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The Berlusconi Government and Intervention in Libya

Ben Lombardi

This article offers an explanation for Italian decision-making in the early weeks of the Libyan crisis. Of the European NATO allies that have been engaged in military operations, none have been so conflict-ridden as Italy. It is the member of the European Union (EU) whose interests, economic and political, are most directly engaged by the unrest. Rome understood from the outset that those interests would be severely challenged by a policy of confrontation with the Qadhafi regime. Indeed, the government of Premier Silvio Berlusconi sought to maintain its longstanding relationship with Tripoli alongside its traditional solidarity with EU partners and NATO allies. From the beginning, that effort proved very difficult, and was ultimately made impossible by the approval of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 (17 March 2011). Italian leaders were then forced to make choices that they originally had very much wanted to avoid. By early-April, they endorsed the efforts by both the EU and the NATO-led force to effect Qadhafi's removal and later recognised the rebel alliance. Rome agreed to contribute forces to help enforce the arms embargo and allowed NATO to use seven air bases. Although Italian forces were initially not permitted to engage in combat, by late April even that caveat had been withdrawn.

As with any public policy, there were undoubtedly a variety of factors that influenced the Berlusconi government's thinking on this issue. The controversies that are associated with Italy's colonial occupation of Libya, the views of the leading political figures in Rome, the positions taken by key allies, as well as the internal dynamic of the governing coalition likely all had an impact. Given that Great Britain and France led the charge in dealing with the crisis meant that, from the outset, the international response was a European concern. That that dimension of Italian foreign policy has become increasingly a bipartisan issue in domestic politics certainly helped frame Rome's overall response to the developments

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in Libya.¹ The presence of the Eurosceptic Northern League (Lega Nord) within the governing coalition, a party emboldened by its victory in the March 2010 regional elections, would have constrained any desire (if one existed) by the premier to take an active role in addressing the unrest in North Africa. Indeed, Berlusconi's legal problems have increased his political dependency on the League over the past year. And while the League has a history of being more interested in domestic as opposed to international affairs, it has traditionally sought to sell its political support for concessions in areas that correspond to the posts occupied by its most powerful members in the government, including the ministers of finance and immigration.² Their perspectives came to dominate Rome's appreciation of the stakes it had in Libya.

Relations with the United States also likely exercised an important influence. Since the end of the Cold War, Rome has emphasised ties with Washington to enhance Italy's international prestige, sometimes in opposition to its European partners (viz. Iraq and Afghanistan). However a declining interest by the US in European affairs, frictions that followed Barack Obama's election, and the clear absence of US leadership in the run-up to the NATO-led intervention created an extremely ambiguous situation. The most recent Strategic Concept (2005) issued by the Italian Defence Ministry declares North Africa to be a strategic interest for Italy for which "the political authorities are more likely to take action" to safeguard it. The Concept states that this requires "trained forces that can be rapidly configured to their different typologies, capable of being projected, mobile, sustainable in time, highly interoperable and flexible".³ But, as one analyst has noted, this requirement is largely conceived in a US-led mission scenario, an assessment reinforced by the current limitations of the EU's military capabilities.⁴ Given the lack of US support prior to the UN vote in the Security Council, the Anglo-French demand that a forceful response was needed to address the growing unrest in Libya undoubtedly left many in Rome wondering how events would ultimately unfold.

And lastly, there is public opinion. Generally speaking, the Italian public eschew the use of military force as an instrument of foreign policy. One analyst has argued that a "trading strategy" dominates Italian thinking on international politics.⁵ Another study has more recently described it as a national perspective that views war as an aberration of inter-state relations. An enemy is not regarded as an implacable foe that needs to be confronted with military power and, instead, can

¹ Andreatta, "Italian Foreign Policy", 174–5.

² De Quirico, "Italy and the Global Economic Crisis", 6, and Carbone, "Italy in the European Union", 113–14.

³ Chief of the Italian Defence Staff, *Strategic Concept* (2005), 37, <http://merln.ndu.edu/whitepapers/Italy2005.pdf>.

⁴ Menotti, "Italy's Growing Burden", 438.

