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Opinion – Priorities and Challenges for Italy's G7 Presidency

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DARIO CRISTIANI, MAR 16 2024

On 24 February 2024, two years to the day after Russia began its full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni flew to Kyiv to host the first video conference meeting of the G7 Heads of State and Government under the Italian presidency. A few days later, she went to Washington and Ottawa to meet President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to communicate Italy's vision for its G7 Presidency as the robust defense of an international system anchored in respect to international law and multilateralism. Against this backdrop, unwavering support for Ukraine and the security situation in Europe is considered imperative and is very much at the core of Italy's G7 efforts.

G7 leaders know that a Russian victory in Ukraine likely means the end of the security system that emerged in Europe over the past thirty years, based on integrating former Warsaw Pact countries into Euro-Atlantic security structures. Italy remains against a direct military engagement with Western/NATO boots on the ground in Ukraine, as French President Emmanuel Macron suggested. Foreign Affairs Minister Antonio Tajani said that sending NATO troops to Ukraine means "risking a Third World war." This French move has created some cracks in the Transatlantic community. Given the adverse reactions this proposal has received, this suggestion had the opposite effect, as it caused a sort of "strategic cacophony" within NATO and the West, a factor that Russia exploits.

In the G7 context, Italy will try to promote greater cohesion in boosting military and financial support while also trying to find ways to reinforce defense production in Europe and the Transatlantic space to support Ukraine in its vital fight against the Russian war of aggression. For Meloni, there is also a domestic element to consider: the longer the war in Ukraine lasts, the more difficult it will be to resist external and internal pressure from those who want it to be over. Italy's official position on a negotiated settlement and talks is that they can start only once Ukraine decides so, meaning that once Kyiv thinks it has achieved what it wants, then Italy will support these talks.

However, pressure on the Italian government remains significant. In early 2024, Russia activated its influence networks in Italy to disseminate anti-Ukrainian propaganda. Inside Meloni's coalition, there are different views on the war in Ukraine and the relationship with Moscow. Salvini's party, the League – as also shown by the words of some of its members after Navalny's death – still has a more pro-Russian attitude. However, their capacity to influence the official government's position on this issue has been limited.

After Ukraine, the second main focus of the Italian presidency is represented by the ongoing war in Gaza. Italy acknowledges its profound impact on the global agenda and is trying to strike a balance between supporting Israel's security while avoiding alienating the Arab world. While there is a widespread agreement among G7 members that Hamas is primarily responsible for the situation – at the same time, there is mounting concern that Israel's reaction is disproportionate.

Rome has called for a ceasefire, presenting a surprising convergence between the government and the opposition. The same concern is driving Biden, whose administration is growing frustrated with Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, although it continues to support Israel. For Biden, the Gaza war also has many domestic implications. Arab communities in the U.S., historically Democratic voters, are becoming more and more disillusioned with him and

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are openly calling for boycotting the Presidential elections. Biden also has a problem with younger Democratic voters, who are not as pro-Israeli as the older generations of the party used to be.

Somehow linked to the Gaza War and its impact on the so-called “Global South,” Italy's G7 Presidency wants to emphasize the relevance of Africa, part of Italy's “Enlarged Mediterranean” for the stability of the global system. Launching the so-called Piano Mattei, the goal is to establish an equal partnership model with African countries, which is different from the past, when Western countries were perceived as predatory. Over the past years, Africa has become the central hotspot for the rise of Jihadism. It is also an area of significant geopolitical competition involving both external powers – such as China, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and GCC countries – and rising African powers. It is one of the areas of the world in which climate change, global warming, and pollution are creating major economic, social, and political problems. For Europe, Africa also represents a concern from the point of view of migration, and it is assumed that promoting African development will reduce migration, ignoring the more complex picture around African mobility.

At the bottom of Italy's G7 Presidency priorities there is the Indo-Pacific region. In normal conditions, this would have represented the core interest of any G7 presidency as it has become the world's political center of gravity. The challenge posed by China to Western democracies, their model of governance, and the capitalist economies G7 countries represent remains a dynamic that has the potential to change the global system. Recent wars in Ukraine and Gaza have changed this focus, presumably temporarily. Italy is a latecomer in the region. Although it still does not have an official Indo-Pacific strategy. In 2022, Italy elevated its relations with Japan and India to “strategic partnership” status while ending its membership in China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Along with Tokyo, Rome is also cooperating in the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), a multinational initiative, including the United Kingdom, to develop a sixth-generation stealth fighter. Italy is also enhancing its military presence in the region. In April, the Italian Navy's second Thaon di Revel-class PPA, Francesco Morosini, commenced a five-month deployment in the Asia-Pacific region, docking at fifteen ports in fourteen countries. This deployment aims to uphold the freedom of navigation and the international law of the sea while carrying out naval diplomacy and maritime security missions. In June 2024, Italy should also deploy its flagship aircraft carrier, Cavour, in the area. Italy's strategic initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region align with various diplomatic and political motives. Withdrawing from the BRI and fostering closer ties with Japan and India underscores Rome's commitment to maintaining its traditional foreign policy alignment in remaining consistent with the moves and preferences of the U.S. and European partners, and this element is critical in the context of the G7 leadership.

Beyond the longer term importance of the Indo-Pacific, Italy's immediate neighborhood, east and south, represents the focal point of its G7 presidency. Italy's support for Ukraine, with the symbolic and substantial visit to Kyiv on the anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion, underscores the centrality that European security and the preservation of the post-Cold War security architecture has for the G7. The Gaza war and the many challenges emanating from Africa are seen as part of those “enlarged Mediterranean” issues that Italy consider essential not only for its own, direct security, but also for the stability of global governance.

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