

# OLD CROSSROADS AND NEW FRONTIERS: BRICS+, THE EUROPEAN UNION, AND THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA

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*This article puts two concurrent developments in the Mediterranean region in conversation with one another. First, the victory of the neofascist Fratelli d'Italia in Italy's 2022 general election has led to fears that the EU's and NATO's leading Mediterranean member state might begin gravitating toward authoritarian global powers like Russia and China. Second, the January 2024 expansion of BRICS saw the leaders of Russia, China, and the bloc's other states invite six new countries to join, including the organization's first member state on the Mediterranean Sea, Egypt. In analyzing these two events side by side, this article suggests that the Mediterranean is likely to see increasing geopolitical competition between liberal-democratic alliances (like the EU and NATO) and partnerships steered by illiberal global powers (like BRICS+ and the BRI).*

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**W**hen Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI) won over a quarter of the votes cast in Italy's 2022 general election, many long-time observers of Europe's radical right advised caution in assuming that Italy would immediately go down the same populist-nationalist, anti-Brussels path trod by Poland's PiS party, Hungary's Fidesz, or even Sweden's SD, whose own victory predated FdI's by two weeks. However, as the first country among the signatories of the Treaty of Rome of 1957 to see a truly far-right government take power, no neat comparison could be drawn between Italy's relationship with the European Union and those of latter-day EU members similarly snagged by the lure of sovereigntist, EU-devolutionist thinking. A few days after Meloni's victory, one expert even commented that Euroscepticism, as a whole, "does not have to be seen as a bad thing, rather as a reassertion of values at the state level in order to pursue the EU's continued development at the supranational level."<sup>1</sup> Nearly a year later, long after Europe had enjoyed a moment to catch its breath and take stock of things, the German Historical Institute-Rome's Alexander Carlo Martinez deemed the quest to nail down Meloni as a Eurosceptic to be a "red herring."<sup>2</sup> Instead, Martinez compared her and others like her to the two-headed god Janus, concluding that "the (far-)right both construct and contest, use and discard, European integration and ideas of Europe when they see it fit."<sup>3</sup>

In many ways, this impulse to trim down the broad, next-Brexit brushes wielded by more excitable journalists and policy wonks is a good one. How, indeed, could even the most far-right Italians argue that the EU had been imposed on them by external forces when, from the very beginning, Italians were the ones doing the imposing? That is, on, first, themselves by Italy's leading role in the negotiations that, in the 1957 Rome treaty, ushered in the European Economic Community (EEC), and on, second, the rest of the continent via Italy's outsized influence in Brussels from thereon forward? As Martinez shrewdly notes, the fact that FdI is in many ways a direct descendant of the neofascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) is key: MSI strongly criticized the economic and political implications of the EEC, while at the same time supporting it in parliament when it came time to ratify the treaty.<sup>4</sup> More so than their equivalents in France, Italy's neofascists understood that a united Europe could benefit their movement if Italy could shape that unification. Indeed, Italy, possibly more than any other parties of the Treaty of Rome, saw the EEC lead to prosperity where previously endemic poverty reigned. Italy's economic miracle was arguably far more impressive than the German one, given both how far behind Italy started and how truly destroyed Italy's less advanced industry and infrastructure was by WWII.

1) Alexander Brotman, "Giorgia Meloni and the New Face of Euroscepticism," *Geopolitical Monitor*, 27 September 2022. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/giorgia-meloni-and-the-new-face-of-euroscepticism/>

2) Alexander Carlo Martinez, "Interview with Giorgia Meloni – Is Italy's New PM a Eurosceptic?" *De (Constructing Europe | Hypotheses*, 14 August 2023. <https://europesist.hypotheses.org/2226>

3) Alexander Carlo Martinez, 14 August 2023.

4) Alexander Carlo Martinez, 14 August 2023.

Thus, unlike Hungary's Victor Orban, Meloni and Italy as a whole have far more to lose than to gain from playing a game of constant brinkmanship with EU leaders. Hungarian influence in Brussels is miniscule in comparison to Italy's, and thus Euroscepticism works better as a tactic in Budapest than it does in Rome. In Meloni's case (and also in the case of Sweden's SD), the more surprising factor was FDI's push to roll back the anti-NATO and pro-Russia rhetoric that the Italian right had flirted with since the days of Forza's Silvio Berlusconi and, more recently and more emphatically, Lega's Matteo Salvini.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, one noted far-right activist, Fabrizio Verde, has expressed rage at Meloni's Atlanticist foreign policy, saying that her pro-Europe and pro-NATO comments, far from benefiting the Italian nation, ensure that Italy remains "locked in the European cage and subservient to the wishes of the USA and NATO."<sup>6</sup> Instead, Verde calls for Italy to adopt the "the BRICS alternative" and rejoin China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), the latter in response to Meloni's decision to withdraw from the BRI in 2023, after her country had been the first G7 member to join it in 2019.<sup>7</sup>

