

The Return of Italy to the Mediterranean

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Introduction: Changes in Italy's Policy Towards the Mediterranean

The two overarching priorities of Italian foreign policy against which all other priorities need to be evaluated consist of playing an important role within the European Union and maintaining good relations with the United States. The Berlusconi centre-right government (2001-2006) had somewhat inverted the order of these priorities, even though official rhetoric did not recognise this shift. Italy's interests were modelled more strongly on Washington's positions rather than on searching for consensus in Brussels. As far as the Mediterranean is concerned, the centre-right's search for raising Italy's international profile led to the government's support of military intervention in Iraq, moving away from the country's traditional focus on the Mediterranean Basin in favour of the broader Middle East, as well as to a position on the Middle East conflict that was strongly influenced by US support of Israel. With the election of the centre-left government led by former European Commission President Romano Prodi in the spring of 2006, the balance between Italy's foreign policy priorities shifted back to its more traditional sensitivity towards its European partners. Prodi's government has reaffirmed also the centrality of multilateralism, and the reinforcement of the role of the UN and of the other international organisations, especially in conflict resolution. As non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, Italy will try to put a renewed emphasis on multilateralism as the guiding framework to address crises in

Afghanistan and the Middle East.

This position is not dictated solely by ideology; it constitutes the glue that is supposed to hold together the slim majority – wrought by internal conflict – that the centre-left holds in Parliament. The renewed importance attributed to the UN and the EU thus serves the dual purpose of ensuring Italy's participation in the major international forums (seen as the best way to promote the country's international profile), as well as providing an external justification for internal political cohesion.

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Although this shift does not imply any profound questioning of Italy's long-standing relationship with the US, parts of the governing centre-left coalition have a more ambiguous relationship with Washington. In other words, the interaction between these positions has not only marked the key discontinuity between the Berlusconi and Prodi governments, but has also been one of the factors determining Italy's successes and failures during the 9 months of the centre-left government. The broader Middle East and the Mediterranean have constituted an important terrain on which these priorities and different political positions were measured.

Italy's Priorities and Interests in the Mediterranean during 2006

Prodi, in a speech given at the European Parliament, stated that "the Mediterranean represents the priority"

of Italy's foreign policy. The government envisages a new role for the Mediterranean in the emerging global geo-economic order: "the Mediterranean should become the Euro-Asian platform" (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006), since commercial flows between the Far East and Europe go through the Suez Canal and thus go through the Mediterranean.

This return to a focus on the Mediterranean Basin reflects the country's longstanding interests in the region. However, given its structural weaknesses and scarcity of resources, the reference framework for developing its Mediterranean policies is strongly tied to the EU's Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

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Rome's dilemma between supporting EU eastern or southern policies has by and large been overcome. On the one hand Italy has consolidated its interests and ties especially with the broad Southeast European region (hence its support for further enlargement to the Balkans and to Turkey). On the other hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also lobbied first to include the Southern Mediterranean countries in the European Neighbourhood Policy with the aim to ensure a distribution of EU political attention and resources between Eastern Europe and the country's immediate South, and then during 2006 to ensure that these would receive a substantial share of the budget earmarked for the ENP. Within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, Italy is also continuing to put pressure on its EU partners to make the Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership (FEMIP) an autonomous lending mechanism – already proposed by Prodi during his mandate as President of the European Commission but not supported by the previous government.

At a bilateral level, even though the country's foreign policy has been characterised by insufficient resources dedicated to the Mediterranean compared to its declared commitments, Rome has a developed web of relations with the Arab states. These have been strengthened by the Foreign Minister Massimo D'Alema, who has stressed the need to launch dialogue with the Arab world and in particular with Islamic moderate

forces, in order to encourage and sustain the democratic potential of these countries (De Giovannelli, 2006).

Other traditional priorities have also been reiterated, which range from the importance attributed to security issues and alliances, the EMP, NATO Mediterranean Dialogue and the '5+5 Group', to maintaining relations with energy supplying countries, especially with Libya and Algeria. A diplomatic meeting between Prodi and Bouteflika in November 2006, for instance, led to an important agreement between Edison and Sonatrach on the distribution of hydrocarbons.

Another crucial dossier for Italy regards the containment of illegal migration flows that arrive on Italy's Southern coasts from Africa, especially through Libya. After some deterioration, relations between the two countries have been recently relaunched with the creation of a joint task force for cooperation between police forces in combating human smuggling. With Morocco, the Foreign Ministers of the two countries agreed, last November, on the development of an approach which would see the containment of illegal migration as part of a broader strategy of social, political and economic cooperation.

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In terms of developing economic interests, alongside the large enterprises involved in the energy market, the government has supported an agreement with Algeria for the development of small and medium-sized enterprises and for the creation of a business network in Algeria; it participated in the Casablanca Economic Forum (with the Italian Minister for International Commerce Emma Bonino), which gathered 200 Italian enterprises and the main enterprise and banking associations.

