

Italian post-2011 foreign policy in the Mediterranean caught between status and fear: the case of Libya

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Abstract

Cold War and post-Cold War Italian foreign policy has been articulated by accommodating and harmonizing three sets of partnerships: Atlanticism, Europeanism and the Mediterranean. Following the 2011 Arab Uprisings, increasing fragmentation in the MENA region, a more ambiguous US role and rising intra-EU divisions have constrained Italian foreign policy in the region. By looking at the case study of post-2011 Libya, the article, through historical process-tracing and in-depth interviews, illustrates how fear of abandonment by its US ally and of marginalization within the EU arena has characterized Rome's approach towards a key Mediterranean energy and political partner.

1. Introduction

The Mediterranean has historically been Italy's geographical backyard, encapsulating an idea, a dream of an African empire (Varsori 2016), an arena, and an ensemble of policies where ambitious appetites could be displayed. Recently, however, the Mediterranean, far from being the natural locus for a search for status (Felsen 2018), has become the graveyard of Italian political and diplomatic efforts at power projection. The way in which Italian foreign policy increasingly looks at the Mediterranean region, however, is through the lenses of United States (US) policies and intra-European Union (EU) dynamics. The article argues that, from 2011 onwards, Italian foreign policy in the Mediterranean has struggled to effectively navigate between three geographical and political dimensions, or circles — the Atlantic, the European and the Mediterranean — which until 2001 were balanced and substantially consistent among themselves (Andreatta 2008). The article frames Italian foreign policy towards the region within a broader framework, taking into account how post-2011 Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) politics has become increasingly fragmented, and how this ongoing regional re-configuration has exposed intra-European and US-European divergences. Against this backdrop, the article investigates how Italian post-2011 foreign policy has balanced the three circles around a key dossier: Libya. The paper looks at Italian Libyan policy as an example of strategic weakness, resulting from the diminished consistency between Italy's Atlanticism, Europeanism and a strong Mediterranean policy. The article identifies fear as a defining feature in post-2011 Italian policy choices vis-à-vis Libya. It does so by focusing on the emotional element of fear and the way in which it has become institutionalized and come to influence key foreign policy choices. Secondly, it shows the extent to

which the Italian view of the southern Mediterranean operates through the prism of American or European lenses and how this impacts Italian policy. In order to do so, the paper analyzes a central case study, Italian post-2011 Libyan policy, methodologically through historical process-tracing, the analysis of secondary sources and in-depth interviews with Italian foreign policy analysts and diplomats.

2. Linking status and emotions in Italian foreign policy

In the words of Leopoldo Nuti, since the end of World War II, Italian foreign policy has been externally driven by the quest for status and recognition, while domestically, it has been instrumentally used as a tool to maintain shaky political equilibria (Nuti 2011). As pointed out by Ennio Di Nolfo (1990), this search for status and recognition was dependent on four interlocking variables: subordination (to the US), interdependence (with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO), integration (with the EU), and attempts at autonomy. The four constraints under bipolarity translated into three circles or dimensions, around which Italian foreign policy was shaped in the Cold War and early post-Cold War period: Atlantism; Europeanism and the Mediterranean. As argued by Andreatta, in the early post-WWII period, Italian governments managed Cold War foreign policy constraints by keeping a careful balance between the Atlantic Alliance — embodied by NATO —, Europe — within the European Community first and European Union later —, and the Mediterranean — with a projection mostly over the Arab world and Israel.

Nuti and Di Nolfo refer to status and prestige interchangeably and, without offering further analytical unpacking, seemingly point to the diplomatic dimension of a state's power projection. In international relations theory, however, prestige is only one dimension of status: prestige depends on military victories and success in peace and war (Onea 2014), while status refers to social rank and has a relational nature. Recent scholarly work in the field has extensively delved into the notion of status and its role in foreign policy, especially vis-à-vis the outbreak of conflicts. This literature examines strategies of accommodation in rising powers' status demands (Paul 2016), status aspiration blockages (Ward 2017), status discrepancies as causes of conflict (Onea 2014), and major powers' strategies for resisting status decline. Status has been approached differently, according to the weight attributed to material or non-material aspects of power and identity-related dimensions. According to T.V. Paul, Larson and Wohlforth (2014), status can be understood as "collective beliefs about a given state's ranking on valued attributes (wealth, coercive capabilities, demographic position, sociopolitical organization, diplomatic clout)". Being a positional good, status revolves around what others believe about a state's relative ranking. Status has a clear link with social hierarchy, as it is recognized through voluntary deference from others. Within an informal social hierarchy, status recognition points to the state's position vis-à-vis other actors. In other words, status is not merely about becoming visible, but is also reckoned with in key foreign policy dossiers by the most significant foreign policy actors.

