

# Introduction to the Special Issue: Italy in Twenty-First Century International Politics

Stefano Costalli

UNIVERSITY OF FLORENCE

At the time of writing, international politics seems almost frozen, and the whole world is focused on how to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. However, contemporary international politics shows many signs of transformation that predate – and go well beyond – the pandemic. The international system is more turbulent, multifaceted and unpredictable than it was during the whole of the twentieth century, and even though the two World Wars represent two unmatched peaks in terms of total deaths and destruction, it seems difficult to claim that wars and armed conflicts are disappearing (Braumoeller 2019).

If we scratch below the pandemic surface and consider the conditions and actions of the great powers that play a central role in shaping the overall international system, we can see that these countries show a remarkable degree of activism. The United States is redefining its role in the world and reconsidering its strategy in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, albeit through an ambiguous trajectory that is mainly the result of strong domestic tensions and high political polarization. China has launched a global initiative that could allow it to complete its transformation from economic giant to real hegemon. This long-term foreign policy plan stretches from intensifying military competition with the United States in the Asian Pacific to the gigantic Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) across Asia toward Europe (Shambaugh 2018). However, the final outcome of these policies is still uncertain and it is producing contrasting reactions in many partner states (De Oliveira et al. 2020). Russia is increasingly active in its neighbourhood and in the Middle East, vigorously reclaiming the role of great power, and using external interventions and armed force in a fashion that recalls nineteenth century European politics (Malyarenko and Wolff 2018).

In this unstable situation, long-standing international organizations seem to have lost their grip and even the European Union is going through a long and deep crisis. An important debate is open about the fall of the liberal order and several authors advance interpretations that stress links between the current features of international politics and the domestic politics of many Western countries (on this debate see e.g. Ikenberry 2018; Mearsheimer 2019; Lucarelli 2020).

Turbulent times and the activism of great powers are not new phenomena in international politics, but the present international system is also marked by the growing importance of non-state actors, transnational flows and unprecedented technologies,

which make calculations more difficult and policy-making increasingly complex. For instance, it has now become common knowledge that most contemporary armed conflicts involve non-state actors fighting states locally in civil wars or transnationally through terrorist attacks. Moreover, huge private companies and economic flows heavily influence international politics and the domestic politics of many countries, causing tensions in various parts of the world. Even individuals are increasingly at the centre of international politics, mainly due to the massive flows of refugees and migrants, which have been growing for years (UNHCR 2019).

In other words, policy makers who want to navigate the turbulent waters of contemporary world politics have to take into account a high number of variables in different dimensions. This situation is especially cogent for the governments of middle powers, which are not at the mercy of international phenomena as small states are, but at the same time are more bound by external conditions than great powers. Italy has long been defined as a typical example of a middle power (Santoro 1991) and – considering the tough challenges the country is facing nowadays – it seems appropriate to make a point about these challenges.

This special issue has, therefore, been conceived to address the role of Italy in twenty-first century international politics, presenting a series of essays that could possibly be interesting for an audience that goes beyond the academic community, including policy makers and commentators. The main aim of these essays is not to advance a theoretical interpretation of Italian foreign policy, a task that has already been successfully achieved by more purely academic initiatives (e.g. Isernia and Longo 2017). The main goal of this collection is rather to try to clarify the current challenges, identifying the available options for Italy's foreign policy, while considering major risks and opportunities. Italy is directly involved in many of the global dynamics mentioned above, primarily for geopolitical reasons. It seems, therefore, crucial to identify its current position in the stormy seas of contemporary international politics and to understand its possible contribution.

In the first article of this special issue, Stefano Costalli and Andrea Ruggeri seek to show the position of Italy on a broad set of key issues for contemporary international politics, from military power to international trade and refugee flows. Relying on a large amount of data, the authors show empirical trends and compare Italy with its neighbours or with the great powers of the international system. It turns out that Italy and the main European countries have converged on many dimensions and, according to the data, Italy seems to have the capacity to have a say in many instances. However, it is crucial to be aware of strongpoints, as well as limits and ties, to identify the opportunities and the most appropriate partners. In the second article, Lorenzo Cladi and Andrea Locatelli study the role of Italy in Europe, vis-à-vis France and Germany, in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. The authors show that, in addition to difficulties in detecting external ties and opportunities, Italy's ambivalent foreign policy in Europe has been strongly influenced by the composition of its governments. When coalition partners' ideologies converged, the leading party did not need to concede much to its partners. Conversely, when coalition partners' ideologies differed, a compromise had to be found and this has been true for pro-EU as well as Euro-sceptic parties.

