



Striking a Balance Between Norms and Interests in Italian Foreign Policy: The Balkans and Libya

Valérie Vicky Miranda

Abstract

To what extent is foreign policy driven by norms and/or by interests? Considering the main trends of Italian foreign policy after World War II and two case studies, the Balkans and Libya, this paper investigates the role played by norms and interests and the interconnection between the two in Italian foreign policy. In the Balkans, norms and interests have neatly dovetailed: supporting democratization and the rule of law has also meant furthering Italian security and economic interests in the region. By contrast, Libya was the theatre of an essentially interest-driven foreign policy. Nevertheless, the Italian government's response to the Libyan crisis between March and May 2011 has interestingly marked a rupture from the recent past.

Keywords: *Italy / Italian foreign policy / Military operations / Crisis management / Western Balkans / Bosnia / Kosovo / Mediterranean / Libya / United Nations Security Council (UNSC) / European Union (EU) / NATO military intervention / NATO mission Unified Protector*

Striking a Balance Between Norms and Interests in Italian Foreign Policy: The Balkans and Libya

by Valérie Vicky Miranda*

1. Introduction

What role do norms play in a foreign policy? To what extent is a foreign policy driven by norms and/or by interests?

The dichotomy between interests and norms as drivers of an actor's foreign policy has been dealt with in different and often conflicting ways.¹ Briefly and simply put, rationalists tend to see interests as the only driving force of foreign policy. All talk about norms is little more than a cloak shielding the pursuit of specific interests. Others argue instead that actors promote norms, so long as these are compatible with underlying (and mostly security-oriented) interests.² Constructivists maintain instead that there is no clear-cut distinction between norms and interests, and that such distinction is determined by epistemological assumptions rather than empirical observations, and is therefore analytically flawed.³ Norms and interests are strictly intertwined and to a certain extent represent two sides of the same coin. In this vein, assuming a normative sphere without interests is nonsense: for instance, an interest in stability should not be unequivocally reduced to a strategic choice; it could also be considered as a norm, at times competing with human rights norms, at times not.⁴ In other words, interests might be seen as particular norms.

The debate is still open and has not led to unequivocal conclusions yet. Within such an open analytical field, in this paper "norms" refer to standards such as human rights, democracy and the rule of law, which are at the core of the EU legal framework, and have a grounding in international law as well. A normative foreign policy is thus simply understood as one which acts consistently with those principles.⁵ By "interests" instead,

Revised and updated version of a paper written for the Summer School on "EU as a Normative Power: National Strategic Views on Past Experiences and Challenges" organised from 13 to 16 July 2010 by the EU Institute for Security Studies, the Cambridge University, and the College of Europe Natolin European Centre.

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¹ For the sake of simplicity, we will refer here only to the interpretation provided by two IR schools of thought, aware that they do not exhaust the complex and multifaceted debate either on the nature of the EU or on norms and interests.

² Richard Youngs, "Normative dynamics and strategic interests in the EU's external identity", in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (2004): 415-435.

³ Thomas Diez, "Constructing the self and changing others: reconsidering 'Normative Power Europe'", in *Millennium. Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2005), p. 624.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 625.

⁵ See the 1948 Universal Declaration on human rights and, on the EU side, the Preamble and art. 2 and 21 of the *Treaty on the European Union* (consolidated version) and the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU* (Official Journal C 83 of 30 March 2010).

this paper refers to those conditions, which a country views as crucial national needs, depending on its position in the international arena and on its strategic objectives. In a pure interest-based foreign policy, serving universal goods appears as a secondary, if not non-existent, goal.

The lively debate on norms and interests has proved to be particularly attractive in studying the European Union as a *sui generis* international actor. However applying these same categories to nation-state is equally fascinating. In this light, this paper considers the main trends of Italian foreign policy after World War II - at EU and bilateral levels - to investigate the role played by norms and interests and the interconnection between the two. To this end, I have chosen two case studies, which are particularly relevant for the scope of this analysis: the Balkans and Libya. Both represent strategic geographical areas for Italy and two traditional fields of action for Italian foreign policy. Both also highlight, differently, the complex interplay between norms and interests in foreign policy.

In the Balkans, norms and interests have neatly dovetailed in Italian foreign policy. Supporting democratization and rule of law has also meant furthering Italian security and economic interests in the region. By contrast, Libya was the theatre of an essentially interest-driven foreign policy, where, until the recent turmoil in North Africa, overtly exporting universal norms appeared as secondary among Italy's priorities. Although at the time of writing in May 2011 events continue to unfold dramatically in the region, the Italian government's response in the Libyan crisis between March and May 2011 has interestingly marked a rupture from the recent past.

2. Italy's foreign policy: norms and interests

Since the end of World War II, Italian foreign policy has been built around three main pillars, or "circles":⁶ the Atlantic Partnership and NATO, European integration, and the Mediterranean.⁷ In the last 60 years, all governments have sought to strike a balance between these three dimensions and in particular between the relationship with the United States on the one hand and with the European Union on the other.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Atlanticism and Europeanism emerged as the two lodestars of Italy's foreign policy. The country's main interests in that period were to regain a status of parity within the international community, namely in Europe and in the Mediterranean,⁸ in order to prevent its exclusion from post-World War II security alliances, and receive protection against Soviet expansionism. For Italian decision-makers, establishing a close relationship with the United States, and being engaged within NATO, perfectly responded to those needs.

⁶ Maurizio Carbone, "Beyond the three circles: Italy and the rest of the world", in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, Vol. 13, No.1 (2010): 1-5.

⁷ We will describe here only the Atlantic and European pillars. For an account of Italy's action in the Mediterranean see the following sections.

⁸ Osvaldo Croci, "Italian foreign policy after the end of the cold war: the issue of continuity and change in Italian-US relations", in *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2007): 117-131.

From the outset, the Atlanticist drive was combined with a Europeanist one. Amongst the founding fathers of the European Coal and Steel Community, Italy has always supported the European integration project, not only for evident economic and social reasons, but also for political and security calculations. Italy was indeed perfectly aware of the unbearable costs that could arise from an unstable and competitive environment in Western Europe. Furthermore, as Lucia Quaglia argued,⁹ the “European choice” was a “choice of field”, embedding Italy in the Western community, that, in turn, was under US influence. This would seem to imply that the committed Italian support for the European project was rooted, initially at least, in a pro-Atlanticist attitude and was seen as instrumental in deepening ties with the United States.¹⁰

During the Cold War, Italy cultivated the relationship with the US and the European Community in parallel. In security terms, primacy was accorded to the Atlantic Alliance. On the one hand, it represented Italy’s main security provider at least until Europe would develop its own security and defence policy. On the other hand, it allowed Italy to sit at the negotiating table on crucial security issues pertaining to the European continent. What is more, Italian governments were persuaded that their loyalty, if not acquiescence, toward the United States would grant them some room for manoeuvre on key national interests - e.g., the Mediterranean or the relationship with some Soviet countries - but peripheral to the US or the Alliance as a whole.¹¹ On all other matters, European integration enjoyed wide consensus during the 1970s-80s, at both elite and public opinion levels, even though this support often failed to translate into a clear and organic Italian strategy towards the European project.¹²

