

## **Assessing the New Course in U.S.-Italian Relations**

*Emiliano Alessandri*

The visit of Italy's President Giorgio Napolitano to Washington this week takes place at a time of overall stability in U.S.-Italian relations. Cooperation between Rome and Washington on issues ranging from trade to counter-terrorism has remained strong after the new U.S. administration assumed office in 2009. Those who predicted an almost inevitable clash of personalities or even ideologies between Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and President Barack Obama have been mostly disappointed. Certainly, the two leaders are very different and there have been some diplomatic gaffes. Soon after the elections, Berlusconi sent Obama his very personal wishes, congratulating him for, among other things, his handsomeness and "suntan" – a remark that the international press immediately labeled as racist. Pictures of Berlusconi throwing up his hands in an expression of delight when greeted by a sleeve-less First Lady at the G-20 Summit in Pittsburgh last September, reverberated around the world in

a similar manner, giving the media another opportunity to comment on Berlusconi's peculiar interpretation of diplomatic etiquette.

Despite these incidents, Obama's realpolitik has enabled him to focus in a pragmatic fashion on what Italy can contribute to America's new policies rather than on the sometimes unconventional habits of Italy's leaders. Rome promptly responded to Obama's Afghanistan appeal with its own surge of close to 1,000 troops; demonstrated greater generosity than other European countries in accepting detainees from Guantanamo; and endorsed FIAT's bailout of Chrysler at perhaps the most vulnerable point in the new U.S. administration's tenure last summer. In light of these and other actions, President Obama has sufficient reason to consider Italy as a valuable ally.

This has created a curious situation. While the mood in several European capitals is one of disappointment with an American administration that has mainly concentrated its attention on domestic or extra-European issues, the feeling in Rome is closer to satisfaction. Italy, like other European countries, has struggled to get U.S. attention, but Rome has perhaps had fewer disappointments than London, Madrid, or Central and Eastern European capitals. As a fan of former President Bush and one of the very few European leaders

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to support John McCain in the 2008 presidential race, the Italian Prime Minister could hardly have hoped for more from his relationship with Washington. At a time of extreme polarization in Italian politics and growing criticism of his leadership (which has created an ever larger group of critics in Europe at large as well as in Italy), Berlusconi has at least neutralized the additional challenge that would have come from a “cold” or even antagonistic U.S. administration. On occasion, thanks to his prompt alignment with new U.S. policies, Berlusconi has even been able to present himself and Italy as among the new U.S. administration’s closest allies in Europe. U.S. During a recent trip to Rome, Assistant Attorney General Lanny Breuer offered remarks on the dangers of limiting wiretapping as a tool for investigations (a measure the Italian Parliament is passing, in part, to assuage Berlusconi’s own private judicial concerns). Breuer’s remarks were not received well by the Italian Prime Minister and his coalition. Nevertheless, for now, this has been a fairly isolated case of interference (later smoothed over by additional statements by the U.S. Embassy) and has not signaled any reversal in the overall cordial and stable U.S.-Italian relationship.

### **New tendencies in Italian Foreign Policy**

Stability in relations, however, does not mean absence of change. U.S.-Italian cooperation during the Obama administration has developed against a backdrop of great international fluidity, which has also highlighted new trends in European and transatlantic politics. New opportunities as well as new questions have emerged, pushing U.S.-Italian relations onto a new course.

Like other European countries, in recent years Italy seems to have embarked on a process of foreign policy “re-nationalization”, though this label may be somewhat excessive. At a time when Europe and the West’s influence is in decline and the European integration process remains uncertain, the temptation in several

European capitals, including Rome, is to assess again the potential of a more national and independent foreign policy. In some instances, this has led to the strengthening of bilateral ties with countries both in Europe and beyond. These ties promise clear gains, at least in relative terms. In Italy this shift towards bilateralism has been noteworthy and prominent especially under the governments of the Center Right. For instance, Rome has tried to re-activate a valuable and diverse network of bilateral relationships long-cultivated in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, neglected during the bipolar world of the Cold War except for a brief period in the 1950s and early 1960s. For economic reasons—in particular those of energy security—Italy has also consolidated ties with countries to the East and South, such as Russia and Iran.

This growing bilateralization of Italian foreign policy has not come at the expense, at least not fully, of more traditional multilateral engagement. Support for European integration has not been withdrawn. Like other European capitals, however, Rome has begun to regard the European Union less strategically and more opportunistically. Some of Berlusconi’s coalition partners are openly Euro-skeptic or even Euro-phobic. Displaying a considerable amount of ambivalence, the Berlusconi governments have invested in European institutions and policies only selectively (to its credit, the Berlusconi government recently took a clear position on the EU’s responsibility for the stabilization of Greece). In general, further European integration has been supported only when it promised the consolidation of inter-governmental structures and practices that Rome could use to its own advantage. This is a notable change from Italy’s not-too-distant past, when several of its leaders were ardent supporters of true European federalism. (The Italian Center Left has, for its part, adopted a much less ambivalent approach to the EU and multilateralism in general, fully overcoming the skepticism that most Italian progressives

displayed until late in the Cold War for both European integration and Atlantic solidarity).

