

# The “Yellow-Green” Government’s Foreign Policy

by Ferdinando Nelli Feroci

## ABSTRACT

Italy’s government’s contract makes limited, vague and generic mention of foreign policy, of European policy and of the country’s posture in the international arena. What’s more, over these past ten months, foreign policy has been the most conspicuous victim of the permanent competition between the ruling coalition partners, the League and 5-Star Movement. Italian foreign policy has been characterised by an evident discrepancy between the rhetoric and narrative of the two parties (which have underlined the need for greater discontinuity with past governments on the subject of Italy’s foreign policy) and the actual conduct of the government, which, despite uncertainties, ambiguities and contradictions, has thus far adopted a relatively less disruptive approach. Italy has nevertheless paid a high price in terms of isolation and marginality both in Europe and the international stage.

*Italy’s foreign policy | Political parties | Italy’s European policy | USA | Russia | China*

**keywords**

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by Ferdinando Nelli Feroci\*

## 1. Origins of the government “of change” and the government’s contract

The current Italian government is the direct consequence of the political elections of 4 March 2018. Following those elections, the only technically feasible, although politically improbable, way to form a government was through an alliance between the 5-Star Movement (the election’s real winner) and the League (emerging from the vote as the strongest of the centre-right parties).

It was a somewhat “unnatural” coalition of two political forces with divergent political platforms, a highly diverse electorate and radically different territorial constituencies. This said, the League and 5-Star Movement did display a few symptomatic elements of convergence, including a proud declaration of the populist nature of their electoral platform and a broad-based hostility toward the European Union as more a tangle of limitations to sovereignty than an opportunity.

This blend of pre-electoral programmes that, despite their few common features, were substantially different – most notably on such issues as taxes, infrastructure and redistribution policies – led to a complex negotiation. Eventually the League and the 5-Star Movement struck a government “contract” that attempted to forge a synthesis of apparently irreconcilable positions.

### 1.1 The government’s contract and foreign policy

Italy’s foreign policy and international posture are nearly non-existent in the contract, with the exclusion of a few vague and generic mentions.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> M5S and League, *Contract for the Government of Change*, 18 May 2018, <https://m5s.international/contract-government-change#foreign>.

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· Revised English version of “La politica estera del Governo giallo-verde”, published in March 2019.

Loyalty to NATO is confirmed, but without evoking the issues of defence expenditures and the GDP quota to be earmarked for them. The United States is cited incidentally and solely as a nod to its status as a privileged ally. More space is given to Russia, which is qualified as an important economic and trade partner and an indispensable interlocutor in the management of regional crises; the contract also evokes the government’s commitment to revoking EU sanctions against Russia. China is not even mentioned. Finally, the few lines dedicated to the Mediterranean merely signal Italy’s interest in regional stability.

### *1.2 The governing contract and relations with the EU*

The section on the EU is a bit broader but not for this reason less vague and confused. The following elements are included (in this order): a generic acknowledgement of the need to foster economic and social progress in an EU single market characterised by greater economic and social cohesion; a not better specified reform of the statute of the European Central Bank (ECB); a stronger European “identity” on the international stage; the establishment of an authentic European citizenship; the idea of increased cooperation in the sectors of justice and internal affairs; a vague reference to strengthening the powers of the European Parliament; the reaffirmation of the principle of subsidiarity and better distribution of competences among Member States and the EU; and reference (devoid of any detail) to the need to reform the rules and instruments of economic governance.

## 2. Not one, but four foreign policies

In these ten months of “yellow-green” governing (with “yellow” being the colour of 5-Star and “green” that of the League), foreign policy has been the most noticeable victim of the ambiguity on which the “contract” is founded, and of the permanent competition between the League and the 5-Star Movement. In fact, we should talk about at least four foreign policies distinct from and often in contradiction with each other:

- That of League leader’s, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini, characterised by incessant antagonism toward the EU, substantial sympathies for Russia, a near obsession with controlling migrant flows, cracking down on irregular immigration and closing external borders, and an explicit and declared affinity for the governments of the Visegrad group (Poland and Hungary in particular).<sup>2</sup>
- That of 5-Star Movement’s leader, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Economic Development Luigi Di Maio, less predictable and linear but equally intent on the need to identify targets for use in a sort of permanent electoral campaign,

<sup>2</sup> The other Visegrad countries are Czechia and Slovakia.

along with daily disputes with EU institutions, criticism of and controversy with France, reticence regarding Italian foreign military missions (witnessed by the extemporaneous announcement of the withdrawal of Italian troops from Afghanistan) and, finally, thinly-veiled Third World sympathies, as seen in the case of Italy’s refusal to recognise opposition leader Juan Guaidò as the legitimate president of Venezuela in place of Nicolas Maduro.