The end of the Cold War alongside the Italian domestic crisis in the early 1990s triggered by the Tangentopoli affair and the ensuing transition from the First to the Second Republic, left the country with a number of opportunities and challenges. The foreign policy vision of the three circles remained valid, although the Mediterranean circle now extended also to the Balkans, where Italy proved to be particularly active in that decade.¹³ As for Atlanticism and Europeanism, Italian governments maintained a certain degree of continuity with the past, notwithstanding oscillations according to the specific government in office. In brief, centre-right governments tended to emphasize more the Atlantic circle, while the centre-left favoured the European pillar. Yet, as Croci cogently argued, differences often regarded rhetoric more than action.¹⁴ Brighi held instead that Italian foreign policy since the early 1990s can be understood in terms of a pendulum, alternating phases of strong Europeanism and weak Atlanticism and viceversa.¹⁵

⁹ Lucia Quaglia, “The Role of Italy in the European Union: between continuity and change”, in *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2007): 133-148.

¹⁰ According to Croci, in case of conflict, the Atlanticist stance tended to prevail over the Europeanist one. Croci, “Italian foreign policy after the end of the cold war”, *cit.*, p. 122.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 122-124.

¹² Quaglia, “The Role of Italy in the European Union”, *cit.*, p. 136.

¹³ Carbone, “Beyond the three circles”, *cit.*, p. 1.

¹⁴ Croci, “Italian foreign policy after the end of the cold war”, *cit.*, p. 130-131.

¹⁵ Elisabetta Brighi, “Europe, the USA and the ‘policy of the pendulum’: the importance of foreign policy paradigms in the foreign policy of Italy (1989-2005)”, in *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2007): 99-115.

Strong rooting in the Euro-Atlantic circles has formed the normative bedrock of Italian foreign policy. It has contributed to strengthening Italy's commitment to multilateral fora such as the United Nations. Commitment to multilateral organizations was not only viewed as the main instrument to bolster the country's international prestige, further its national interests,¹⁶ and gain a certain degree of autonomy from "intrusive" allies like the United States. It also meant viewing foreign policy through the lens of international law and collective security.¹⁷ Indeed, Italy's loyalty to multilateral bodies has never been questioned and has been enshrined in national law. As stated in its Constitution (art. 11): "Italy agrees, on conditions of equality with other States, to the limitations of sovereignty that may be necessary to a world order ensuring peace and justice among the Nations. Italy promotes and encourages international organisations furthering such ends".¹⁸

Consistent with the norms of the international organizations it belongs to and with domestic public opinion,¹⁹ Italy has contributed to the development of international human rights protection, as suggested, for instance, by its activism within the UN Human Rights Council,²⁰ and by its participation in negotiations and ratification of treaties on the protection against torture or slavery and on the establishment of the International Criminal Court. While some initiatives have had mainly a symbolic value, not leading to legally binding instruments, others, namely the campaigns to ban the death penalty,²¹ proved more successful, whereby Italy was able to lead a coalition of countries, advance its position, include such issues on the UN's agenda and influence the final outcome.²² In the same vein, as a corollary of the battle conducted within the UN for a more rule-bound international system, Italy's role in the international scene has undergone a progressive evolution, from being mainly a "security consumer" to becoming a "security provider". Italy, in fact, ranks among the top contributors to

¹⁶ The so-called "forced multilateralism". See Carlo Maria Santoro, *La politica estera di una media potenza*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1991.

¹⁷ Giovanna Antonia Fois and Fabrizio Pagani, "A wolf in sheep's clothing? Italy's policies toward international organizations", in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, Vol. 13, No.1 (2008): 75-88.

¹⁸ See Constitution of the Italian Republic,

http://www.senato.it/documenti/repository/istituzione/costituzione_inglese.pdf. This is referred to as "institutional multilateralism" in Fois and Pagani, "A wolf in sheep's clothing?", *cit.*

¹⁹ As stated by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Italy's priorities in the field of human rights protection are the promotion of democracy and the rule of law, the defence of children's rights, especially children in armed conflict, combating torture and the struggle against xenophobia, racism and all forms of discrimination, the defence and promotion of women's rights and the fight against the death penalty.

²⁰ On 20 May 2011, Italy was re-elected to the UN Human Rights Council, see "Minister Frattini welcomes Italy's election to the UN's Human Rights Council", *MFA Press releases*, 20 May 2011,

http://www.esteri.it/Mae/En/Sala_Stampa/ArchivioNotizie/Comunicati/2011/05/20110520_sodcons.htm.

²¹ The first initiative undertaken by Italy against the death penalty dates back to 1994, when the Italian government presented a draft resolution to the UN General Assembly that was rejected by 8 votes. The Human Rights Commission (replaced in 2005 by the Human Rights Council) instead approved Italian resolutions against the death penalty in 1997, 1998 and 1999. In 1999, the European Union made the 1997 resolution its own, and continued to present it (obtaining the Human Rights Commission's approval) until 2005. Finally, in December 2007, Italy and the EU, leading a trans-regional alliance of 87 governments, succeeded in having the resolution approved by the UN General Assembly. For a detailed account of Italy's commitment in the fight against the death penalty see "Italy and Human Rights", *MFA website*, updated 11 April 2011,

http://www.esteri.it/Mae/En/Politica_Estera/Temi_Globali/Diritti_Umani/LItalia_e_i_Diritti_Umani.htm.

²² Fois and Pagani, "A wolf in sheep's clothing?", *cit.*, p. 80-82.

military and civilian missions under the UN, EU and NATO flags.²³ This commitment to human rights and the rule of law in the international system highlights the link drawn by Italian governments between foreign policy interests and norms.

When it comes, however, to Italy's neighbourhood, and in particular to the interaction with authoritarian regimes, how does Italian foreign policy combine the pursuit of national interests and international norms? According to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs,²⁴ Italy is exposed to an "arc of instability" running from the Mediterranean to the Balkans, with extensions into the Gulf, Central Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Most of the challenges to national security (i.e. unauthorized immigration, organized crime, regional crises, terrorism, WMD proliferation and competition over energy supplies) originate from this area.²⁵ For the purpose of our analysis, two areas can be considered as crucial due to their strategic significance for Italy: the Balkans and Libya. By reviewing these two areas, the sections below aim at shedding light on the complex and changing relationship between interests and norms in Italy's foreign policy.

