

# An Overview of US-Italian Relations: The Legacy of the Past

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## ABSTRACT

At the end of World War II the United States became Italy's indispensable ally, and throughout the Cold War, US-Italian relations remained consistently strong, even accounting for some inevitable ups and downs. In the post-Cold War era, the relationship has remained strong in spite of a number of dramatic changes in both the international system and Italian domestic politics. The rise of populist movements on both sides of the Atlantic in recent years, however, might challenge the centrality of the United States in Italy's foreign policy.

*US-Italian bilateral relations | US foreign policy | Italian foreign policy*

**keywords**

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by Leopoldo Nuti\*

## Introduction

The United States became Italy's indispensable ally in the years that followed World War II. US assistance was crucial for the process of economic reconstruction and international rehabilitation that Italy was going through at the time. Washington had important reasons to be supportive of Italy, ranging from its interest in the broader political and economic stabilisation of Western Europe to the imperative to keep the Italian communists, who had a clear preference for the Soviet Union, at bay. Due to its geographical location on the East–West fault line and the strength of the Italian Communist Party, Italy was a primary strategical country for the US government, which sought and secured a strong partnership with Rome. In the post-Cold War era, the US-Italian relationship remained strong in spite of dramatic changes in the international system as well as in Italian domestic politics. The rise of populist movements on both sides of the Atlantic in recent years, however, might challenge the centrality of the United States in Italy's foreign policy.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a number of previous essays I have dedicated to the same topic, in particular: "The Richest and Farthest Master is Always Best: US–Italian Relations in Historical Perspective", in David M. Andrews (ed.), *The Atlantic Alliance Under Stress. US–European Relations After Iraq*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 177-198, and more recently, with Daniele Fiorentino, "US-Italian Relations", in Mark Lawrence (ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of American History*, published online on 31 March 2020.

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## 1. The forging of a special relationship: US-Italian relations from World War II to the Cold War

To understand the specificity of US-Italian relations during the Cold War, we must go back to the darkest hour in Italy's history, namely the armistice of 8 September 1943 – a watershed of fundamental importance – and to the traumas that followed it until the signature of the Peace Treaty on 10 February 1947. The series of unprecedented disasters that struck Italy during those years left the country not only in a state of utter powerlessness, but also in an extremely turbulent domestic situation that threatened to precipitate into chaos if not outright revolution. As often happens when existing institutions are entirely discredited by defeat in a war, a sizeable part of Italian society reacted to the catastrophic events of 1943 with the strong aspiration to sweep away the remnants of the old order and to carry out a thorough, radical renovation of the Italian political system. The sense of an impending revolution was strongest in the final months of the war and in its immediate aftermath, as well as in the period leading up to the dramatic elections of April 1948, the first under the new republican constitution crafted in 1946–47.<sup>2</sup>

This was the moment when the relationship between republican, democratic Italy and the United States began to be forged, gradually turning Washington from erstwhile enemy and occupying power into crucial ally and the most important point of reference for Italian foreign policy. For the United States, Italy provided a most useful testing ground not only for its World War II occupation policies, but more importantly, for its post-war foreign policy. As the first occupied country in Western Europe, Italy became the place where the United States for the first time was confronted with the multiform challenges of stabilising an occupied country, engineering its economic reconstruction, and providing a political framework that would guarantee against any backsliding into chaos.

With the outspoken support of the large Italian-American community, the Administrations of US presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933–45) and Harry S Truman (1945–52) adopted a benevolent attitude towards Italy as early as late September 1944, when Roosevelt managed to persuade the reluctant British prime minister, Winston Churchill, to announce a conciliatory Allied policy towards Italy. Throughout the final phase of the war and its immediate aftermath, however, Washington's benign attitude towards Italy had limited impact, as Great Britain remained determined to play a significant role in post-war Italy, and Washington's policies had to be reconciled with the far tougher attitude of London. It wasn't until the adoption of a firm anti-Soviet attitude by President Truman that the US disposition towards Italy evolved into a coherent design for its stabilisation and its international rehabilitation. Anti-communism, as Italian historian Ennio Di Nolfo

<sup>2</sup> There is a vast body of literature on US-Italian relations during the final phase of World War II and the onset of the Cold War. For an introduction, see James Edward Miller, *The United States and Italy, 1940–1950. The Politics and Diplomacy of Stabilization*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1986; Ennio Di Nolfo, *La guerra fredda e l'Italia (1941-1989)*, Firenze, Polistampa, 2010.

wrote many years ago, provided the glue that cemented what until then had been a loose set of well-meaning but rather incoherent policies.<sup>3</sup> From 1947 on, Italy became one of the battlegrounds of the Cold War. As such, it also became a key testing ground for the new US policy of containment.

