

The Italian Job: Navigating between the UK, the EU and Trump

by Luca Cinciripini

Amid the transatlantic rift in the first months of the second Trump administration, Italy and the United Kingdom are seeking to position themselves as *'transatlantic bridges'*, drawing either on long-standing alliances or ideological affinities, to keep channels of dialogue open on shared challenges. However, this balancing act carries significant risks, particularly for Italy. The UK, no longer bound by European Union membership, enjoys greater autonomy in its dealings with the United States, although it risks undermining efforts to reset its relationship with the EU. Rome's more ambiguous positioning between Washington and Brussels, by contrast, could weaken the EU's unity at the negotiating table, eroding the coherence of its external action and contributing to internal fragmentation. Ultimately, bilateral initiatives by London and Rome may well serve to reinforce transatlantic cohesion – or to deepen its divisions and weaken the foundations of the EU.

UK-Italy relations: Strengthening cooperation in a post-Brexit era

In recent years, UK-Italy relations have been marked by strong cooperation, both on a bilateral level and within the numerous multilateral forums in which the two countries participate, first and foremost the United Nations and NATO. Until 2024, this partnership was further strengthened by the ideological proximity between Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and the then-Conservative UK Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak. This culminated in the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in April 2023, which laid the groundwork for further bilateral cooperation in specific sectors, such as global security, economic growth, climate change mitigation and cultural exchanges, alongside the strengthening of financial ties between their respective private sectors.¹

¹ UK and Italy, *Memorandum of Understanding between the UK and Italy*, 27 April 2023, <https://>

Luca Cinciripini is a Researcher in the "EU, politics and institutions" programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

The UK general election in 2024 resulted in a decisive victory for the Labour Party led by Keir Starmer, politically and ideologically distant from the Italian government's stances, casting doubt on the continuation of bilateral cooperation. Surprisingly, the bilateral summit in Rome in September 2024 demonstrated a strong alignment between the two governments on shared key policy areas and common tools to address pressing international challenges.² The greatest convergence has emerged on irregular migration, with Starmer reportedly expressing interest in Italy's Albania migration deal.³

Italy and the UK already enjoy well-established cooperation on security and defence issues and Italy regards the UK as a cornerstone of European security and is eager to align the UK with the EU defence ecosystem, especially at a time when Europe's security architecture is being recalibrated in light of transatlantic uncertainty.

The Trump factor on European security

After the inauguration of the second Trump presidency, Italy and the UK have worked to keep the US engaged in European security affairs, positioning themselves as '*transatlantic bridges*'

www.gov.uk/government/publications/memorandum-of-understanding-between-the-uk-and-italy.

² UK and Italy, *Joint Statement between UK and Italy*, 16 September 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-between-uk-and-italy-16-september-2024>.

³ Aletha Adu, "Giorgia Meloni: Starmer Showed Great Interest in Our Albania Migration Deal", in *The Guardian*, 17 September 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xvfh74>.

capable of narrowing the divide between the two shores of the Atlantic.

Rome has leveraged the ideological proximity between Meloni and the Trump Administration, underpinned by a shared vision on several key political issues. Meloni's expressed support for Vice President Vance's positions on Europe is a striking example of this alignment.⁴ The UK, by contrast, is relying on its historic '*special relationship*' with Washington, seeking to capitalise on deep-rooted cultural and historical ties, while Starmer can use Brexit as an additional asset to strengthen his cooperation with the White House.

Both Starmer and Meloni have consistently reaffirmed their unwillingness to choose between the US and Europe, considering a widening rift across the Atlantic a strategic mistake. Each has pursued a delicate balancing approach to preserve the strength and stability of the transatlantic relationship.⁵

The contradictory and at times destabilising stance adopted by Donald Trump on issues such as the future of Europe's security architecture and the US commitment to Ukraine has further incentivised bilateral cooperation between the UK and Italy in these areas.

⁴ Roula Kalaf et al., "Italy's Giorgia Meloni Rejects 'Childish' Choice between Trump and Europe", in *Financial Times*, 28 March 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/96d02345-1079-47d0-b208-1e80bcedf684>.

⁵ Luigi Scazzieri, in Ben Coxon (ed.), "How Should Britain Step up to Enhance European Security?", in *Britain's World*, 21 March 2025, <https://www.britainsworld.org.uk/p/the-big-ask-12-2025>.

From Rome's perspective, the UK represents both a key partner and a cornerstone of European security, with the potential to contribute to a more robust European security posture. Thus, Italy actively supports efforts to reconnect London with the EU's defence ecosystem. This may include aligning the UK with initiatives such as PESCO and the European Defence Fund to enhance interoperability while contributing to a more coherent European pillar within NATO. Strengthening ties with London is seen as essential not only to safeguard the transatlantic bond but also to prevent unilateral initiatives within the EU defence sphere and to counterbalance France's dominant role. For the UK as well, enhancing its role as a key European security actor is considered a vital step in the broader process of resetting relations with Brussels, particularly as political obstacles persist in areas such as trade and youth mobility.