Others have focused on the less visible drivers of war, downplaying the role of material capabilities or factual elements of power ranking, choosing instead to focus on the existential dimensions of international politics. Richard Ned Lebow has interpreted the search for status as the need by states to be esteemed, to be accorded a ranking among other states, and to be honored (Ned Lebow 2010). Following a culturalist reading of international relations,

Ned Lebow argues that the lack of such recognition is responsible for most international conflicts, as it ignites desire for revenge. Status decline is particularly visible in cases where a country raises expectations about its military prowess and encounters a harsh military defeat, as was the case with Mussolini's Italy, rapidly categorized as a 'paper tiger'. Onea considers it a case of status inconsistency, typical of 'arrivistes' powers which, at best, only excel in one dimension of power, and often not the military one (Onea 2014: 134). The devastating experience of World War II and the ways in which Italian historical responsibilities have failed to be scrutinized in Italian public discourse have hampered an honest assessment not only of racist behavior in Italian domestic and foreign policy in the 1930s and early 1940s but it has tainted any public debate concerning national interests and the instruments to be used to pursue them. In postwar Italy, public conversations about the atrocities committed by Fascism, domestically as well as in Europe and Africa, were mostly swept under the carpet (Judt 1992). In addition to this, the adoption of general amnesties for former members of the regime led to a postwar normalization of Fascism and fascists in Italian history and society. This, *de facto*, engendered a sense of mistrust in the country's public self-representation. In failing to address historical responsibilities linked to crimes committed against minorities domestically and against local populations in countries where Italy ventured into colonial adventures, in the post-war era national discourse focused on the need to be internationally appreciated, acknowledged, and accepted (Aresu and Gori 2018: 61).

The search for external recognition — premised on a fear of being undeserving — has influenced Italian foreign policy in the three circles in which it operates, i.e. the Atlantic circle, the European and the Mediterranean, or Middle Eastern and North African one. More to the point, because of its wartime legacy and postwar alliances and unification projects, Italy has, with few exceptions, sacrificed its autonomy vis-à-vis the Mediterranean, subjugating its preferences to US and European interests or veto powers. Italy has increasingly looked at the first two circles, Atlanticism and Europeanism, through the lenses of fear — of abandonment and of marginalization — and this has in turn impacted its policy in the third circle, torn as it is between the constraints provided by the two former circles and the search for strategic autonomy. The role of fear — fear of abandonment by the US in the post-war and post-Cold War eras, and the fear of marginalization from European allies during and after the Cold war — is an illuminating explanatory device if we grant emotions the ability to influence and shape behaviors and choices. In line with the works of Neta Crawford (2000; 2002) and Brent Steele (2008), emotions cannot be discarded as an ontological basis for state behavior. Far from positing a cold, all-calculating state, neorealists and neoliberal scholars accept two important emotions, fear and hate, as drivers of state behavior (Steele 2008: 16). As succinctly put by Neta Crawford, "emotions and beliefs structure the acquisition and organization of knowledge and the development of standard operating procedures and routines handling challenges" (2014: 547). Specific emotions, in other words, rather than being posited in contrast with reason and rationality, should be understood as social forces which come to be internalized by policymakers and diplomats, cognitively driving their reading and perceptions of choices that can be made and decisions that are in the country's best interest. Emotions are embedded within specific cultural and social contexts and are interwoven with existing and prevailing ideas, interests and discourses (Hutchison and Bleiker 2014). Emotions permeate contemporary understandings that underpin how politics, and foreign policy, operate in value-terms.