3. Italy in the Balkans: supporting European integration for the sake of national security

Italy has a long-standing relationship with the Balkan countries mainly due to common historical and political traditions as well as cultural affinity. In this framework, security concerns are by no means secondary. Indeed because of geographical proximity, events occurring in that region inevitably affect Italy's domestic and external security. On these grounds, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' *Rapporto 2020* identified the Balkans as a strategic priority for the Italian government.²⁶ In particular, the latter faces two challenges: on the one hand, ethno-nationalist tensions arising from the collapse of former Yugoslavia and, on the other hand, threats such as organized crime, illegal trafficking and unauthorized migration, that in part originate from the Balkans and in part transit through the region.²⁷

Against this backdrop, Italy's strategic interests are: i) consolidating the domestic stability of each Balkan country and the effective functioning of their institutions, notably in the field of justice and the rule of law; ii) supporting the gradual integration of the Balkans into the EU and NATO, with a view also to re-balancing Euro-Atlantic institutions towards southern Europe; iii) preventing the rise of new nationalist movements in the Balkans (namely in Serbia, or in Bosnia and Macedonia) following

²³ In 2010, Italy took part in almost 30 missions with about 7,800 soldiers deployed. Italy is thus among the main contributors to international missions, with NATO operations ranking first, followed by UN and EU ones.

²⁴ Marta Dassù and Maurizio Massari (eds), *Rapporto 2020. Le scelte di politica estera*, Rome, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008, http://www.esteri.it/mae/doc/Rapporto2020_SceltePoliticaEstera_090408.pdf.

²⁵ *Ibid.* and Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers, *Relazione sulla politica dell'informazione per la sicurezza 2009*, http://www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/web.nsf/documenti/_relazione2009.pdf.

²⁶ This was recalled by Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs, Alfredo Mantica in the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Chamber of Deputies (17th February 2010).

²⁷ See Chapter IV in Dassù and Massari (eds), *Rapporto 2020, cit.*, and Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers, *Relazione sulla politica dell'informazione per la sicurezza 2009, cit.*

Kosovo's independence: and iv) fostering the economic and social development of the region, with ensuing opportunities for Italian trade and investment.²⁸

With these aims in mind, since the early 1990s, Italy has engaged in promoting peace and stability in the Balkans, investing increasing levels of political, economic and military resources. Despite a slow start, mainly due to the Italian domestic political and economic crises in the early 1990s, over time, Italy has started playing a more active role, carrying out a structured and multifaceted policy, partly embedded in EU policy frameworks, partly involving other regional fora, and partly carried out at the bilateral level.

As far as multilateral engagement is concerned, besides the EU-led Regional Cooperation Council (i.e., the former Stability Pact for South East Europe),²⁹ the most significant projects promoted by Italy included the Central European Initiative (CEI) launched in 1989, and the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative (IAI), launched in 2000 and headed by Italy from June 2009 to May 2010 - whose main objectives are to foster the political and economic development of the recipient countries through the establishment and enhancement of regional networks.³⁰ Equally significant has been the Italian contribution to several military and civilian missions under UN/EU/NATO flags. These have been pivotal for the region's stabilization and security and have clearly shown the Italian commitment to and sharing of international norms. Such is for instance the case of the still ongoing Eulex and NATO KFOR missions in Kosovo, in which Italy is respectively the first and second largest contributor, or of Eufor Althea and EUPM (EU Police Mission) in Bosnia and Herzegovina.³¹ Multilateral missions are therefore one of the main instruments through which Italy contributes to the establishment of a safe and secure environment, favours local sustainable development and ownership, supports police, judiciary and customs authorities in their fight against organized crime and corruption, offers monitoring, mentoring and advising as well as capacity-building and training.

In the new millennium, in the light of reconstruction and stabilization, bilateral ties between Italy and the Balkans have tightened up. Italian elites have shown great activism in the region, which, besides being a priority from both political and security perspectives, is now a crucial economic area in terms of both trade and investment. Alongside Germany, Italy is the main trading partner of the Balkans and concentrates its investments in public utilities and the financial sector. For instance, Italy is currently Albania's first trading partner, covering 35% of the country's trade, as well as the top investor (in terms of number of companies present in the country) and the top donor.

²⁸ Dassù and Massari (eds), *Rapporto 2020, cit.*, Chapter IV.

²⁹ The Regional Cooperation Council replaced the Stability Pact for South East Europe in 2008. For further information see the European Commission website: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/projects-in-focus/regional-cooperation/index_en.htm.

³⁰ On 5th May 2010, during a IAI meeting, Italy proposed to re-launch the IAI through the creation of a macro-region within the EU framework. Greece, Italy and Slovenia were mandated to this end. See Riccardo Alcaro and Benedetta Voltolini (eds), *Cronologia della politica estera italiana. Gennaio-dicembre 2009*, Rome, Istituto affari internazionali, 2009, <http://www.iai.it/content.asp?langid=1&contentid=445>.

³¹ Italy contributes with about 1,247 troops to the NATO Kfor mission and with 200 officials to Eulex (the Head of Eulex Justice component is an Italian). Besides, also the EU Special Representative to Kosovo is an Italian. As for Eufor Althea, Italy is the second largest contributor, with 172 units.

Similar is the relationship with Croatia: trade between the two countries now amounts to over €4 billion and is grounded on a Memorandum of Understanding, signed in 2009, establishing structured cooperation in a wide range of sectors, including industry, energy, environment, education, agriculture, etc. In the same year, Italy also concluded a Strategic Partnership with Serbia, as the result of stronger ties and growing investments in the country, such as the establishment of the headquarters of Fiat Auto Serbian (FAS) and the signing of a protocol of understanding between Italian and Serbian agencies for the promotion of investment.³² Furthermore, several Italian companies have shown a rising interest in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a view to delocalizing their production there (this is the case of the Industrial Union of the Venice Province) as well as in Montenegro, mainly in the infrastructure and energy sectors.³³

These Italian political and economic initiatives are, however, embedded in a wider approach, which pays equal attention to the support for democratization and local economic and social development mainly through local and non-state actors (i.e., regions, local authorities and non-governmental organizations).³⁴ Such multifaceted approach is epitomized by the endorsement of law 84/2001, which regulates “Italian participation in the stabilization, reconstruction and development of the Balkans”. The recipient countries of the law were Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro and Romania. With the overall aim of coordinating Italian interventions in the region, the law identified four main and interconnected fields of action: development aid (including training, assistance to local institutions on the rule of law, and security sector reform); support for Italian companies operating in the region; decentralized cooperation and specific interventions of importance to Italian interests.³⁵

Amongst the Balkan countries, Albania has held a special place in Italian foreign policy. Italy’s rapprochement with post-communist Albania was based on different and sometimes conflicting economic and security considerations. Closer economic contacts, soon brought Albania under Italy’s “sphere of influence”. This entrusted Italy with prime international responsibility to induce Albanian transition. Italy’s involvement in Albanian affairs became evident with the serious financial crisis Albania faced in 1996, and the subsequent armed rebellion there. The latter encouraged Italy to plan and lead a multilateral operation - Alba - to stabilize the situation and stop the flows of

³² See “Country System: Serbia, Italy’s growing presence”, *MFA Press releases*, 13 May 2011, http://www.esteri.it/Mae/En/Sala_Stampa/ArchivioNotizie/Approfondimenti/2011/05/20110513_SistemaPaese.htm.