⁵ Isernia, "Italian Public Opinion and the Use of Force", 87.

be more effectively engaged using diplomacy.⁶ Indeed, during the Kosovo War (1999), the Italian public consistently supported a return to diplomacy (as opposed to an increased military commitment) to bring the air campaign, that had gone on much longer than expected, to a halt.⁷ Polling in the first weeks of the Libyan crisis indicated that such beliefs continued to resonate in the public. In one survey, conducted in early March 2011 for the French Catholic daily *La Croix*, a large number of respondents in Italy (76 percent) were fearful of developments in the Middle East and North Africa.⁸ An IPSOs-MORI poll, published on 12 April, revealed that only 40 percent of Italians favoured intervention.⁹ When, a second poll was conducted a month later support for intervention stood at 52 percent, but the support was still very soft: only 16 percent fully endorsed the mission, while 36 percent of respondents stated that they only “somewhat supported” it.¹⁰ While one never knows the extent to which public sentiment exercises influence on any government’s decision-making, it can be assumed that for Italy’s leaders it was a consideration in this instance.

When combined, these factors encouraged an emphasis by key policymakers on more immediate national and national-political (as opposed to European or transatlantic) interests.¹¹ That focus helps explain the two strategic objectives that defined Italian policy at the time: to preserve the commercial relationship constructed over the course of the past decade with Libya, and to prevent a mass exodus of illegal migrants from North Africa toward Italy. As the crisis escalated, the international response changed shape: so too did Rome’s approach. Protecting its economic interests became increasingly problematic as the Western Alliance drifted toward military intervention. A large refugee influx also seemed likely to become a product of the unrest as Libya no longer policed its coastline and it was no longer practicable for Rome to return apprehended migrants to that country. In the end, all that could be salvaged was a vague promise from the rebels that existing agreements would be honoured and that future economic ties (that is, opportunities) would be scaled to the level of support given by European partners. The late April agreement with France to co-sponsor a proposal for reforms to the EU’s open door policy addressed satisfactorily a political issue that never assumed the dimension Rome feared it would.

⁶ Foradori and Rosa, “Italy: Hard Tests and Soft Responses”, 66–7.

⁷ Everts, “War without Bloodshed”, 238.

⁸ “Une intervention militaire des Français en Libye? C’est non!”, *France Soir*, 9 March 2011.

⁹ IPSOS-MORI, *Military Action in Libya*, 12 April 2011, <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2763/ReutersIpsos-MORI-International-poll-on-Libya.aspx>.

¹⁰ IPSOS-MORI, *Assessment of NATO’s Military Intervention in Libya*, May 2011, <http://www.ipsos-na.com/download/pr.aspx?id=10723>.

¹¹ See Menotti, “Italy’s Growing Burden”, 441; Davidson, “Italy-US Relations”; and T. Parks, “Booted – What Really Ails Italy”, *The New Yorker*, 11 April 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2011/04/11/110411crat_atlarge-parks.com.

Italy and Libya

Geographically proximate – at its nearest, the Libyan coastline is around 130 miles from the island of Lampedusa – the two countries share a history that goes back centuries. Nearly a century ago, in 1912, Italy invaded and occupied the Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan. Local resistance led to a twenty-year insurgency that was ended by the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini. If Rome's hold on this territory was cut short by defeat in the Second World War, the name that Mussolini had given to those lands (Libya, recalling the ancient Greek designation) persisted, Italian colonists remained behind after the war, and Italian culture exercised an attraction for many in the newly independent country. However, the colonial era was always a sore spot for the Arab population and, shortly after the 1969 coup that brought him to power, Qadhafi ordered the approximately 20,000 Italian nationals to leave the country and expropriated much of their property.

In the years that followed, Italy's relations with Libya were limited. There was some trade and the Italian energy giant, ENI (Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi), continued to invest in Libya's booming energy industry, but Qadhafi's support for the Red Brigades in Italy during the 1970s and for other terrorist causes throughout Europe left Libya largely isolated.¹² Despite joining its EU partners in declaring such activities unacceptable, Rome periodically signaled a desire for improved ties. In 1973, and despite opposition from Israel, Italy repatriated to Libya a team of Arab commandos who had fired a missile at an El Al passenger jet near Rome's Leonardo da Vinci airport. Italy also refused to allow the US to use bases on its territory to conduct the airstrikes it launched against Libya in 1986. It was later revealed that Premier Bettino Craxi had betrayed Washington's confidence by warning Qadhafi of the raid.¹³ Rome retained low level ties with Libya even as that country was further isolated by new sanctions following the 1988 Lockerbie bombing.

