

# Italy and the Global Systemic Crisis

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*The world is rapidly changing. For some years now, even more rapidly. Systemic crises (and the following “great depressions”) have historically caused an acceleration of the already existing dynamics of the rise and fall of powers: the 1873 crisis facilitated the rise of the USA and Germany relative to Great Britain, that of 1929 helped the German recovery and the USSR to cross its industrial gap. The crisis started in 2008 accelerates the rise of the so-called “emerging powers” (in truth often already they have “emerged” for quite a while), particularly the BRICS, and above all China, while the until now dominant Western system of the USA, Europe and Japan is losing ground. The short unipolar moment, approximately coincident with the 1990s and the early 2000s, has now passed: today we commonly speak of a multipolar world. In reality, we are still in a transitional unipolar to multipolar phase with the USA maintaining its hegemonic position. But an arrival at a realized multipolar system in the near future seems to be now inevitable.*

The changes we are facing are not of little importance. Some events have a crucial dimension; it is the case of the revival of China and India after centuries of oblivion, or the progressive loss of political, cultural and economic centrality of the West. A structure manifesting itself since the sixteenth century is now vanishing. In the face of momentous changes none, not even Italy, can stay still and inactive. The time has come for Italy to reflect, without any ideological bar or immobility due to habit, on its national interests and on the most appropriate strategy to achieve them in a future approaching apace. Adapting to the environment is essential for success. Attention must be directed above all to the two pillars which have determined Italian foreign policy during the last sixty years and more: *Atlanticism* and *Europeanism*. An epochal change brings also a categorical shift. Geopolitics can provide useful tools to define and understand the new historical categories, even if it must be assisted by a series of auxiliary sciences ranging from economics to anthropology, from technology to geography.

Halfway through the twentieth century Italy inserted itself into the Western system, or rather North Atlantic, with US leadership. This was an inescapable choice: Italy had just lost the war, had been military occupied and its destiny had been arbitrarily decided by the powers that had won the Second World War when Europe was divided into spheres of influence. Italy chose the Atlantic sphere first of all because it was forced to do so. Then, of course, there was the Soviet threat, although more imaginary than real. The USSR continued to be aggressive with its rhetoric and universalistic ideology, but in reality, since Stalin and until its dissolution, it had mainly a conservative conduct. Stalin chose to build socialism only in one country and his successors had to face the problem of making it survive. This problem in the end found itself to be unsolvable.

In the Europe of 2012, Russia - no longer communist since twenty years - obviously does

not represent a threat anymore. Apart from the insistence of certain areas of the press, the Russian Federation is a reliable partner to deal with, with a culture similar to the European one (or rather European itself), which does not have aggressive aims but aims to be a partner of Western and Central Europe, with whom it has a strong potential of compatibility (the classic example is the Russian oil and gas necessary to power the European economy). Nevertheless there is a significant obstacle to the partnership between Russia and Europe and it is called NATO. It is known that the North Atlantic alliance was born to have an anti-Russian function, and it is a fact that it maintained that peculiarity even after the end of the Cold War. NATO, in fact, since then has broadened and enlarged its area of competence, but all this has been added to the past base without erasing it. In Europe, NATO, post-1989 arriving even as far as the borders of the Russian Federation, continues to serve first of all to “keep the US inside and the Russian outside”, to use Lord Ismay’s words. Sergio Romano, during an interview published in the first issue of *Geopolitica*, defined Europe as a NATO prisoner and hoped for the revival of a European foreign policy distinct from the US one. The military balance of the continent should be considered no more as the extension of the US area of influence, but as pan-European security. NATO should leave space to or transform itself in an organization of collective pan-European security which cannot exclude Russia. The problem will be the status of the USA.

Thinking that US and Italian interests perfectly coincide is a contradiction. The USA is a great continental nation in North America bordering two oceans; Italy is a little peninsula in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. The different geopolitical characteristics can only create differences of interest from time to time, more or less profound. The Mediterranean and Near East policy of Washington in the last decade is a clear example of that. During Bush Jr.’s presidency the USA structured, even if not officially, its policy towards the Muslim world on the “clash of civilisations” and the “creative destruction.” That could only lead to hostility between the two banks of the Mediterranean powering regional destabilization to the detriment of local nations, among whom Italy. On the contrary Obama is supporting, even if with some reserve, the “Islamic Awakening” in action in the Arab world. This is not a wrong choice in itself since the rise of Islamic movements is a well established trend for decades, but the extremes of this strategy are surely worrying, because it leads to the support of radical armed groups linked or similar to Al-Qaeda in Libya or Syria. We know well what such conduct led to in Afghanistan and we are still paying the price with an onerous (in terms of money, means and men) military occupation of the Central Asian country. Now the real risk is that shrines of extremism and terrorism are born not far from us. The USA, protected by an ocean, can be more willing to risk; Italy, so close to the Arab world, cannot.

