aula mediterrània
Programa Interuniversitari de l'IEMed.

n.109 12/2/2021

SIXTEENTH-CENTURY GEOPOLITICS. SPANISH LOMBARDY AND NORTHERN ITALY BETWEEN EUROPE AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

ARTICLE

Mario Rizzo*

For most of the sixteenth century, Spanish monarchs directly ruled a large and diverse part of the Italian peninsula: an inland region such as Lombardy, two major islands (Sicily and Sardinia), a peninsular "amphibious" territory such as the Kingdom of Naples, and the small but strategically important coastal area known as the *Stato dei Presidi* in Tuscany. Moreover, Spain exerted a profound influence on a number of independent Italian states, thus controlling the majority of the peninsula in one way or another. Given all this, the Lombard case study can shed light on the Grand Strategy of the Spanish Empire (a typical example of early modern "composite states separated from each other by other states, or by the sea," according to John H. Elliott's definition) and more broadly provide fascinating insights into key general questions concerning strategy and geopolitics.

In order to analyse the Italian geopolitical landscape in the *Cinquecento*, it may be useful to introduce a handful of basic strategic notions. From a methodological point of view, modern concepts like "Grand Strategy", "soft and hard power", or "sticks and carrots" may reasonably be employed to examine early modern strategic issues, although we must never underestimate the differences between modern and early modern history, when it comes to science and technology, transportation, communications, logistics, weaponry, economic and social organisation, not to mention ideology and political culture. Furthermore, the international system has deeply changed. In the sixteenth century, especially in Italy, we observe a wide variety of actors: not only major and medium-sized states, but also smaller polities, feudal lords, leagues, notables, and so forth, whereas throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (at least until the 1980s), Grand Strategy was the realm of sovereign, territorial, nation states. The past three decades have witnessed the emergence of phenomena that in certain respects invite comparison with the early modern period. The ever-increasing role played by a variety of non-state actors such as ethnic groups, criminal and terrorist organisations, NGOs, multinationals, supranational institutions and megacities, together with globalisation and the growing importance of unconventional forms of conflict (guerrilla, terrorism, ethnic cleansing), seem to have challenged the traditional strategic schemes of the age of the nation state.

*full professor, department of Humanistic Studies, Università degli Studi di Pavia

That being said, the fact remains that a sensible use of texts and concepts belonging to different times and places is not necessarily anachronistic, nor does it imply a search for universal and eternal strategic principles: in Mark Twain's (presumed) words, history never repeats itself – but it often rhymes, actually, and a long run analysis of strategic events confirms the existence of recurring factors common to different ages and regions. Interacting with many other local and specific variables, these factors shape each unrepeatable strategic situation.

Complexity being a major feature of modern strategic thought, the idea of Grand Strategy deserves to be stressed, which Paul Kennedy describes as an effort made by powers in order "to integrate their overall political, economic, and military aims and thus to preserve their long-term interests." This approach rests on a wide variety of elements, many of which cannot be defined as military in nature, but nonetheless deeply affect strategy – suffice it to mention the stipulation of alliances or the promotion of technological innovations and industrial production, often aimed at preventing war by demonstrating a state's capacity to win and therefore deterring the enemy. Not surprisingly, the term "strategy", which originally had the naked meaning of "the management of military operations", has gradually evolved to indicate "the comprehensive utilisation of a state's military power for political or diplomatic purposes", becoming an essential element of international politics and diplomacy.

The intricacies of strategy and the interdependence between "hard" and "soft" power are well explained by Joseph S. Nye. "Military and economic power," he argues, "are both examples of hard power, which can be used to persuade others to change their positions. Hard power can be based on menace (the stick) or inducement (the carrot). Yet there is also an indirect way to exert power," since a country can achieve its goals in foreign policy because other countries follow its political or economic blueprint and share its values: this is soft power, depending on "intangible sources of power, such as culture, ideology, and institutions able to appeal to others."