Verde, a neofascist gadfly and frequent blogger for the Türkiye-based United World International (UWI), which is in fact an organ operated by the infamous pro-Kremlin "troll farm" that calls itself the Internet Research Agency (IRA), is not representative of the average member of the Italian or broader European right.<sup>8</sup> Most far-right Europeans do not have enough of a true interest in world politics to walk very far down such paths without returning to their old region-specific, revanchist claims. But Verde's repeated criticisms of Meloni (and other pro-EU, pro-NATO leaders on the far right that he finds disappointing) in UWI outlets, in the *Tehran Times* (Iran's English-language, state-controlled paper), and in the pro-China Turkish journal *Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly* go to show that his words hold strategic merit among well-funded propaganda operations associated with the "R" and the "C" in BRICS+ as well as Iran—the second "I" to join the bloc via this year's expansion.<sup>9</sup> To be sure,

5) I have intentionally avoided using the phrases "pro-Western" and "anti-Western" to refer to conflict between the various geopolitical blocs I discuss. Although they continue to pass muster in journalistic and political venues, such terms are too vague and too loaded to be worthy of use in a serious critical analysis. Instead, I endeavor to stick to specific, named organizations (EU, NATO, BRICS+, etc.) or nations (US, Russia, China, etc.).

6) Fabrizio Verde, "Giorgia Meloni Wants an Even More Atlanticist Italy," *United World International*, 17 November 2022. <https://unitedworldint.com/27530-giorgia-meloni-wants-an-even-more-atlanticist-italy/>

7) Fabrizio Verde, "Italy and the BRICS Alternative," *United World International*, 27 March 2023. <https://uwidata.com/29356-italy-and-the-brics-alternative/>; Fabrizio Verde, "Missed Opportunities," *United World International*, 5 January 2024. <https://uwidata.com/32794-missed-opportunities/>

8) For more information on United World International's connections to Russia's IRA, see the report from the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab: DFRLab, "Disinformation Campaign Removed by Facebook linked to Russia's Internet Research Agency," Medium, 24 September 2020. <https://medium.com/dfrlab/disinformation-campaign-removed-by-facebook-linked-to-russias-internet-research-agency-3cbd88d0dad>

9) See Fabrizio Verde, "Italy 'chose the old order,'" *United World International*, 11 December 2023. <https://uwidata.com/32638-italy-chose-the-old-order/>; Mohammed Mazhari, "Ukraine War Breaks U.S. Global Geopolitical Dominance: Italian Expert," *Tehran Times*, 30 April 2022. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/472207/Ukraine-war-breaks-U-S-global-geopolitical-dominance-Italian>. Verde's pro-BRICS article for UWI, cited above, originally appeared in the *Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly*, thusly: Fabrizio Verde, "Italy and the BRICS Alternative," *BRIQ*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2023): p. 78-82.

there are numerous Verdes in European far-right social media and the blogosphere who are either in the pay of or are simply providing free service as mouthpieces for the EU's and the U.S.'s strategic competitors.<sup>10</sup> And not just activists: the Italian senator Vito Petrocelli, a member of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S) recently decried Meloni's exit from the BRI and blamed U.S. involvement in European affairs as responsible for "a new cold war," a dramatic pronouncement made in an interview with none other than the Chinese Communist Party tabloid, the *Global Times*.<sup>11</sup> The fact that BRI membership turned out to be, according to a Council on Foreign Relations report, a losing deal for Italy's balance of trade with China appears not to have mattered to Petrocelli—defaming the U.S. and its allies by means of a new global Kultur is, to him, worth Italy's losses.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, loud and powerful voices in BRICS+—an organization predicated on acting as a counterbalance to NATO and the EU in global politics—clearly think that it is worth their time and money to aggressively platform anti-NATO, anti-EU, and anti-U.S. voices in places critical for the expansion of their international clout. What is more, with Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine and China's possible one in Taiwan, time is of the essence. With Egypt joining Iran, Ethiopia, and the UAE in the same January expansion,<sup>13</sup> BRICS+ has its first Mediterranean member and therefore its first formal step into that sea's complex political economy. As Algeria, Palestine, Tunisia, Syria, and (most importantly) Türkiye are all either official or potential candidates to join BRICS+, the bloc's reigning nuclear states of Russia, China, and India are likely to see their profile raised in Mediterranean affairs—a mirror of European neoimperialism in Africa and Asia throughout the post-WWII era. Where the old Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) failed, Verde's "BRICS alternative" might end up being a viable goal for any Mediterranean state looking to link up with other regional partners along an alternative axis to those currently on offer. At the very least, for many Mediterranean states excluded from NATO (e.g. all of North Africa) or denied accession to the EU (e.g. Türkiye, whose official candidacy seems permanently stalled), membership in BRICS+ feels like a promise of being part of a growing organism on the offensive, which might be all the appeal needed for states whose culture and politics often feature a feeling of being unjustly ignored on the world stage.