³³ See “Italy-Balkans Bilateral Relations”, MFA website, updated 30 July 2008, http://www.esteri.it/Mae/En/Politica_Estera/Aree_Geografiche/Europa/Balcani.

³⁴ For a detailed account of the Italian cooperation activities conducted in the Balkans, see the reports issued by the Directorate General for Development Cooperation of the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs (DGDC-MFA) within the Italy-Balkans Territorial Partnerships: “Europa Orientale e Mediterranea”, *MFA website*, <http://www.cooperazioneallosviluppo.esteri.it/pdgcs/italiano/iniziativa/Europa.asp>. One of the largest ongoing programmes of decentralized cooperation is SeeNet (<http://www.see-net.org>), a network of more than 60 partners including regions, local authorities and non-governmental organizations from Italy and the Balkans. The network is co-funded by the DGDC-MFA and is coordinated by the Tuscany region.

³⁵ For further details see *Legge 84/2001* in the Informest website: <http://balcanionline.progetti.informest.it/legge84.aspx>.

refugees.³⁶ In the following years, cooperation between the two countries continued to flourish.

A final crucial element of Italian policy towards the Western Balkans is its strong commitment in Brussels to support the swift integration of the region into the EU,³⁷ at first sought through the implementation of practical steps such as visa liberalization, an issue debated at almost every meeting with Albania and Bosnia officials.³⁸

From this brief overview, two interesting aspects emerge. First, Italian strategic interests in the Balkans tend to coincide with international norms. This applies for instance to the promotion of democracy, which is viewed as instrumental to satisfy - directly and indirectly - Italian national objectives, such as curbing trafficking and unauthorized migration. Irregular flows, Italy believes, can be controlled more effectively by democratic institutions in the region. Likewise, democracy and the rule of law can secure a more favourable environment for Italian trade and investment.³⁹

Second, the Balkans represent the most evident case of convergence between European and Italian norms and interests as well as the policies they give rise to. In line with Italian claims, the EU Commission has underlined on many occasions that weak rule of law, corruption and organized crime in the Balkans threatens the EU and also prevents the region from achieving European standards and EU membership. A swift and successful conclusion of the integration process therefore responds also to the EU's interests in stabilization. This is why all European initiatives aim to steer the democratic transformation of the Balkans towards the European mainstream, by conditioning the integration process to democratic benchmarks. Italy shares this EU approach. A successful European integration of the Balkans is viewed as a strategic national interest for the Italian government. This is why Italy would like to accelerate the process and regularly calls upon the EU to commit more clearly to the Balkan enlargement. While acknowledging the importance of meeting the conditions imposed by the EU, in the case of Serbia, in order to speed up the process, Italy seemed to favour a more flexible interpretation of the accession criteria, when it encouraged Belgrade to apply for membership (officially presented in December 2009) even though former Serbian leader Rako Mladic was only arrested in May 2011.⁴⁰

³⁶ Roberto Belloni and Roberto Morozzo della Rocca, "Italy and the Balkans: The rise of a reluctant middle power", in *Modern Italy*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2008), p. 180-183.

³⁷ In 2009, the Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs presented an eight-point roadmap to speed up the Western Balkans' Euro-Atlantic integration. Riccardo Alcaro and Benedetta Voltolini, *La politica estera dell'Italia. Gennaio-giugno 2009. Analisi della Cronologia della politica estera italiana 2009*, Rome, Istituto affari internazionali, 2009, http://www.iai.it/pdf/Cronologia/analisi_2009_01-06.pdf, p. 6.

³⁸ Serbia, Montenegro and FYROM already obtained visa liberalization. After approval of the European Parliament, the Justice and Home Affairs Council adopted the Commission's proposal (November 2010).

³⁹ See on this also Maurizio Carbone, "Between ambition and ambivalence: Italy and European Union's Mediterranean Policy", in *Modern Italy*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (May 2008), p. 161.

⁴⁰ On the contrary, Belgium and the Netherlands opted for a more rigid interpretation and blocked for 18 months the implementation of the Association and Stabilization Agreement (ASA). During the summer of 2010, the deal was unblocked. See Stephen Castle, "E.U. Approves Step Toward Serbian Membership", *International Herald Tribune*, 15 June 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/15/world/europe/15iht-union.html>. In August 2010, Italy ratified the Agreement.

4. Italy and Libya: is their special relationship already over?

Due to geographical proximity and traditional ties, the Mediterranean and the Middle East has been one of the three pillars of Italian foreign policy. Its strategic importance to Italy is mostly due to security reasons, including Italy's dependence on foreign energy supplies and the important trade opportunities arising with countries in the region.⁴¹

In their assessment of the Italian governments' ability to pursue an autonomous and effective foreign policy in the Mediterranean over time, most authors are sceptical. Their common feeling is that Italian policy in the Mediterranean has hardly developed as a "self-standing" pillar, but rather as an instrument to strengthen the relationship with either the European Union or the United States.⁴² While the constraints of the Cold War had not left Italy with much room of manoeuvre in the Mediterranean, its end offered many opportunities, which called upon Italy to confront several challenges and take on new responsibilities.

Italy's strategy towards the Mediterranean has been based on a security approach featuring balance of power measures, bilateral engagements, and efforts to promote a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, good governance and of the rule of law and regional economic cooperation. The results have been mixed. A frequent claim is that Italy has not been able to take full advantage of the opportunities arising from its southern neighbourhood. Despite their efforts, the centre-right and centre-left coalition governments since the early 1990s have failed to make the Mediterranean the core pillar of Italy's national and European foreign policies. For instance, a number of proactive initiatives proposed between 1989-1992 by the then Foreign Minister Gianni De Michelis, i.e., the Central European Initiative or the Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, were not approved due to the opposition of European institutions and some member states, respectively. Due to the domestic political crisis of the early 1990s, Italy also failed to play a lead role in the negotiations of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, leaving Spain to bask in the limelight. A similar failure was reported more recently, in the French-led Union for the Mediterranean⁴³ Beyond contingencies, several structural reasons lie behind these failures which affected particularly Italy's Mediterranean policies: the lack of a long-term perspective in foreign policy-making (the so-called "politics without policy"⁴⁴), the lack of clear priorities in the definition of national interests, and poor resources devoted to foreign policy.⁴⁵ All these factors have compelled Italy to concentrate its efforts in areas other than the Mediterranean: the Balkans in the late 1990s and Central Asia after 9/11.