3. Fear as an analytical element behind the first two circles of Italian foreign policy

These three circles — Atlanticism, Europeanism and the Mediterranean — encapsulated Italian national interest in a bipolar and unipolar world (Garruccio 1982; Andreatta 2008; Brighi 2013). At least until the ascent of Silvio Berlusconi in 2001, these circles balanced and reinforced each other (Andreatta 2008). From then and until 2006, the Italian government unequivocally aligned with the US and prioritized Atlanticism over the other two circles. This was made painfully clear by the 2003 US military intervention against Iraq. In a way, some scholars argue, when Rome adhered to Bush's coalition of the willing, spearheaded by the United States this represented a shift from being, as was the case during the Cold War, merely a 'security consumer' to becoming and acting like a 'security producer' or security provider (Croci and Valigi 2013). However, this decision contributed to weakening international multilateralism, as it occurred without United Nations Security Council authorization and was, as later reluctantly admitted by the then UN Secretary General Annan, in explicit violation of the UN Charter (The Guardian 2004). Siding with the US on a polarized issue also reverberated within Europe, where two opposing camps were created according to who intervened in Iraq (United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Poland) and those who remained critical of the intervention (France and Germany *in primis*). This drove a wedge within the EU and dealt a blow to EU foreign policy that took time to heal. Others have framed this phase of Italian foreign policy as one where a clash materialized between traditional internationalist approaches and the re-nationalization of foreign policy (Quaglia 2007: 144).

Under unipolarity, two facets occur: a vast reduction in constraints on the unipole, and the continuation of alliances from previous eras, albeit with less bargaining power for minor allies as there are no alternative great powers and the "systemic imbalance of power magnifies uncertainty about the unipole's intentions" (Monteiro 2011/2012: 24). What this has meant in practice for Italian foreign policy is that Rome has sided even more assertively with Washington in most Middle East and North African dossiers. The beginning of the end of the unipolar moment came with the 2003 Iraq war, which polarized European allies and fragmented EU foreign policy consensus. Since then, fear of US abandonment, a classic risk or pathology in alliances (Snyder 1984), has accounted for much of Italian subservience to Washington even in key hotspots such as 2011 Libya. It could therefore be argued that the first circle was perceived through fear. Fear of being left behind and of being considered the weak link in the alliance is the key reason behind the choice made by Italy to prioritize US preferences over European ones and the identification of national interests with automatism in looking first and foremost across the Atlantic. Andreatta recalls the cases of Albania in 1993 and 1997 and the crisis in the former Yugoslavia, where Italy was initially excluded from the Contact Group (*ibid*).

Another kind of fear dominated the second European circle in the eyes of Italian policymakers during and after the Cold War: fear of marginalization within the EU. In the last decade, this has been coupled with a fear of neglect, as Rome has felt left alone in dealing with southern Mediterranean challenges. These feelings developed into a perception of either being or at least being treated as a second-class citizen among EU powers, or what a diplomat has dubbed the 'Violetta syndrome', the Verdi character who is desperate to be loved back by her lover and never stops asking for reassurances (Aresu

and Gori 2018: 60). This motivated much of Italian foreign policy in EU circles (Cladi and Webber 2011), especially vis-à-vis the perceived motor of European integration, the Franco-German engine. As in the previous circle, fear — here of being a second-class European power — changes what we look for, what we see and the way we think (Crawford, 2014). It affects how we filter and organize knowledge and can contribute to cognitive dissonance by leading us to discount alternative information. In the words of a senior diplomat, the Franco-German condominium was particularly hard to swallow for Italy as it basically denied Italy's aspiration to be a 'regional power' (Aresu and Gori 2018: 66). This is arguably a reformulation of what Varsori asserted about Italian Cold War status expectations of being recognized as a 'middle power', aware of its subordination but searching status parity with other middle powers (Varsori 1998).

The EU circle changed in its dynamics and in the eyes of the beholder, i.e. Italy, with the emergence of a *directoire* in charge of negotiations with the Islamic Republic of Iran in the second half of the 2000s. This was even more apparent after the 2008 financial crisis, with decisions increasingly taken between Berlin, Paris and, to a lesser degree, London, and then somewhat superimposed on remaining partners (Aresu and Gori 2018: 67).