- Then there is the foreign policy of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte – and, on some points, of Ministers of the Economy and Foreign Affairs Giovanni Tria and Enzo Moavero Milanesi – who is often engaged in acrobatic manoeuvres aimed at redressing the gaffes and political/electoral undertakings of the government’s two stakeholders, and ensuring a minimum of continuity to the country’s international posture without, however, openly contradicting the two majority leaders. Which is what happened, for example, in the case of the thorny negotiations over the budget bill, in forging a position on the crisis in Venezuela, in tense relations with France and in the controversy over the EU-funded TAV high speed train project.
- Then, finally, is the foreign policy of President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella who, in his distinctive sober and reserved style, and rigorously within the limitations of the Constitution, has more than once employed that “moral suasion” required from time to time to ensure predictability and continuity to the country’s foreign policy.

### 3. Antagonism toward the EU

That said, and beyond the rather useless contents of the government’s contract, the yellow-green executive’s distinctive feature has been, from the very beginning, a biased and broad-based hostility toward the EU. In the League and 5-Star Movement leaders’ daily narrative, the Union is described as a supranational institution lacking in democratic legitimacy and governed by non-elected bureaucrats. It is also presented as a jumble of rules and institutions whose main task is to limit national sovereignty, put the country in a straitjacket if not, indeed, become the instrument by which to promote the hegemony of Germany or France over the rest of Europe.

Before the 2018 elections, there was no lack of statements by representatives of the two parties invoking the need to leave the Eurozone or at least to hold a referendum on membership in the common currency or even, in some extreme cases, floating around the notion of an “Italexit” from the EU. Now there is no longer talk of withdrawing from the euro, and the idea of a referendum has been set aside. But the leaders (and often their followers) of both parties (too often confusing the role of members of the government with that of political leaders) maintain a heavily Euro-critical narrative.

Specifically, the rules on budgetary discipline are regularly criticised as the main cause of the Italian economy’s precarious state of health. The austerity policies that were supposed to have been imposed on Italy to keep the deficit and debt under control are considered the principal perpetrators of pro-cyclical effects on an already weak economy. Limitations on public spending are targeted as the main obstacle to the adoption of measures that might have contained and reduced widespread social distress. Finally, Europe’s lack of solidarity in managing migration flows is constantly indicated as one of the most critical issues for a country that feels more exposed than others are to the influx of migrants and asylum-seekers. These arguments are partially grounded in truth, but are being manipulated on a daily basis by the two parties primarily as a way to delegitimise the European Union in the eyes of their respective voters.

### *3.1 Clash with the EU on the budget law*

In light of the above, it was no surprise that the first occasion for clash with the EU was over the 2019 budget law.

With the aim of providing financial resources for the two largest spending items in the government’s contract (a pension reform and the basic universal income), the executive had initially (mid-October) proposed a draft budget that would have brought the deficit for 2019 (and two subsequent years) to 2.4 per cent of GDP, based on an entirely unrealistic growth projection for 2019 of 1.5 per cent.

It was clear from the start that this draft budget law violated both the EU rules for fiscal discipline and the commitments announced by the same government in June. And it is no accident that this was correctly interpreted and labelled as an open rejection of those rules and of the very authority of the European Commission, which has the responsibility for reviewing draft budgets and, when needed, recommending changes before they are submitted to their respective national parliaments.

Thus began a lengthy and delicate confrontation with the Commission, which from the very beginning and with the support of all Member States had requested significant revisions to the draft budget. The Commission’s threat to open an infringement procedure (the first in the history of the euro for excessive debt), the consequent reaction of financial markets with the rapid rise of the spread (the differential in the interest rate on Italian bonds compared to that paid on German bonds), and the discreet but effective moral suasion of the President Mattarella convinced the government to step down.

After painstaking negotiations conducted personally by Conte, an agreement was reached on a deficit of 2.04 per cent of GDP and on a more realistic (but also optimistic) projected GDP growth of 1 per cent. The process was painful and not without some lingering repercussions, not least because during the difficult discussions reference was repeatedly made to the claim that the euro rules penalise



the Italian economy, do not allow for growth and employment and limit the flexibility needed to enact the government’s programme and adopt the measures necessary to combat poverty and create jobs. With the result that these criticisms and polemical attacks contributed to fuelling the conviction of an already very tepid public opinion that the Union and the euro are the root cause of Italian low growth and under-employment.

### *3.2 Migration, another battleground with the EU*

Migration is another inevitable and predictable opportunity for confrontation with the EU.

