



NATO Foundation
Defense College



Italy's stabilising role in the "wider Mediterranean"

Diego Brasioli

Ambassador of Italy to Luxembourg

The one underway in Ukraine is certainly not the only recent or ongoing war in the world but, at the dawn of this third millennium, it stands as the first major interstate conflict of an entirely new nature. The war has reactivated deep telluric faults that in many cases we thought had been dormant, triggering or aggravating several global crisis factors: scarcity of energy supplies, demographic dynamics, migration flows, climate change, food security, exploitation of the planet's resources, new technologies, world trade crises, implications of artificial intelligence, increasing authoritarian populism, widening gaps and social inequalities, and the risk of ever-widening conflicts. In short, the key factors of the new global strategic balances - or imbalances.

In such a complex context unleashed by the first “globalized war”¹, what role can Italy play, beyond the government's support for Ukraine, firmly reiterated by Prime Minister of Giorgia Meloni on several occasions, most recently during her visit to Kiev on the 22nd of February?

First of all, it should always be remembered that Italy is a founding member of NATO and the European Community; these organizations represent the two polar stars of Italy's position in international relations, the basic canvas on which to set diplomatic action to protect Italy's national interests and act as global stabilising actor.

As Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Antonio Tajani reiterated in his first meeting with the press at the Farnesina, on the occasion of the ambassadors' conference held last December 21-22² (and as the Head of State President Sergio Mattarella authoritatively emphasized in his traditional end-of-year address), the Mediterranean and Africa will be the main areas on which Italy's foreign policy action will focus in the coming months, with the aim of arriving as soon as possible at “concrete results” on the Libyan dossier and the migration issue.

The government's conviction is that the migration crisis “must be solved in Africa,” with the application of a “Mattei plan” at national level, which promotes a “non-predatory, but collaborative” attitude³, and a “Marshall plan” at European level, in order to find resources for further economic intervention on the African continent. A joint strategy then, that must lay the groundwork for

¹ <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/bertrand-badie-en-ukraine-nous-assistons-a-la-premiere-guerre-mondialisee-20220408>

² https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/news_dalle_ambasciate/2022/12/22/tajani-costruire-ponti-e-linea-politica-dellitalia-nel-mondo_892577e8-17cc-4f1f-b509-0d5b0b3c90b3.html. Enrico Mattei was the legendary founder of the Italian ENI oil and gas company, capable to put Italian energy policy firmly in the global scene.

³ <https://www.ft.com/content/05d17d35-b0c3-47d2-b6b7-6f7d65d758fc>.

addressing such momentous problems as climate change, poverty, war, and terrorism, all root causes of the “great migratory pressure” on the south-north route. Tajani, in this regard, also mentioned the demographic push that will bring the African continent to have “2,5-3 billion inhabitants” in 2050 and that could, in the coming years, make migration flows “unstoppable”.

The head of Italian diplomacy spoke about the Sahel, expressing his intention to open soon an embassy in Mauritania and stressing the need to have “more Europe” in an area where the threat of Al Qaeda is growing, as well as the Horn of Africa, where Italy is “working for stability.” He also spoke about industrial policy, of the need to forge agreements that allow for the purchase at advantageous prices of raw materials such as lithium, essential for battery production, but investing “with an African eye.” “We need to bring our know-how and process raw materials in Africa with African labour. We have to work together for mutual benefit,” he explained.

Minister Tajani is also focussed on the Balkans, a region that is extremely important to Italy for two main reasons: on the one hand because it is a transit area for the Eastern migratory corridor, and on the other because it risks becoming an area “controlled politically, economically and strategically by non-European countries. “For this reason, Italy is in favour of the accession to the European Union of all candidate countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina as stressed at the national conference *Italy and the Western Balkans: growth and integration*” held in Trieste on the 24th of January⁴.

These first programmatic statements confirm that the new executive, in line with the approach of previous governments, also intends to move in the context of the “wider Mediterranean” (*Mediterraneo allargato*).

As is well known, the concept of the wider Mediterranean has been developed since the Nineties of the last century by the Italian Navy, in order to define a geographical and geostrategic area whose control would be fundamental to Italian interests, and that stems from the need to consider this sea basin interconnected to all surrounding areas⁵.

The Mediterranean appears, only on superficial examination, to be a small and semi-enclosed sea, fundamentally secondary in the logics of the great international powers. If, however, one turns one’s

⁴ <https://www.iltempo.it/italpress/2022/12/19/news/tajani-mediterraneo-ucraina-e-balceni-priorita-politica-estera-34272242/> .

⁵ <https://www.difesaonline.it/geopolitica/analisi/la-teoria-del-mediterraneo-allargato-e-la-geopolitica-classica-italia> .

gaze beyond its purely geographic boundaries, it is easy to understand how, with all its political and economic linkages, the Mediterranean becomes the fulcrum of fundamental strategic interests.