The Italian strategy over three decades of maintaining contact with Tripoli eventually paid off when, following the abolition of the sanctions regime in late 2003, Qadhafi sought closer ties with Europe. Rome moved quickly to capitalise on the new opportunity. Berlusconi was the first Western leader to visit that country after its rehabilitation and followed that up with six further visits in 2004 alone. In the years that followed, Rome's influence with the Libyan regime was often exaggerated; despite reports, Rome does not appear to have exercised any substantive influence in encouraging Libya's divestment of its weapons of mass destruction.¹⁴ Italy was, nonetheless, regarded by Qadhafi as a gateway to Europe

¹² Martin, *The Sage Encyclopedia of Terrorism*, 494.

¹³ S. Sherer, and A. Freeman. "Italy Warned Libya of Bombing, Saved Qaddafi's Life", *Bloomberg News*, 30 October 2008.

¹⁴ M. Indyk, "The Iraq War did not Force Gadaffi's Hand", *Financial Times*, 9 March 2004.

and, according to one source, in 2009 he indicated that he intended to “concentrate 90 percent of Libya’s foreign investment in Italy and to give special priority to Italian businesses that want to operate in Libya”.¹⁵ By that time, the Berlusconi government had laid the foundations for a mutually beneficial relationship that continued to grow until the ‘winds of change’ blew into Libya in early 2011.

Italian leaders were understandably eager to insulate the bilateral relationship as much as possible from the unrest in Libya. This meant that Rome was reluctant to abandon Qadhafi even after his regime incurred the opprobrium of the international community by using extreme measures against demonstrators. In late February, Foreign Minister Franco Frattini cautioned his EU counterparts about opposing Qadhafi fearing, as he argued, that only the Libyan leader was holding that country together. It was an argument that quickly alienated Rome, and Frattini was later forced to qualify his position. European leaders were further taken aback when Berlusconi initially refused to use his personal connection to Qadhafi to urge a cessation of violence, saying that the Libyan leader was “too busy” at the moment.¹⁶ One of the opposition leaders, Francesco Rutelli, criticised the government’s reticence, arguing that “Italy has been behaving with extraordinary lightness in the face of a dictator.”¹⁷

That criticism has to be set against Rome’s uncertainty as how best to balance practical considerations (such as making sense of US policy and persuading European partners to approach the crisis in a certain way) with Italy’s own interests in Libya. As a consequence, Italian policy during the first weeks of the uprising in Libya was characterised by hesitancy and hedging. Even when Berlusconi finally did contact Tripoli, his criticism of Qadhafi was subdued, excusing the excesses occurring in the country by the claim that the regime was no longer in control of events. At a late February meeting in Rome, he observed that more than human rights considerations were involved, noting that the popular revolt could bring democracy and freedom, but it could also trigger the emergence of “centers of Islamic fundamentalism a few kilometers from our shore” and a wave of refugees. For these reasons, he said, “Europe and the West cannot remain spectators of this process and above all we [Italy] cannot do that. The events of the past few weeks affect our trade relations, our energy supplies and our own security.”¹⁸

The government nonetheless believed that quiet diplomacy might prove more conducive to advancing Italian and European objectives. Unlike most of its EU partners, it was opposed to using economic sanctions against Libya, and only agreed after intense lobbying by Washington and EU governments.

¹⁵ Ronzitti, “The Treaty of Friendship”, 131.

¹⁶ “Berlusconi Speaks to Ghadafi by Phone”, *Associated Press*, 22 February 2011.

¹⁷ C. Barry, “Italy’s Close Ties with Libya Run Deep”, *HuffPost Business*, 22 February 2011, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/huff-wires/20110222/eu-italy-libya/>.

¹⁸ “Berlusconi: Gadhafi no Longer in Control of Libya”, *Ha’aretz*, 26 February 2011.

