

Italian “Mediterraneanness”: A New Path in Italy's Foreign Policy?

Donatella Cugliandro*

RÉSUMÉ

La politique méditerranéenne de l'Italie, est entravée par les mêmes difficultés qui ont amené le pays de ne pas agir jusque-là de façon positive dans le contexte plus large de la politique internationale. Sa fameuse politique “of-the-chair-attitude” répond à la soi-disant “catering diplomacy”, ne laissant pas de place à la mise en oeuvre d'une politique plus substantielle dans la région. L'équilibre entre les accords régionaux et bilatéraux risque de miner la crédibilité de l'Italie dans le bassin. Il n'est pas surprenant que ce qui émerge de l'analyse de la politique méditerranéenne du pays est l'absence de stratégie claire. L'espoir vient de l'intérêt croissant de la société civile dans le partenariat euro-méditerranéen, en particulier dans le domaine culturel. La valeur ajoutée que l'Italie peut fournir à la région demeure une approche ascendante de politique étrangère culturelle.

ABSTRACT

Italy's foreign policy in the Mediterranean is hindered by the same setbacks which have prompted the country not to positively act in the wider context of international politics hitherto. Its notorious “politics-of-the-chair-attitude” meets the so-called “catering diplomacy”, leaving no room for a more substantial policy to be implemented in the region. The balance between regional arrangements and bilateral relations risks undermining Italy's credibility in the basin. Not surprisingly, what emerges from the analysis of the country's Mediterranean policy is the lack of any clear strategy, with more heed paid to a political window-dressing approach. Hope stems from civil society's increasing interest in the euro-mediterranean partnership, especially in the cultural field. The added value Italy may provide to the area remains a bottom-up cultural foreign policy.

Since its unification, and more decidedly in the aftermath of Fascism, Italy's foreign policy has been characterised by elements which, *mutatis mutandis*,

* University of Bologna.

persist to this day. The literature on the argument is wide and well supported by national historical events. Santoro, for instance, identifies five recurrent variables in Fascist Italy's foreign policy: first is the gap between the role Italy aspires to in the international arena and its effective capabilities to pursue it. Second is the oscillatory politics which prevails over stable alliances with other countries, so that some scholars refer to it as a "pendulum" foreign policy.¹ Third is the absence of targeted objectives to be pursued in a foreign policy context – hence the lack of any specific national interest as a clear foreign policy goal. Fourth is the subordination of Italian foreign policy to its domestic dimension and setbacks. Fifth is the peculiar political attitude to merely react – rather than act positively – to other countries' initiatives in the foreign policy domain, being moved by political opportunism.²

While discussed in the context of Fascism, such variables seem to perfectly fall within the guidelines of post-war Republican Italy as well. Indeed, many scholars' contributions to the subject take into account the whole period from the country's unification to today, proving that a 150-year *continuum* in Italian foreign policy exists.³ This becomes more evident when considering the historical period since the 1920s. In this respect, Mussolini's pre-war wavering between the alliance with western democracies and the pact with the Third Reich highlighted the same "pendulum" politics found in today's tendency to balance between Europeanism and Atlanticism. It goes without saying that the respective contexts are profoundly different, not least because Italy does not run the risk to back up a totalitarian regime. But it is nevertheless true that the core attitude remains the same: Rome prefers to "jump on the bandwagon" instead of taking its own initiatives, which would mean, first, choosing its political allies more firmly, and, more importantly, taking greater responsibilities in international affairs. This is one of the reasons why the country adopts a pendulum politics wavering between Europeanism and Atlanticism and taking the side according to political convenience;⁴ an attitude, which further strengthens the idea of Italy as a "middle-power" with no strategic and political objectives, whose aim is the consolidation of its rather precarious position in the international arena – the so-called "politics of the chair", according to which the mere presence is more of importance than the substantial participation in any political event.⁵ Without having effective instruments for maintaining a foreign policy role, Italian foreign policy is constantly devoted to the achievement of the "honest broker" status, which permits it – or rather gives it the illusion – to become an esteemed player on the international level.⁶ Hence the need to act in a multilateral context, where

decisions are taken in common without the risk of being overshadowed by more influential international actors.⁷

Bearing the aforementioned foreign policy attitude in mind, might Rome take a different and more pro-active role in other international scenarios, such as the Mediterranean one? Its geographical location places Italy at the center of the basin, thus allowing the country to be regarded as a leading actor in the region, at least in principle. However, even though geography represents an asset for Rome in this respect, it would be of the essence to implement a distinctive foreign policy in the area. Hitherto, “the Mediterranean has been only a relative foreign policy priority, subordinated to Italy’s concerns over its relationships within the European Union and with the United States.”⁸ Nevertheless, new regional dynamics might prompt Italy to take advantage of its privileged position in the area, thus transforming itself into the Mediterranean hub *par excellence*. It goes without saying that such shift in Italian foreign policy might occur only if moving away from the traditional path of bandwagoning and political subordination. Italian “Mediterraneanness” needs the country to be a protagonist, not merely a supporting actor, in the international scene. Towards this shift some politicians have recently stressed the importance of taking into account a third directive in Italian foreign policy, besides Atlanticism and Europeanism, that is “Mediterraneanism”.⁹

