

NATO: THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTIVISM IN THE MEDITERRANEAN SCENARIO

The secure defense of NATO members does not depend on the Kyiv frontline; the southern flank is the most unguarded. This paper deals with the Mediterranean, a closed sea without borders which globalized before globalization, examining some strategic alternatives for Western allies. The Mediterranean is a point of contact, a diaphragm, and a battlefield. In addition, the central Mediterranean is a relevant area where Russia and China have their foot in the door because of the disengagement of France and Italy and the lack of attention of NATO. It is precisely on this weaker frontier that NATO must relaunch its commitment and presence. Defending marine spaces determines the continent's safety. So, losing the Mediterranean can be disastrous. And finally, it examines Italian policy in the Mediterranean to date and the reasons why Italy can and must correct the strabismus of the USA, which is completely looking at the Indo-Pacific, and of imagines a peripheral Europe without politics.

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine is like a seaquake in contemporary history. The repercussions on food and energy systems and the global chessboard are epochal. Energy systems, as the heart of the economic model of development, stability, are under stress. Global relations are in a fluid phase. The heavy return of Russia on the center stage of history stands in the way of a Western world that is regaining momentum after years of exhaustion, in which its values have worn out. In this changing scenario, the Atlantic Alliance must play a role, especially in the “Wider Mediterranean”.

NATO Race to The East: Effects, Perspectives, Fragility

Contrary to those who had predicted its “brain death”, the Atlantic Alliance has shown its usefulness; by closing its ranks and is giving a new impetus to expansion to east by welcoming new members and strategic partners “outside the area”. Indeed, NATO is successful if it works as a dynamic, flexible, extended alliance because the Atlantic could be protected by protecting the peripheral seas, such as the Baltic, Blake Sea, Persian Gulf, and so the Mediterranean.

In an interview, Stoltenberg¹ retraced the evolutionary stages of NATO: the containment of the USSR, the operations against ethnic conflict in the Balkans – this commitment must be relaunched, the fight against terrorism and then, from 2014 onwards, the containment of Russia. Stoltenberg envisioned a global projection of a multidimensional and “open-door” NATO, with a focus on the Arctic, Baltic, and Black seas. However, there is no specific reference to the Mediterranean region.

NATO has been shifting its centre of gravity further east, following precise geopolitical theories,² and now Poland is a stronghold with Baltic countries and heroic Ukraine as outposts. Meanwhile, Russia and China are increasing their influence in the “Wider Mediterranean”. Russia’s militaries and militias have exercised in Syria and Libya for years while China continues to enforce commercial cooperation – these should be warning signs.

The Mediterranean is still in turmoil after the Arab Springs and is seeing all these developments. The UE considers the Mediterranean only when migratory flows increase and must contract out the management. However, the new NATO Strategic Compass opens a phase of renewed activism, also in the “peripheral” seas: here the fate of the clash could be decided. The expansion eastward made it possible to

¹ S. Lumet and E. Perrot, “La solidarité stratégique après Madrid, une conversation avec le secrétaire général de l’OTAN, Jens Stoltenberg”, *Le Grand Continent*, 15 July 2022.

² Z. Brzezinski, *Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (Basic Books, 1998).

be prepared for the worst as predicted by Past USA President Bill Clinton,³ and the same should be done on the southern side.

The Relevance of a “Global Sea” and Its “Peninsula-Island”

The “Great Game” between ascending global or regional powers is in its early stages and the Mediterranean will be a decisive factor as ever. Cap Bon, the Transmed gas pipeline that carries precious Algerian gas to Italy, ends up in Mazara del Vallo in Sicily, and the Pantelleria-Pelagie-Malta triangle in the Strait of Sicily, are a necessary passage, a point whose control determines global equilibria.

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It was in Sicily that Garibaldi had landed less than a century earlier, in 1860, supported by British gunboats to complete the dream of Italian Unity, defeating the Kingdom of Naples. The Southern Italy was also the first landing point of the USA, a fully-fledged global superpower, in Europe, with the Husky operation in 1943. The American presence in Sicily, confirmed by subsequent military installations (the bases of Sigonella and Niscemi and missiles), was decisive for the projection towards the Old Continent of the USA and control over the Mediterranean for Soviet containment.

In the British proposal for the partition of Italy at the Tehran conference (1943), the two Italian islands, Sardinia, and Sicily with the control of the Strait of Messina, would in fact have come under British protection – the folds of history are so illuminating.