A parallel, but gradual, process took place in Rome, as both the government and professional diplomats were slow to grasp and fully metabolise the transformation of the international system and the emergence of an entirely new bipolar structure. When they did, after absorbing the shock of the peace treaty, they began to perceive the relationship with the United States as one of the few tools available that Italy could use to eventually regain lost ground in the international order. Not only did the United States not regard Italy as a traditional enemy, but the warm feelings of the Italian-American community for the homeland also turned out to be a precious asset for an Italian foreign policy seeking to reverse the consequences of a punitive peace treaty.

This benevolent American disposition was all the more important as the other European powers still retained a much more hostile attitude towards Italy, as became clear during the peace conference in Paris. France, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union sought to extract concessions from a defeated Italy and to keep it in a state of prostration. At the plenary session of the peace conference in the summer of 1946, US Secretary of State James Byrnes gave a tangible sign of America's more friendly disposition by being the only foreign secretary to shake hands with the visibly troubled and painfully isolated Italian prime minister, Alcide De Gasperi.

Aside from this unique inclination to support Italy's rehabilitation, a number of other factors combined to make Washington the key point of reference for post-war Italian foreign policy. The United States emerged from the war as the wealthiest country on the planet by far, and very early on, Italy came to perceive US support as indispensable to Italy's economic recovery. As early as 1944, Prime Minister Ivanoe Bonomi had dispatched a delegation, led by the bankers Quinto Quintieri and Raffaele Mattioli, to the United States to explore how Italy might benefit from US economic support.<sup>4</sup> However, it took several years for US help to materialise, first through United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Assistance, then with a major loan from the Export-Import Bank in January 1947, and finally with the enactment by the US Congress of the European Recovery Program, more commonly known

<sup>3</sup> Ennio Di Nolfo, "The United States and Italian Communism, 1942-1946. From World War II to the Cold War", in *The Journal of Italian History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1978), p. 74-94; Ennio Di Nolfo, "Stati Uniti e Italia tra la Seconda guerra mondiale e il sorgere della Guerra fredda", in *Italia e Stati Uniti dall'indipendenza americana a oggi (1776-1976). Atti del 1. Congresso internazionale di storia americana, Genova, 26-29 maggio 1976*, Genova, Tilgher, 1978, p. 123-135.

<sup>4</sup> On the Quintieri-Mattioli mission, see Egidio Ortona, *Anni d'America, Vol. I: La ricostruzione, 1944-1951*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1984; Ilaria Tremolada, "The mission": Quintieri e Mattioli negli Stati Uniti per l'Italia (1944-1945)", in *Eunomia*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2015), p. 117-144, <https://doi.org/10.1285/i22808949a4n1p117>.

as the Marshall Plan. The onset of the Cold War played a major role in promoting US economic assistance, which became a crucial tool to stabilise the Italian (and wider European) economy and society. Even after the critical phase of post-war reconstruction, the reliance on US economic assistance continued in more subtle ways, from American financial support for a joint military initiatives to subsidies to Italian political parties that continued until the late 1960s.

This leads to the second crucial factor in explaining the Italian interest in forging a strong bond with Washington: anti-communism. As the confrontation with the Soviet Union became the highest priority of US foreign policy, the strength of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) inevitably drew increasing attention from the Truman Administration, which redoubled its efforts to strengthen the more moderate political parties and prevent a communist takeover of the Italian government. The notorious – and effective – intervention by the Central Intelligence Agency in the Italian political elections of 1948 in support of anti-communist forces became the first of many covert operations that US intelligence would carry out to ensure favourable political outcomes in a large number of countries.<sup>5</sup> The moderate Italian coalitions run by the Christian Democratic party (DC) were keen to exploit this American concern to extract as many concessions as possible, from economic assistance to support for Italy's foreign policy goals. Rome and Washington did not always agree on the best possible tactics to handle Italy's communist problem, but their shared ideological orientation gave Italy's non-communist leadership a relatively strong hand in dealing with the US government.