It is with this framework in mind that this article will endeavour to understand Italian policies and perspectives in the Mediterranean, intending to assess whether or not the country’s traditional foreign policy variables remain unchanged even in this domain. The article will first dwell upon the potential role Italy might cover in the recently established regional political framework, the Union for the Mediterranean. With regard to this, some proposals have been made by the government, especially in the field of regional economic development and security issues. The article will then analyse the bilateral relationships Rome has with its Southern partners in the area, concentrating on their economic aspects. Finally, it will take into consideration the cultural ties linking the Mediterranean countries, concluding that a substantial foreign policy in the Mediterranean is far from being effectively implemented by Italy. Indeed, on both a multilateral and a bilateral level, Italy fails to act as a powerful political actor. Multilaterally, it missed the opportunity of being the real protagonist of the Union for the Mediterranean, leaving the role to Sarkozy’s France. Bilaterally, it pays much more heed to the economic facets than to the political ones. It ensues that Rome might be able

to carve out a leading role in the region perhaps only by means of the cultural ties with its Mediterranean neighbours. The added value Italy may provide to the area remains its cultural foreign policy.

Italy's Mediterranean Policy: Between Regional Arrangements and Bilateral Relations

Rome's foreign policy in the Mediterranean basin falls within Italian traditional political guidelines, balancing between a multilateral approach and the endeavour to create personal, bilateral relations with the countries of the region. Again, the "oscillatory mechanism" prevails over a more stable foreign policy. In doing so, the government aims at both joining international fora as a reliable partner and establishing more direct and privileged relations with the countries of the Southern Mediterranean flank, the twofold aim of achieving a reputable position on the multilateral level and, simultaneously, strengthening ties on the bilateral one. Without considering, however, that such behaviour risks attaining the opposite goal, undermining the country's credibility in the regional context – where each actor is expected to act through multilateral consultation – and reducing the scope of bilateral relations to the economic sphere in so far as political issues are already dealt with in the context of multilateral frameworks.

This being the general scenario, it is not surprising to see the balancing between nationalistic revivals, which tend to privilege direct and bilateral relations in the Mediterranean, and European-led political behaviours, mostly guided by the awareness of the country's political weakness and need for multilateral frameworks of action. Hesitation among these two opposite attitudes also results as a consequence of the regular change in Italian governments between the center-right and the center-left. In this respect, the two political alignments support dissenting opinions, with Berlusconi's *Popolo della Libertà* being more inclined to the strengthening of the Atlantic alliance and the creation of personal links with leaders of third countries, whereas Franceschini's *Partito Democratico* is more favourable to Europeanism and the achievement of an Italian pro-active role within the EU multilateral framework.¹⁰

Besides differences between the two main political parties, some ambivalences and contradictions are evident within the two political groupings as well. A critical case in point is, on one hand, the government's resolute support for the establishment of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in

July 2008 alongside its strong commitment to the conclusion of a bilateral – recently ratified – treaty between Italy and Libya.

It is fair to say that the idea of the July 2008 meeting held in France was previously endorsed by the Prodi's government in 2007. The "appeal de Rome", signed on December 20, 2007, by the Italian, French and Spanish governments, was intended to encourage the creation of the UfM and to endorse Sarkozy's proposal for a meeting to be held in Paris seven months later. However, the Italian Prime Minister clarified the government's stance with regard to the UfM's objectives, especially as concerns the controversy over Turkey's participation to the UfM and its subsequent exclusion from the EU. In this respect, Prodi stated: "I ask that this proposal we are elaborating for a grand Mediterranean policy not be thought of as a way of resolving the problem of our relations with Turkey. It's something else."¹¹ Notwithstanding such clarifications, the overall project has been fully supported by the Italian government, by both the center-left and the center-right in the aftermath of the change in government in April 2008. Few days before the Paris meeting, the current Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Franco Frattini, highlighted the role of the Mediterranean as a "bridge" between the West, the Middle East and the Balkans, stressing the utmost importance of the region for Italy's international image.¹² Leaving aside differences in the historical context, the same rhetoric is found in a 1996 article written by the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lamberto Dini, who urged to take advantage of the peculiar position of the peninsula – "*la peninsularità italiana*" – to the benefit of the country.¹³ The political rhetoric thus remained unchanged over the years, with more heed being paid to window-dressing politics than to concrete policy proposals. On both sides of the left-right divide, representatives have exhorted to act, yet none illustrated how.