For Italy, the fear of neglect by the EU in the migration portfolio was deeply felt with the deterioration of the situation in the southern Mediterranean and in sub-Saharan countries. The assumption that the combination of revolts, deteriorating economic conditions and climate shocks would trigger new migratory waves towards Europe, and southern Europe in particular, was a motivating factor in Italian policymakers' appeals to the European Commission and Council for joint policies, especially throughout 2015 and since then. The lack of a European consensus over migratory policies and the difficulties in changing the Dublin Regulation meant that legal provisions envisioned for non-emergency phases of migratory flows proved to be highly inadequate in 2014-2017 and Italy bore the brunt of the rigidity of other European member states. Between 2013 and 2017, over 650,000 migrants reached Italian shores, a fourth of which in 2016 alone (Rome Med 2017: 26). The Italian Interior Minister, Marco Minniti, appealed to the other member states for help in 2017: only Germany seemed to listen, accepting a small number of asylum seekers and pushing the EU to assist Italy in maintaining refugee camps in Libya (Longo 2017). On the Italian political landscape, the migratory crisis represented the short circuit between the second and the third circle, the Mediterranean. In 2017, 90% of migrants came from Libya (ibid). The 2003 Dublin Regulation foresees the criteria of attributing to the first country of arrival the duty to process asylum requests. Already in 2008, the European Parliament acknowledged that the system "in the absence of harmonization will continue to be unfair both to asylum seekers and to certain member states" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR). This was echoed by the European Commission, which proposed amendments, endorsed by the European Parliament, which remained on paper for a decade.

After several years of painful negotiations, the Regulation was eventually 'temporarily' modified at the La Valletta summit in September 2019, theoretically sharing the burden across European states vis-à-vis migratory flows. This, however, was done outside existing EU treaties and inter-governmentally, at an informal meeting of Interior ministers in Malta (Carrera and Cortinovis 2019). In the case of Italy, both the delayed

timing of the acceptance of solidarity and the lack of implementation of the decision were the nails in the coffin in terms of perception of neglect, verging on abandonment, by Europe.

The latest testing ground of the second circle for Italy is the 2020 Covid-19 related crisis. The devastating impact of Covid-19 diffusion in early 2020 wreaked havoc, not just in terms of sustainability of the health system but also of the skyrocketing level of the country's debt and its entering into recession because of the impact of the lockdown adopted to contain the pandemic. Demands for a coronabond or the mutualization of public debt encountered resistance from a coalition including Germany, the Netherlands and Austria. While many parallel the ongoing health and economic crisis in Italy, and potentially also Spain and France, to the one experienced a decade ago after the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, the demands and supply shocks experienced, with varying degrees, by most European countries present a different set of challenges, requiring qualitatively new policy responses both at the national and supranational level.

4. The Mediterranean, between a dysfunctional EU second circle and an increasingly reluctant first US circle

As aptly illustrated in the previous paragraph, with the exemplary case of the handling of migratory pressures from the southern Mediterranean on southern Europe, the expanded Mediterranean increasingly represents a plethora of security challenges. More than that, it encapsulates all interlocking threats identified in 2003 by the European Union in its first strategic document. EU diplomacy identified five pressing challenges to the security of the continent in the European Security Strategy: regional conflicts, terrorism, WMD, organized crime, state failure (European Union 2003). In it, a preferred and endorsed policy approach which should have informed EU policies in a consistent way was depicted as 'effective multilateralism'. There the idea was to act, whenever possible, under the *aegis* of legitimate international organizations, *in primis* the United Nations, in a forceful way.

Since then, however, both the nature of the international system and European politics have significantly changed. Internationally, the unipolar moment (Monteiro 2014) has faded away while, at the EU level, qualitatively new phenomena have included the rise of nationalist and Eurosceptic political parties and governments across the Union and the loss of one of its core members with Brexit. The EU has also faced spillovers from external shocks, ranging from terrorist attacks on its soil to unprecedented migratory flows. The combination of these elements has transformed the proactive and optimistic outlook of the early 2000s into an increasingly torn and inward-looking Europe. The changing landscape was aptly epitomized in 2016 by a new strategic document, the Global Strategy where, rather than focusing on the kinds of threats the continent faces, or the specific kind of multilateralism to be endorsed and sustained to face them, two notions are spelled out: principled pragmatism and resilience. Coupled together, they signaled a less ambitious agenda, the abandonment of transformative ideals (Juncos 2017) and the adoption of a post-liberal foreign policy attitude (European Union 2016). The EUGS also embodies European fears, articulated in the fear of losing identity and the European way of life in the section dedicated to the 'Security of Our Union'. This materialized in December 2019 in the post of the European Commission's Vice President in