These mixed results are also due to the EU's difficulties in carrying out an effective policy towards the Mediterranean, first with the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership,

⁴¹ Gianni Bonvicini and Alessandro Colombo (eds), *La politica estera dell'Italia. Edizione 2010*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2010.

⁴² Raffaella Del Sarto and Nathalie Tocci "Italy's politics without policy: Balancing Atlanticism and Europeanism in the Middle East", in *Modern Italy*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2007): 135-153.

⁴³ Carbone, "Between ambition and ambivalence", *cit.*, p. 159-161.

⁴⁴ Del Sarto and Tocci, "Italy's politics without policy", *cit.*, p. 136.

⁴⁵ Carbone, "Between ambition and ambivalence", *cit.*, p. 156.

followed by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Union for the Mediterranean. The impasse that has characterized EU initiatives from time to time and the tensions between Italy and EU institutions on how to pursue potential common interests, i.e. fighting unauthorized immigration, have induced Italy to establish close bilateral relations with key players such as Egypt,⁴⁶ Libya, Algeria and Turkey in parallel to (and sometimes in contrast with) multilateral EU commitments. In the absence of stronger and clearer EU engagement, Italian policy-makers have pursued bilateralism in order to safeguard Italian perceived interests.

Of particular significance in this respect is the bilateral relationship with Gheddafi's Libya, often viewed with suspicion by Italy's traditional allies. Up until the early months of 2011, Italy had pursued a progressive rapprochement with Libya, driven by national strategic economic and security interests. As for security, in the second half of the 2000s, Italy perceived an emergency in the field of unauthorized migration and human trafficking. In line with a post-Cold War trend to securitize a broad range of foreign policy dossiers, the increased flow of migrants landing on Italian shores⁴⁷ has been viewed as a threat to national security.⁴⁸ As far as economic interests are concerned, energy has played a crucial role. Libya ranks first and third, respectively, among Italy's suppliers of oil and natural gas; Italy is Libya's top purchaser of crude oil, and hydrocarbon fuels account for 99% of Italian imports from Libya.⁴⁹

The signing of the *Treaty on Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation* in 2008⁵⁰ was a turning point in the relationship between the two countries,⁵¹ consolidating a process of normalization that had begun in the late 1990s and furthered with the end of international sanctions on Libya in 2003.⁵² What is more, the Treaty closed, once for all, the "painful chapter of the Italian colonial past" and a new era of mutual

⁴⁶ In the last two years, official meetings and visits between the two countries have intensified considerably. From a political perspective, trade between Italy and Egypt has increased considerably, reaching over €4 billion in 2009. Italy is thus amongst Egypt's main economic partners. For further details on the Italian-Egyptian relationship, see Azzurra Meringolo, "Italia-Egitto: una partnership a metà", *Affari Internazionali*, 16 June 2010, <http://www.affarinternazionali.it/articolo.asp?ID=1479>.

⁴⁷ Estimates refer of over 7000 irregular immigrants landing on Italian shores in the first months of 2009 mainly through the Libyan route.

⁴⁸ The Italian Ministry of Interior has reported that since August 2009 (thus after the entry into force of the Italy-Libya Treaty and Italy's *refoulement* of immigrants to Libya) the number of immigrants landing on Italian shores has been dramatically reduced (-88%). See *Immigrazione, gli sbarchi sulle coste italiane diminuiti dell'88% in un anno*,

http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.interno.it/dipim/site/it/documentazione/statistiche/politiche_immigrazione_asilo/Dati_su_sbarchi_immigrati_al_31_7_2010.html.

⁴⁹ See statistics in the website of the Italian Ministry of Economic Development Directorate General for Energy and Mineral Resources (DGERM): <http://dgerm.sviluppoeconomico.gov.it/dgerm>.

⁵⁰ The Treaty entered into force in February 2009.

⁵¹ See for example, the bilateral Agreement on Tourism (1998), the Consular convention (1998) and the Agreement to promote and protect investments (2000), alongside a series of Procès Verbal and Memorandums of Understanding concerning different issues.

⁵² The closer relation between Italy and Libya was seriously questioned both at domestic and international levels. The main concerns regarded the growing Libyan presence in strategic sectors of the Italian economy, i.e. banking (Unicredit), energy (Eni) manufacturing (Fiat) and infrastructure.

engagement and cooperation on sensitive issues, including immigration, commenced.⁵³

The most important and ambitious part of the Treaty regarded cooperation in a host of sectors, from culture, science, economy, industry and energy, to defence, non-proliferation and disarmament the fight against terrorism and irregular migration. As for the latter, the Treaty provided, *inter alia*, for joint patrolling on boats supplied by Italy as well as satellite control of Libyan land borders by means of a detection system co-funded by Italy and the EU.

The section on irregular migration raised considerable human rights concerns internationally, in particular with respect to the fate of migrants turned back to Libya, given that the latter is not part of the 1951 Convention on refugees.⁵⁴ In this vein, throughout 2009, international attention focussed on the surveillance activities carried out by Italy and Libya, whose *modus operandi* was thoroughly criticized on many occasions.⁵⁵ In particular, Italy's practice of intercepting migrants' boats in high seas and redirecting them back to the country of origin by considering migrants as illegal regardless of their possible status as asylum-seekers was questioned by international organizations and NGOs, which invoked the principle of *non-refoulement* (art. 33 of the Geneva Convention)⁵⁶ and international asylum obligations.⁵⁷

The respect of international legislation was a sensitive issue not only in the case of the fight against illegal immigration, but also in the wider realm of human rights protection. Despite the explicit commitment of both parties to adhere to the principles of the United Nations Charter, no conditionality was included in the 2008 Treaty. The Treaty played no role in encouraging the democratic transition of Gheddafi's regime. This, indeed, was not its primary intention. All in all, in looking for a privileged partnership with Libya,

⁵³ This came with a strong Italian commitment to build basic infrastructures, amounting to a total of USD 5 billion. No funds were to be transferred to Libya however as work was expected to be carried out by Italian companies.

⁵⁴ See Natalino Ronzitti, *The Treaty on Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation between Italy and Libya: New Prospects for Cooperation in the Mediterranean?*, Rome, Istituto affari internazionali, 2009 (Documenti IAI 0909), <http://www.iai.it/pdf/DocIAI/IAI0909.pdf>.

⁵⁵ For instance concerns see UNHCR *deeply concerned over returns from Italy to Libya*, 7 May 2009, <http://www.unhcr.org/4a02d4546.html>; Human Rights Watch, *Italy/Libya: Migrants Describe Forced Returns, Abuse*, 21 September 2009, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/09/17/italylibya-migrants-describe-forced-returns-abuse>; Council of Europe, *Report to the Italian Government on the visit to Italy carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) from 27 to 31 July 2009*, 28 April 2010, <http://www.cpt.coe.int/documents/ita/2010-inf-14-eng.htm>.