Finally, it must be emphasised that from an Italian perspective, the establishment of a hegemonic US presence in Western Europe added another crucial factor in explaining the importance and the duration of the alignment between Rome and Washington. The creation of a US-led Western bloc had the consequence of placing *all* Western European countries – winners and losers alike – in a similar state of dependence on Washington. Under the tight rules of a bipolar world run by Washington and Moscow, there would be no room for a renewal of the struggle for supremacy in Europe among the other European countries – a game that Italy had played and lost with disastrous results. This was perhaps the single most significant contribution that US foreign policy offered to post-war Italy – the creation of a stable international environment based as much as possible on multilateral (albeit asymmetric) frameworks. While the Atlantic space was not an impeccably liberal rules-based order, it did offer Italian foreign policy a framework in which, first, intra-European rivalries would be muted and eventually replaced by the gradual emergence of a process of Western European cooperation (systematically prodded by the Truman administration) and, second, a number of multilateral institutions and organisations could be created and thrive.

<sup>5</sup> Kaeten Mistry, *The United States, Italy and the Origins of Cold War. Waging Political Warfare, 1945–1950*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

The combination of all these factors, that came into play with the intensification of the Cold War eventually forged a bond that remained central to Italian foreign policy for the next forty years. The United States became simultaneously the supreme guarantor against any Soviet threat, the counterweight against the other resentful – if not outright hostile – Western European powers, and the central pillar of Western multilateralism. The United States was also a major force in Italy's domestic arena, supporting the (re)creation of a market economy and a pluralist democratic political system. No other country could play all these roles at the same time, and no other country could offer Italy such a swift rehabilitation process. By signing the North Atlantic Treaty in April 1949 (which later evolved into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, or NATO), Italy turned from a defeated country humiliated by a punitive peace treaty to an ally of its erstwhile enemies – and all this in little more than two years. The centrality of the relationship helps explain why, whenever there were any tensions between the United States and its Western European allies, Italy at first tries its best to mediate between them but, if push comes to shove, it inevitably chooses Washington over Paris. It repeatedly did so throughout the Cold War – most notably during the 1956 Suez crisis and at the time of the repeated Gaullist challenges to the Atlantic alliance in 1963 and 1966.

The Cold War relationship between Rome and Washington, however, should not be seen as one in which Rome obsequiously followed the more or less benevolent hegemon from across the Atlantic. It was a dialectical relationship in which Italy constantly probed the limits of its autonomy, tried to expand its room for manoeuvre, and strove to bend Washington's foreign policy to accommodate its own designs.<sup>6</sup> Inevitably, this led to a number of misunderstandings, frustrations, and tensions, particularly in the Mediterranean and in the Middle East, the region where Italy was keenest to extend its economic influence, sometimes running afoul of US projects there.<sup>7</sup> More disputes would follow at the time of the signing and ratification of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, as the Italian diplomatic establishment perceived the agreement as a humiliating imposition that would forever freeze Italy (and other European countries) in a position of subalternity to the great powers.<sup>8</sup> In the 1980s, the different perspectives on how to deal with Middle Eastern issues degenerated into a serious crisis that, for a few tense moments, even risked turning into a confrontation between the Italian Carabinieri and the US Delta Force over the fate of a group of Palestinian militants who had hijacked the Italian cruiser Achille Lauro. It was the most serious dispute between

<sup>6</sup> For a similar view of Italy's foreign policy during the Cold War, see Ennio Di Nolfo, "La politica estera italiana negli anni ottanta. Relazione introduttiva", in Ennio Di Nolfo (ed.), *La politica estera italiana negli anni ottanta*, Manduria, Lacaita, 2003, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Alessandro Brogi, *L'Italia e l'egemonia americana nel Mediterraneo*, Scandicci, La nuova Italia, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Leopoldo Nuti, "A Turning Point in Postwar Foreign Policy. Italy and the NPT Negotiations, 1967–1969", in Roland Popp, Liviu Horovitz and Andreas Wegner, (eds), *Negotiating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Origins of the Nuclear Order*, London/New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 75–96; Leopoldo Nuti, "Italy as a Hedging State? The Problematic Ratification of the Nonproliferation Treaty", in Joseph F. Pilat (ed.), *Nuclear Latency and Hedging: Concepts, History and Issues*, Washington, Wilson Center Press, 2019, p. 119–154, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/book/nuclear-latency-and-hedging-concepts-history-and-issues>.

the two countries in the history of their post-war relationship, but perhaps what really matters is not that it happened but that it was contained and – above all – that any serious negative repercussions were avoided.<sup>9</sup> Bilateral relations were so important for both countries that neither wanted to jeopardise them any further.