Two articles in the special issue directly deal with the relationships between Italy and the great powers. Gabriele Natalizia and Mara Morini explore the relationship between

Italy and Russia, challenging conventional wisdom according to which the two countries enjoy constant cooperative relations. On the contrary, the authors show that even in this case Italian foreign policy has been far from constant. Here, the main reason for the variations is the degree of stability in the international order. Italy is more prone to a cooperative stance towards Russia when the international order is fundamentally stable, but Italian and Russian interests tend to diverge in periods of instability. Simone Dossi's contribution looks at the relations between Italy and China at the time of the BRI. The BRI is one of the most notable foreign policy initiatives in contemporary international politics and the author seeks to explain why Italy and China, apparently so distant from both a political and an economic point of view, opted for cooperation under the BRI and signed the ad hoc Memorandum in 2019. In tune with the message of other articles in the special issue, Dossi argues that while the BRI is expected to be adjusted with a stronger emphasis on China's own priorities, Italy is missing a long-term vision for the future of the country's relations with the Asian rising power.

Two additional articles deal with the Italian position on global issues that feature prominently in contemporary international politics: climate change and mass migrations. Federica Genovese investigates Italy's position in global climate change politics and seeks to understand why this country, like similar middle powers, has adopted ambiguous positions on such a global public policy issue. Relying on data for the pollution costs of Italian industrial sectors and on public opinion surveys, Genovese argues that Italy gives importance to climate change, but mixed domestic incentives counterbalance each other and push the government to take mild and ambiguous positions. Antonio Zotti and Enrico Fassi look at Italy's position in the European debate about international migrations focusing on the peculiar feature of this issue, which is partly a matter that falls within the country's foreign policy and partly a domestic issue, partly a national affair and partly a European concern. Even in this case, Italy's stance has been somewhat ambiguous, depending, the authors claim, on the government coalitions and on the attitudes of these coalitions towards the EU.

Finally, two articles deal with international security issues, even though they tackle this subject from different perspectives. Fabrizio Coticchia and Francesco N. Moro study Italian participation in military interventions abroad since the end of the Cold War, following their increase between 1991 and 2011 and their subsequent decrease after the Libyan War. The authors review this evolution and assess the arguments proposed to explain it. Both international conditions and domestic factors contribute to explaining changing Italian policy over time, but Coticchia and Moro also suggest that currently understudied factors such as the stance of armed forces and technological change play important roles. Finally, Ruth Hanau Santini looks at the Italian role in the Mediterranean, and especially in Libya. The author analyses Italian foreign policy in the Mediterranean, arguing that Italy acts in this area while reading the situation through the lenses of US policies and intra-EU dynamics. According to Hanau Santini, a fear of abandonment by the US and a fear of marginalization by European allies have strongly affected Italian foreign policy in the Mediterranean, eventually leading the country to carry out some ineffective and self-defeating initiatives. In Libya this sort of syndrome has reduced Italy to an invisible player in a heavily populated theatre.

While considering different aspects of Italian foreign policy and evaluating Italy's position in different dimensions of contemporary international politics, the articles of this special issue share a clear and important point. They explicitly or implicitly show that Italy's position is often ambiguous, ambivalent and erratic. Adjusting the country's foreign policy to changing circumstances can be a deliberate and rational strategy for a middle power, but the articles of this special issue show that this is not the case for Italy. On the contrary, Italian foreign policy in the twenty-first century seems to result from a lack of long-term vision and a systematic difficulty of Italian political forces to correctly identify the risks and opportunities present in the turbulent contemporary world. A more structured and permanent debate involving academics, policy-makers and a broader audience through efficient media would be essential to this aim. We hope this special issue can contribute to achieving this goal.

## References

- Braumoeller, B. (2019) *Only the Dead. The persistence of war in the Modern Age*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press.
- De Oliveira, G., Murton, G., Rippa, A., Harlan, T. and Yang, Y. (2020) China's Belt and Road Initiative: Views from the ground. *Political Geography*, 102225 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102225>.
- Ikenberry, G. J. (2018) The end of liberal international order? *International Affairs*, 94 (1) pp. 7-23.
- Isernia, P. and Longo, F. (2017) The Italian foreign policy: Challenges and continuities. *Italian Political Science Review*, 47(2) pp. 107-124.
- Lucarelli, S. (2020) *Cala il sipario sull'ordine liberale? Crisi di un sistema che ha cambiato il mondo*. Milano: Vita e Pensiero.
- Malyarenko, T. and Wolff, S. (2018) The logic of competitive influence-seeking: Russia, Ukraine, and the conflict in Donbas. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 34(4) pp. 191-212.
- Mearsheimer, J. (2019) Bound to fail: The rise and fall of the international liberal order. *International Security*, 43(4) pp. 7-50.
- Santoro, C. M. (1991) *La politica estera di una media potenza. L'Italia dall'Unità ad oggi*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Shambaugh, D. (2018) US-China rivalry in Southeast Asia. Power shift or competitive coexistence? *International Security*, 42(4) pp. 85-127.
- UNHCR (2019) *Global trends 2019*. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/5ee200e37.pdf>.