⁵⁶ Art. 33 of the Convention prohibits States from expelling or returning refugees and asylum seekers to the territories where their life or freedom would be threatened on account of their religion, race, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

⁵⁷ The UNHCR as well as the European Court of Human Rights and the European Commission have rejected the interpretations of the governments involved in the deal (Italy and Malta), which argued that this principle applies only to national territory and national waters. In this sense, the EU Commission, in asking the Italian government for clarification on the measures taken to ensure that returned foreign nationals would receive adequate protection, clarified that under the Schengen Borders Code and the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights, border surveillance activities, even when conducted in high seas, entail extra-territorial jurisdiction, which requires the application of the *non-refoulement* principle. For further details see Bruno Nascimbene, *Control of Illegal Immigration and Italian-EU Relations*, Rome, Istituto affari internazionali, 2009 (Documenti IAI 0922), <http://www.iai.it/pdf/DocIAI/IAI0922E.pdf>.

Italy followed a pragmatic approach in pursuit of its national strategic interests, regardless of the international status and scarce legitimacy of its partner. This in part applied also to the EU. As remarked by Joffé and Paoletti,⁵⁸ despite the allegedly normative nature of EU common foreign and security policy, over the last decade, the Union has progressively embraced Libya through its Mediterranean policies - the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the UfM, and the ENP. Despite Libyan reluctance to accept passively EU policies, negotiations on a Framework Agreement were launched in 2008.⁵⁹ The migration dossier was one of its core elements, which responded to some southern member states' requests for a greater EU involvement in this field. Whereas both the Italy-Libya Treaty and the EU-Libya talks for a Framework Agreement included references to human rights, the EU variant was a more sophisticated attempt to hide strategic concerns with nominal normative preoccupations.⁶⁰

Over the last months, the scenario in North Africa has dramatically changed. Since the end of 2010, and starting from Tunisia and Egypt, the entire region has witnessed mass turmoil and rebellions against ruling authoritarian regimes. The most violent attacks against protesters have taken place in Libya, propelling the country into a de facto civil war. Against this backdrop, Italy's relationship with Libya has undergone a profound U-turn. When, in mid-February 2011, the news on the Libyan uprising first broke out, the Italian government maintained a cautious "neutrality" vis-à-vis the regime and the rebels. Prime Minister Berlusconi stated he did not want to "disturb" Gheddafi at such a critical moment, despite the evidence of the latter's use of force against protesters.⁶¹ The Italian government, uncertain of the final outcome in Libya and concerned about Italian economic and security interests, opted to sit on the fence. The government's attention was mainly focused on the serious consequences the Libyan situation could entail for Italy itself, with particular reference to the expected migratory flows into Italy.⁶² In line with such concerns, the government called upon the European Union to take the lead through a more active role of Frontex.⁶³ Equal attention was not paid to the increasing violence the regime perpetrated against the rebels as well as to the growing number of civilian casualties.

⁵⁸ George Joffé and Emanuela Paoletti, *Libya's Foreign Policy: Drivers and Objectives*, Washington, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2010 (Mediterranean Papers), http://www.gmfus.org/cs/publications/publication_view?publication.id=1300.

⁵⁹ The Framework Agreement would provide for political dialogue and cooperation on foreign policy and security issues; for a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement; and for cooperation in key areas of common concern such as energy, transport, migration, visas, justice and home affairs, environment and other topics like maritime policy and fisheries, education and health. See EU Commission, *Commissioners Malmström and Füle visit Libya to reinforce EU-Libya cooperation* (IP/10/1281), 4 October 2010, <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/10/1281>. With the outbreak of violence in 2011, negotiations have been suspended.

⁶⁰ Namely "the determination of Brussels to act as arbiter of security in the European periphery as part of an attempt to prevent inward migration, primarily from sub-Saharan Africa as well as from North Africa itself." Joffé and Paoletti, *Libya's Foreign Policy: Drivers and Objectives*, cit., p. 28.

⁶¹ See "Libia, la repressione fa più di 100 morti. Berlusconi: 'Non disturbo Gheddafi'", *Repubblica*, 19 February 2011, http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2011/02/19/news/libia_hr-12640156/.

⁶² In alarming tones, the Minister of Foreign Affairs spoke of about 300,000 potential immigrants. See Camera dei Deputati, *Informativa urgente del Governo sugli sviluppi della situazione in Libia*, 23 February 2011, http://www.camera.it/_dati/leg16/lavori/stenografici/sed438/SINTERO.pdf.

⁶³ On 20th February 2011, Frontex and Italy started the joint operation Hermes to manage the inflows of migrants. See Frontex press release: *Hermes 2011 running*, 22 February 2011, http://www.frontex.europa.eu/newsroom/news_releases/art96.html

As days passed, the Italian government's tune changed, becoming more critical towards Gheddafi. Concerns over migration continued to loom large, but were increasingly matched by more explicit statements by the prime minister and the ministry of foreign affairs, who denounced the regime and stated that its violent repression was no longer acceptable.⁶⁴ In this vein, Italian Defence Minister Ignazio La Russa claimed that the 2008 Treaty with Libya was *de facto* suspended.⁶⁵ International pressure - i.e., United Nations Security Council Resolution 1970 establishing sanctions against Libya and similar measures undertaken by the EU Council⁶⁶ - as well as Italy's need to remain within the Western mainstream certainly played a role in explaining this change. Although Italy had struggled in previous years to re-integrate Gheddafi into the international community by presenting him as a reliable partner, Italy could no longer support the Libyan leader in view of the atrocities his regime was committing against its people.

In line with this new approach, in early March 2011, the Italian government began to play a more assertive role. First among EU countries, it launched a humanitarian mission to the Libyan-Tunisian border in order to assist the thousands of refugees fleeing from Libya; it explicitly agreed with all sanctions endorsed by the UN and the EU and with their strengthening. What is more, alongside its Western allies, Italy hypothesized sending a UN monitoring mission to Libya or establishing a no-fly zone over the country. When the no-fly zone was approved by UNSC 1973, Italy participated in it,⁶⁷ as in the NATO mission "Unified Protector" launched at the end of March, obtaining the command of its naval component aimed at ensuring the respect of the arms embargo.⁶⁸ Italy thus confirmed the prevalence of its Euro-Atlantic commitments over its "special relationship" with Libya.

The latest developments suggest Italy's ambition to play a major role in this crisis in order to pave the way for a renewed close partnership with post-Gheddafi Libya. Italy's pro-active policy covers a number of fronts. At the political-diplomatic level, Italy was the third country recognizing the Libyan Transitional National Council (TNC) as the only legitimate interlocutor. It has also pursued talks at the bilateral level as well as within the Libya Contact Group in order to identify the best way to support the TNC. At a more operational level, Italy has combined humanitarian assistance with a strengthened role

⁶⁴ See for instance "Libya: Tripoli must listen to Europe's appeal and stop the violence against civilians, says Frattini. The Minister is visiting Cairo today", *MFA Press releases*, 22 February 2011, http://www.esteri.it/Mae/En/Sala_Stampa/ArchivioNotizie/Approfondimenti/2011/02/20110222_Libia.htm.