Its borders do not stop at Gibraltar, but reach across the Atlantic to the Canary Islands and the west coast of North Africa. To the south, its border is no longer the Levant and Maghreb coast but is projected toward the Sahel, whose crises directly affect the “Mare Nostrum”. To the northeast, the border reaches directly to the Black Sea, and then to Crimea. The wider Mediterranean penetrates directly into the Middle East; the Red Sea as well as the Horn of Africa are part of it, extending then to the Persian Gulf. Across the Mediterranean, despite having a surface area equal to 1% of the world’s seas, passes 20% of the world’s maritime traffic, because it is the most advantageous route to connect the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian and Eastern Pacific Oceans; moreover, the underwater communication backbones connecting Europe to Asia and Africa lie on its seabed

It is an area of overriding national strategic interest, at the centre of multiple, highly heterogeneous and potentially conflicting dynamics, on which enduring crises are being grafted, whose effects reverberate on Europe and primarily on Italy. It is a complex area, shaken by deep fault lines, resulting in strong geopolitical drives, fuelled by social, confessional, security and climatic phenomena, accelerated and exacerbated by the pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The Mediterranean basin, as the events of recent months show, is exposed perhaps more than any other area of the world to worrying phenomena of migration, competition for resources, trans-national criminal activities, military tensions, crises and conflicts and climate change. It naturally includes neighbouring countries and geographic areas whose affairs impinge on Italy and the alliances to which it belongs, the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union.

The Mediterranean region constitutes the “Southern Flank” of both the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union, our country’s two main references in security, defence and social and economic integration. It is therefore a concrete success of Italian diplomacy that in principle the “Wider Mediterranean” was reflected by important documents of the two International Organizations, both in the new *Strategic Concept* of NATO⁶ as well as in the *Strategic Compass* of the European Union⁷, both adopted in 2022.

⁶ <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/index.html>.

⁷ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/21/a-strategic-compass-for-a-stronger-eu-security-and-defence-in-the-next-decade/>.

Italy has always looked at the Mediterranean region as a natural area of strategic interest, finding itself right at the centre not only geographically, but also historically and culturally.

Last year marked the 40th anniversary of the *Italcon Mission* (Italian contingent in Lebanon), the peacekeeping operation carried out from 1982 to 1984 by the Italian armed forces in Lebanon with France, the United States of America and the United Kingdom.

Italian troops from had already participated in truce monitoring or peacekeeping missions abroad since 1949 (UNMOGIP) and 1950 (Somalia transition to independence), but it was actually the first time since the end of World War II that an Italian contingent with heavy armament went on a mission outside Italian borders, to defend the civilian population of a country in open conflict.

Italy in this occasion developed a new way of conceiving and executing peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations, creating a model fully recognised as a standard at international level

Indeed, Italy is, among Western countries, the leading provider in terms of military and police personnel, to peacekeeping operations and the seventh largest contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget. Italian participation in UN missions is particularly valued, especially due to our contingents' ability in keeping open a dialogue with local populations and in effectively blending civilian and military components in stabilization and peacekeeping operations⁸.

This remarkable expertise has developed through the experience of forty years ago, from the battered southern suburbs of Beirut, thanks to the professional teamwork between the military led by General Franco Angioni⁹ and the diplomats. It was perhaps in those years that Italy, in full coherence with the contribution to a security architecture in the Euro-Atlantic framework and the construction of a fully integrated Europe (not only at the economic and social level, but as a community of values) realised that it could play a consistent leading role in international relations, precisely starting from the wider Mediterranean area.

Nowadays the wider Mediterranean is at the centre of three major crisis factors: a growing migratory pressure, the food emergency and the issue of energy supplies. It clearly shows how the attentions of

⁸ https://www.esteri.it/it/politica-estera-e-cooperazione-allo-sviluppo/organizzazioni-internazionali/onu/onu_ruolo_italia_nel_peacekeeping/.

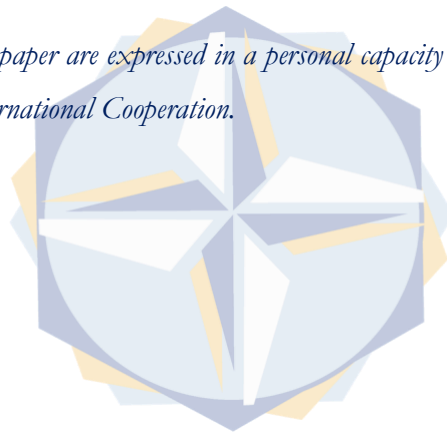
⁹ Franco Angioni, *Un soldato Italiano in Libano*, Milano, Rizzoli, 1984.

major global powers, other emerging players, but also transnational non-state actors, evidently converge on this area.

Therefore, the wider Mediterranean, together with the Atlantic dimension and European integration, constitutes the main theatre in which Italy is called to engage, not only to protect national interests, but also to project and conduct, in various forms and modalities on the basis of Parliament's decisions, diplomatic activities and bilateral or multilateral cooperation, including in the context of stabilization and pacification missions and operations developed in synergy with allies, partners and International Organizations.

This is a key area where Italy will be play and strengthen its leading role, focussing on the tools that make it a reliable security provider and promoter of stability at the international level.

** N.B.: The views contained in this paper are expressed in a personal capacity and are not attributable to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.*



Diego Brasioli

Ambassador of Italy to Luxembourg

Diego Brasioli is the Italian Ambassador to Luxembourg. Has been Ambassador to Romania (2013-2017) and Principal Director for North Africa and the Middle East of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2017-2018). From 2018 to 2020 he has been Principal Director for Security Matters and Deputy Director General for Political Affairs of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



NATO Foundation
Defense College