Nevertheless, a number of suggestions have arisen on the part of the Italian government in the framework of the UfM.¹⁴ First is the proposal for the creation of the Mediterranean Business Development Agency (MBDA), which would guarantee financial support to small and medium businesses of the Mediterranean countries. However, the project, jointly presented by the Spanish and Italian Prime Ministers, preceded the establishment of the UfM, going back to the bilateral meeting between Italy and Spain in February 2007. In order to allow the project to fall within the UfM parameters, the Italian government has recently called on both the EU Commission and the European Investment Bank (EIB) to launch a feasibility study with the intent of verifying whether a joint action, both on the part of the EU and of the

UfM, is going to be efficient or not in this domain. Therefore, such a project will turn out to be successful only if it provides an added value to similar activities already launched by the EIB.¹⁵

Second, the government has suggested a meeting, to be probably held in Milan in July 2009, among political representatives, business actors and technical experts of the Union's members, and aimed at providing a high-level and all-encompassing consultation on the current financial crisis. According to Foreign Ministry Undersecretary, Stefania Craxi, the economic forum would also represent an occasion for both governments and economic actors to interact and increase investments in the region.¹⁶

Finally, Italy has proposed a "soft-security" mechanism in the Mediterranean basin, grounded on a joint inspection carried out by the coastal countries of the region. More specifically, this project would allow coastguards to cooperate in fighting illegal fishing, also launching a common program for civil defence and maritime safety. The concept of soft-security applied to the Mediterranean was first introduced by the Italian government, which strongly backed the idea of joint sea inspections in 2001.¹⁷

Notwithstanding such proposals, Italian institutions, on both the national and local level, find it difficult to carry out their ideas. The first setback stems from the risk of an overlap and duplication of functions between the EU and the UfM. In this respect, the Italian proposal for the establishment of the MBDA is unlikely to achieve its original aim, as its objectives are already on the EIB agenda.

Furthermore, the country aspires to attain some goals which are out of reach. A critical case in point is the stance some Southern Italian regions have taken with regard to their potential role in the UfM. In this respect, the Governor of Sicily, Raffaele Lombardo, has actively promoted a series of initiatives to assure a more pro-active role of the Region within the UfM. In the course of a bilateral meeting with Franco Frattini – the first time ever an Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs has met a Governor in his/her Region – Lombardo confirmed the need for Sicily to regain its place in the Mediterranean.¹⁸ Few days later, he was nominated President of Coppem, the Permanent Committee for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership of Local and Regional Powers. Some projects promoted by the regions have been launched, aimed at rendering Italy a future regional hub in the Mediterranean. Although the ideal geographical position permits Italian Southern regions to bring forward such projects, local and regional leaders seem not to consider the most relevant issue at stake, that

is the deficiency of their territories' basic infrastructure necessary for the effective functioning of the hub they aspire to create.¹⁹ Before being projected abroad, such Regions need large-scale domestic reforms, in terms of transportations, telecommunications and university centers. That is the reason why, for instance, the project for a Euro-Mediterranean University will be implemented in Slovenia rather than in Sicily, although it was originally proposed by the latter's Regional Governor. What remains fundamental is a collective effort on the part of national and local actors aiming at mobilising resources for these areas, which would not otherwise benefit from the establishment of the UfM. The challenge is to move *beyond* mere declarations of intent and *towards* concrete proposals. Unfortunately, the Mediterranean rhetoric often risks damaging Italian politics rather than representing an asset. Italy's discourse on the region remains rooted in its unquestioned and privileged geographical position, without however considering the increasing role other actors are likely to play in the basin.²⁰ After all, the political dimension of the Mediterranean tends not to overlap with its geographical boundaries, so that "a geographical term does not by itself make for a meaningful political entity".²¹ Consequently, the self-centered concept of "geographical Mediterranean" no longer represents the single, least of all the most relevant, definition to be used for the region.

Being aware of this, a two-way policy is expected from Italy: first, the government needs to cooperate on a multilateral level with the ultimate goal of drawing EU attention to the Mediterranean. Considering the relative political weakness of the country, this can be achieved only through consultation with other EU members and states from the Southern flank of the Sea. Second, benefiting from the friendly relations with all its Mediterranean neighbours, Italy might offer its good offices for the resolution of long-standing problems hindering the cooperation among some countries of the area.²² Nevertheless, the Rome "middle-power" status is unlikely to boost such relations, especially in the absence of a multilateral framework supporting Italian efforts in this endeavour.²³

Therefore, the balancing behaviour between multilateralism and bilateral relations continues to be at the forefront of Italy's Mediterranean foreign policy. While preferring – or having to privilege – the multilateral framework within the UfM context, on the other hand Italy favours strong bilateral ties with all its Southern neighbours, from the Maghreb countries to the states of the Near East.²⁴ A critical case in point is the relationship with Gaddafi's Libya, recently strengthened by the ratification of the Friendship, Partnership and

Cooperation Treaty signed between the two countries on 30 August 2008 and ratified in March 2009. The original proposal was first brought forward by the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Dini in 1998, who admitted the existence of concentration camps built by the Italian government in Libya during the colonial period.²⁵ The current Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, has further blamed Italy for crimes committed during the colonial era, offering an apology to the Libyan people and inviting Gaddafi to the coming G8 conference to be held in Italy in July 2009.²⁶ The Treaty stresses the “privileged and special” relationship the two countries intend to develop in the future and provides for the realisation of infrastructures financed by the Italian government over the next 20 years, for an overall amount of five billion dollars. Furthermore, special privileges will be granted to Italian businesses and compensation is expected for those Italian firms which previously claimed tax refund from the Libyan government. The document becomes “ambitious” concerning the bilateral partnership, which entails cooperation in energy, defence, economics, non-proliferation and disarmament. Particular heed is paid to joint maritime surveillance aimed at tackling the hot immigration issue, which has become increasingly articulated as a “security” problem in Italy in recent years.²⁷ Doubts and opposition have arisen with regard to the humanitarian consequences deriving from such operations. Of particular concern is the violation of human rights, also considering that Libya has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention. In this respect, some from the Italian parliamentary opposition have expressed criticism over Libya’s political regime.²⁸ Despite this, the ratification of the Treaty has been welcomed by most of the political establishment, thus allowing the current Prime Minister to conduct a “personal policy” founded on direct relations with other countries’ leaders. It goes without saying that the center-right government favours bilateral relations and encourages personal contacts with its political counterparts, privileging such forms of foreign policy to European or regional frameworks. Broadly speaking, Italy finds it difficult to operate in a multilateral context, where cohesion with other countries and political coherence are of the essence for cooperating.²⁹