Alongside these longstanding interests, Italy has also placed a renewed emphasis on the centrality of the resolution of the Middle East conflict as key to regional stability. In contrast with the previous government, D'Alema considers the role of multilateralism, the Quartet and the Road Map as the framework through which negotiations should

take place between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, aligning the country once more to the EU position on the Middle East.

The Test of Lebanon

The war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006 represents a test case of Italy's ambitions and role in the Mediterranean. The choice of taking on a leading role was determined both by a widespread belief within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the need to support Lebanon, as well as by the opportunity to recover national credibility in Brussels. From this point of view, D'Alema's gamble, which could have posed numerous political and military risks, proved a successful endeavour. According to one authoritative commentator, Italy's involvement in the Lebanese crisis represented the only area in which the country managed to live up to the widespread expectations that it would play a stronger role in Europe, regaining prestige in the EU after the five years of the Berlusconi government (Cerretelli, 2007).

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Italy's strategy was both political and military, exploiting to the most the multilateral organisations and instruments available. After hosting the international conference on Lebanon in Rome on 26 July 2006, bringing to negotiation the relevant parties (Arab States, EU Member States, the European Commission, the EU Presidency and the High Representative for Foreign Policy, the UN Secretary-General and the World Bank) in order to find a political solution to the crisis, Italy raised the stakes by pushing the EU Member States to take a leading role in the military management of the crisis, in the framework of a UN peacekeeping force. This proposal led to the UN Security Council Resolution 1701, adopted on 11th August 2006, which called for a reinforcement of UNIFIL (the UN monitoring force in South Lebanon created by the UN Security Council Resolution 425

in 1978) in order to assist the deployment of the Lebanese army to Southern Lebanon.

Support to the implementation of Resolution 1701 was immediately expressed by the EU, already engaged in the efforts to find a lasting solution to the conflict, through the mission of the Troika in Israel, Gaza and Lebanon and the engagement of the High Representative Javier Solana in further diplomatic contacts. The common position of 25th August 2006 reiterated the EU's will to play a key role in supporting the rapid implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 bringing humanitarian relief to the Lebanese population and supported the member states' willingness to contribute to the reinforcement of the UNIFIL forces by providing troops.

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In this latter effort, Italy played a valuable role. It responded to France's resistance to taking the lead militarily and Germany's reluctance to sending troops to Israel's northern border with Lebanon by committing 3,000 soldiers (Operation 'Leonte') and accepting to assume command of the peacekeeping force, as proposed by Israel. Rome's perseverance helped overcome the initial hesitations and make the EU the backbone of the UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon, with almost 8,000 troops.

Italy capitalised on its unexpected role in the Lebanese crisis also to nourish its relationship with Washington, by justifying to the international public its readiness to send troops also as a way to compensate for the absence of the United States in leading the resolution of the conflict due to its military commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan (Fisher, 2006).

Nonetheless, the extent to which this commitment could lead to a stronger role of the EU and Italy in the Mediterranean and the Middle East remains questionable. If the EU managed to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the Middle East, it lost an opportunity of using the toolbox it has created to support its development as an autonomous international actor. Instead of deploying the existing mechanisms of rapid reaction foreseen by the "Petersberg's tasks", EU

intervention has been possible only by creating an *ad hoc* coalition under the flag of the UN. Italy too would need to persevere in the maintenance of diplomatic, military, political and economic resources if it wants to reap the benefits of its role in the Lebanese crisis. In any case, the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs D'Alema has recognised the need to define a long-term strategy which goes beyond the UNIFIL and concerns the entire region. In particular, the Lebanese crisis can not be overcome without taking into account the conflict between Israel and Palestine, and the resumption of negotiations between Israel and Syria.

Conclusions: The Problems of a Middle-Sized Power

In February 2007 D'Alema gave a speech to the Senate that outlined a vision for Italy's foreign policy that suggested that the government had been developing a strategy that rests on short as well as long-term objectives, interests and an analysis of priorities. It is thus ironic that that speech led to a government crisis (that was eventually contained). The absence of a long-term strategy has been historically one of the reasons behind Italy's weaknesses in translating its interests and priorities into policy.

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One of the issues of contention, alongside Italy's role in Afghanistan, was precisely the degree to which the centre-left government has marked a discontinuity

with the previous government's foreign policy, with part of the coalition favouring a bipartisan foreign policy and another keen to underline change. This article has tried to illustrate the changes in emphasis that the centre-left government has entailed, through the withdrawal from Iraq while seeking to reassure the US of Italy's international commitments, by returning to a more active involvement in the Mediterranean and by maintaining its military presence in Afghanistan. Despite these discontinuities between the Berlusconi and Prodi governments, they both share the structural problems of limited resources, weak coordination of the many actors involved in promoting Italy's interests abroad, and a weak economic and political backbone supporting foreign policy.

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