

## **5+1, 5+2, the US and Europe**

On June 12 President George Bush visited Italy. On the agenda there was Italy's inclusion in the 5+1 Group, which is formed by the UN Security Council's permanent members plus Germany (as well as the EU High Representative as a spokesperson) to negotiate with Iran on nuclear issues. Italy's inclusion in the 5+1, a matter that had already been raised by the previous government of Romano Prodi, is now a major foreign policy priority for the new Berlusconi Government.

Just before his trip to Italy, in an interview with the Italian television, Bush voiced his support for Italy's inclusion, confirming what the Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had already told Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Franco Frattini. French President Nicolas Sarkozy – who needs Italy's full support for its Mediterranean Union due to be launched next July – is more open to the idea, so are the Chinese, thankful to the Italian authorities for not having met with the Dalai Lama. Yet, as Germany strongly opposes Italy's involvement, also the Bush administration became more hesitating.

On the merits, the inclusion of Italy in the negotiations with Iran makes sense. The 5+1 Group has not produced the hoped-for results. The negotiations are stalled, and a further UN resolution on the matter is unlikely due to opposition from both China and Russia. In 2009, Iran will enter an election year, making concessions from their side more difficult. Yet, there is a slim but real chance that the election could spark an internal debate. Italy has important relations with Iran for both geopolitical, and trade reasons, being the second European economic partner with Iran after Germany. Italy also has a solid relationship with Russia, and this, too, could be an asset given Russia's influence with Iran. Also, giving new momentum to negotiations with the inclusion of a new actor would help counterbalance the weaker role the US will be able to play in the upcoming months due to its own presidential elections and the start of a new administration

Last but not least, Italy has a tradition of diplomatic expertise excelling in fostering difficult agreements. The forthcoming elections in Iran will either open a window of opportunity or close the door to negotiations for many months. It is therefore in everyone's interest that every effort be taken to achieve a breakthrough. In such situations, manners count – which is to say that the ability to put the parties at ease and show empathy with Iran will make a real difference. The current negotiators need a new actor, one that is welcomed by Iran - at the beginning of the negotiations Tehran itself had asked Rome to be part of the group. For these reasons Italy's participation in the negotiating team should be welcomed by all the players.

However, many, both in Italy and in Germany, link the issue of the 5+1 or 5+2 to the question of the possible restructuring of the UN Security Council, making an agreement more difficult. For both, inclusion among the permanent members is indeed a pillar of their foreign policy and a matter of high national interest. In this light, the question of inclusion in the 5+1 Group becomes an issue that goes well beyond the actual negotiations with Iran.

Yet, the two questions should be separated, as the question of how to unblock negotiations with Iran should come first on any western country agenda – military options is still a real possibility. So introducing petty disputes among Europeans is sterile and counterproductive.

Even more so as, shall the Lisbon Treaty enter into force, because in any case a solution must be found following to the referendum in Ireland - the wisest thing to do would be to remodel the 5+1 introducing a single voice for the EU, for instance in the image of the Quartet for the Middle East. The High Representative would then act not only as a spokesperson for the entire negotiating group,

but also as the formal representative of the EU. Clearly, there will be resistance against this option – inside and outside Europe.

Italy could contribute to this debate and thus help to unblock negotiations with Iran by making it clear that it would be willing to step back from an eventual 5+2 the day that the EU takes over. What must be avoided at all costs is a quarrel among current and prospective negotiators that would show Iran that, after all, there is no need to negotiate. In dealing with Iran, we cannot afford a divided negotiating team.

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