

Italian foreign policy in the Second Republic: new wine in old bottles?

Written by Luca Ratti

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LUCA RATTI, OCT 15 2009

Revelations about the alleged payment by Italian troops of protection money to local Afghan commanders to stop attacks on their forces have reignited a recurrent debate among scholars of international affairs: does Italy have a coherent foreign policy, or even a foreign policy at all? While Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has warned that the remarks of part of the foreign press are damaging Italy's reputation, in recent weeks Italian policy-makers and public opinion have paid tribute to the Italian soldiers fallen in an Afghan bomb attack on 17 September 2009, portraying them as 'heroes' and 'missionaries of peace', in a rare spirit of bipartisan unity among the Italian political forces. Whereas following the suicide bombing that in November 2003 had killed 19 Italian soldiers in the city of *Nasiriyah* in southern Iraq – the highest loss suffered by the Italian armed forces since the end of World War II – part of the centre-left opposition had demanded the immediate withdrawal of the Italian contingent, on this occasion no major voices have been raised against Italy's Afghan presence. Only one of the ruling coalition's partners, the Northern League, and the leftist opposition 'Italy of Values' movement led by former magistrate Antonio di Pietro, have called for a swift reconsideration, if not for an outright departure, of the Italian contingent in Afghanistan, without finding, however, appreciable consensus either in the ranks of the centre right government or in those of the mainstream centre left opposition.

Despite the reiterated bipartisan commitment to maintain a military contingent within the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) which, since November 2003, operates under NATO command in Afghanistan, however, the bitter political fight that has marked the fourth right of centre Berlusconi government, featuring reiterated accusations of corruption against the Prime Minister and attempts to silence criticism from the press, have undoubtedly contributed to casting new doubts on Italy's international credentials and prestige. The decision taken at the beginning of October by Italy's Constitutional Court to reject a law granting the four most senior office-holders in the country immunity from prosecution further ignited the domestic debate with significant international echoes.

Notwithstanding, the long string of scandals and judiciary accusation that have marred Berlusconi's political career, however, since the end of the East-West division in 1991 and during the four centre right governments that the media tycoon has headed since 1994, Italy has indeed had a coherent policy on the international stage. As for many other state actors, however, this policy has been more lucidly expressed and acted upon on some occasions than on others, being dictated mostly by the structure of the international system rather than by the shrewdness or ineptness of Italian decision-makers.

As a geo-political 'middle power' and one of the last of the great industrial economies, Italian executives have endeavored consistently since unification in 1861 to win recognition at the table of the Great Powers, making the search for legitimization through international coalitions and alliances the cornerstone of Italy's choices on the international stage. Be this the Triple Alliance with Austria and Germany in 1882, the Quadruple Entente with London, Paris and St. Petersburg in 1915, the Pact of Steel between Mussolini and Hitler in 1939, or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949, there has been a constant lodestar in Italy's conduct on the international stage: the search for protection by the current hegemonic power, the big *Padrino* which could protect and, ideally respect, Italian interests in the three geographic areas upon which the country's security and wealth impinged: the Balkan-Mediterranean neighborhood; the European continent; and, since the late 1940s, the transatlantic region. In addition

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to this, since the early stages of the Cold War, Italy's anti-fascist political forces and Christian Democratic governments have supported a radical transformation in one of these areas, adding another dimension to the country's foreign policy – the often unconditional support for European integration – with the aims of preventing the eruption of a new conflict in Europe and of escaping subjugation by the dominating great power that is, more specifically, the United States.

Although throughout most of the Cold War, specifically until the early 1970s, Atlanticism and Europeanism were harshly criticized by Italy's communist opposition, Italian foreign policy has hardly changed since 1991. A major strategic alliance with the United States and European integration remain the key pillars of the country's conduct on the international stage. What has undergone some limited change, though, arguably during Silvio Berlusconi's led right of centre governments, has been the relative importance and emphasis upon these two pillars. This evolution is not totally irrelevant given the fundamental continuity in the country's international orientation since the collapse of the fascist regime in July 1943. More specifically, it has been argued that under Berlusconi's leadership, Italian foreign policy has tilted towards Washington, while showing signs of restlessness and, on some occasions, skepticism towards Europe. This analysis, while reflecting some early decisions and political orientation in the Prime Minister's conduct, such as the row which, in January 2002, led in to the resignation of pro-European Foreign Minister and former WTO head Renato Ruggiero, is based, however, on a superficial and 'short-term' analysis of Italian foreign policy and is, at least in part, inaccurate. If anything, regardless of which ruling coalition has been at *Palazzo Chigi*, since the end of the Cold War, Italy has followed a more pro-active approach to foreign affairs which has challenged the previously unconditional support for NATO and European integration, showing that after almost sixty years in which Italian decision-makers were accused of 'externally delegating' foreign policy decisions, two decades following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the crisis of the First Republic it has become difficult for Rome to elude a more active role on the international stage. While during the Cold War Italy hardly questioned transatlantic unity and European solidarity, the end of the East-West division urged Italian decision-makers to take a firmer position in intra-Atlantic and European debates. More specifically, both the collapse of the bipolar structure of international politics and the participation of former communist and neo-fascist political forces in the executive have driven Rome to adopt policies which, while substantially confirming Italy's Atlantic loyalty and European vocation, have not always coincided with those of its partners. Although as a result of this development many have challenged Italy's international credentials and reliability, particularly that of the right of centre governments, my argument is that Rome's post-Cold War international conduct is best understood as a manifestation of a returning 'neo-Atlanticism' and of an emerging post-Cold War 'neo-Europeanism' rather than as an outright rupture with the foreign policy traditions of the First Republic.