When it comes to NATO, Italy's support has remained strong, and its position has often dovetailed with that of the United States. In the most recent instance, Italy did not join the attempt by Germany and others to revise NATO's nuclear deterrence policy through the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear warheads from European sites (Italy hosts some of these in military bases in the north). Italy's close relationship with Moscow, strongly reinforced by Berlusconi's personal ties with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, has, at least for now, not interfered with U.S.-Italian cooperation in NATO. On the contrary, Berlusconi takes credit himself for the historic move by NATO and Russia at Pratica di Mare in 2002 to establish the "NATO-Russia Council"—which the Obama administration is now interested in reinvigorating. Italy's tepid stance on further NATO enlargement to Eastern Europe and the Caucasus was certainly met with disagreement in Washington during the Bush years but has now become mainstream including in the United States.

### **U.S.-Italian Relations**

Moreover, the new trends in Italian foreign policy have not undermined U.S.-Italian bilateral ties - at least not yet. On the contrary, in recent years, Italy has more fully appreciated the strategic, political, and economic value of this long-standing relationship. Italy's close and often deferential relations with Washington have been a key and constant element of Italian foreign policy since the end of World War II. Despite having one of Europe's largest communist parties during the Cold War and maintaining a lesser spot among Western Europe's liberal elites, Italy has a true fascination with America. This orientation has been a major cultural and social factor in bilateral affairs and has served to prevent anti-American sentiments from becoming mainstream.

During the bipolar era and its immediate aftermath, however, Italy was on America's side in a different and more fundamental way than it is today. Italy consistently sought membership in the international organizations that the U.S. created or sponsored in order to consolidate a broader Western order. Although maintaining a standing of its own, the bilateral relationship was, to a large extent, the core of a larger system of relations that defined its international strategy and limited Italy's autonomy and the scope of its national ambitions. This dynamic is less active today.

Italian governments of both the Center Right and the Center Left have been vocal about the need to strengthen the position of Europe and the West in today's globalizing world. During the Bush administration, the Italian government's alignment with America was firm, although realized through policies of varying accordance, depending on the color of the government. At the same time, however, Italian foreign policy gradually came to incorporate a more independent set of aims and priorities. The identification and definition of the latter seems to have increasingly less to do with considerations about what Europe and the West mean - and Italy's place within them - than with notions of an often only vaguely defined Italian national interest.

For the time being, this more independent course of Italian foreign policy has notably created more opportunities than tensions with the United States. On the one hand, Italy has invested heavily in confirming its status as a loyal ally in Washington on the premise that the relationship with the U.S. is by far the most valuable. For example, as with other European countries, Italy's presence in Afghanistan is principally a testimony to its solidarity and loyalty to the United States. On the other hand, Rome's autonomous choices have sometimes resulted in spontaneous convergences with U.S. policy, creating *de*

*facto* synergies between the U.S. strategy and the Italian diplomacy.

### **Engagement with Russia**

One significant case is Russia. Washington has certainly followed Rome's dealings with Moscow with skepticism and even apprehension, especially as regards energy cooperation. Concerns that Europe's dependence on Russian oil and gas may become even greater as a result of the deals that Italy's leading industrial company, ENI, has signed with Gazprom, have not lessened in the transition from Bush to Obama. Obama's "reset policy" with Moscow, however, has allowed Italy to present its own engagement with Russia as perfectly consistent with or even constructive for the new U.S. strategy of dialogue and cooperation. If alignment with the U.S. toward Russia reflected Italy's "choice of camp" during the Cold War, today's synergies are less strategic and may prove to be short-lived. Italy certainly subscribes to the view that Western security is enhanced if the European system becomes more inclusive and less antagonistic to Russia. However, there is much enthusiasm (and opportunism) in Italy's relationship with Russia today, the essence of which can be captured in two words: energy and business.

### **Iran and Italy's Policy in the Emerging Global South**

The most notable case of unexpected and perhaps only short-term synergy between Italian and U.S. foreign policies during the Obama administration has been Iran. Obama's diplomatic opening to Iran last year suddenly made Italy's engagement with Tehran more acceptable to Washington. In the past Rome has been harshly criticized for taking too soft a stance toward the Iranian regime, often as a consequence of its strong commercial ties (Italy ranked first among Iran's trade partners in the EU in 2008). This situation changed during the first year of the Obama administration. Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini

apparently received a green light from Washington to attempt to involve Iran in the discussions over the stabilization of Afghanistan, though Italy's outreach quickly proved overly optimistic and impractical. Italy's rotating presidency of the G-8 Summit in 2009 briefly gave Rome some authority and room to maneuver for conducting a policy of engagement with Tehran parallel to the one led by the United States. This synergy, which has probably already faded, says little, however, about America's and Italy's respective views of the Iranian problem.