Bilateral ties in the Mediterranean tend to be strengthened especially in the energy field, which represents a sensitive issue for Italy given its energy needs and dependence. Unlikely other EU Mediterranean countries, such as France, Greece and Spain, Italy is highly dependent on energy imports and this involves closer relations with the Southern flank of the Sea, whose countries are by far the largest energy suppliers of the area. Furthermore, national coasts represent almost half of the EU Mediterranean borders, thus giving a

preeminent position to security-related arguments. Taken together, such reasons contribute to explaining the further development of relations with these countries and the intensification of economic ties between the two sides. Italy is the second EU trade supplier of the region after France, with growing Italian foreign investments both in Egypt and Israel. The country is also the first trade supplier in Lebanon and exports towards Morocco have risen by 115% from 1995 to 2005.³⁰ Available data strikingly suggest that Italian foreign policy directives in the Mediterranean are mainly determined by economic considerations, also in view of the fact that both Mediterranean and Gulf countries represent crucial areas for the promotion of Italian exports.

There are some apparent exceptions to this tendency to conduct relations purely on the economic and commercial labels. Italian-Lebanese relations are a case in point. In this respect, Italian foreign policy has appeared more incisive than elsewhere. The Italian government has made numerous efforts to guarantee a ceasefire between Israel and the Lebanese Hizbullah in 2007. The most relevant action has been the deployment of UNIFIL II, despite the initial hesitation of other member states. Rome's international image has positively benefited from this political stance, especially after the Italian General Claudio Graziano took over command of the Unifil II mission on February 2, 2007. In this phase, multilateral commitment was regarded as the ultimate solution, as then Prime Minister Romano Prodi stated at the 62th General Assembly of the UN on September 25, 2007: "National approaches to solving the world's problems no longer exist. [...] It is only through multilateralism, by marshalling everyone's energies, that we can hope to do good."³¹ The country's undertaking of a preeminent role in Lebanon also signals the credit given by the international community to Italy's role in the region. Long-standing relations between Rome and Beirut have allowed more leeway for Italy, whose freedom of action was officially recognized by both Brussels and Washington. The country focuses on South-Eastern Mediterranean crisis management efforts in the NATO framework as well, in so far as France is a marginal actor and Spain a relative newcomer within the organization.³² What ensues is that Rome undertakes policy actions abroad according to the leeway granted to the country by the international community. Indeed, "[...] a substantive strategy to bring about change in the region by exerting the newly acquired leverage was never elaborated."³³ Such behaviour perfectly falls within the scheme of the "reactive" rather than "pro-active" policy, in view of which the government tends to align itself to others' directives and policies instead of assuming any personal initiative in the foreign policy domain.

Italy's Cultural Foreign Policy in the Mediterranean

What emerges from the examination of Italian foreign policy in the Mediterranean is the lack of any clear strategy, which would be instead useful in order to identify the country's national interests in the region. After all, such tendency is not surprising, especially when the analysis is widened to include all Italian foreign policy's domains beyond the Mediterranean. Indeed Italian governments have always paid more heed to the window-dressing approach than to the real content and substance of policy, privileging the so-called "catering diplomacy", that is the hosting and promotion of high-level diplomatic events.³⁴

When it comes to the Mediterranean region, the structural weakness of Italian foreign policy becomes striking, highlighted by the wavering balance between the multilateral approach of recent years and long-standing bilateral tendencies. Furthermore, the "declaration-of-intent" style is predominant over "concrete-policy-proposals", with more attention being given to rhetoric than to political projects. Within this framework, for the time being Italy might hope to gain a new proactive role in the Mediterranean by relying on cultural cooperation among the countries of the region. Cultural dialogue represents the third chapter of the ambitious UfM, after the political and economic ones. While Italy seems to get lost in the case of the first two chapters, being unable to find an effective strategy aiming at achieving well-defined objectives in both fields, on the other hand Rome might find it easier to foster cultural ties among Mediterranean countries. This is mainly because culture is a low-politics issue, which does not run the risk of splitting governments and political parties, representing instead the essence of the Italian rhetoric centered on the premise that the "core of culture" resides in Rome. The credibility gap Italy is likely to generate in the case it persists in balancing its policy between multi- and bilateralism, might be filled only through the shaping of a clear Mediterranean cultural policy. As in the case of Lebanon, where Italy was given more freedom of action because the international community recognized a privileged role to the country in the area, similarly the field of cultural cooperation might become a frontline issue for Rome. There where the other EU members and Mediterranean countries have reserved to Italy a preeminent position in a specific field, the country has demonstrated its ability to make concrete foreign policy proposals and to work jointly.