Following the approach of Salvini and the League, which have made irregular immigration the government’s top priority as a safe source of consensus, the executive has adopted an overall harder line on the issue. It has decided to close Italian ports to ships with migrants aboard; tightened the rules on NGOs engaged in rescue operations in the Mediterranean; exploited the unsustainable situation of migrants aboard ships heading for Italy to put pressure on European partners and force other Member States to take in their fair share of asylum-seekers; introduced more rigorous procedures for reviewing asylum applications; reduced the use of humanitarian protection; and revised the criteria for the reception and distribution of migrants on national soil.

Nevertheless, it has not managed to make headway on European partner solidarity, with the exception of some isolated cases, and has used this stalemate over the notion of shared responsibility for the management of migration flows to accuse the EU of incapacity, indecision and lack of solidarity. The result has been that a public opinion already increasingly sceptical over the merits of the EU can now blame the EU for the botched management of migration flows as well.

### *3.3 The European Parliament elections: Change of strategy in the two-party majority alliance*

The now imminent European parliamentary elections have further accelerated the pace and intensity of the electoral competition between the two parties of the government’s majority. The executive, too often paralysed by the majority’s differences over the most politically sensitive decisions, appears in visible difficulty also with regard to the more general question of Italy’s position in Europe and the international scene, too frequently giving the impression of uncertainty and ambiguity.

With the elections looming, the two parties have abridged their narrative vis-à-vis the EU. The Union remains the target of almost daily criticisms, but the League and the 5-Star Movement, albeit with varying emphasis, are no longer generically against the EU but against “this EU”, for which they propose radical changes. Their criticism targets an EU described as being at the service of international finance,

the banks, multinationals, major industrial complexes and lobbies; an EU that has not understood in time the real concerns of its people; an EU not sufficiently democratic and legitimate.

### 4. The price of greater isolation in Europe

The activities, and the often excessive activism, of the two majority parties, and the tendency of the two deputy prime ministers to confuse their responsibilities of party leaders with those of top government officials, leaves the government paying a high price.

The executive is forced into acrobatic manoeuvres to alleviate the concerns of traditional allies – such as the US – when Italy is seen as too close to Russia and China; when collaboration with Italy’s natural and historical partners in Europe (i.e. France and Germany) are called into question; when attitudes toward EU institutions are uselessly antagonistic; or when the Visegrad countries are viewed as potential allies in the name of a presumed political and ideological affinity with their mostly right-wing, populist rulers.

Meanwhile, the Italian government is not showing signs of having worked out either strategies or concrete proposals on how to position itself in the discussions over the future of the EU. It does not seem to have a clear idea of Italy’s role in Europe nor of Europe’s in the world. In general, it appears isolated and marginalised, devoid of a cohesive strategy on alliances or, at the very least, on convergences with other Member States. It is, for all intents and purposes, absent from the most significant negotiations within the EU, including those that will lead to the elections of the new top positions in EU institutions.

#### 4.1 Relations with European partners

The most difficult relationship in Europe is currently with France. It should be pointed out that responsibility for problems is in some ways shared, and the recent tensions are owed to various factors.

Surely of significant relevance has been a lack of understanding with regard to migration, with exchanges of reciprocal accusations for insufficient willingness to collaborate on migration flows management. It is worth mentioning the various abrasive comments by French officials on Italy’s political context and on the migration policies adopted by the Italian government. Nevertheless, equal note should be made of the empty accusations by the 5-Star Movement regarding France’s presumed responsibility for its colonial policy in Africa and the CFA franc’s role in causing mass migration, not to mention a recent impromptu attempt to open a dialogue with the most extremist participants in the *gilets jaunes* movement.

Bilateral relations have also felt the effect of Italy’s recurrent criticism of France’s military intervention in Libya in 2011, and of clear and persistent differences over how to resolve the present chaos in that country. The same is true of the misunderstandings and tensions surrounding some initiatives of industrial collaboration (as in Fincantieri’s buyout of STX, but also the Vivendi/Tim/Mediaset affair), the role of so-called national champions and the presence of French investors in Italy and vice versa.

These divergences cloud a solid relationship that, despite its ups and downs, dates back to at least 1945; sound commercial relations worth 80 billion euro in trade in 2017, with a surplus for Italy of 10 billion, along with good collaboration on defence, culture and research.

Thus far, despite the formal normalisation of bilateral relations after a February crisis in which the French ambassador to Italy was temporarily withdrawn, it is difficult to imagine a revival of a solid collaborative political rapport between Paris and Rome in the near future. In fact, more competition than collaboration is to be expected until at least the European elections, not least because French president Emmanuel Macron’s electoral campaign and the yellow-green coalition will continue to occupy opposite camps.