By mid-March, as political sanctions were also being implemented, Berlusconi went on record that he considered the referral of Qadhafi to the International Criminal Court to be a mistake, for it would harden the Libyan leader's heart toward compromise.¹⁹ Rome's support for the use of military force was even more half-hearted. Prior to the passage of Security Council Resolution 1973, Defence Minister Ignazio La Russa had discounted the military option.²⁰ After, when Italy acknowledged the legitimacy of the intervention, its military contribution was subject to very significant restrictions.

By late March, however, Rome's policy pivoted. While the objectives remained the same, there was a reassessment of the best means to advance them. Washington's support for the Anglo-French resolution at the Security Council and the intervention must have helped reorient the views of government leaders. We are not yet privy to what US officials said to their Italian counterparts in the weeks that followed the UN vote. However, it can easily be assumed that requests for military assistance to demonstrate NATO's credibility and resolve were made. Such an argument would have appealed to the government's traditional focus on the US relationship. Qadhafi's threats of reprisals would also have led to the recognition that Italy would never be rewarded for its support (however reluctant) for sanctions and, ultimately, intervention. "If Qadhafi regains Libya," one commentator wrote, "for Italy it's going to hurt; we will pay a high price in terms of economic costs. This is not to mention the difficulty of re-establishing cooperation on sensitive issues such as control of migration from Africa."²¹

This new thinking was evident when Frattini met with representatives of the rebel National Committee at the London Conference (29 March). In a statement that followed, he noted the rebel group's intention to honour "agreements entered into at the international level", including those with ENI, and to ensure "continuity in economic action".²² These commitments, albeit made by an entity the composition of which Rome was still not certain, made the policy shift somewhat more palatable. Six days later, Frattini endorsed regime change when he announced that Italy would become the third country (after France and Qatar) to recognise the insurgents as the legitimate voice of the Libyan people. "Any solution for the future of Libya," he stated, "has a precondition: that Qadhafi's regime leaves... that Qadhafi himself and his family leave the country".²³ That same week, Rome agreed to the creation of EUFOR Libya, an EU-led military force under the command of an Italian rear-admiral to be made available to the UN for

¹⁹ "West may have Miscalculated with Gaddafi – Berlusconi", *Reuters Africa*, 11 March 2011.

²⁰ "Ue-Usa: Subito assistenza umanitaria; La città di Zawia sotto le bombe", *Corriere Della Sera*, 24 February 2011.

²¹ A. Panebianco, "Tre Scenari Per Una Crisi", *Corriere Della Sera*, 7 March 2011.

²² A. La Mattina, "Frattini a microfoni spenti 'È stato un fallimento'", *La Stampa*, 30 March 2011.

²³ R. Lucas, "Italy Recognizes Rebels as Legitimate Libyan Voice", *Associated Press*, 4 April 2011.

humanitarian operations.²⁴ By late April, Rome moved even closer to its allies when La Russa announced that, like Britain and France, Italy would send military advisors to assist the rebels.²⁵ It came as no real surprise, therefore, when Berlusconi informed President Obama in a 25 April telephone call that the caveats on Italy's military contribution to the NATO-led force were being removed.²⁶

Commercial relations with Qadhafi

There were two basic reasons why Rome followed the course it did during those first weeks of the Libyan crisis. First, the government sought to preserve the close relationship with the Qadhafi regime. In addition to his earlier visits, the Italian premier met with Qadhafi eleven times between 2006 and 2011. The high water mark in these relations was reached in August 2008, when Berlusconi journeyed to Benghazi to sign the Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation.²⁷ Much of the treaty's contents can be found in the 1998 Joint Communiqué signed for Italy by Foreign Minister Lamberto Dini, which assumed a larger political agreement would follow, but political circumstances had prevented that from happening before Berlusconi's re-election in 2008.

