

Why Italy matters

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It's not just a matter of showing up to the table, but also of delivering something for others. Italy is realizing that it has always been better off when it works with others.

Italy matters to the world. It matters more than Italians think, fear or even imagine. Too many Italians retreat into the overwhelming insularity of their domestic narrative. They care little about the world. Italy's international role is the least of their concerns. But they miss the very root causes of their own anxiety and worries. They look inward, while their security, wellbeing, competitiveness, and self-confidence are challenged from without.

Day in, day out, we are faced with tests on the shores of Lampedusa, in the financial corridors of Frankfurt and London, in the mountains and valleys of Afghanistan, in the gas and oil fields of Mozambique, Vietnam and Azerbaijan, in the industrial competition from Brazil and China, in the Mediterranean aftermath of the Arab Springs... If Italy does not go to the world, the world will still come at Italy.

Insulating ourselves from a world moving forward so fast is wishful thinking at best. It is certainly a bad option. Either we join it or we fall behind – and our domestic problems will only get worse. Stagnation at the periphery of the European and international scene is a luxury we simply cannot afford.

Italy badly needs the returns of active international engagement. Challenges are bigger than us. Think about terrorism, immigration, trade and investment, energy security, climate change.... We cannot go it alone. Nobody can.

Because of its geography, economy and history, it makes a difference whether or not Italy is politically stable, whether or not it balances the budget, whether it stagnates or grows, whether it is a security provider or a security consumer. Our course of action is of international consequence. The rest of the world will take notice. Italy can benefit from it – as long as we live up to our international potential and responsibilities. Italians, and not only Italians, have to choose: to be “in” and matter, or be “out” and be bystanders.

At the time of this writing, Prime Minister Enrico Letta was visiting the White House and the American debt ceiling deadline was hours away. It was the third bilateral meeting with the President of the United

States in Letta's short tenure at Palazzo Chigi. They had recently shaken hands while crossing paths at in New York. Previously, on February 15, President Giorgio Napolitano had been given the Washington red-carpet treatment at the Blair House – just across the street from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Why does President Obama, usually not easily available to foreign engagements, keep such a direct, continuing and intense dialogue with the leaders of Italy?

Good chemistry helps. But the full answer lies in Obama's letter of last April, congratulating Napolitano on his (unsolicited) reelection. Beyond the warmth and esteem for a statesman he admires, the President of the United States makes no mystery of his relief for the outcome of the institutional stalemate in the newly elected Parliament “because Italy's stability and reliability are too important internationally.” The same sentiment, that the good health of Italy is relevant well beyond the realm of Italian politics, was echoed from many quarters as far afield as Beijing, Canberra, Ankara, Ottawa, Hanoi and Belgrade – not to mention from all EU capitals.

In the last couple of years Italy has gone through a rollercoaster of international apprehension and praise, of assurance and self-doubt. In 2011, the eurozone sovereign debt crisis weighed on Italy's willingness to suffer the pain of restoring fiscal discipline and credit worthiness. Italy could not be “saved”: it had to save itself. And it did, going from being the euro's main liability to the euro savior in a few months' time. Having bounced back from humiliating EU and G-20 experiences in Cannes and Brussels, Italy was again a relevant player in the European debate about fiscal rigor, financial integration and banking union. More recently, the Letta government has been instrumental in shifting the EU focus toward growth and employment.

There has been no lack of recognition for Italy's (and Italians') role. In October 2012, at the 20th Pontignano Italian-British Conference, Charles Grant, of the Centre for European Reform, a leading British think-tank, stated simply: “There is no leadership in Europe today, except for the two Marios” – Monti and Draghi.

US President Barack Obama and Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta shake hands during a meeting in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, DC, October 17, 2013.



To foreign eyes Italy had been on an extended leave of absence. It was now back: back in Europe, back in the international fora, back from being part of the problem to being part of the solution. But back also in effectively standing up for its national interests.

As for recognition, the White House Press Office Fact Sheet of October 17 speaks for itself, detailing the impressive reach of US-Italy Cooperation, ranging from security in Libya and Afghanistan to the Year of Italian Culture in the US. Such a foreign policy of deeds and achievements is exactly what Italy needs. Today the international pecking order cannot be taken for granted: it depends on each country's “added value,” multilateral and bilateral, and on its effective contribution to international peace and security, to the advancement of human rights, to economic growth, to the fight against hunger and poverty, to global issues, such as environment, terrorism, proliferation, global warming.

Often, in the past, Italian foreign policy has been driven by the anxiety of exclusion from restricted international meetings and fora. While being at the table may offer the illusion of reassurance about status, what matters today is what one brings to the

table: delivery not just presence. Participation without ideas and willingness to engage makes it unlikely to be invited again. At times of crises there is no substitute for action, be it economic or political, diplomatic or military.

Engagement abroad relies on institutional and political consistency at home. On October 2 another collective sigh of international relief greeted the strong confidence vote for the Letta government in the Italian Parliament. This reaction has nothing to do with partisanship, and everything to do with the European and international eagerness for stability, continuity and reliability in Italy. Hence the references made by the Prime Minister to Italy's role in Europe and to the upcoming EU Presidency in the second half of 2014.

Challenges abound on Italian traditional turf, Europe and the Atlantic: unfinished work in the eurozone; the EU's return to a path of sustained growth and employment; the “boat people” arriving from North Africa, for whom Sicily or Malta are only ports of entry in their dramatic journey toward a final European destination; the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP); the EU accession negotiations with the candidate countries, Iceland,

Turkey, Serbia and Montenegro, while Tirana, Skopje, Pristina and Sarajevo wait in the wings; enhancing the EU's relevance on the world stage; charting a course for post-Afghanistan NATO; finding a balance between European and American commitments to collective defense and international stability.

It is not only Europe, or NATO, or the United States. Italy has a good track record across the board. Note the Balkans, where since the 1990s Italy has sustained, bilaterally and multilaterally, a comprehensive and inclusive strategy that bears fruits in the entire region. Note our multifaceted relationship with Russia. Note also the diplomatic success story of the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP). In a Mediterranean in turmoil, Italy can count on good friends and access in all capitals, all the way to the Gulf. We have a special role – and responsibilities – in Libya and in Somalia. We are asked to raise our profile and presented with economic opportunities in areas as diverse as the Caucasus, Southeast Asia or Sub-Saharan Africa.

It is only up to us not to disappoint expectations.