Curiously, relations with Germany seem apparently less problematic, perhaps because Chancellor Angela Merkel and German politicians in general have appeared less critical toward the new majority that emerged in Italy after the March 2018 elections. Restraint in criticising Germany is possibly due to awareness of the importance of the German market for Italian exports, a sensitive theme especially for the League. As for the electoral campaign phase, both government members and the main representatives of the parliamentary groups have avoided the usual critiques of Germany for its presumed hegemony over Europe or for having imposed rigorous rules on the Eurozone against the interests of the indebted countries of southern Europe.

In reality, however, relations with the German government have receded to a bare minimum, mainly managed by Prime Minister Conte, who Chancellor Merkel reckons is her most reliable interlocutor. Periodic contacts between government members are almost non-existent and there is little or no dialogue between respective political forces. Missing also is any strategic plan for reliance on Germany as a privileged partner.

Finally, the government has followed the vicissitudes of Brexit, the United Kingdom’s prospective exit from the EU, with a certain detachment and without taking a public stance. In keeping with previous executives, it has dutifully aligned itself with the common position of the EU on negotiations with London. While monitoring the question of EU citizens’ rights in the United Kingdom with understandable attention, the Italian government has carefully avoided taking punitive positions and, above all, has insisted on the need to forge a close cooperative relationship with the UK after Brexit.



#### 4.2 Fascination with the Visegrad countries

This cooling of relations with traditional partners has coincided with signs of openness and interest, especially on the part of Salvini and the League, toward the Visegrad countries and their nationalist governments.

The surprising rapprochement with Central-Eastern Europe is due to a fundamental misinterpretation: the idea that presumed ideological affinity (on the issue of migration, recovery of sovereignty and widespread hostility toward the EU) can ensure a convergence of objective interests. In reality, the government has proved much more prudent on this front, perhaps in the awareness that the divergences with those countries (on issues ranging from migration policies to relations with Russia) number well more than the convergences.

The imminent electoral campaign is likely destined to bring out this contradiction and force the government to mediate between the League – currently the majority party most interested in convergence and collaboration with those countries – and the real interests of Italy that would certainly suggest other allies and interlocutors.

### 5. Trump’s America

The government has taken every possible public opportunity to underscore the permanent and strategic nature of the transatlantic relationship and the importance for Italy of solid relations with the US. Thus, it has systematically preferred to underplay the objective differences, and avoid underscoring otherwise predictable difficulties with certain of President Donald Trump’s decisions that clearly conflict with Italian national interests: from protectionist measures that target the EU, to contesting the Iranian nuclear deal, the rejection of climate change accord, or the termination of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty).

At the same time (and in line with previous executives), various members of the government have sought recognition in Washington as reliable allies on every level. Indeed, the League especially, but also in part the 5-Star Movement, have stressed the objective convergences not so much on individual policies as on the fact that both the outcome of the American presidential elections of 2016 and the political scenario that emerged in Italy with the March 2018 are an expression of a common phenomenon that calls for revolt against the elite and recovery of a direct relationship between rulers and the people, the resurgence of nationalism, protection of narrowly defined national interests, obsession with irregular immigration and a governing style that proudly proclaims itself populist.

It should be added, however, that despite this instinctive political/ideological affinity with President Trump, the government has aligned itself with most of the EU’s position on the US regarding trade tensions, Iran, Russian sanctions and climate change.

The greatest complications with Washington have appeared on the front of relations with Russia and, more recently, with China. On more than one occasion, the US has publicly expressed concerns that the Italian government could break ranks with its Western allies on relations with Moscow (American pressure on thwarting Italy’s efforts to lift EU sanctions) and with Beijing (Washington’s equally significant and explicit warning against Italy’s participation in the Belt and Road Initiative). Finally, the US’s insistence on raising defence spending to the 2 per cent of GDP threshold agreed on by NATO leaders in 2014 remains an open problem, even though the American administration has avoided any direct public accusation of Italy.

### 6. Russia

The League and the 5-Star Movement have expressed a clear affinity for Vladimir Putin’s Russia, especially before and during the 2018 electoral campaign.

The explanation for this lies in a combination of factors: a thinly veiled fascination with authoritarian democracies and strongman leaders; a clear affinity with President Putin’s openly nationalistic politics; Italian business interests in the Russian market and collaboration in the field of energy due to heavy dependence on Russian gas.

During the electoral campaign both the League and the 5-Star Movement had frequently cited the need to lift, or at least lighten, the sanctions on Russia. The same issue was reintroduced in the governing contract, without addressing the problem of the necessary consultation with European and NATO partners. But following the composition of the government both political parties have become much more prudent on the subject.