⁶⁵ See "Libia, La Russa: 'Trattato d'amicizia di fatto inoperante'", *Adnkronos*, 26 February 2011, http://www.adnkronos.com/IGN/News/Politica/Libia-La-Russa-Di-fatto-sospeso-Trattato-damicizia-con-Gheddafi_311730305961.html. See also Natalino Ronzitti, "Che fare del Trattato con la Libia" *AffarInternazionali*, 28 February 2011, <http://www.affarinternazionali.it/articolo.asp?ID=1679>.

⁶⁶ See *UN Security Council Resolution 1970 (S/RES/1970 (2011))*, 26 February 2011, <http://www.un.org/Docs/journal/asp/ws.asp?m=S/RES/1970%20%282011%29> and European Council, *Libya: EU imposes arms embargo and targeted sanctions (7081/11 Presse 41)*, 28 February 2011, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/119524.pdf.

⁶⁷ See "Italy will make an active contribution to any EU-NATO-UN decisions", *MFA Press releases*, 9 March 2011, http://www.esteri.it/Mae/En/Sala_Stampa/ArchivioNotizie/Approfondimenti/2011/03/20110309_FocusLibia2.htm.

⁶⁸ See NATO Fact sheet *NATO Arms Embargo against Libya. Operation Unified Protector*, http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2011_03/20110325_110325-unified-protector-factsheet.pdf.

in military operations. As far as the former is concerned, Italy helped evacuate third country citizens fleeing Libya as well as Libyans wounded during the bombings; shipped a total of 91 tonnes of humanitarian aid alongside medical kits and pledged more funds to international agencies, i.e. UNICEF.⁶⁹ A desk of the Italian Development Cooperation should be established in Benghazi soon.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Italy has offered to take the lead of a military CSDP operation in support of humanitarian assistance which the EU could deploy at the request of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance.⁷¹ Whereas the extent of the Italian commitment to humanitarian assistance has never been questioned, the country's involvement in the military operations under NATO has undergone a troubled evolution. The Italian government has, in fact, been caught in between two domestic impulses: on the one hand, playing a minor role by putting at NATO's disposal its military bases and aircrafts only for surveillance purposes, and taking active part in the air raids on the other. Whereas in mid-April 2011 the government explicitly stated that Italy would not directly participate in NATO raids,⁷² only ten days later it changed its mind, stating that Italy was ready to increase "the operational flexibility of its aircrafts with targeted actions against specific military targets on Libyan territory with the aim of contributing to the effort to protect Libya's civilian population".⁷³ This stronger commitment was the Italian reply to the pressing requests by NATO, other allies and the TNC. In the words of Minister of Foreign Affairs Frattini: doing so was "the natural development of the line followed since March"⁷⁴ (i.e., since Italy officially disregarded Gheddafi as an interlocutor).⁷⁵

5. Conclusions

There is no unequivocal answer to whether Italy has pursued primarily its interests or broader international and European norms when conducting its foreign policy. The cases of the Balkans and Libya highlight the complex interplay between the two. In

⁶⁹ See for further details "Humanitarian emergencies - Italy's initiatives", *MFA Press releases*, 18 April 2011, http://www.esteri.it/Mae/En/Sala_Stampa/ArchivioNotizie/Approfondimenti/2011/04/20110418_emuman.htm.

⁷⁰ On 22 May 2011, the EU opened an office in Benghazi, see "EU High Representative Catherine Ashton opens European Union office in Benghazi", *EU External Action Press releases*, http://www.eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2011/220511_en.htm.

⁷¹ EU Council, *Council decides on EU military operation in support of humanitarian assistance operations in Libya* (8589/11 Presse 91), 1 April 2011, <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/11/st08/st08589.en11.pdf>.

⁷² See "Italy's input to the NATO mission remains unchanged", *MFA Press releases*, 15 April 2011, http://www.esteri.it/Mae/En/Sala_Stampa/ArchivioNotizie/Approfondimenti/2011/04/20110415_FocusLibia_ItaliaNATO.htm.

⁷³ See "Targeted actions: Italy's decision following requests from the Allies and the TNC", *MFA Press releases*, 26 April 2011, http://www.esteri.it/Mae/En/Sala_Stampa/ArchivioNotizie/Approfondimenti/2011/04/20110426_AzioniMirate.htm.

⁷⁴ See "Targeted actions are a natural development of the Italian line, says Frattini", *MFA Press releases*, 27 April 2011, http://www.esteri.it/Mae/En/Sala_Stampa/ArchivioNotizie/Approfondimenti/2011/04/20110427_FocusLibia.htm.

⁷⁵ See "Berlusconi: Gheddafi non è più un interlocutore credibile", *Sky Tg24*, 11 March 2011, http://tg24.sky.it/tg24/politica/2011/03/11/silvio_berlusconi_ue_gheddafi_crisi_libica.html.

order to make sense of this interplay we can imagine a spectrum in which a pure norm-based foreign policy lies on one end and an interest-driven foreign policy on the other. The closest example of a norm-based foreign policy is Italy's commitment to supporting in multilateral fora a number of human rights related issues. Italy's campaign in the United Nations to ban the death penalty, whose later endorsement by the European Union acted as a sounding board, is a clear case in point. Factors that might favour norm-based choices of this kind include: strong domestic support from all political parties and public opinion; a shared commitment amongst Western partners; the international status gained by pursuing such initiatives (e.g., a more prominent role in multilateral fora); and, last but not least, the limited risks entailed for Italian national interests were Italian initiatives to fail. However, in some circumstances, Italy's promotion of norm-based policies has contrasted with what a key national interest: maintaining close relations with its main allies. This is for instance the case of Italy's campaign against the death penalty, which meant adopting a position unpopular with the United States. Nevertheless, the distance that might arise between the two countries when discussing this issue has never questioned Italy's traditional support for and loyalty to the US and the Atlantic Alliance. Such support and loyalty have been confirmed on a number of other occasions, including Italy's participation in a host of multilateral missions also in areas far from Italy's immediate interests (i.e., Afghanistan).

Halfway along the spectrum, we can place Italy's role in the Balkans. The Balkans represent a rather exceptional example of convergence between international norms and national interests in Italian foreign policy. Here, Italy's support for democratization and the rule of law is in line with internationally acknowledged norms and, at the same time, falls within the strategic interests of the Italian government, whose final aim is to ensure national security. Furthermore, Italy's approach and policies in this area correspond to and converge with European ones, thus positively contributing to the EU as a normative actor. Nonetheless, Italy's pursuit of its underlying interests in the Balkans should not be disregarded. Italy's human, economic and political support for stabilization and democratization in the Balkans has gone hand-in-hand with the country's pursuit of national interests. First and foremost, Italy has a security interest in the stabilization of the Balkans due to its vulnerable geographic position and the risks originating from a war-torn region in its immediate neighbourhood (i.e., unauthorized immigration and organized crime). Second, a stable Balkans would allow Italy to seize the economic opportunities arising from the region.