Today, the American order seems to have changed. The progressive strategic retreat of the U.S. – the VI Fleet has reduced its range of action – and the simultaneous pulling back of France and Italy, especially after the Libyan crisis, has been compensated only in part by the renewed activism of Türkiye in the *Ak-deniz*. This is a critical point for the entire Alliance and should present a strategic concern.

³ B. Clinton, “I Tried to Put Russia on Another Path”, *The Atlantic*, 7 April 2022. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/04/bill-clinton-nato-expansion-ukraine/629499/>

However, geography is a constant and it is predictive. Italy, while retreating, still juts out in the Mediterranean, and because of this, is destined to be involved in the clash due to its barycentric position – primarily in Sicily – and if not in the Russia-USA clash via Ukraine, it might be involved in the latent clash with China, in asymmetrical forms. Italy may appear, at most perhaps, a co-star, if it can relaunch its autonomous presence: otherwise, it will remain a much sought-after prey.

The Clear NATO Choice

In the early stages of the Russian invasion, Italy was a “special note” for its historical and economical affinity with Russia. The cultural relations between the two peoples have solid foundations and so do the economic ones, although already undermined by the wave of post-2014 sanctions.

Italy was the main supporter of an opening of credit towards Russia, placing faith in a transition towards a Western-style model. In the “End of History” climate of the late 1990s, Italy had tried to bring Russia closer to the Western world. It was the season of the historic meeting in Pratica di Mare⁴ between Putin and Bush, the formal end of the cold war, which, indeed, was resolved with nothing. History took up another, less desirable, path.

That attempt was born of a political vision that saw Europe as a container within concentric circles with a political and geographic centre in Western Europe and extending to Russia, one of the homelands of European culture. However, the first cracks in this project emerge with the ethnic conflicts in the Balkans at the end of the 90’s.

Indeed, although it is strongly linked to Russia due to its dependency on gas, Italy immediately sided with conviction against Russia by actively participating in the various sanctions with heavy economic repercussions. It is also true, that due to the strong presence of economic interests that have resulted in lobbying actions, which in the political debate has often been influenced by pro-Russian positions; the Russian mission also contributed during the toughest weeks of the Coronavirus. Italy and Germany, respectively the second and first manufacturing powers, are strongly interconnected - the production districts of Northern Italy, the most developed region, are part of the German value chain - and both are in serious trouble due to the consequences of energy dependence to the point of being forced to soften their position from the threat of collapse on the social order.

⁴ Kremlin statement, At the Russia-NATO Summit President Vladimir Putin and leaders of 19 NATO countries signed the Rome Declaration “NATO- Russia Relations: A New Quality”, 28 May 2002.

Italy within the NATO: a Happy Intuition

Italy's entry into NATO was a "win-win" move. On the one hand, Italy regained international credibility and recognition after the horrors of totalitarianism, the armistice, and the flight of the king – the lowest moment in the history of the ruling classes in Italy – through the then-new Alliance with the USA, GB, France, Benelux, and Portugal etc. On the other, the Alliance overcame the typically Atlantic characterization and the self-limiting order it imposed, projecting itself fully into the Mediterranean as the main actor. It was a fortunate intuition.

After all, the Mediterranean, Braudel noted, is a "sea of seas" (Aegean Sea, Adriatic Sea) but also a "sea between seas" and therefore, in its extensive interpretation, is of considerable importance. The entrance to the peninsula was strategic, like that of Türkiye, which wedges the Alliance into Eurasia, another important area for the Wider Mediterranean. NATO, therefore, is not as a system with watertight compartments, it is as flexible and capable of grasping the complexity of geopolitical issues, which require more long-term policies and planning.

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In parallel of the entrance in the Alliance, the U.S. commitment to the reconstruction of Italy has led to rapid industrialization centered around flourishing production districts that are still the backbone of the industrial system, currently in severe crisis due to energy scarcity. This strategy has made it possible to cement the model of democracy and prosperity.

The adhesion was supported both by the USA – with its continued presence in Sicily – and by the Italians (the activism of the then ambassador to Washington Alberto Tarchiani⁵ for this cause was remarkable – he leaved a detailed diary of his last year in the USA), it was a great intuition because it allowed NATO to open to the Mediterranean. Within the Alliance, Italy has been able to act as a guide and mediator in the transition of the Arab world in the phase of decolonization.

⁵ A. Tarchiani, *Tormenti di un ambasciatore. L'anno conclusivo di Washington 1954*, new Italian edition by Daniela Felsini (Rubbettino, 2006).