charge of the portfolio ‘Promoting our European way of life’, problematically linked to migration and security management. Paradoxically, this has sat quite well with Italian foreign policy in the Mediterranean, which, far from being driven by transformative goals, aims at navigating increasingly complex challenges, rising geopolitical competition and ensuring that Italian economic and energy interests are safeguarded (Barberini 2020). In other words, fear of losing out from what was acquired in the past, the status quo ante, becomes the justification for policies aimed at protecting values and interests vis-à-vis external challenges threatening core principles and values. This is a full reversal of the European Security Strategy transformative ethos, less so for Italian foreign policy guiding principles, which, as demonstrated in the case of Libya, are articulated with the core goal of preserving and losing as little as possible rather than rethinking, relaunching, revising, and transforming the country’s approach to the dossier.

5. Italian Libya policy and the short circuit of the three circles

In the words of a senior Italian diplomat in charge of MENA affairs at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), four drivers explain Italian foreign policy in North Africa and towards Libya in particular: energy needs, responding to migratory challenges, countering terrorist threats and the search for status (interview, Rome, February 2020). The Libyan dossier epitomizes all of them.

Italian-Libyan relations have been marred by the legacy of Italian colonialism (1912-1943), which only with the 2008 Treaty on Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation signed between Libyan ruler Muammar Qaddafi and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi solved all Libyan claims related to colonialism, especially economic ones. Italy committed to pay 5 billion dollars’ worth of reparations over the course of two decades in exchange for sustained cooperation on migration (Croci and Valigi 2013). Rudely but honestly, the agreement was dubbed by Berlusconi as enabling ‘more oil, fewer migrants’ (Paoletti 2010). Italian Libyan policy, it is widely held, has been a bipartisan one, as no notable difference could be detected in the different center-left and center-right governments since the 1990s.

After 42 years in power, Muammar Qaddafi was ousted after an initially peaceful nation-wide protest movement, militarized after brutal repression by the regime, coupled with aerial bombing by NATO forces between March and November 2011. Italy joined Operation Odyssey Dawn-Unified Protector on March 19, 2011 after the no-fly zone had been approved by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, profiting from the abstention of China and Russia (and among the non-permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, UNSC, Germany, India and Brazil). Italian center-right Foreign Minister Franco Frattini pushed for a NATO mission rather than an ad hoc coalition. The reason might reside in the fear that a non-NATO operation would be led by a small *directoire* (Croci and Valigi 2013), Italy being antithetic to such foreign policy practice out of fear of being marginalized. Even then, however, Rome displayed reluctance to contribute troops on the ground to aid NATO’s efforts. It did however, with the ‘Cirene’ mission from 2011, albeit in a limited fashion, engage in military and security cooperation with Libyan forces, training them to patrol borders and in maritime security. In May 2012, the two sides — the Italian government and the Libyan transitional government headed by Ali Zeidan — signed a Memorandum of Understanding

(MoU) which officially sealed this bilateral security cooperation, mostly aimed at avoiding losing what had been secured since 2008 in political and economic terms (IAI 2014). Between late 2011 and the June elections in 2014, Libya seemed to be on track for a domestic-led transition. In July 2012, assisted by the UN Support Mission to Libya (UNSMIL), the country held peaceful and democratic elections. What the first Libyan democratic elections produced were formally democratic institutions (a parliament and a government) which, however, resembled an empty shell more than functioning bodies. The aftermath and the period up to the June 2014 elections already pointed to an existing and increasing divisiveness among Libyan political forces. Fractures revolved around the secular-Islamist cleavage, interlocking with personal and local exclusionary political dynamics. The 2014 elections, however, proved to be the nail in the coffin of the country's democratic trajectory. Islamist political parties lost the vote but failed to accept the electoral results, did not recognize the legitimacy of the new legislative body, and refused to hand over power.