Whilst during the Cold War protection from the perceived Soviet threat was portrayed as Italy's primary security interest, after 1991 the situation changed radically. Following the first Gulf War, the breakup of Yugoslavia with the resulting Balkan conflicts and instability, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, new issues, such as control of mass migration, proliferation of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction, transnational organized crime, political and religious terrorism, and energy security, have come high on the Western and, as a result, Italian agenda. Unlike was the case during the Cold War, these challenges have forced Italian decision-makers, as well as many of Rome's European partners, to embrace a much more pro-active and noticeable role on the international stage. As in the case of the Federal Republic of Germany, which also underwent a radical process of transformation through the virtual annexation of the German Democratic Republic in 1990, the changed scenario has led occasionally to disagreements and tension with the Atlantic and European partners, without, however, bringing about a significant rupture in the country's international collocation. More specifically, Italy took part in combat operations in the Gulf in 1991, joined NATO and US led initiatives in the Balkans, contributing during the second half of the 1990s in a very effective way to troop deployment, although much less decisively to any of the high profile political solutions, supported the eastern enlargement of the transatlantic alliance and the EU, made an important contribution to the international mission in Afghanistan, and stood firmly in the pro-Atlantic camp during the military buildup in Iraq, while at the same time playing an active role in the negotiations and ratification process of both the European Constitutional Treaty and the Lisbon Reform Treaty. In addition to this, Italian-decision makers endeavored to improve Italy's profile in the wider Mediterranean area, assuming a fundamental role in the UN peacekeeping mission to Lebanon in 2006 and reestablishing close cooperation with neighboring Libya in 2008. While deployment to the Lebanon was decided upon by Romano Prodi's centre left government and pacification with Libya had the mark of Silvio Berlusconi's

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personal diplomacy, these two decisions reflect a significant continuity in the country's regional interests and conduct. As the centre right government did not call into question Rome's commitment to the Lebanon, in the long-term Italy's agreement with Libya is unlikely to be disavowed by the centre left opposition, despite justified concerns that its application might violate the fundamental human rights of African migrants.

Most of these undertakings have earned Italian decision-makers international credibility, leading many analysts to argue that in the post-Cold War system Italy has become a producer of security – but there is also some widespread criticism. This criticism has been directed mainly at Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi (rather than at the entire right of centre government) who, while enjoying a previously unheard of longevity in office, has been accused of taking a personal and, too often, deviant approach to Italy's foreign relations. While rallying the Italians in the pro-Atlantic camp not only in the aftermath of 9/11 but also in the controversial buildup to the Iraqi war during his third mandate in office, attempting to cultivate strong personal relations with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and engaging in open disputes with the European Commission on the issue of his government's alleged restrictive migration policy, Berlusconi has been hailed as having weakened Italy's European credentials. These analyses fail, however, to stress that, even under the right of centre leadership Italian decision-makers restated Rome's commitment to European integration, supported the EU Constitutional Treaty and Lisbon Reform Treaty, argued in favor of the eastern expansion of the EU, consistently backing the candidacies of Croatia and Turkey, and were able to assert Italian interests vis-à-vis the United States, beginning the withdrawal of Italian armed forces from Iraq despite strong U.S. pressure for a prolonged stay, while increasing its troops contribution in Afghanistan during the 2009 presidential elections. By contrast, leaving aside the Irish case, some of Italy's European partners, including France, Germany, and the Netherlands, were much less forthcoming on central EU themes.

