooperation to tackle the health crisis and enhance state and societal resilience among Mediterranean Basin countries, again reiterating how stability and cooperation with the southern Mediterranean remains a strategic imperative for the Union. The Agenda promises the rollout of more efficient, swift and tailor-made cooperative frameworks with individual countries, taking into account the region's diversity, interests and needs. While it is too early to make assessments, it appears that the EU has integrated some past lessons, promoting more mutually beneficial partnerships based on co-ownership among the sides and greater appreciation of diversity.

The European Green Deal can also become an opportunity to revive cooperation after the pandemic through transparent mechanisms of dialogue, proposing an investment plan that is adapted to the diverse needs of partners while promoting energy transitions and sustainability. For this, the EU should reassure partners in the south and dispel the notion that

cooperation in technology and higher education, migration, parliamentary cooperation and other domains. Participation includes: Spain, France, Italy, Malta and Portugal plus Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia. See, The 5+5 Dialogue website: <http://www.fiveplusfive.rihe.org>; and the MedThink 5+5 website: <https://medthink5plus5.org/en/the-dialogue-55>.

²¹ European Commission, *Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood. A New Agenda for the Mediterranean*, JOIN/2021/2, 9 February 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021JC0002>.

Europe only seeks to secure its energy and economic interests or that Europe – the greater historical polluter of the Mediterranean – wants to impose the green transition on MENA states independently from its possible social costs and risks.²²

In this regard, Italy and Europe should develop plans capable of maximising benefits while sharing the burdens of the impending energy transition. Sharing the costs of climate change and the green transition will be indispensable to ensure both environmental and social sustainability among Mediterranean Basin countries.²³ Such approaches, if genuinely pursued and supported by political and economic will, would go some way towards alleviating some of the grievances among southern Mediterranean states and potentially help to re-launch Euro-Mediterranean relations on a more stable, cooperative and mutually beneficial plain.

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²² Gonzalo Escribano and Lara Lázaro, "Balancing Geopolitics with Green Deal Recovery: In Search of a Comprehensive Euro-Mediterranean Energy Script", in *Analyses of the Elcano Royal Institute (ARI)*, No. 95/2020 (15 July 2020), http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/ari95-2020-escribano-lazaro-balancing-geopolitics-with-green-deal-recovery.

²³ Gonzalo Escribano, "La energía como vector de cooperación y desarrollo sostenible en el Mediterráneo", in *Revista de Occidente*, No. 461 (October 2019), p. 23-33.

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