In this respect, it is worth mentioning the eloquent words of Tommaso Campanella, who – like other theorists such as Giovanni Botero and Baltasar Álamos de Barrientos – was "much exercised by the problem of how to conserve a composite monarchy." To preserve amity between Spain and Italy, according to Campanella "it is necessary to deal with Naples and Milan in such a way, that the neighbouring peoples admire them as happy states and wish to be like them." It should also be noted that in Genoa, during the uprising of 1575, the commoners complained about the fact that in Naples, Milan, and the other States of the King of Spain the subjects were well taken care of, the artisans were all rich, and justice was equal for all regardless of social rank: all of which was definitely not the case in Genoa. Should we read this as a genuine result of an effective *ante litteram* soft power or as a purely rhetorical statement? Whatever the answer, the bottom line is that the reference to the non-accidental prosperity of the subjects of the King of Spain and to the ideal of the *rey justiciero*, administering equal justice to his peoples, is surely emblematic of the prevailing political *mentalité*.

The key strategic goals of Spain in sixteenth-century Italy were threefold: to achieve and maintain *paz y quietud,* in order to safeguard its dominions and strengthen its hegemonic position in the peninsula; to employ these territories as safe strategic bases for its European and Mediterranean manoeuvres and campaigns (many documents of the time significantly referred to Lombardy as the *plaza de armas* and the *corazón de la Monarquía*); to prevent, wherever possible, any further escalation of military and financial commitments, as the burdens were already exceedingly heavy upon Milan, Naples and Sicily. Moreover, "in so far as the perpetuation of multiple monarchies also depended on the deterrent of coercion," as well as on consensus and mutual interest, every now and then the garrison troops of the Italian dominions could be sent to other provinces of the *Monarquía* to put down troubles.

Not without good reason it can be said that during the reigns of Philip II and Philip III Spain played a fairly comfortable hegemonic role in Italy, at the same time exerting considerable influence on Europe and the Mediterranean. However, what might appear an undisputed and smooth routine in hindsight, in actual fact was the result of an incessant work of diplomacy, deterrence, and use of military force, combined together in order to build a sort of *Pax Hispanica*, anything but easy to achieve and keep within the marked geopolitical complexity of Europe, and especially Italy, which Giovanni Botero masterfully describes in his *Relazioni Universali*. He also emphasises the interaction between nature and geography, on the one hand, and human agency, on the other, critically important in order to understand history.

Italy, in particular, "è soggetta a più prencipi et repubbliche. Tra i prencipi d'auttorità ogn'uno cede al pontefice romano, di potenza al Re Cattolico." The latter, together with "il Turco […] e il pontefice romano," is significantly included by Botero among the "prencipi quasi universali, benché molto differentemente." He also highlights that the rise of the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, who later were to become archrivals in the Mediterranean, had begun almost simultaneously, considering that the "Serenissima Casa d'Austria […] cominciò ad acquistar riputazione e fama quasi ne' medesimi tempi che la casa Ottomana e par fatta da Dio per riparo, per propugnacolo della Chiesa sua contra i Turchi e gli eretici." However, Botero adds that neither great power (least of all Spain) could afford to concentrate exclusively on this rivalry, since both had to compete against other fearsome antagonists as well. At the end of the day, because of their own magnitude and inherent complexity, both empires were compelled to tackle multiple challenges simultaneously, requiring a seamless strategic effort on a number of fronts.

Well known among modern scholars, not surprisingly the geopolitical value of Lombardy was widely already recognised in the *Cinquecento* and *Seicento*, with momentous strategic and political consequences, it being one of the most coveted objects of desire for European powers, first and foremost for its situation, as the Venetian diplomat Antonio *Mazza* explained in 1565, underlining "l'opportunità del sito, commodissimo ad esser offeso ed opportunissimo per passare ad offesa d'altri e ad acquisti di Stati di grande importanza, avendo tanti Stati e principi d'ogni intorno e dando ricetto così buono e