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10) For a more comprehensive portrait of this phenomenon, see Catherine Belton, "Kremlin Runs Disinformation Campaign to Undermine Zelensky, Documents Show," *Washington Post*, 16 February 2024.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/02/16/russian-disinformation-zelensky-zaluzhny/>

11) Wang Wenwen, "China Spearheads the Growth of Most Innovative Cooperation Formats," *Global Times*, 22 October 2023. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202310/1300329.shtml>

12) See David Sacks, "Why Is Italy Withdrawing from China's Belt and Road Initiative?," *Asia Unbound*, Council on Foreign Relations, 3 August 2023.

<https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-italy-withdrawing-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative>

13) Although Saudi Arabia and Argentina were also accepted in the same expansion, the former has not yet confirmed that it will officially join while the latter, in a resonance with the Italian case, decided to decline its acceptance in preference for a reaffirmation of its alliance with the U.S.

What, then, does Egypt gain from membership in BRICS+? Above all, it provides Egypt's president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, with serious advantages in cementing his authoritarian rule. Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's also-brutal leader between 1981 and 2011, had rather artfully performed a regional balancing act, somehow maintaining (however uneasily) alliances with the Arab League, Israel, and the U.S. while still currying support among the Egyptian populace by dangling the carrot of well-paying government jobs. Sisi has none of Mubarak's pragmatism, but he definitely understands the need to cultivate foreign ties. As *Middle East Eye's* founder, David Hearst, has written, "Sisi is a dictator for slow learners": by the time it was too late, Egyptians realized that Sisi had no interest in returning anything to normal but instead only cared about enjoying iron rule.<sup>14</sup> Sisi effectively cast his coup overthrowing the democratically elected Mohammed Morsi as a symbol of ardent patriotism, casting out the transnational Muslim Brotherhood in favor of a regime favoring the Egyptian nation above all. Worse still, U.S. and EU leaders have become, Hearst argues, "useful idiots" for Sisi, as they continue to buy Sisi's propaganda that, without him, Egypt would descend into total chaos.<sup>15</sup>

In such an atmosphere, enjoying the friendship of leaders who foment nationalist fervor in order to reinforce their executive power—like Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, and Narendra Modi do—is essentially a no-lose proposition. There is very little chance that the U.S., Israel, and the Arab League will break things off with Sisi over his joining BRICS+. An additional advantage for Sisi (and possibly, but by no means assuredly, for his country) is that Egypt can take a leading role in shaping the regional direction and character of the BRI, whose rapidly accreting influence in Africa has frightened U.S. and EU leaders used to treating that continent as an economic and strategic space primarily in the orbit of NATO member states.<sup>16</sup>

France, as another Mediterranean, NATO, and EU power, has been arguably the worst offender of African nations' sovereignty in this regard, but there are of course other states that have had to quickly adjust to the fact that a Chinese alternative for investment and alliances seems to offer more promise than the current system, based as it is mostly on old neoimperial legacies and the U.S.'s blue-water, orbital reach.<sup>17</sup> Should Algeria join BRICS+, then the character of post-imperial, Cold War-relevant (and, not coincidentally, anti-French) complaints should further serve to

14) David Hearst, "Sisi's Useful Idiots: How Europe Endorses Egypt's Tyrant Leader," *Middle East Eye*, 21 February 2019. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/sisis-useful-idiots-how-europe-endorses-egypts-tyrant-leader>

15) David Hearst, 21 February 2019.