At the operational level, Italy and the UK maintain a long-standing and multifaceted cooperation in defence, grounded in shared strategic interests and deepening industrial partnerships. A notable example is their trilateral collaboration with Japan on the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), aimed at developing a sixth-generation fighter aircraft and advancing technological interoperability among like-minded democracies.

However, differences have emerged regarding the operational response to the war in Ukraine. Prime Minister Keir Starmer has openly supported the creation of a *'coalition of the willing'*

to enforce a potential ceasefire, also considering military deployments on the ground. Italy, while firmly committed to Ukraine through diplomatic and material support, has drawn a more cautious line. Giorgia Meloni has categorically ruled out any Italian troop deployment without a UN Security Council mandate or direct US involvement, reiterating the importance of maintaining balance and unity among Western allies.

Strategic gamble or miscalculation?

The strategy pursued thus far by Italy and the UK to reduce tensions between the two sides of the Atlantic and to renew cooperation between the US and Europe on shared challenges represents, on one hand, a valuable attempt to safeguard the international order and global cooperation. Yet, while understandable, the cautious approach adopted by both countries, and their renewed strategic alignment in reinforcing European security at a time of transatlantic uncertainty – is not without risks.

First, an effective response to the more assertive posture of the Trump Administration cannot bypass a coordinated and unified approach from Brussels. Disjointed responses by individual European countries or EU member states would risk playing into the White House's apparent strategy of weakening Brussels, undermining the EU's coherence and diminishing its negotiating power on the global stage. Even if the UK no longer belongs to the EU, its strategic interests remain firmly anchored in the European continent and point towards an effective reset of

its relationship with Brussels. From this perspective, the current equilibrium pursued by both countries may prove fragile or unsustainable over time. While diplomatically useful in the short term, it could become increasingly vulnerable to deliberate efforts to weaken European unity, exploiting these channels to drive wedges within the EU.

Second, this strategic dimension is particularly relevant for Italy, whose actions are more constrained by its commitments as an EU member. If Rome should pursue a foreign policy overly reliant on personal relations between leaders, it could result in premature or unilateral initiatives that not only weaken the EU's collective voice but also risk politically isolating Italy within the Union. More broadly, London operates outside the EU's institutional framework, and, as a result, Italy and the UK, despite shared values and overlapping interests, do not always act in concert or with aligned constraints. Italy must continuously calibrate its positions within a complex web of EU dynamics, limiting its ability to fully synchronise with UK initiatives that may be incompatible with broader EU interests.

Indeed, the decision by Italy and the UK to act as mediators between the two sides of the Atlantic may prove to be a risky gamble. Rather than contributing to the reconstruction of a cohesive transatlantic community, it could inadvertently deepen internal divisions within Europe. In contrast, the Trump Administration's aggressive policies appear to have a unifying effect on European public opinion,

which is increasingly sceptical of the US.⁶ This dynamic should serve as a strategic prompt for both Italy – as an EU member – and the UK – which has a clear interest in rebuilding its relationship with Brussels – to align more closely with European priorities and act in synergy with EU objectives.

The differing institutional frameworks of Italy and the UK, coupled with the unpredictability of Washington's actions, make it imperative to prioritise European strategies over bilateral initiatives. Deepening dialogue with key European partners – primarily Germany and France – on measures to support Kyiv, even in the event of a ceasefire, is essential. In this regard, Italy's push to integrate the UK more closely into the restructuring of Europe's security and defence governance appears both timely and necessary.

As part of the broader reset in EU–UK relations, the upcoming official summit on 19 May⁷ – bringing together leaders from both sides – will be a key moment. In light of recent international turbulence, pressure has grown for a comprehensive agreement, while two priorities are currently under discussion. First, a potential security and defence pact to formalise the largely informal cooperation developed so far, particularly on

⁶ Nathalie Tocci, "The Far Right Has Seemed Unstoppable in Europe. Here's How Trump Tariffs Could Change That", in *The Guardian*, 4 April 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/x2vkhq>.

⁷ Jon Stone, "EU Leaders to Travel to UK for Brexit Reset Summit in May", in *PoliticoEU*, 4 February 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=6095598>.

Ukraine. Particular attention should be paid to any provisions enabling the UK to participate in joint military procurement with EU member states, as well as access to new defence funding instruments being discussed in Brussels. More complex, however, is the second track of negotiations, which involves issues such as mobility schemes, fishing rights and phytosanitary regulations. Against this backdrop, for Rome, while bilateral cooperation with London should continue to be encouraged, it must be framed clearly within an overarching commitment to EU cohesion and strategic autonomy.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Phone +39 066976831

www.iai.it

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