This political framework also includes the choice of gas as a source to produce electricity: material support for the stabilization of the ruling classes in North Africa that have come out of the yoke of colonialism. The Italian commitment to support the National Liberation Front in Algeria but also Tunisia during Bourguiba and his successor is to be viewed in this way.

Mediterranean, The Long Trail of Chaos. Russia at The Gateway

The more NATO expands and consolidates in the Northeast, the more Russia tries to penetrate from the South, the weaker the flank. The conquest of Crimea, Russia's outpost towards the much desired "warm seas", the armour plating of the Donbas, and the stabilization in the Black Sea make Russia a fully-fledged Mediterranean power. The Russian role is confirmed by the stable presence in Syria, Libya and in areas such as the Sahel which naturally extend to the Mediterranean; the Chinese presence in Algeria⁶ must also be considered, as demonstrated by the agreements for gas and phosphates, as well as the presence in Greek and Italian ports. Russia is upon us.

The Mediterranean is still affected by the long trail of the chaos of the Arab Spring season which did away with the elites made in post-colonialism, which had developed a framework of stability, albeit with some serious inconsistencies. Tunisia has been devastated by terrorism and only a return to presidential form seems to ensure any stability. Although spared by the Springs, fragile Lebanon – two years after the terrible explosion of the port of Beirut (4 August 2020) – is increasingly becoming a battleground between regional powers. Libya no longer exists – an unforgivable mistake on France and Italy's part.

While the U.S. has reduced its presence and attempted stabilization with the Abrahamic Agreements, France and Italy have lost their presence and credibility of the past. The difficulties of the two regional powers are also confirmed by the end of the mission in Mali coordinated by France which leaves the Sahel area dangerously uncovered, where, conversely, Russia's interest is confirmed. However, the mission had shown several limitations and the two coups in Mali had already compromised relations with Paris.

At the same time, some Arab countries have moved towards the western bloc: Morocco and Tunisia, as demonstrated by the participation in the Ramstein summit and the aid promised at the last summit in Spain. In the first case, an effect of the Abrahamic Pact which attracted the western bloc; in the second the need

⁶ "Un accord sino-algérien relance un mégaprojet de phosphates", *Arab News*, 23 March 2022.

for acceptance by the IMF. Net of these approaches, the situation in the enlarged Mediterranean remains potentially critical.

Looking for New Alliances?

As a center of gravity in the Mediterranean, the Italian peninsula can be a stable landing place towards the Mediterranean or a shore towards Europe. Someone suggests, it is “almost an island”. For this reason, bilateral relations are intensifying, with France, which is interested in returning to the Mediterranean Sea, and with Türkiye, which needs a stopover in Europe.

The Quirinal Treaty confirms closer collaboration with France and inaugurates a privileged axis with Paris, which anticipates a redefinition of the European framework. The great confusion and autonomous pressures are breaking up the EU front: the understanding between Italy and France is an attempt to respond to the chaos.

A relaunch of relations with Türkiye is also very positive. The third Italo-Turkish summit, the previous one was in 2012, solidifies the relations between the two peoples – at the time Italy was a strong promoter of Türkiye’s EU accession – primarily industrial and commercial but also energy relations, because Türkiye became a hub in gas infrastructures.

Conclusions

The resurgence of Italian proactiveness in the central Mediterranean would be a guarantee of security and stability for the whole Alliance as well as a harbinger of development for the North Africa and Mediterranean people, who suffer most from the consequences of war.

It is a process that requires a plurality of actions: a relaunch of the presence of the Army and, above all, of the Navy (in constant downsizing) and cultural diplomacy which, thanks to the legacy of the recent past, would find fertile ground – to be counted within this effort, the proposal of the former Prime Minister Romano Prodi⁷ to favor Mediterranean universities; the strengthening of the infrastructural system, such as the bridge between Messina and Reggio Calabria to keep Sicily linked, avoiding centrifugal forces, the ports or that of Taranto or that of Trieste as an outlet on the Mediterranean of Central Europe.

What is certain is that any ambition to go back to being a medium-sized regional

⁷ P. Bricco, Prodi: «Costruiamo nuove università mediterranee per cambiare visione», *Il Sole*, 24 Ore, 10 July 2022.

power will be crumbling if the problem of energy dependence is not resolved in time with a national and European strategy for self-sufficiency. The recent political fibrillations with the thunderous fall of the government led by the coach Mario Draghi make Italy even weaker.

A short-sighted view of history has condemned Mediterranean to be peripheral, but the latest episodes show its undisputed importance in the “Great Game”.