transito così commodo a quei che, venendo di là da monti, volessero passare alle offese sue ed a danni degli altri *Stati d'Italia* ed a quei che l'Italia volessero passare di là da' monti." Interestingly, as early as 1513 Niccolò Machiavelli had expressed his concern to Francesco Vettori regarding the fact that, by controlling Milan, the "bestiali, vittoriosi e insolent" Swiss could eventually become the "arbitri" of Italy. In Francesco Guicciardini's seminal Storia d'Italia, the Venetian doge Andrea Gritti describes the Duchy of Milan as "una scala di salire allo imperio di tutta Italia" for the extremely ambitious and powerful young Emperor Charles V. Such metaphors abound in the literary and archival sources of the time, which on the one hand undeniably proves the existence of established geopolitical and strategic *topoi* and clichés, but on the other confirms that there was a vast consensus on the consequential role played by Milan. The latter appears to be all the more important, since it was just during those decades that a systemic conception of Spanish imperial strategy began to take shape, according to which Habsburg territories in Italy and Europe were reciprocally interdependent and should therefore be ruled and defended as such, appropriately blending consensus building and the use of force.

The fresh imperial ambitions and the unprecedented strategic needs of the newborn Spanish Empire magnified the long-standing "structural" features of Lombard geopolitics and to some extent transformed them. In the words of an anonymous author, "lo Stato di Milano è come uno anello che congionge li stati di Sua Maestà massime quei d'Alemagna con Italia, et di Spagna anco con l'Alemagna [...] li paesi d'Alemagna con Napoli Sicilia che importa assaissimo." In 1544, during the debate concerning the so-called "alternative" between Milan and Flanders, reconstructed by Federico Chabod in a celebrated article, the Duke of Alba referred to Lombardy as the hub of Habsburg communications in Europe, the loss of which would have jeopardised the very existence of the Spanish Empire. It is to be noted that, according to Alba, the actual choice was not merely between Lombardy and Flanders, but between the latter and an Italian geopolitical system also including Naples and Sicily: a clear-cut example of the incipient systemic vision mentioned above. In the view of those who championed the cause of Milan, among whom Ferrante Gonzaga, by keeping it "se puede defender mejor del enemigo todos los estados del Emperador," Spain included.

Habsburg's authorities in Milan implemented a multifaceted approach towards the Swiss, through treaties of alliance, pensions paid to magnates, export licences (especially for food supplies), and opportunities for employment in the military. In addition, soft power was used: for instance, Catholic students were attracted towards Lombard universities, where they came into contact with and hopefully assimilated Habsburg values and attitudes.

The nature of Italian geopolitics forced the rulers in Milan and Naples to establish a far-reaching network with a variety of magnates throughout the peninsula, not only with the most powerful amongst them, like the Savoys, the Farneses, and the Gonzagas of Mantua, but also with a number of other families and individuals, whom the *Austrias* could hardly afford to disregard or alienate. It is worth mentioning the thorny management of the

Emilian region and the Ligurian hinterland, requiring a sophisticated mix of patronage, deterrence, and diplomacy aimed at keeping a status quo favourable to Spain.

In Piedmont the strategic competition between Spain and France was particularly harsh and encompassed open war, the possession of fortified strongholds, the subsidisation of the dukes' military endeavours, the race for economic influence, and the creation of intelligence networks, diplomatic links, patronage systems, and dynastic bonds.

The relationship with Genoa was critical for the Spanish Grand Strategy, for financial, commercial, geopolitical and logistical reasons. Spain could employ several tools in negotiating with Genoa. Since Liguria was poor in grain, the surplus in Lombard agricultural production could be harnessed as a valued diplomatic weapon, either by permitting or by threatening to stop the exportation of cereals. Moreover, Genoese *hombres de negocios* were the kingpin of Philip II's treasury, and the Genoese élite often supplied galleys, soldiers, seamen and a few military leaders to Spain. Several *patrizi* were also feudal lords and landowners possessing titles, fiefs, and real estate in Lombardy, the *Mezzogiorno*, or Sicily. At times, however, even the tasty carrots of business and co-optation were not enough, and tougher measures had to be implemented or at least threatened, as happened in the mid-1570s, when Philip II instructed the governor of Milan to make military preparations in order to intervene in Liguria if necessary. German infantrymen in Madrid's service were consequently billeted on the border and heavy pressure was brought to bear on Genoa.