16) On BRI's influence in Africa and EU/NATO response tactics, see O. Felix Obi, "Africa-Centric New World Order: A Transatlantic Alliance in Commercial Diplomacy," *Georgetown Public Policy Review*, 17 March 2023. <https://gppreview.com/2023/03/17/africa-centric-new-world-order-a-transatlantic-alliance-in-commercial-diplomacy/>

17) Indeed, France's clandestine African power had for so long been an open secret that, last year, President Emmanuel Macron went so far as to publicly declare that France was done with trying to secretly manage African affairs. See Andrew Hilliar, "France Interference in Africa is 'Over,' Macron Says during Four-Nation Tour to Rebuild Ties," *France 24*, 2 March 2023. <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230302-french-interference-in-africa-is-well-over-president-macron-says-during-four-nation-tour>

create a multipolar, possibly divisive Mediterranean space—a situation that would reinforce an assumed north-south, east-west divide already long argued for by the ardent nationalists found on all sides of the sea.

This last possibility brings us to the issue of the Mediterranean Sea as a historically plastic, transnational space that, for more than two hundred years, has progressively been reinscribed as a space of frontiers and borders. Of course, as everyone knows, there has been no era of true “togetherness” in the Mediterranean; it has been one of the hallmark spaces of competition and fracture throughout the entirety of human history. However, it is only in the modern era that nationalist ideologues have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to convince their respective populaces that the Mediterranean is, truly and eternally, a violently divided space. As I have written in other venues, this modern tendency to divide up the sea appears to have its genesis, paradoxically, in precisely those liminal, overlapping qualities that define it (and, perhaps, any region characterized by high population and ease of transport).<sup>18</sup> Heretofore a union of far-flung and geographically large countries, BRICS+’s entry into the Mediterranean holds not only the promise of future influence but of future dilemmas stemming from local grievances.

Still, despite the EU’s attempts to the contrary, defining the Mediterranean as a non-European space can be made not only with geographical ease but by referring to the very histories European anti-African and anti-Asian (thus also, according to the present migratory moment, anti-immigrant) voices draw on to mark out the sea as a province of Europe. For example, the Greeks and the Romans are central to the European mythos and yet, in reality, featured key cultures and figures whose provenance lay in regions today deemed to be African or Asian.<sup>19</sup> The Crusades may be central to Europe’s conception of its international role in the Mediterranean, yet virtually the entirety of the centuries-long conflict drew its energy from the specific conditions of the Levant.<sup>20</sup> Napoleon only sought to conquer Egypt because to do so would claim the original human civilization for France and, moreover, for the united Europe he hoped to build upon the continent’s heterodox ashes.<sup>21</sup> In other words,

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18) See, for example, my articles: “The Eastern Question as a Europe Question: Viewing the Ascent of ‘Europe’ through the Lens of Ottoman Decline,” *Journal of European Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2014): p. 64-80; “Small Islands, Global Challenges: Greece, COVID, and Mediterranean Migration,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, 3 May 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/05/small-islands-global-challenges-greece-covid-and-mediterranean-migration/>; “Malta, Italy, and Mediterranean Migration: A Long History and an Ongoing Issue,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, 24 September 2020. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/09/malta-italy-and-mediterranean-migration-a-long-history-and-an-ongoing-issue/>

19) On this topic, see Shane Weller, *The Idea of Europe: A Critical History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

20) As Paul M. Cobb argues in *The Race for Paradise: An Islamic History of the Crusades* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), the Eurocentric portrait of the Crusades ignores the local origin, meaning, and impact of the overall conflict and its eventual resolution.

21) On Napoleon’s concept of European integration, see Tigran Yepremyan, “Napoleonic Paradigm of European Integration: Theory and History,” *Napoleonica. La Revue*, Vol. 1, No. 39 (2021): p. 35-53.

the fiction is the reality when it comes to transnational, world-facing blocs. Lest one consider the above to be facile examples born out of a too-loose attention to recent conditions, consider that the EU made the conscious decision to have all Euro notes depict only imaginary representations of European-seeming artifacts: windows, arches, bridges, facades—none of which actually exist.<sup>22</sup> Advancing a composite identity involves the sterilization of diversity, at the margins and in the center.

A much fuller study than this one would methodically run through, at the very least, the potential participation in BRICS+ among each of the Mediterranean Sea's twenty coastal countries to explore the above point, not just the several states mentioned here. Hence, I am the first to admit that one must be cautious about any broader conclusions drawn from something so simple as a single Mediterranean country joining BRICS+. That said, we should consider the possibilities for divergence from a geopolitical norm in which EU states' national politics result, no matter the outcome, in a reinforcement of the pro-EU, pro-NATO status quo, as has occurred in Italy. As my brief analysis points at, generalizing about political outcomes becomes more difficult the farther one travels from established positions of power and the closer one gets to the often razor-thin pluralities parties need to embark on the iconoclastic goals that form their popular appeal. Italy, despite its complaints, is a world power. The same is not true for all EU countries.