The 2008 agreement included a formal apology for colonial injustices alongside a promise by Rome to spend USD5 billion over twenty years on infrastructure projects as a form of reparation. Raised by a tax on the income of firms operating in the energy sector, the work in Libya was intended to be done by "Italian companies with funds managed directly from Italy".²⁸ In return, Libya promised to hinder illegal immigration by more aggressively patrolling its coastline. In June 2009, the Libyan leader travelled to Rome, although diplomatic niceties often seemed strained. Qadhafi embarrassed his host by publicly emphasizing Rome's apology the previous year and prominently displayed on his uniform a picture of Omar Mukhtar, the Cyrenaican rebel leader executed by Italian authorities in 1930. If tolerating such eccentricities was the price of doing business with Libya, Berlusconi, who has always tended to mix official and personal relations in his dealings with foreign leaders, took such challenges in stride.²⁹ In August 2010, Italy "lavishly hosted" Qadhafi in Rome to celebrate the second anniversary of the

²⁴ Council of the European Union, "Council Decides on EU Military Operation".

²⁵ A. Cowell, and R. Samaiya, "France and Italy will also send Advisors to Libya Rebels", *The New York Times*, 20 April 2011.

²⁶ White House, "Readout of the President's Call".

²⁷ J. Hooper, "The Gaddafi-Berlusconi Connection", *The Guardian*, 4 September 2009.

²⁸ Ronzitti, "The Treaty of Friendship", 128.

²⁹ Around the time of the 2009 visit, Qadhafi was permitted to purchase a sizable share in Quinta Communications, a company owned by Berlusconi. Hooper, "The Gaddafi-Berlusconi Connection".

Friendship Treaty.³⁰ The Italian premier was also apparently willing to help advance Qadhafi's wider ambitions.³¹

More tangibly, Italy has benefitted from an economic relationship on a scale that Libya does not enjoy with any other EU member. Much of this has been centred on the energy sector. As the third largest supplier of energy resources to Europe after Russia (30 percent) and Norway (14 percent), over 85 percent of Libya's oil production was exported to European (both EU and non-EU) countries before the unrest began.³² Italy was deeply involved in exploiting this resource. ENI's holdings in Libya account for 14 percent of Libya's global oil and gas output, while 23 percent of Italy's oil imports and 12 percent of its natural gas supplies came from Libya (its third largest supplier).³³ That this relationship came with a price became evident following the outbreak of the unrest, when the Greenstream pipeline was closed, leading to a significant increase in the cost of petroleum products.³⁴

In fact, Italy has been Libya's largest trading partner, and was the source of nearly 20 percent of Libyan imports and the destination of over 40 percent of its exports.³⁵ Italy has investments worth an estimated USD11 billion in Libya, much of which is concentrated in the holdings of ENI.³⁶ For its part, Libya has invested vast sums in Italy, with the result that it has become a major stakeholder in the country's economy. The Libyan Foreign Bank owns 67.5 percent of Banca UBAE SpA, of which slightly less than 11 percent is owned by Italy's largest bank, UniCredit, of which Libya owns 7.5 percent.³⁷ According to a leaked US diplomatic cable, the Libyan Investment Authority also owns 2 percent of the aerospace and defence company Finmeccanica, 7.5 percent of Turin's Juventus Football Club, and 2 percent of both the car maker FIAT and oil giant ENI.³⁸

Given Libya's sizeable presence in Italy's economy, any government would even at the best of times have sought to protect that investment. The impetus to do so was, however, reinforced by the efforts of the government to mitigate the impact of the global financial crisis. Its policy of cutting public spending while supporting

³⁰ G. Segreti, "Libyan Investment stirs Unease in Italy", *Financial Times*, 15 October 2010; and Conley, *Turmoil in Libya*.

³¹ According to the London-based *Daily Telegraph*, Berlusconi assisted his candidacy for head of the African Union in 2009 by supplying escorts to an unnamed foreign leader who had initially opposed him. N. Pisa, "Berlusconi 'Sent Escorts to Ghaddafi Opponent as Favour to Libya Leader'", *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 March 2011.

³² The figures are taken from the European Commission, *Registration of Crude Oil Imports*, and International Energy Agency, *Facts on Libya*.

³³ "Les livraisons de gaz libyen par ENI ont ralenti, selon Edison", *Agence-France Presse*, 22 February 2011.

³⁴ M. T. Picardi, "What's at Stake for Italy in Libya", *Limes – Heartland*, 3 March 2011 <http://temi.repubblica.it/limes-heartland/whats-at-stake-for-italy-in-libya/1697>.

³⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA World Factbook 2010*, 403.