Special attention must be paid to the co-optation of the baronial and patrician élites, whether in the dominions or in the independent states. By granting business opportunities, offices, pensions, gifts, honorific titles, and dignities to them, Spain fostered political consensus in Italy; significantly, minor *mercedes* were bestowed even upon people of middling social rank. This multi-tiered system of patronage was a cornerstone of the Spanish composite monarchy, which heavily relied on it. The beneficiaries of patronage tended to share interests and values with their benefactors. Spanish hegemony in Italy largely depended upon a sense of inclusiveness. Soft power proved to be a valuable tool to reinforce the attachment to Madrid and was implemented in a number of ways: for instance, Giannettino Doria, one of Gian Andrea Doria's sons, studied at the University of Salamanca, the heart of Castilian culture and tradition.

At the top level, this policy implied the co-optation of major sovereign princes (like those of Savoy, Florence, Parma or Ferrara) and their relatives, by appointing them to prestigious executive posts, granting military commands, conceding honours, paying pensions, giving presents, arranging marriages, transferring land, interfering in and taking advantage of family dissensions, or admitting at court an heir apparent in order to give him a cultural, political and military education suitable to Spanish interests – a peculiar practice of soft power, of which the experience of the young Alessandro Farnese presents a perspicuous example. He was brought up just like an *Austria*, developing a life-style and a *Weltanschauung* typical of that milieu. Thus, an outstanding military and political leader

was forged, and a crucial geopolitical liaison with the duchy of Parma and Piacenza was tightened. Not surprisingly, Alessandro proved himself to be not merely one of those Italian princes inclined to opportunistic alliances with the *Austrias:* in many respects, he had become one of them. Two other important Italian princes, Emanuel Philibert of Savoy and Francesco de' Medici, enjoyed an education in Madrid somewhat comparable to that of Farnese, although their careers were marked by identification with the Spanish pattern and system of power to a lesser degree.

For Spain, co-optation was not only an irreplaceable instrument to create consensus. It also had another vital function, which Campanella sharply grasps in his *Della Monarchia:* that of providing human capital and economic resources, indispensable to the strategic effort of the Monarchy. Together with taxation, co-optation was a primary means through which the non-Iberian components (as well as some non-Habsburg areas) made their essential contribution to the Spanish Empire. Several Italian magnates were induced to finance (and sometimes to lead) the tremendously expensive imperial campaigns; many others held political, diplomatic, technical, and administrative offices of all ranks.

All of this corroborates the argument that Spanish pre-eminence in the *Cinquecento* was not merely a matter of soldiers, weapons, and ships – in other words, of hard power. As we have seen, soft power was also crucial. Furthermore, even when hard power was deployed, this branch of Madrid's strategy was as concerned with political and economic carrots as with military sticks. A wide range of tangible and intangible strategic methods and tools were used in Italy, and a variety of actors (often anything but submissive to Madrid) had to be dealt with, although none of them could compete with Spain as an equal. Spanish Grand Strategy was extremely sophisticated, striving to balance the use of violence (or its threat, as a deterrent) with economic and financial pressures, ideological propaganda, patronage, diplomacy, intelligence, and a number of incentives offered to individuals, families, political and social groups. This cocktail was intended to foster stability and increase consensus in the dominions in order to enhance the mobilisation and management of resources, to collect information about and hinder French and Ottoman plans, to expand the Spanish zone of influence by attracting new allies and *aderenti*; that is to say, minor potentates, federated with or recommended to major polities.

The influence exerted by the Spanish great power over the Italian peninsula was doubtless largely based on its overwhelming military force, both actual and potential. The fact remains, however, that Madrid could not solve all its strategic problems by the employment of its *tercios* and galleys. In this it was no different to twentieth- and twenty-first-century Great Powers, since in many circumstances it was – and still is – hardly possible to deploy their full military potential. As formidable as it was, Spanish hegemony in Italy was never established once and for all, and could by no means be taken for granted: on the contrary, it needed to be patiently built and constantly nurtured throughout a demanding strategic process, against a highly complicated geopolitical background.