For example, one can imagine Spain's anti-immigrant, anti-EU Vox party, having come third in the country's last two elections, attempting to reorient Spanish foreign policy along a multipolar line should it ever achieve enough votes to form a government. After all, unlike Italy, Spain's entry into the EU came after decades of post-WWII authoritarianism and relative international isolation. Along with Poland, Spain's high population and demonstrated tendency toward regional and rural vs. urban political divisions makes it a potential site for BRICS+'s leaders to contribute to those local wedge issues that weaken the reputation of the EU and NATO as friendly partners.<sup>23</sup> The fortunes of France's Rassemblement National (RN), which seems to have entirely replaced the French center-right (and large parts of the old French left), is an additional X factor, given France's famously fraught relationship with the U.S. over NATO's character.<sup>24</sup> Both RN's current leader, Marine Le Pen, and her ambitious, talented niece, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, have criticized France's ties to NATO for limiting the country's influence on the global stage, the latter going so far

22) On Euro notes' intended style and subsequent updates, see "Design Elements," European Central Bank, <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/euro/banknotes/current/design/html/index.en.html>

23) For example, see the report on suspected Russian influence in the Catalan separatist movement by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP): Antonio Baquero Iglesias, "Spain Extends Probe into Russian Involvement in Catalanian Independence Plans," *OCCRP*, 29 January 2024. <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/18412-spain-extends-probe-into-russian-involvement-in-catalonian-independence-plans>

24) On RN's success among Northern France's previously Communist left, see Katy Lee and Claire Sergent, "How Leftists Learned to Love Le Pen," *Foreign Policy*, 7 February 2017. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/07/how-the-left-learned-to-love-le-pen-national-front-france-communists/>

as to argue in 2022 that France should “refuse any form of alignment” given Russia’s BRICS partners having carefully avoided condemning the Kremlin outright for the war in Ukraine.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, the rising fortunes of Germany’s far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has put scrutiny on how key China has been in elevating the status of the party’s current man of the moment, Maximilian Krah.<sup>26</sup>

There are also other EU countries, like Cyprus and Malta, whose ties to Russia and China might make them sites of even greater propaganda efforts by Russia’s secretive IRA or China’s public equivalent, Xinhua.<sup>27</sup> Despite Cyprus’s earnest attempts to distance itself from its past as a site for Russian money-laundering, the country’s continuing failures on that front led Jack Straw (the UK’s former Foreign Secretary and a noted pro-EU, anti-Brexit voice) to declare that Cyprus’s original bid for EU membership should have been rejected.<sup>28</sup> BRICS+ will never capture all Mediterranean states’ eyes, let alone a majority of EU member states in the region, but it has a foothold in the EU’s southern extremity. This should not be dismissed as a mere aside in the long and storied history of Mediterranean international relations. Amid such new, unstable frontiers, it may be in the best interest of liberal-minded EU leaders to pitch the peaceful notion of the Mediterranean Sea as an old, reliable crossroads and, that done, hope for the best.

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25) Qtd. in Mahaut de Fougères, “NATO as Seen by France’s Presidential Candidates, Expressions, Institut Montaigne, 25 March 2022. <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/nato-seen-frances-presidential-candidates>

26) On Krah’s Chinese connections, see Tim Hildebrandt, “Germany’s Far-Right Pivot to China,” *The Diplomat*, 6 October 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/germanys-far-right-pivot-to-china/>

27) On Malta and China, see Karl Azzopardi, “Malta Committed to China’s Belt and Road Initiative as Italy Mulls Pulling Out of the Agreement,” *Malta Today*, 26 October 2023, <https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/125616/malta-committed-to-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-as-italy-mulls-pulling-out-of-the-agreement>.

On Xinhua’s rising influence in international media, see Raksha Kumar, “How China Uses the News Media as a Weapon in Its Propaganda War against the West,” Reuters Institute, University of Oxford, 2 November 2021. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/how-china-uses-news-media-weapon-its-propaganda-war-against-west>

28) Jack Straw, “We Should Never Have Let Cyprus Join the EU,” *Politico*, 7 September 2023. <https://www.politico.eu/article/cyprus-eu-vladimir-putin-russia/>