In recent years, both national and local institutions endeavoured to strengthen cultural ties in the Mediterranean with the attempt to gain a

leading regional role in this field. In this respect, civil society organizations took a decisive stance in favour of cultural cooperation. Bottom-up pressure has highly contributed to the promotion of multilateral euro-mediterranean partnerships in the cultural field. A critical case in point is the establishment of the Mediterranean Foundation, an Italian organization born in 1994 to foster links through the Mediterranean between the Arab world and Europe. The Foundation gives national civil societies the key role for encouraging communication and information and promoting human rights and culture throughout the basin. As its main goal, the organization endeavours to foster dialogue and interaction among societies, with the intent of highlighting Mediterranean peoples' shared interests while working to promote pluralism and cultural diversity.³⁵ Through cultural cooperation and contacts among civil societies, national political representatives are gradually tempted to coordinate their efforts in order to cooperate in fields other than culture, emulating the functional spillover typical of the European Community's first steps. Similarly, Italy might focus on the cultural chapter in order to make contacts with its neighbours more frequent and fluid, thus guaranteeing subsequent coordination in other fields as well. Moving away from its "high-level policy" style, which privileges diplomatic and political contacts among high representatives, Rome ought to further take into account national civil society organizations, whose efforts might lead to stronger ties within the Mediterranean. With regard to this, local representatives seem to have better understood civil societies' potential in strengthening regional links, probably in view of their closer proximity to the people. Indeed, some "cultural proposals" have already been made by some local politicians with the intent to renew the awareness of a common Mediterranean identity. Besides the aforementioned proposal of a Sicilian-based Mediterranean University, whose location is instead going to be Slovenia, some low level initiatives seem to be welcomed both by national and local counterparts in the basin. Whereas the establishment of a university hub would require the presence of material infrastructures – from transport to telecommunication – mostly lacking in Southern Italian regions, the establishment of Mediterranean-related organizations might represent a starting point for civil society's involvement in transnational cultural activities, with the final outcome of developing the awareness of a common regional identity. Hence the creation of local cultural centers, such as the *Fondazione Mediterranea*, whose main objective is to promote the shift of the Straits of Messina from a mere geographical navel of the Mediterranean to a cultural center.³⁶

It goes without saying that such an ambitious project is hindered by the same obstacles faced by the university's establishment in Sicily. Nevertheless, while the improvised foundation of a Mediterranean University without necessary infrastructures was highly unlikely, the bottom-up process originating from the creation of a civil society organization might bring about positive effects both locally and through the Mediterranean basin. In this respect it is also important to note the competences assigned to Italian Regions in the aftermath of the 2001. Constitutional modification guaranteeing more freedom of action for local representatives in some policy fields, such as cultural cooperation with third countries.³⁷ In this respect, Sicilian representatives of the Democratic Party have recently signed a bill for the promotion of international cooperation and solidarity among people, in order to give the Region the instruments to cooperate with its Mediterranean counterparts for tackling poverty in the Southern flank of the basin.³⁸ The bill represents a useful example of how cultural and social dialogue among people in the Mediterranean may lead to other forms of interaction, such as development cooperation initiatives. This also favours the involvement of the national level, which is gradually called to intervene in order to coordinate such forms of transnational cooperation. Indeed, while it is true that Regions are entitled to take transnational initiatives in well-defined fields clearly listed in the Constitution, the overall coordination and final decision over their implementation remains with the national government. Hence, dialogue among local institutions in the Mediterranean countries might foster dialogue among national institutions as well, reversing the usual top-down process in favour of the bottom-up push stemming, first, from Mediterranean civil societies and, then followed through by local government representatives. Only through a two-way process by the national government, which must be committed to both improve ties with its Mediterranean neighbours and tackle the *questione meridionale* in the Southern area of the country, might Italy assume a leading role, culturally speaking, in the Mediterranean basin.³⁹ It goes without saying that the Southern Regions are not involved in the issue in an exclusive way, in that some other Northern Regions have already launched joint initiatives with their counterparts in other Mediterranean countries. A critical case in point is Lombardy, which has carried out several activities in the Mediterranean region.⁴⁰ However, the initiatives taken by Northern Regions in this basin mainly cover the economic field, focusing on the internationalization of trade and the development of local businesses in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, unlike the cultural chapter, trade-related issues rarely raise civil society's attention, thus reducing the

chances of a greater involvement on the part of people in the “Mediterranean discourse”. Hence the lack of the aforementioned bottom-up push, of the essence for mutual interaction in the basin and to further long-term cooperation in more sensitive issues.