Italy has been clear that it will not accept a revisionist and nuclear Iran. Its understanding of what is needed to avoid this scenario, however, seems to differ in some important respects from Washington's. Condemnation of the Iranian regime's repression of its citizens following elections last summer and reassurances, most recently given to another important regional partner of Italy, Israel, have not been matched by willingness to fully embrace U.S.-sponsored sanctions. Even though non-alignment on this issue seems improbable, Italy is in a different category from European countries like France, which has actively engaged extra-European powers in attempts to bring them into an anti-Iran coalition. Rome insists that sanctions are acceptable and will be effective only if they receive universal support, and it has expressed strong skepticism about a possible military option should sanctions fail. Obama has tested whether this stance translates into a constructive position by, for instance, urging Italy to pressure Turkey towards the adoption of sanctions and greater alignment with the U.S. position. The nuclear fuel-swap deal, most recently signed by Turkey, Brazil, and Iran, has already exposed the limits of Italy's persuasion.

In fact, both Turkey and Italy seem to be involved, though in varying degrees and with different aims, in a new development that some analysts have described, perhaps too hastily and emphatically, as the rise of the

South. Turkey's less-aligned, if not competitive, diplomacy in the greater Middle East is at the center of the international debate and is followed with attention and growing preoccupation in Washington. Italy too has revived and expanded its relationships in the Mediterranean region, showing an activism that lends itself to different interpretations, as it has been multi-directional. In only the past two years, Italy has successfully concluded a rapprochement with Libya, upgraded its relationship with Egypt, and established new ties with Syria (attempting, among other things, to replace Turkey in the difficult mediation between Damascus and Jerusalem). At the same time, Rome has considerably strengthened its dialogue and cooperation with Israel, even when it has been at the expense of Italian-Iranian relations.

This activism has not necessarily resulted in transatlantic tensions. Rapprochement with Libya has taken place at a time when the United States itself, even before the Obama administration, has made an effort to normalize relations with Tripoli (while still maintaining a guarded relationship with Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi himself). The United States also deeply appreciated Italy's efforts to prevent or contain conflict in the Middle East, not only through its ties with both Arab nations and Israel, but also through concrete proof of its leadership, as in Lebanon where until recently Rome led the United Nations Interim Force (UNIFIL II) peacekeeping mission in the south of the country. Italy, moreover, remains one of the last few supporters of Turkey's EU membership, a goal that the United States has advocated for decades with perhaps greater strength than any European government.

These and other convergences should not lead one to underestimate the evolving international context in which they take place, nor deduce that they necessarily underscore a natural harmony of U.S.-Italian long-term interests. Although still one of the most committed members of NATO and leader of

European integration, Italy seems to have drawn particular national lessons from globalization and the end of America's unipolar standing. Unlike emerging actors, Italy's strategy looks chiefly defensive, with the goal to preserve a position and status that now seems challenged. Like rising actors such as Turkey, Italy is nonetheless reinventing its role. Using historical legacies in the Mediterranean and new relationships with emerging powers, Rome is primarily safeguarding and perhaps even expanding its own influence, as opposed to that of the West or Europe. In this context, the alliance with the United States has been re-confirmed as key to Italy's priorities. But the partnership has also been transformed as it has become more strictly linked (or subordinated) to the pursuit of the Italian national interest, rather than a broader set of responsibilities and orientations. If this development continues to hold true, it will unleash a new set of issues and questions, including the possibility that, as the global context evolves further, the traditional solidity of U.S.-Italian relations may be tested and perhaps even undermined by developments taking place in Europe or the Mediterranean, but still capable of reverberating across the Atlantic.

As a seasoned and enlightened statesman – the first leader of the Italian Communist Party to be granted a visa to travel to the U.S. during the Cold War and among the earliest supporters from the left of European integration – President Giorgio Napolitano has followed attentively the evolution of Italian foreign policy. Napolitano is aware of the potential and the challenges of the new era. In his current role as President of the Republic, Napolitano is respected by government and opposition parties alike as an impartial guarantor of Italian institutions and an active champion of Italy and Italian interests abroad. As he discusses current global issues and the economic situation in Europe with the U.S. president, the hope is that a debate will start at the highest levels about the future course of U.S.-Italian relations. This will ensure that, as the

configuration of power in the world keeps changing and new trends emerge, U.S.-Italian cooperation will remain a constant feature of America's engagement with Europe and of Italy's contribution to international security and peace.

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