Even more important is the fact that the USA, being a hegemonic power, will try to impede the rise of other countries. Italy has not the same interest: it has no reason to stand out against the rise of China, Russia, India or Brazil. It is not from our point of view a negative event. On the contrary multipolarism strengthens the Italian position. Consider the crisis of Italian foreign policy after the end of the cold war: unipolarism had limited our freedom of action and reduced our strategic importance. In a multipolar system Italy would regain its importance. Moreover as long as Europe relies on the USA in order to guarantee its security it will not have its own strategy and foreign policy. To grow it is necessary to emancipate oneself.

Unfortunately also the other pillar of Italian foreign policy of the last decades – the European one – has started noticeably to creak. There are multiple examples. Like the other great countries of Western Europe until now Italy has had to favour bilateral relations with Russia

because the multilateral diplomacy of Brussels maintains a not too well hidden hostile policy towards Moscow. The attempt of European Union authorities to impede the achievement of the South Stream, the great strategic infrastructure for Italian energy supply, cannot be ignored. The Libyan crisis of the last year highlighted further divisions within the EU, as happened in 2003 with the invasion of Iraq, but in this case they affected us closely. Libya had become a strategic partner for Italy – a relationship sealed with a recent treaty of friendship and cooperation – but some European nations supported by the USA and led by France and Great Britain did not hesitate to attack the country. We can give whatever subjective political and moral judgment on the fall of al-Gaddafi, but it is an objective fact that a relatively prosperous and stable North African country has been turned into a country divided in a mass of rival armed groups. It is worrying – and revealing of the respect that Rome has within the hegemonic North Atlantic alliance – that the Washington-London-Paris Axis destabilized with a light heart a friendly country and strategic supplier of hydrocarbon and financial resources to Italy.

The last and most current example is the behaviour of Europe in the face of the debt crisis which concerned different countries of European Union, Italy among them. The European Union was not able to unite on a common front. Instead egotism and particular interests prevailed, ending up with a worsening of the situation in the more exposed countries. Instead of holding out a hand and offering real help, the European executive board (ever more German in nature) imposed depressive and rigorous policies leading to (and probably promoting) the substitution of democratically elected governments with “technocratic” ones, not legitimized by the popular vote. It can be, as recently hoped by Sergio Romano, that at the end Europe will come out of this crisis stronger and more united, with the foundation of the “United States of Europe”. But it is also possible that this crisis will end on the contrary with the disintegration of the European Union, or at least leaving it in the limbo of an imperfect and insufficient integration.

The shadow of the end of the dream of European unity, or of an indefinite stall in the integration process, imposes on Italy the task of learning to rely less upon multilateralism, so relevant for our diplomacy in the last decades. The ability to interweave strategic bilateral relations becomes fundamental in the present context, with a global and European crisis and the transitional unipolar to multipolar phase. However that does not mean that during our time a single nation such as Italy may not have clear physical limits to its political and strategic action. The global trend is regional integration, as new integrations such as UNASUR and the announcement of the Eurasian Union particularly show. Europe, that has been at the cutting edge, risks in this phase to be a counter-trend and crumble. In that case Italy will have to look around and search for some alternatives. Geography gave us a unique alternative to Europe: the Mediterranean Sea.

The European Union may survive or crumble but a review of the “third circle” of Italian foreign policy is necessary. A great regional power, Turkey, is emerging in the Mediterranean and a renewal process of the socio-political elites has begun in most parts of the Arab world. This renovation movement could also foreshadow the comeback to its former splendour of another nation with a great potential: Egypt. The Islamists entering in the “control room” of lot of countries, and particularly the success that the Muslim Brotherhood is gaining in different states, prefigure a change of non-secondary importance in the strategic and political pattern of the Mediterranean and the Arab world. Italy has had a worrying inability to interfere in this process concerning our face-to-face neighbours. On the contrary it is necessary to let the Mediterranean become an area of peace, cooperation

and potential integration (a goal to which the IsAG has devoted itself also through taking part in the Moscow-Istanbul-Rome *Initiative*).

Until now it has been discussed how Italy should conduct itself towards the outside world, but it is not less important to touch on what should be done inside. The foreign policy is only the predicate of a subject which is the state itself. The most wise and smart strategy cannot compensate the lack of a solid internal base to rest upon. Italy will not be able to accomplish its national interests or develop a successful strategy if it is not a strong nation. We start from a privileged outpost: Italy is the eighth nation in the world for nominal GDP and the Italian state has the sixth largest budget on the planet. But we must change our course which has been descending for twenty years now. A serious industrial policy is necessary: the Chinese rise shows how tertiarization (or financialization) is not the “supreme phase of capitalism”. Italy needs to host again great industry with a high technological potential that we possessed some time ago. Moreover it is necessary to support the pillar of the Italian economy that is made of small and medium businesses, suffering nowadays from the combination of a strong currency and a more and more stiffening tax burden. The educational system, whose faults are well known, must be reformed but without giving in to the temptation - very popular in this time of “sacrifice” - to create an inexpensive class system education, unjust and unproductive. But more than everything else, full Italian sovereignty must be regained, which is first of all freedom of strategic thought, and must be supported by a strong and cohesive people. Unfortunately Italy currently lacks all these elements.

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