For these reasons, Italy’s foreign policy in the Mediterranean proves to be more successful if it pursues cultural, rather than purely economic, goals. And in this respect, Southern Regions have taken a more pro-active stance than their Northern counterparts, first and foremost because they cannot strive to achieve any economic traction given their internal state of economic backwardness and administrative disarray. The cultural variable represents a soft-issue, which can be tackled with few political repercussions and only needs the mutual awareness of a common Mediterranean identity by its advocates. This attitude mostly mirrors Italian foreign policy behaviour, devoted to gain the maximum benefit with the minimum cost. Similarly, through the cultural issue Rome might gain a proactive role in the Mediterranean without necessarily taking any political responsibility alone. By supporting Southern Regions’ cultural initiatives and extending them to the national level, Italy might hope to move beyond its traditional foreign policy directives and follow a new path, which is more realistic and suited to the country’s capabilities. The traditional definition of Italy as a middle-power does not represent a mere clichè, but it must be seriously taken into account in the foreign policy domain, in so far as the recognition of national political limits represents the starting point for any kind of credible initiative on the international level. Coordinated efforts both by local authorities and by national institutions are of the essence for Rome’s gradual advancement in the Mediterranean basin, an advancement that has greatest chances of success if pursued in and launched from the cultural domain.

Concluding Remarks

Italy’s foreign policy has traditionally wavered between multilateralism and bilateralism, undecidedly balancing between Atlanticism and Europeanism. The long-standing tendency towards bandwagoning prompted the country to position itself as a middle-power, with no clear strategy and no specific national interests to be pursued in the foreign policy arena, beyond economic interests. Hence the only conceivable policy to follow has been that implemented by other international actors. The Mediterranean foreign policy has to be regarded in line with this political behaviour, as seen in the context

of the UfM. The effective status of Italian foreign policy is far from the role Rome aspires to cover on the international level, and the gap between real capabilities and political declarations becomes more and more striking. What remains of the essence is to bring an awareness of reality and start anew, avoiding mere declarations of intent and shaping concrete proposals only there where Rome would be capable to maintain a leading role, that is in the cultural field. A glimmer of hope stems from civil society's increasing interest in the euro-mediterranean partnership. Only if this bottom-up pressure decidedly comes to the fore, thus thrusting cultural and social dialogue into the spotlight, might Italy shift away from its traditional foreign policy's directives. By contrast, current and future governments risk underestimating the "Mediterranean challenge" following the prudent path in the middle between Washington and Brussels and revealing once again not to be ready for a stable and credible position in the international panorama. At the mercy of other countries' initiatives and decisions, and constantly wavering between Atlanticism and Europeanism, Italy might miss the unprecedented opportunity to be at the frontline of Mediterranean policy, even if only limited to the cultural domain. Launching initiatives and taking a positive stance in the social and human fields might be *the* role for Italy, giving the country the chance to find a new dimension in the international realm without necessarily struggling to achieve a position it does not have the capabilities to sustain. Besides Atlanticism and Europeanism, Rome ought to take further into account its forgotten cultural "Mediterraneanism".

NOTES

1. See also A. Panebianco, *Guerrieri democratici. Le democrazie e la politica di potenza*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1997.
2. See C. M. Santoro, *La politica estera di una media potenza. L'Italia dall'Unità ad oggi*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1991.
3. See Santoro, *La politica estera di una media potenza*, op. cit.; G. Mammarella and P. Cacace *La politica estera dell'Italia. Dallo Stato unitario ai giorni nostri*, Roma, Laterza, 2006; L. Saiu, *La politica estera italiana dall'Unità a oggi*, Roma, Laterza, 2006 and S. Romano, *Guida alla politica estera italiana. Da Badoglio a Berlusconi*, Milano, Rizzoli, 2004.
4. On the balancing between Europeanism and Atlantism, see A. Albonetti, "Come opporsi al declassamento dell'Italia", *Affari Esteri*, No. 157, January, 2008, pp. 55-

- 77; Atlanticus, "La politica estera...nazionale", *Aspenia*, No. 34, 2006, pp. 69-78; R. Del Sarto and N. Tocci, "Italy's politics without policy: Balancing Atlanticism and Europeanism in the Middle East", *Modern Italy*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2008, pp. 135-153; E. Greco, "La politica estera del Governo Prodi" in Colombo, A. and N. Ronzitti, *L'Italia e la Politica Internazionale*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2007, pp. 41-56 and P. Ignazi, "Al di là dell'Atlantico, al di qua dell'Europa. Dove va la politica estera italiana", *Il Mulino*, No. 2, 2004, pp. 267-277.
5. The term was coined by the Italian Ambassador Pietro Quaroni.
 6. On the origin of the Italian role as an honest broker in the international relations, see P. Kennedy, *Ascesa e declino delle grandi potenze*, Milano, Garzanti 1987.
 7. See M. Clementi, "La politica estera italiana", in Colombo, A. and N. Ronzitti, *L'Italia e la Politica Internazionale*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2008; E. Greco et al., "Europa oltre la crisi: quindici punti per la politica europea dell'Italia", *La Politica Europea dell'Italia, IAI Quaderni*, Rome, January 2007.
 8. R. Balfour, "Italy's Policies in the Mediterranean" in H. A. Fernandez and R. Youngs, *The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: Assessing the First Decade*, Madrid, Real Instituto Elcano, 2005, p. 122.
 9. See interview to the former General Director for the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Riccardo Sessa, in *L'Italia e il dialogo euro-mediterraneo*, Dossier Farnesina, MAE, Ed. VOICES, Milan, September-October 2006; interview to Gaetano Quagliariello (Forza Italia, MP) in J. Laurence, "Renewal and Continuity in Italian Foreign Policy", *l'Occidentale*, 15 September 2008, <http://www.loccidentale.it/articolo/renewal+and+continuity+in+italian+foreign+policy.0057843> .
 10. Franceschini recently succeeded Walter Veltroni as Secretary General of the Democratic Party (PD), after the latter's resignation in February 2009. The center-left party is facing internal political changes because of electoral defeats and the absence of a strong political cohesion among its top echelons. For more information about the Europeanist attitude of the center-left and the Atlanticist behaviour of the center-right, see R. Aliboni, "Neo-Nationalism and Neo-Atlanticism in Italian Foreign Policy", *The International Spectator*, Vol. 38, No. 1, January-March 2003, pp. 81-90; F. Frattini, "The Fundamental Directions of Italy's Foreign Policy", *The International Spectator*, Vol. 39, No. 1, January-March 2004, pp. 95-99; E. Greco, *Italy's European vocation: The foreign policy of the new Prodi government*, US-Europe Analysis Series, Washington D.C., Brookings Institution, 2006; S. Romano, "Berlusconi's Foreign Priority: Inverting Traditional Priorities", *The International Spectator*, Vol. LI, No. 2, April-June 2006, pp. 101-107.
 11. "France's Sarkozy, Italy's Prodi say they share common goals for EU", *International Herald Tribune Europe*, May 28, 2007, <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/05/28/europe/EU-GEN-France-Italy.php>.