As the dispute over the 2014 elections results triggered a widespread clash and a relapse into violence was materializing, the international community committed to a negotiated settlement and the establishment of a new governing authority. Such efforts eventually led to the Shirkat Political Agreement in December 2015. The agreement, however, failed to tackle the most controversial issues, including security arrangements (Droz Vincent 2018). While the UN-recognized authority, the Government of National Accord (GNA) was established in Tripoli and was led by Fayeze al-Serraj, the Islamist forces, refusing to hand over power, maintained control over the House of Representatives (HoR) in the eastern part of the country and appointed Khalifa Haftar as Field Marshal Libyan National Army (LNA), a mixture of military units and tribal or local-based armed groups mostly supported by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. From late 2014 and throughout 2015, Haftar and the LNA took control over Cyrenaica, Libya's eastern region, and expanded south, controlling most of Fezzan by 2018 (Lacher 2019). The proliferation of domestic and external actors further complicated the political dynamics between the two polities. Low-intensity violence characterized the period until April 2019, when, a few days before the National Conference set up by the UN envoy to Libya, Ghassan Salamé, general Haftar moved his forces towards Tripoli and started staging an attack that has been ongoing ever since. The attempt by military means to take control of the entire country, attempted again in April 2020, failed to succeed.

While officially the European Union, which has played virtually no role in the Libyan crisis, recognizes and supports the UN-sponsored Tripoli government, since early 2015, France has been supporting general Haftar with military advisers and special forces (a fact which became impossible to deny once two French military advisors were killed in a helicopter crash near Benghazi in July 2016) (Harchaoui 2017). This occurred under the watch and patronage of French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, who served as Defense Minister under President Hollande (2012-2017) and who shares French President Macron's view of Libya through the prism of combating terrorism, political Islam and serving French national interests. In this context it should be noted how, Paris, especially since its 2013 intervention in Mali, which France considers a success, looks at North Africa through the prism of the Sahel, and does so from a securitized perspective where countering terrorism and limiting the spread of Islamists are its

driving goals. In July 2017, President Macron organized a meeting at La Celle-Saint-Cloud, which served its purpose, i.e. legitimizing Haftar in the eyes of the international community. Besides this aspect, the political value of the meeting between Haftar and Serraj was null as they did not sign the final communiqué. The French diplomatic initiative did not go unnoticed and it ruffled a few feathers in Rome, as French activism was perceived as a way to bypass Italy (Falchi 2017). Again, Italy — this time reasonably so — feared marginalization by a European power in what Italy perceives its backyard, because of colonial ties and energy relations, ENI being in Libya since the late 1950s.

In order to take back control of diplomatic initiatives in Libya, Italy went back to its first circle and in September 2018, Prime Minister Conte visited the United States and obtained what was interpreted as a green light from the Trump administration to relaunch the mediation process. Shortly afterwards, in November 2018, Rome organized the Palermo conference, considered an important milestone in Italian diplomatic activity. According to a senior diplomat, though, it was the perceived success of the conference that created a false sense of security in the Italian government which led Conte to sit on his laurels (interview, Rome, February 2020). As previously mentioned, a few months later, in April 2019, general Haftar launched a surprise large-scale attack against Tripoli, something which caught Italy and Europe unprepared (Wehrey and Lacher 2019). The fear of abandonment came into play when Rome realized that the US, despite being one of the few external powers able to leverage enough incentives and threat of sticks (sanctions) to bring both sides to the table, would be unlikely to engage more in the conflict. This reverberated in Rome in particular after the only Italian hospital in Libya was almost hit by Haftar forces in a bombing against Misurata in July 2019. Italy maintains there a military hospital with 300 servicemen and considers it a crucial logistical base. Within the void determined by scarce US action, in September 2019, Russian mercenaries arrived in support of Haftar in southern Tripoli. While Russia had been stepping up its efforts in Libya since 2015, this was unprecedented in scale, as Russia provided the LNA with anti-tank missiles, laser-guided artillery and support through paramilitary forces, the Wagner group (Wehrey and Harchaoui 2020). Italy had renounced any kind of military activity on the ground, from 2011 onwards, thereby also limiting its appeal to Serraj who, by mid-2019, accepted an aid offer from Turkish president Erdoğan and in November 2019 signed an MoU with Turkey.