³⁶ "Libya and Italy: Colonial Past, Future Business at Stake with Ghaddafi's Regime on the Brink", *La Stampa*, 21 February 2011, <http://www.worldcrunch.com/libya-and-italy-colonial-past-future-business-stake-gadaffi%E2%80%99s-regime-brink>.

³⁷ G. Dinmore, "Rome sits at Hub of Former Colony's Web", *Financial Times*, 3 March 2011.

³⁸ "Leaked Cable Reveals Libya's Assets in Europe, U.S., Africa", *Daily Star*, 25 February 2011.

banks and large firms has been designed to avoid the domino effect of bank failure and an increase in unemployment.³⁹ That Italy occupied the position of a frontier between the most economically stable members of the EU and those who were most vulnerable (Greece, Portugal and Spain), alongside its own growing national debt, reinforced the government's risk averse attitude. The loss of liquidity should Libyan funds have been withdrawn or otherwise made unavailable would almost certainly have had a negative impact on what was already viewed as a weakened economy. Such thinking was evident early on in the crisis when Foreign Minister Giulio Tremonti publicly warned his EU colleagues about the effects of sanctions and of the destabilising effect if Arab governments were to withdraw the vast sums invested Europe.⁴⁰ Libya's involvement in Italy's economy has been such that on 21 February, following the first weekend of violent clashes, the Italian stock market declined by 3.6 percent. The next day, according to one commentator, only a technical glitch that prevented the Borsa from opening on time avoided "the panic-selling of Italian-held stocks and any further damage to Italy's markets".⁴¹ So long as it appeared that the international coalition was not committed to regime change, there was no incentive for Italian policymakers to turn their back on the lucrative commercial relationship that had been built up over the past decade, the unraveling of which could do considerable harm.

Libyan unrest and illegal migrants

Alongside economic considerations, the Berlusconi government has regarded the prevention of illegal immigration as equally important. For his part, Qadhafi honoured his pledge in the 2008 Friendship Treaty to monitor Libya's coastlines and to accept migrants returned by Italy. Some non-governmental organisations were alarmed by the subsequent treatment of such persons by Libyan authorities, and Human Rights Watch condemned what it termed a "dirty deal", but from Rome's perspective the agreement was highly successful.⁴² The number of illegal immigrants declined by 98 percent, from 37,000 in 2008 to 405 in 2010, an outcome that the government presented to its supporters at home as a significant achievement. Other governments, most notably that of Romano Prodi (2006–08), had likewise adopted harsh measures in addressing illegal immigration.⁴³ However, given the profile of the League in the coalition, controlling the flow of illegals was

³⁹ De Quirico, "Italy and the Global Economic Crisis", 8 and Bonvicini *et al.*, *Italian Foreign Policy*, 4.

⁴⁰ N. Winfield, "Italy Warns of Issues if Libya Pulls Investments", *Associated Press*, 4 March 2011.

⁴¹ M. T. Picardi, "What's at Stake for Italy in Libya", *Limes – Heartland*, 3 March 2011 <http://temi.repubblica.it/limes-heartland/whats-at-stake-for-italy-in-libya/1697>.

⁴² Human Rights Watch, *Pushed Back, Pushed Around*.

⁴³ Finotelli and Sciortino, "New Trends", 2.

not only a means of shoring up electoral support. As Umberto Bossi, the League's controversial leader, frequently warned, a tough approach was essential to maintaining the unity of the government.

The government was therefore sensitive to the potential damage that the Libyan crisis would do to its achievements on this file. Early on in the crisis, Qadhafi had threatened to allow Europe to become black by refusing to enforce immigration agreements.⁴⁴ Media reports heightened concern by noting, by early March, that the number of migrants landing in the Pelagic Islands was 10 times the total for all of 2010. That the majority of migrants were Tunisians did not dampen anxieties, particularly as reports of large numbers of Libyan refugees decamping to Egypt and Tunisia underscored that an exodus by sea was always a possibility. In meetings with its EU partners prior to the 17 March vote at the Security Council, Italy stated that military intervention could result in a huge outflow of people from Libya arriving on its southern coasts – “immigration of epochal dimensions” according to Frattini in late February. Interior Minister Roberto Maroni stated that the number of North Africans entering Italy in 2011 could top one million.⁴⁵ A 7 March column in *Corriere Della Sera* captured this perspective:

If Libya were to become a failed state, it would turn into a platform specializing in the transfer across the Mediterranean of masses of desperate wretches, of chaos, of crime, and of terrorism, in other words of the poisoned fruits that always flourish in a failed state. And we would be in the front line, the first to suffer the consequences.⁴⁶

Fearing that the numbers were certain to rise, on 15 February, Rome requested assistance from Frontex, the EU agency responsible for coordinating border security. In response, Joint Operation Hermes, a joint air and sea mission in the central Mediterranean to intercept vessels seeking to land illegal migrants, was launched only five days later. At the 11 March Extraordinary Summit, the European Council urged member states “to provide further human and technical resources to Frontex, as required”.⁴⁷

Rome was nonetheless frustrated by the apparent lack of interest in the issue north of the Alps. Indeed, some EU members were openly unenthusiastic about responding to its claim that a refugee crisis was looming. “There’s no refugee influx right now,” German Interior Minister Thomas de Mazière stated, “let’s not provoke one by talking about it.”⁴⁸ This was not the first time that Italy had clashed with its European partners over immigration. In 2010, Brussels had criticised the

⁴⁴ “Libya: Up to a Million Refugees could Pour into Europe”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 February 2011.

⁴⁵ R. Fox, “Africa on the Move: Why Italy Fears Migrant Flood”, *The First Post*, 4 March 2011, <http://www.thefirstpost.co.uk/75913,news-comment,news-politics,robert-fox-africa-on-the-move-why-italy-fears-migrant-flood-from-libya>.

⁴⁶ A. Panebianco, “Tre Scenari Per Una Crisi”, *Corriere Della Sera*, 7 March 2011.

⁴⁷ Council of the European Union, *EUCO 7/11*, para. 10.

⁴⁸ J. Chaffin, “EU Ministers Cool to Italy’s Call for Aid”, *Financial Times*, 25 February 2011.

Italian-Libyan approach, leading the Berlusconi government to accuse the EU of not having a realistic common policy on the issue.⁴⁹ It was not altogether a surprise therefore that, by late March 2011, the government had become incensed by the expectation that it should deal with the likely influx on its own. Maroni gave vent to those feelings when he observed that “[i]t’s fine when Italy contributes to bail-outs, to wars, but on this very specific issue of helping us out, EU states are absolutely not willing to show solidarity”.⁵⁰ Berlusconi was equally frank, suggesting that the EU’s value as an organisation was over-rated: “Either Europe is something real and concrete, or it is nothing. If the latter is the case, it would be better if we all went our own ways and each determined our own politics and allowed selfishness to follow.”⁵¹

The political importance of the migrant issue moved Italy toward heightened frictions with its European partners. By early April, nearly 23,000 North African migrants had arrived in Italy, and holding camps on Lampedusa were overwhelmed. In response, the Italian premier announced that the migrants would be moved to the Italian mainland. Once there, they would be issued with six-month travel visas allowing them, under the terms of the Schengen Accord (1985), to move freely throughout most of the EU. Given that the vast majority of migrants did not want to remain in Italy, the visas were a safe passage to preferred destinations in France and Germany. Rome had decided to pass the problem on to its EU partners. “Most states are opposed,” Maroni observed, “because with this measure the principle of burden sharing is asserted.”⁵²

Rome’s EU partners were infuriated. At a mid-April gathering of EU interior ministers in Luxembourg, Italy found itself isolated and several ministers noted that they had no option but to consider the tightening of border controls.⁵³ The new German interior minister, Hans-Peter Friedrich, declared that issuing travel visas to migrants “contradicted the spirit of the Schengen Agreement”.⁵⁴ And, while he accepted the argument that a whole-of-Europe approach was needed, he declared Rome’s action to be irresponsible: “Italy is a large country, so 23,000 refugees are no problem with regard to the entire population.”⁵⁵ Britain, Austria, the Netherlands and Hungary reacted similarly. By far, however, the most hostile reaction came from Paris. Confronted with the prospect of trainloads of migrants transiting to France, the Sarkozy government closed the rail link between the towns of Menton and Ventimiglia. Indeed, media reports suggest that France was

⁴⁹ Bonvicini *et al.*, “Italian Foreign Policy”, 6.