12. See Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Comunicazioni del Ministro degli affari esteri Frattini sulle linee programmatiche del suo Dicastero alle Commissioni Congiunte 3_ (Affari esteri, emigrazione) del Senato della Repubblica e III (Affari esteri e comunitari) della Camera dei deputati”, Rome, 2 July 2008, http://www.esteri.it/MAE/IT/Stampa/Sala_Stampa/Interventi/2008/07/20080709_Frattini_CommCong.htm and “Discorso del Ministro Frattini al Laboratorio Euromed”, Rome, 30 June 2008, http://www.esteri.it/MAE/IT/Stampa/Sala_Stampa/Interventi/2008/06/20080808_Discorso_Frattini.htm.
13. See L. Dini, “Il Nord Africa e il Medio Oriente: Stabilità e Dialogo”, *Energia*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 1996, pp. 8-11.
14. Interview with the author, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome, March 2009. The interviewee, working within the Mediterranean and Middle East directorate, expressly stated his preference for his/her identity not to be revealed.
15. Interview with the author, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome, March 2009. On the creation of the Agency, see also F. Zallio, “Da Barcellona a Parigi: un Mediterraneo diverso”, *ISPI Policy Brief*, No. 92, July 2008.
16. See “Unione per il Mediterraneo: la sede sarà a Barcellona”, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 5 November 2008.
17. The proposal was written in the Marseille Declaration adopted by the Fourth Euro-Mediterranean Conference of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, 15-16 November 2000, <http://medlab.euromedi.org/page/partenar/Conferenza/Dichiarazione%20di%20Marsiglia.doc>.
18. See “Il Ministro Frattini in Sicilia e la cooperazione rafforzata con l’Isola”, *Unità per il Sistema Paese e le Autonomie Territoriali MAE*, No. 3, January, 2009, <http://www.consmontreal.esteri.it/NR/rdonlyres/71D4D8C7B546415BA96DF7FF81B64FE4/21017/Periscopio20n320Gennaio202009.pdf>; “Mediterraneo: Frattini e Lombardo d’accordo, puntare su Sicilia”, *AGI News*, December, 15, 2008, <http://cooperazione.agi.it/le-altre-news/notizie/200812151447-cro-rt11200-art.html>.
19. See A. Spataro, “Mediterraneo, mare di convegni”, *La Repubblica*, 20/12/2008.
20. Interview with the author, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome, March 2009, op. cit.
21. Sentence pronounced by the Austrian Minister Metternich with reference to Italy, found in A. Moulakis, “The Mediterranean Region: Reality, Delusion, or Euro-Mediterranean Project?”, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2005, pp. 11-38. See also F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996.
22. For instance, in the framework of the UfM, problems inevitably arise when considering the Algerian-Moroccan relations, or the Greece-Cyprus-Turkey issue, not to mention the Israeli-Arab conflict.