Italy had lost valuable time due to domestic reasons. Between late spring 2019 and the summer, the Lega-5Star movement had crumbled and a political crisis erupted, culminating in a government reshuffling, and substituting the Lega with the center-left Democratic Party. If the former Foreign Minister in 2018-2019, Moavero Milanesi, had been barely visible on the Libyan dossier, the new Foreign Minister from the 5Star movement, Luigi Di Maio, had no international or diplomatic experience and little appetite for foreign policy. He only grasped the importance of the Libyan dossier for Italian domestic and foreign policy on the occasion of the Rome Mediterranean Dialogues, which took place in late November 2019 and saw the participation of most Arab Foreign Ministers. Unfortunately, despite renewed interest in Libya, the successive diplomatic initiative was a fiasco. In January 2020, prime minister Conte tried to arrange a meeting in Rome between the two Libyan leaders, Serraj and Haftar, offending the former and falling short of creating a viable track two diplomatic channel with the latter. Shortly

afterwards, on January 19, 2020, Germany took the lead and set up the Berlin conference, whose main output was the adoption of an arms embargo. Italy's fear of marginalization was then substantiated. The wound, however, was partially self-inflicted. As a consequence of the Berlin conference, a new naval military operation, Irini, replacing the previous Operation Sophia, was launched on May 4, 2020. Serraj, however, complained that this mission would mostly facilitate Haftar forces, whose refurbishment from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) arrived by air or by land from Egypt, while Turkish military support to Tripoli would be the one most likely to be intercepted by Irini. While Italy supports the military naval mission, it is left with few arrows to spare and has become mostly an observer of the complex interlocking domestic developments in Libya, impacting also on Italian politics, from migratory flows to energy cooperation to political relations.

This section intended to show how Italian Libyan policy has become hostage of the first two circles and Italian fears of abandonment or of marginalization by Europe — and France in particular — on the Libyan dossier have become a self-fulfilling prophecy, leaving Italy an invisible player in the heavily populated Libyan theatre.

6. Conclusions

By analytically unpacking the three circles and the first two in particular, this short paper has attempted to illustrate how, identifying the emotional dimension of each circle, post-2011 Italian foreign policy in a key Mediterranean dossier like the Libyan one, has been characterized by strategic weakness. This resulted from increasing challenges in having the two circles — Atlanticism and Europeanism — converge in the Mediterranean, which, rather than providing increased room for maneuver for Italian foreign policy, has been read through the lenses of fear of abandonment by the US and fear of marginalization within the EU.

The article has offered a reading premised on the identification of a key emotional dimension accounting for Italian foreign policy relations with the US and within Europe and has tried to illuminate how the emotional backbone of these relations is premised on the element of fear, be it of abandonment or marginalization. Through historical process tracing, secondary sources and in-depth interviews with Italian foreign policy analysts and diplomats, the article has provided a series of empirical illustrations from the Libyan post-2011 period in order to testify to the self-sabotage of Italian foreign policy in its third circle due to excessive weight placed on external constraints attributed to the US or the EU or other European powers. With regard to the former, a sense of subordination has led Italy to postpone actions and launch initiatives, uncertain of a clear US mandate, only to be left alone to deal with its own diplomatic fallout. With regard to the latter, Libya, in European terms, has become a battlefield for status rivalry between Italy and France, where the two European powers, while formally supporting the same side, the UN-backed Tripoli GNA, are rivals on the ground as France has increasingly supported Haftar and the LNA. The failure of the January Rome meeting and the Berlin conference, where most of the issues agreed by the parties were particularly welcomed by Paris, only reinforces this point. The Irini naval military mission, while on paper aiming at implementing those decisions and the arms embargo, might end up reinforcing the side France has been not so silently supporting for the past

five years, also with covert operations, while Italy has refrained from doing so, in abidance with UN resolutions. The combination of US abandonment, French isolation and lack of diplomatic clout have eventually brought about the demise of Italy in one of the last theatres in the Mediterranean which it considered its own backyard and a foreign policy priority.

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