Completely absent from the public discourse of the two majority parties is any criticism of Russia’s role in Ukraine and other Eastern European countries. The ruling parties have not criticised President Putin’s repeated violations of the rights of opposition members and minorities or repression of freedom of speech and the press. Nor have they voiced concerns regarding the confirmed hacking of European government websites or Russia’s presumed interference in EU electoral processes.

Despite all this, the government’s approach to relations with Russia has been in a substantial line of continuity with that of previous executives. It has neither launched isolated or impromptu initiatives with regard to sanctions, nor abandoned the common European and Atlantic stance on the non-recognition of Russia’s annexation of Crimea. On the contrary, it has aligned itself with the EU on the sanctions even when, on the UK’s initiative, it was decided to adopt additional measures in retaliation against the poisoning of two Russian citizens on British soil (the Skripal affair).

## 7. China

Although with clear differences in emphasis distinguishing the League from the 5-Star Movement, the government’s prevailing attitude toward China is open and forthcoming, based on the assumption that the “Middle Empire” is decidedly more an opportunity than a risk for Italy. China is not generally perceived as either a national security threat or a potential obstacle to maintaining the independence of our economic and manufacturing system.

It is true that some divisions have appeared within the majority during the preparations for Chinese President Xi Jinping’s state visit to Italy, and in relation to the formalisation of Italy’s participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China’s massive infrastructure and connectivity project. Overall, however, the government has concentrated primarily on the trade opportunities offered by a strategic partnership with China without too many concerns for the political costs of an eventual Chinese presence in the Italian economy; and it has underscored, above all, the extraordinary potential of China as a market for our exports without dwelling too much on the more problematic aspects of gaining access to the Chinese market.

Attention has been limited regarding the more critical aspects in relations with Beijing: insufficient protections and absence of a level playing field for investments in China; scarce transparency of BRI-related financial deal; scarce protection for intellectual property and technology transfers; unfair competition from heavily subsidised government-held companies; potential national security threats associated with Chinese companies’ participation in new generation telecommunications networks (although it should be noted that to date caution has prevailed on the issue of Huawei and ZTE gaining access to bidding for the 5G grid).

### Concluding considerations

Overall, Italian foreign policy has been marked by a major discrepancy between the rhetoric and narrative of the two majority parties, which have insisted on the need break with the past, and the behaviour of a government that, despite uncertainty and ambiguity, has pursued a line of relative, albeit often hesitant, continuity. Despite the populist rhetoric of the two forces in the government, the EU and NATO and a solid relationship with the US remain, clearly with the necessary adjustments over time, Italian foreign policy’s points of reference even in the times of the “government of change”.

The frequent and unorthodox initiatives and statements by the leaders of the League and the 5-Star Movement have created more than a few obstacles for the government, complicating the task of Prime Minister Conte, who is engaged in almost daily remedial efforts. These initiatives have contributed to increasing the

country’s isolation and making the government’s actions less predictable.

The area that has been marked by the most pronounced discontinuity, and in which problems and tensions have arisen, remains that of relations with the EU. The League and the 5-Star Movement continue to view “this” EU as an obstacle to the country’s potential, and continue to fuel constant opposition to the Union and its institutions and rules. This position appears to be based on the conviction that attacking Europe will pay off in terms of electoral consensus, but also appears largely conditioned by the weakness of the Italian economy, the burden of our public debt and the government majority parties’ intolerance for European budgetary rules that require gradual reduction of the public debt.

Italy’s main European partners’ poor sympathies and modest support for the positions of the League and the 5-Star Movement, their frequent and at times disjointed disputes with the Commission and incomprehensible strategy regarding alliances are among the reasons for Italy’s growing isolation in Europe. As a result, Italy is being left out or in the margins of the debate on the future of the EU and irrelevant in the most sensitive political discussions: from major European economic policy decisions to completion of the Eurozone and Banking Union governance; from the definition of a common European industrial policy to evolution of the rules on competition and state aid, to the multiannual EU budget and the distribution of resources for the various common policies.

Less a point of contention is Italy’s presence in NATO. But even on this front, the government is forced to deal with the divergences that periodically re-emerge between the two majority parties: the issue of overall defence spending (still well below the goal of 2 per cent of GDP); several weapons systems procurements (with disagreement re-emerging on the acquisition programme of the F-35 multi-role aircraft); the issue of Italy’s participation in foreign military missions (on which the differences in sensibility between the League and the 5-Star Movement are well known, even beyond the premature and not previously agreed announcement that Italian troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan).

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