It should be sufficient to recall that the centre-right- dominated Italian Parliament completed the ratification process of the EU Constitutional Treaty in April 2005, while in the months of May and June respectively two referendums marked its rejection in France and the Netherlands, without causing a major outcry about the European vocation of two countries which were among the original signatories to the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Community in March 1957. Also on the issue of the EU enlargement policy both France and Germany have embraced a much more lukewarm strategy, particularly in their attitude towards Turkey, although their resistance to Istanbul's candidacy could also be interpreted as a manifestation of a refusal to bow to U.S. pressures to have a long term strategic partner, such as Turkey, in the EU. Finally, despite ongoing claims by the opposition against the centre right government's restrictive migration policy, in October 2009 the European Commission closed infringement cases it had opened against Italy and Austria for their failure to transpose a racial equality directive since the two countries have fully complied with its provisions. What has been perceived by some as an erratic, if not uncooperative conduct, particularly towards Italy's European allies, has mostly been the consequence of the changing international system which has had implications also on the choices of many of Italy's European and Atlantic partners. For example, French President Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to bring France back into NATO's integrated military structure in 2009 is a case in point of how the end of the bipolar structure of international politics has brought about a reassessment of priorities for many of Italy's allies, without necessarily bringing about radical foreign policy changes. After all, a reversal of de Gaulle's decision to move away from NATO's integrated military structure had already been undertaken by Sarkozy's predecessor Jacques Chirac during the early 1990s in the aftermath of German reunification and Balkan instability.

Similarly, since the end of the East-West division Germany has striven for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, initially rejecting the prospect of a common European one, and reluctantly accepting this possibility only after a long row with some of its closest European partners, Italy included. This debate has provided an additional demonstration of a bipartisan perception of the country's national interest among the Italian political forces that goes beyond short-term domestic political calculations, as both the centre-right and centre-left coalitions firmly opposed a reform of the United Nations that would exclude Italy from an enlarged Security Council. In addition to this, it is difficult to accuse Berlusconi of having altered Italy's strategic priorities for any scholar who has historical knowledge of Italian foreign policy. Even during the East-West division, when Italy had been forced reluctantly to make a choice between the prospect of a French-led Europe and the United States, as was the case during the Presidency of Charles de Gaulle in France between 1958 and 1969, Rome's Christian Democratic and left-of-centre governments,

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like those led by the Christian Democratic Union in the Federal Republic of Germany, privileged the bilateral relationship with the Americans, if anything attempting to mediate between the United States and the 'deviant' French attitude on the most difficult issues, even within the European Communities. Italy's interest in maintaining European cooperation within a wider transatlantic framework was largely confirmed in October 1991 as French president Francois Mitterrand attempted, with the lukewarm support of German chancellor Helmut Kohl, to present the WEU as a possible post-Cold War alternative to NATO for the Europeans. The then Italian government, which was headed by the Christian Democratic leader Giulio Andreotti, while not rejecting the Franco-German argument, rushed to sign a joint declaration with the conservative British Prime Minister John Major, which restated the centrality of the transatlantic alliance for European security. Berlusconi's openly declared support for the candidacy of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair to the presidency of the European Union, when the ratification process of the Lisbon reform treaty will be completed, while on the surface related to the Italian Prime Minister's domestic political battles, is also in line with Italy's traditional interest in reconciling the Atlantic and European dimension of its foreign and security policy.

Other controversial policies, such as the search for friendship with Russia and an understanding with Libya, long predated Berlusconi and are best accounted for by a structural realist approach to Italy's foreign relations. It should be sufficient to recall the initiatives of socialist President Giovanni Gronchi during the late 1950s and early 1960s and socialist Prime Minister Bettino Craxi in the 1980s in order to avoid misreading the long-term implications of Berlusconi's conduct and frame them in a longer-term analysis of Italian foreign policy. After all, in the last few years even Britain has sought an improvement in relations with Libya, following a change of attitude in Washington, hardly being accused, however, of endangering its Atlantic vocation.

Italy's interests and policies have not changed substantially since 1991: Europe and the United States remain the keys to Italy's position in the international arena. However, external pressures and domestic transformations, themselves in part also a consequence of the end of the Cold War, while not challenging Italy's fundamental support for the transatlantic alliance and European integration, have allowed not so new versions of the old policies to reemerge. While Berlusconi's personal credentials may not be towering, and Italy's role on the world stage may not be comparable to those of long-term partners, such as Britain, France, and the newly-confident Federal Republic of Germany; overall Italy's international profile, despite ongoing bitter domestic debate, has been raised considerably since the end of the Cold War, while a balance is being sought between new and old versions of consolidated policies. The evolution in the Italian attitude does not anticipate, though, a far-reaching redefinition of Italy's fundamental geo-strategic interests. As a result, as realism aptly suggests, in the long term, Berlusconi or not, Italy is poised to remain where it firmly belongs: in the Atlantic and European camps.

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