The same can be said of the repeated clashes over how to deal with Italy's internal problems. The integration into the Western bloc generated an internal rift between the DC-led De Gasperi government and the communist and socialist left, which only began to heal in the early 1960s, but which also persisted, in a more subdued form, well into the 1970s. Washington and Rome almost always shared the same goals – generating economic growth in Italy and preventing the PCI from gaining a foothold in the government – but they often disagreed how best they could achieve that. Washington did exert a remarkable amount of influence over Italian politics, and it had no qualms about using a vast array of resources, from covert operations, which included secret funding for Italian political parties, to public diplomacy and cultural initiatives.

In this context, it was very rare for Italian politicians to dare to openly contradict the positions of the US government. Yet, at the same time, the solutions that the Italian political forces envisaged for their own country's internal dilemmas sometimes clashed with those that the United States preferred or encouraged them to adopt. Even in the 1950s, when the US sway in Italy was at its strongest and the US ambassador in Rome exerted a formidable influence on Italian politics, there were times when the Italian government refused to follow US suggestions on how best to curtail the power of the PCI. And throughout the long crisis of the 1970s, when a significant part of the DC was inclined to explore possible paths of cooperation with the communist party as a way out of the country's economic and social predicaments, the United States firmly opposed any such idea. Preventing the PCI from extending its influence over the Italian domestic system remained a matter of concern in Washington almost all the way to the end of the Cold War.

## 2. After the Cold War: A strong but no longer special relationship

The strongest rationale for the special US-Italian relationship, namely Italy's position as a "frontier" country in the East–West conflict (both internally and internationally), rapidly disappeared by the end of the 1980s. The gradual disintegration of the Warsaw Pact and the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union marked a major turning point in the history of the international system. With the Soviet Union changing at break-neck speed under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev (1985–91), the PCI belatedly chose a new course and was no longer perceived as a latent threat to Italy's Western alignment. More importantly,

<sup>9</sup> Matteo Gerlini, *Il dirottamento dell'Achille Lauro e i suoi inattesi e sorprendenti risvolti*, Milan, Mondadori Education, 2016.

Washington quickly lost interest in Italian domestic politics. Suddenly, anti-communism was no longer a central part of the equation. The key consequence was that the United States stood aside and watched as the Italian political system began to unravel under a series of criminal investigations that disclosed the murky sources of financing of the Italian political parties. In the new post-Cold War world, the United States no longer had any particular interest in the stability of Italian political forces. If corruption was publicly revealed, eventually leading to the downfall of the Republican party system, so be it.

The disappearance of one of the central elements of the relationship, however, did not imply its demise. Both countries retained an interest in preserving a close alignment at a time of major, unpredictable changes in the international system – even if there were instances when, as in the past, they did not always see eye to eye. In 1990–91, for example, the Italian government was hesitant to support the US determination to use force to reverse the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Italy repeatedly supported efforts to prevent a military confrontation. In the end, however, Italy did participate in the combat operations with eight Tornado aircraft and a naval group in the US-led coalition that against Iraq in 1991.<sup>10</sup>

A similar inclination to retain a strong connection with the United States was seen in the Maastricht negotiations for the transformation of the old European Economic Community into the European Union. As the debate moved towards the creation of a common foreign and security policy for the Union, a sharp contrast emerged between two significantly different visions – one supporting a more autonomous European foreign policy and another insisting that NATO remain at the centre of any future architecture of European security. Unsurprisingly, Italy tried to mediate between the two options, but after the George H.W. Bush Administration (1989–92) made clear its dislike of the first alternative, it quickly joined the United Kingdom in issuing a declaration that restated the two countries' strong interest in preserving NATO as the key European security organisation. As in the past, Italy expressed a preference for an integrated Europe closely aligned with the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly enough, this close alignment became the core of an increasingly bipartisan foreign policy, as none of the new Italian political forces that emerged from the collapse of the old party system believed that there would be any benefit to hostility towards the United States. On the contrary, alignment with Washington was central to both the centre-right coalition led by tycoon-turned-politician Silvio Berlusconi and the new centre-left coalition led by Romano Prodi. They wanted

<sup>10</sup> Antonio Varsori, *L'Italia e la fine della guerra fredda. La politica estera dei governi Andreotti (1989-1992)*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2013; Luca Riccardi, *L'ultima politica estera. L'Italia e il Medio Oriente alla fine della prima repubblica*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> On the Dobbins demarche, see Kori Schake, "Nato after the Cold War, 1991–1995: Institutional Competition and the Collapse of the French Alternative", in *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1998), p. 379-407. On the Italian reactions, Leopoldo Nuti, "Italy, German Unification and the End of the Cold War", in Frédéric Bozo et al. (eds), *Europe and the End of the Cold War. A Reappraisal*, London/New York, Routledge, 2008, p. 191-203.



the only remaining superpower to see them as legitimate interlocutors.