Italy's approach towards Libya until 2011 instead lies on the other end of the spectrum, highlighting a clear interest-driven approach. In this case, norms and interests appeared to be at loggerheads, and faced with an apparent choice between the two, Italy opted for the latter. In the case of Libya, Italy felt compelled to come to terms with a controversial partner. The imperative of securing energy supplies, containing migratory flows and seizing investment opportunities pressed the government to establish a privileged relationship with Libya, regardless of norm-based arguments put forward by the international community. Additional factors that drove this choice included contingent domestic circumstances, e.g., a centre-right prime minister used at conducting foreign policy through personal relationships (i.e., with Putin's Russia, Erdoğan's Turkey as well as Gheddafi's Libya), as well as the lack of a broader international and European consensus on how to deal with specific foreign policy

dossiers. The latter may be crucial in explaining Italy's different attitudes towards the Balkans and Libya. In both cases, proximity entailed an interest in stability. In the case of the Balkans, such an interest was transformative and dovetailed with norms also due to a strong and structured EU presence in the region not only to favour the Balkans' stabilization and reconstruction but also to tackle transnational issues affecting its southern member states. Italy's interests coincided with European ones and, with the way paved by the EU, it was easier for Italy to carry out bilateral initiatives in line with those of the EU. What is more, the "carrot" of future accession to the EU has represented for the Balkans a strong catalyst, making these countries fertile ground for concerted Italian, EU and international actions. The case of Libya was different. There, the Italian stance was more conservative. The lack of a coherent EU engagement led Italy to perceive that its interests, including challenges to its national security, would be better served through bilateral initiatives, awaiting a stronger EU commitment. In this respect, it is worth noting that Italy has consistently called for a more active EU engagement towards the southern shore of the Mediterranean. Norms and interests have dovetailed in Italian foreign policy - i.e., in the Balkans - when the EU did just this.

As crisis broke out in Libya in February 2011, Italy, aware of its enormous interests and considering the uncertain outcome of the rebellion, first avoided a clear condemnation of Gheddafi's actions, soliciting criticism amongst its EU partners. The 2008 Treaty was first viewed as a constraint, preventing an excessive distancing from Gheddafi. As developments unfolded, Italy then condemned the atrocities by referring to that same Treaty, which overtly recognized the principles of the UN Charter. Soon afterwards, Italian policy towards Libya underwent a substantial change. Minister of Foreign Affairs Frattini condemned the violent repression, Italy accepted and participated in the UN and EU sanctions, as well as in the ensuing no-fly zone and the NATO mission and air raids to destroy Gheddafi's armaments. Italy has also persisted in its humanitarian effort in Benghazi to assist refugees and the civil population, launched a humanitarian mission to the Libyan-Tunisian border, and was appointed as Commander of a possible EU CSDP mission of humanitarian assistance to Libya. In early April 2011, Italy became the third state to recognize the authority of the Benghazi-based Transitional National Council and since then it has conducted intensive talks at the bilateral level and within multilateral groups (i.e., the Contact Group for Libya, whose second meeting was hosted in Rome in early May 2011) to support the TNC and press Gheddafi to step down. Italy's approach has thus shifted towards a more normative stance. How could all this be explained?

According to official statements, Italy's current policy towards Libya, including the recent decision to take part in NATO raids, is a natural development of the line adopted since it disregarded Gheddafi as Libya's legitimate interlocutor. Nevertheless, this development has not been so linear, as proved by the government's first vacillations and frequent rethinks on how to proceed. The government, in fact, initially excluded an Italian involvement in NATO's air-to-ground bombings officially because of sensitivities due to Italy's history as a colonial power and to concerns for possible civilian victims.⁷⁶ However, one week later, the government approved to participate in the air raids.

⁷⁶ See MFA briefing to the press "Briefing Stampa sul ruolo dell'Italia nella crisi libica: intervenuti il Portavoce Maurizio Massari e il giornalista libico Farid Adly", 18 April 2011, http://media.esteri.it/videoEsteri/20110418_briefing.wmv.

Some official statements help us shed light on the rationale behind Italy's U-turn. Frattini justified Italy's stronger role in the NATO mission through a humanitarian rationale. He also referred to pressures from NATO, other allies and the TNC.⁷⁷ Despite the alleged normative shift in Italy's approach, an underlying interest-based drive thus remained dominant. It is the nature of the interests at stake which has changed, with security and commercial concerns being replaced, at least partially and temporarily, by more immediate needs such as preventing Italy's international isolation, realigning Italy's position with that of its allies and confirming Italy's commitment to its Euro-Atlantic bonds. Equally important in explaining Italy's U-turn is the perceived need not to lose ground to other international actors (i.e., France and the UK) and not to lose credibility with the TNC, on which Italy is betting for the future of Libya. This entails that Italy's role in the post-Gheddafi Libya seems to be present in Italian strategic thinking. In this vein, Italy would follow a twofold approach. On the one hand, Italy's intention is to establish a solid partnership with the future Libyan regime and to revitalize the currently suspended Treaty of Friendship (thus serving its national economic and security interests). On the other hand, Italy is concentrating its efforts on more normative purposes, including institution building, with different initiatives currently under evaluation.⁷⁸

At the time of writing the situation remains extremely fluid. As events unfold however, Italy is bound to continue rethinking its foreign policy towards Libya and the region, and to promote, in accordance with its traditional allies, a new and effective policy framework for the southern Mediterranean. After the Balkans, Libya could become a fertile ground for Italy to reconcile interests and norms in the pursuit of its foreign policy, embedded within EU and international multilateral frameworks.

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⁷⁷Frattini explained that "with action on the ground ruled out, we either strike Gheddafi's tanks from the air with single targeted actions or we knowingly allow hundreds or maybe thousands of civilians to be killed. That's why we can't hold back". The situation in Libya is a "humanitarian emergency of grave and growing proportions". Moreover, it was not just NATO and its allies who "strongly and repeatedly called for more flexible military support from Italy" but also the representatives of the Transitional National Council.

"Targeted actions are a natural development of the Italian line, says Frattini", *cit.*

⁷⁸ See MFA Briefing to the press, "Sviluppi in M.O, Libia, Siria e Yemen, sono alcuni dei temi che verranno discussi al prossimo Consiglio dei Ministri degli Esteri dell' Unione Europea", 20 May 2011, http://www.esteri.it/Mae/It/Sala_Stampa/ArchivioMultimedia/Audiovisivi/BriefingStampa.htm.

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