⁵⁰ “Italian Minister Questions Value of EU Membership”, *EU Observer*, 11 April 2011.

⁵¹ “Germany’s Friedrich: Italy Must Solve ‘Its own Problem’ with Tunisian Refugees”, *Deutsche Welle*, 10 April 2011.

⁵² M. Ludovico, “Maroni Defends Permits, Europe Offers Funds”, *Il Sole-24 Ore.com*, 10 April 2011.

⁵³ S. Bolzen and M. Lutz, “Das grenzfreie Schengen-Systeme am Ende?”, *Die Welt*, 12 April 2011.

⁵⁴ M. Lutz, “Deutschland führt wieder Grenzkontrollen ein”, *Die Welt*, 9 April 2011.

⁵⁵ S. Lorig, “Interview with German Interior Minister Hans-Peter Friedrich; ‘Italy Must Live up to its Responsibilities’”, *Deutsche Welle*, 11 April 2011.

considering a temporary suspension of Schengen, including the re-establishment of controls along the Franco-Italian frontier.⁵⁶

Faced with an escalating challenge to a core principle of the EU, Paris and Rome sought a way out of the impasse. They were likely alarmed by the economic damage that would follow a scaling back of Schengen, an argument that the coalition in Rome would have found compelling. At a bilateral summit in Rome (26 April), Nicholas Sarkozy and Berlusconi announced that the two governments would co-sponsor an initiative in Brussels to “make the EU more effective in the struggle against illegal immigration in southern Europe” and to increase the resources for Frontex.⁵⁷ Both leaders gained by demonstrating to national audiences that illegal immigration is a political priority. The media also claimed that Rome’s backing down on the visa issue (a French objective) led to Sarkozy endorsing an Italian as the next head of the European Central Bank. (Indeed, in June, Mario Draghi was selected to succeed Jean-Claude Trichet in that post.) In any event, the Franco-Italian agreement was reached the day after Italy announced its decision to contribute to military operations in Libya.

Conclusion

By dint of the size of its population and its economy, to say nothing of its unique cultural footprint, Italy is an important member of the EU. Despite its obvious ranking, it is often overlooked by commentators who tend to focus on Britain, France and Germany. Examining Italy’s approach to the Libyan crisis, however, highlights the very different interests of EU member states – and, in fact, different types of interests – engaged by crises that occur outside the borders of the EU. Not all of the member states, including a key player like Italy, see the world in the same political hues.

Unlike the motivations of France or Britain, the two strongest advocates of military intervention in Libya, Italian policy was neither informed by an appeal to broader normative considerations, nor by a desire to assert leadership in Europe or further afield. And because Italy’s approach was grounded upon a much narrower base, solidarity with key partners necessarily came with a relatively higher price, namely the compromising of national political and strategic interests: a broadening commercial relationship that could, if damaged, create significant harm to Italy’s already weakened economy; and the government’s successful record in handling illegal migration from North Africa that would cost it both public and political support. That both of these had the potential to threaten severely the cohesion of the governing coalition underscored this assessment. Italy’s leaders repeatedly tried to steer international discussions away from

⁵⁶A. Barluet, “Un sommet franco-italien sous tension”, *Le Figaro*, 27 April 2011.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

intervention, and cautioned EU member states about rushing to the support of the rebel alliance then forming in Benghazi.

From the outset, however, the Berlusconi government recognised that the West could not stand by and do nothing as Libya descended into chaos. The question for Rome was what to do? The absence of a clear strategy underlying the Anglo-French intervention that established clear objectives, and that accounted for likely consequences, meant that Italy could only hedge and hesitate in the first weeks. So long as Qadhafi was likely to stay in power, and NATO defined its mission goal as humanitarian relief, Rome could not wholeheartedly support the Anglo-French approach. A policy based on “in for a penny, in for a pound” only made sense to Rome once Washington had made clear that it supported regime change in Libya, an aim that went beyond the strictest interpretation of UNSC Resolution 1973. Then, over the course of several weeks as it sought to protect its interests as best it could, Italy came to the conclusion that Qadhafi’s days were obviously numbered, and Italy went to war.

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