Berlusconi, throughout his multiple tenures as prime minister (1994–95, 2001–06, and 2008–11), made Atlanticism one of the hallmarks of his governments. The most glaring example was the ostentatious support for the controversial decision in 2003 by US President George W. Bush (2001–08) to invade Iraq.<sup>12</sup> While more intellectually and emotionally attuned to European integration, the post-Cold War centre-left Italian governments also displayed a similar interest in maintaining a close relationship with Washington. During the tensions that accompanied the Kosovo war in 1999, the government led by Massimo D'Alema (1998–2000) tried to balance the anti-war inclinations of its left-wing constituencies with the need to reassure the United States and other NATO allies of Italy's reliability. An Italian government led by a former PCI member could still be a trustworthy member of the Atlantic alliance – and indeed Italy played a crucial role in the military operations by providing the central logistical bases for the air campaign.<sup>13</sup> Thus, for both the left and the right, Washington remained the lodestar of Italian foreign policy, and a bipartisan consensus on the importance of this relationship took root. The most conspicuous difference was that the centre-left governments attached an equal importance to the construction of Europe, which Berlusconi viewed far less enthusiastically.<sup>14</sup>

As the US invasion of Iraq quickly morphed into a protracted insurgency, criticisms of US foreign policy grew in Italy, although Italian administrations continued to follow the parameters of the traditional alignment.<sup>15</sup> However, the warmth of the bilateral relationship increasingly reflected domestic trends in both countries, a dynamic that had been secondary (but not altogether insignificant) during the Cold War. Centre-left governments in Italy were more at ease with Democratic administrations in the United States, and Italian centre-right coalitions were more comfortable with Republicans. Even so, the second Prodi government (2006–08) could cooperate with the Bush Administration. When, in 2006, the Prodi coalition had to decide whether to continue participating in the NATO mission in Afghanistan, the Parliament voted in favour of doing so.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, despite a few awkward moments, the last Berlusconi government (2008–11) cultivated a good relationship with US President Barack Obama (2009–17). It is worth noting, however, that the US Administration increased reliance on Italian President Giorgio

<sup>12</sup> Emidio Diodato and Federico Niglia, *Berlusconi 'The Diplomat'. Populism and Foreign Policy in Italy*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 115-120.

<sup>13</sup> Osvaldo Croci, "Forced Ally? Italy and 'Operation Allied Force'", in *Italian Politics*, Vol. 15 (2020), p. 33-50, <https://doi.org/10.3167/ip.2000.150105>.

<sup>14</sup> Emidio Diodato and Federico Niglia, *Berlusconi "The Diplomat"*, cit., in particular chapter 6, "Italy and the EU in the Berlusconi Government", p. 143-268.

<sup>15</sup> "Bipartisanship started to leave the ground to politicization". Emidio Diodato and Federico Niglia, *Berlusconi "The Diplomat"*, cit., p. 116.

<sup>16</sup> Jason W. Davidson, "Italy and the U.S.: Prestige, Peace and the Transatlantic Balance", in Maurizio Carbone (ed.), *Italy in the Post-Cold War Order. Adaptation, Bipartisanship, Visibility*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2011, p. 143-160 at p. 153-154.

Napolitano to make sure that the country fell in line with policies set at the EU and NATO level, as was the case during the eurozone crisis of 2010–12 (which led to the downfall of Berlusconi) and NATO's intervention in the Libyan civil war in 2011 to support the rebellion against long-time autocratic ruler Muammar Qaddafi.<sup>17</sup>

As domestic politics have become increasingly polarised both in the United States and Italy – and indeed across the whole Western world – a new trend has emerged. The global financial crisis of 2008 and the failure of the American military adventures in the Middle East have eroded the foundations for a common vision of the international order. The largely bipartisan consensus has been at least partially replaced by the search for transnational alignments between US and Italian political parties promoting widely competing visions of what the international system should look like.