23. Interview with the author, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome, March 2009, op. cit.
24. While France or Spain tend to privilege relations with some countries of the Mediterranean, as Morocco or Algeria, Italy enjoys good relations with all its neighbours, perhaps as a consequence of its “being-anyone’s-friend” politics. On the bilateral relations with these countries, see M. Dassù, and M. Massari (ed.), *Rapporto 2020. Le scelte di politica estera*, Unità di Analisi e Programmazione MAE and Gruppo di Riflessione Strategica, 2008, http://www.esteri.it/mae/doc/MD_COMPLETO.doc; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Directorate for Mediterranean and Middle East, *Italy’s bilateral relations with the Maghreb countries*, 2009, http://www.esteri.it/MAE/EN/Politica_Estera/Aree_Geografiche/Mediterr_MO/Rapporti+bilaterali+Paesi+del+Maghreb (accessed 11.03.2009); Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Directorate for Mediterranean and Middle East, *Italy’s bilateral relations with countries of the Near East*, 2003 http://www.esteri.it/MAE/EN/Politica_Estera/Aree_Geografiche/Mediterr_MO/Relazioni+bilaterali+Paesi++Vicino+Oriente (accessed 11.03.2009).
25. See interview to the Italian historian Angelo Del Boca, “Noi e la Libia? Finalmente le parole giuste”, *Corriere della Sera*, 13 March 2009.
26. See M. Slackman, “5 Years After It Halted Weapons Programs, Libya Sees the U.S. as Ungrateful”, *The New York Times*, 10 March 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/11/world/africa/11libya.html?ref=africa>; “Italia-Libia, inizia una nuova era”, *La Stampa*, 2 March 2009, <http://www.lastampa.it/redazione/cmsSezioni/politica/200903articoli/41555girata.asp>.
27. According to the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), the percentage of immigrants in January 2009 increased by 12,6% with respect to January 2008. Among them, the most numerous come respectively from Romania, Albania and Morocco. See APCOM, “ISTAT: Stranieri residenti in Italia 3,9 milioni a primo gennaio”, February 26, 2009, http://www.apcom.net/newsronaca/20090226_143800_4a9cdfb_57024.shtml. The increasing number of immigrants, together with some episodes of aggression towards Italian citizens, has prompted both the public opinion and the government to consider the immigration issue as one of security concern. This has triggered a diplomatic “crisis” with Romania, when the Romanian Foreign Ministry declared that some Italian political representatives within the government incite xenophobia. See “Romania: Nel governo italiano c’è chi incita alla xenofobia”, *La Repubblica*, 10 February 2009, <http://www.repubblica.it/2009/02/sezioni/politica/dl-sicurezza/romania/romania.html>.
28. For more information about the legal clauses of the Treaty, see N. Ronzitti, “Luci e ombre del Trattato tra Italia e Libia”, *Affarinternazionali.it*, 8 February 2009, <http://www.affarinternazionali.it/articolo.asp?ID=1066>. For the economic aspects, see instead A. Varvelli, “Il Trattato Italia-Libia e il nuovo contesto

- economico libico”, *ISPI Med Brief*, No. 8, 23 September 2008, http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/Med_Brief_8_2008.pdf.
29. Interview with the author, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome, March 2009, *op.cit.*
30. For further information on economic relations between Italy and other Mediterranean countries, see M. Zupi, (ed.), *La proiezione economica del sistema Italia nel Mediterraneo*, CESPI, Rome, Carocci Editore, 2008; ISPI, “Italian-Egyptian Business Council”, <http://www.ispionline.it/it/ricerca.php?id=88> (accessed 13.03.2009); F. Zallio, “Le economie mediterranee tra Europa e Golfo”, *ISPI Med Brief*, No. 1, 3 March 2008, http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/Med_Brief_1_2008.pdf.
31. “Statement by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Italy Romano Prodi at the 62th General Assembly of the United Nations”, *General Assembly of the UN*, New York, 25 September 2007, <http://www.un.org/webcast/ga/62/2007/pdfs/italy-en.pdf>.
32. Interview with the author, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome, March 2009, *op.cit.*
33. See interview made by Nathalie Tocci and Raffaella Del Sarto to Italian officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in R. Del Sarto and N. Tocci “Italy’s politics without policy”, *op. cit.*, p. 150.
34. See R. Del Sarto and N. Tocci “Italy’s politics without policy”, *op. cit.*; V. Coralluzzo, “La politica mediterranea del governo Berlusconi: continuità e cambiamenti”, paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Italian Society for Political Studies, Bologna, 12-14 Sept. 2006; A. Spinelli, “Problemi e prospettive della politica estera italiana”, *La politica estera della Repubblica italiana*, M. Bonanni, Milan, 1967.
35. See Mediterranean Foundation website, <http://www.euromedi.org/inglese/main.asp>.
36. The local-based *Fondazione Mediterranea* is not to be mistaken with the above mentioned Mediterranean Foundation, which is a national organization originally translated as *Fondazione Mediterraneo*. For more information on the *Fondazione Mediterranea*, see <http://www.fondazionemediterranea.eu/>.
37. “Modifiche al titolo V della parte seconda della Costituzione”, Legge costituzionale 18 ottobre 2001, n. 3, *Italian Parliament*, <http://www.senato.it/parlam/leggi/01003lc.htm>. On the potential role of the Regions in the international context, especially in the field of development cooperation, see R. Caso, “Il ruolo internazionale delle Regioni: il contributo della UE”, *ISPI Policy Brief*, No. 68, December 2007, http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/pb_68_2007.pdf.

38. See “Sicilia: PD presenta DDL per cooperazione allo sviluppo”, *AGI*, 2 February 2009, <http://cooperazione.agi.it/le-altre-news/notizie/200902021403-pol-r012356-art.html>.
39. See A. Badini, “Mediterraneo, la svolta necessaria”, *Il Mattino*, 7 July 2008.
40. See Regional President of Lombardy R. Formigoni, *Accelerare i tempi dell'integrazione*, Camera di Commercio di Milano, No. 65, October/December 2003, <http://www.mi.camcom.it/upload/file/1460/730306/FILENAME/formigoni.pdf>.