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Italy – US: Dependable, but not indispensable?

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The palpable insecurity about Italy's status in American foreign policy calculations, despite Italy's status as a member of the G-8, its historically critical role in shaping the trajectory of European integration and not insignificant contributions to military operations in Afghanistan and Libya, has been heightened with the reelection of President Barack Obama and the uncertain outcome of the Italian parliamentary elections at the end of February. The United States has declared itself to be the indispensable nation in the international system, but it remains open whether it remains a dependable partner, particularly on those issues most likely to affect directly Italian interests in the Mediterranean. Any European-led, out-of-area military operation requires American enabling capabilities for the successful projection of power, but the American supply of those capabilities for European purposes is now hedged by a variety of developments, most notably the Asian pivot of the current administration, Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense nominee Chuck Hagel's skepticism about the use of force, domestic fatigue with seemingly pointless wars without end, and the institutional paralysis in the American Congress that will complicate any foreign (or domestic) policy initiative emanating from the White House.

This constellation of factors is mirrored in the Italian case, although in different measure. Even the most sympathetic observer of Italian foreign policy would refrain from describing Italy an indispensable nation, while a critical observer would likely consider Italy to be something less than a dependable ally. Both assessments are off the mark. Italy has demonstrated a hedged constancy as a foreign policy actor in Afghanistan, where its military and financial contributions to ISAF have not been egregiously disproportionate to its economic size and capacity, and in Libya, where the Italian contribution was critical to the operation's success and impressive owing to the geostrategic importance of Italy in the Mediterranean, the authorization to deploy allied aircraft from seven Italian air bases, the significant Italian contribution of naval and air assets to the operation, and the Italian share of total NATO sorties. Only the French and British efforts exceeded the Italian commitment of air and naval assets and stood in stark contrast to German non-participation.

Italy's credibility as a foreign policy actor and partner was enhanced when Mario Monti replaced the mercurial Silvio Berlusconi as Prime Minister. Monti's efforts to push through needed structural reforms to enhance Italy's economic competitiveness and reduce the level of government debt, thereby making a significant contribution to the stability of the Eurozone, had the cumulative effect

The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

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of enhancing Italian prestige and demonstrating a seriousness of purpose. The coverage of Italian policy and politics in the American press, for example, shifted from a preoccupation with the escapades of the previous prime minister to with the substance of Italian policy positions on economic and military issues of common concern.

The current volatility of Italian domestic politics has undermined this hard-won credibility. When France intervened in Mali, the Italian government initially offered France two C-130 transport aircraft and one Boeing 767 refueling tanker. That offer was subsequently retracted: Monti blamed parliamentary inconstancy and the upcoming election for the volte-face. The subordination of an implied Italian foreign policy obligation to the exigencies of electoral politics is not unique to Italy. But the nature of the current electoral competition has pushed to the surface long-held and unflattering American assumptions about the Italian political class and electorate, particularly the public's seeming rejection of Monti's serious governance, the electorate's embrace of the comedian-led Five Star Movement and the reemergence of Berlusconi, who recently said nice things about Mussolini, as a serious prime ministerial candidate.

Italy's postwar internal political dynamic created the undeserved perception that Italy is undependable. The next Italian government, particularly if neither Monti nor Pierluigi Bersani emerges as prime minister, will be hard-pressed to implement additional structural reforms necessary for revitalizing the economy and stabilizing Italy's fiscal position. If the US foreign policy elite concludes that Italy is ungovernable, in conjunction with the American pivot to Asia and the refinement of 'leading from behind' that will effectively leave Europe to cope with its own problems with minimum US assistance, Italy will be reclassified (at best) as a problem to be solved rather than as a partner that can be relied upon in time of need.

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