This trend was particularly evident during the presidency of Donald Trump (2017–20), who made no secret of his scorn for past US policies, both domestic and international. His provocative, unorthodox views pushed to the forefront of the US political scene a number of controversial figures who often attracted the attention of Italian politicians. For example, Trump's (short-lived) chief strategist and unofficial ideologue Steve Bannon, a right-wing firebrand, and the secretaries of Italy's right-wing parties, the League's Matteo Salvini and Fratelli d'Italia's Giorgia Meloni shared a strong intellectual proximity.<sup>18</sup> These links were particularly close during the short-lived period in which Italy was run by an unorthodox coalition between the League and the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (2018–19). Bannon even tried to turn the sixth-century abbey of Trisulti (not far from Rome) into the headquarters of the ultra-conservative Dignitatis Humanae Institute think tank.<sup>19</sup> A number of political figures in both governments openly floated very unusual ideas about restructuring the international order and the need to rethink the nature of national interests – ideas that, a few months earlier, would have been regarded as little more than bizarre ramblings by people on the fringes of the political establishment. What transpired during the Trump Administration was a potential transatlantic realignment along very different lines than those on which the relationship had been based for the previous seventy years.

The end of the Trump presidency and new government coalitions in Italy brought about a (possibly temporary) return to the traditional paradigms of Atlanticism,

<sup>17</sup> Giuseppe De Vergottini, "La gestione della sicurezza internazionale: un correttivo presidenziale", in *Rivista AIC*, No. 1/2012, particularly p. 15-16, <https://www.rivistaaic.it/it/rivista/ultimi-contributi-pubblicati/giuseppe-de-vergottini/la-gestione-della-sicurezza-internazionale-un-correttivo-presidenziale>.

<sup>18</sup> Giada Giorgi, "'Brother Salvini' ma non solo: gli amici italiani di Steve Bannon", in *Open*, 20 August 2020, <https://www.open.online/2020/08/20/steve-bannon-amici-italiani-salvini-meloni>.

<sup>19</sup> Tom Kingston, "Italy Throws Steve Bannon Out of Populist Academy", in *The Times*, 1 June 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/italy-throws-steve-bannon-out-of-populist-academy-68x7gg286>. For the Institute, see Dignitatis Humanae Institute, *Abbey of 6th Century Marian Apparition Now Under DHI Management*, 14 February 2018, <http://www.dignitatishumanae.com/?p=4943>.

and both US President Joe Biden and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi have consistently presented their administrations as a return to normality. Nationalist forces and their attempts to redesign the foreign policies of both countries have been marginalised, but it is not clear how long this phase can last. It is far from certain whether the Biden Administration can win a second term. Perhaps more importantly, it is also uncertain whether Biden, even if re-elected, can resurrect the role of the United States as the central pillar of the international order while trying to adapt to a number of systemic shifts. Nor do we know what will happen in the notoriously unpredictable Italian political system when the current legislature's term ends in 2023.

### Conclusions

Both in Italy and the United States the notion of a rule-based international system, a historical feature of the US-Italian relationship, is increasingly perceived by political forces (especially on the right) as a *partisan vision*, to be countered with an alternative, more nationalistic one. It is hard to tell whether the transatlantic bond can survive the widespread rise of populist movements in the West, and whether current developments represent a different challenge from the ones that the US–European alliance has managed to survive in the past. Optimists point out that the history of the transatlantic alliance is the history of its crises, and that US–European relations have weathered – and overcome – a number of serious disputes, always emerging stronger than before. From this perspective, the current state of transatlantic unease is not any different from previous ones. Pessimists, on the other hand, stress the cumulative impact of a sequence of parallel tensions, including the socioeconomic consequences of the 2008 financial crisis; the emergence of several key challengers to the US-based international system, from China to Russia; and the transformation of domestic politics across the West. It is the sum of all these long-term processes, pessimists argue, that creates a “perfect storm” for the transatlantic relationship, potentially making this crisis qualitatively different from all the previous ones. After all, in history, institutions and structures seem permanent until, all of a sudden, they break down.<sup>20</sup> As the international system is moving in a new, more complex and uncertain direction, US-Italian relations remain strong, but they could also be powerfully affected by some of the tectonic shifts currently underway.

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<sup>20</sup> The debate in the scholarly literature is wide open. On the pessimist side, see Gordon Friedrichs, Sebastian Harnisch and Cameron G. Thies (eds), *The Politics of Resilience and Transatlantic Order. Enduring Crisis?*, London/New York, Routledge, 2019; Marianne Riddervold and Akasemi Newsome, “Transatlantic Relations in Times of Uncertainty: Crises and EU-US Relations”, in *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 40, No. 5 (2018), p. 505-521, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2018.1488839>. A much more optimistic appraisal in Jussi M. Hanhimäki, *Pax Transatlantica. America and Europe in the Post-Cold War Era*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021.

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