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## The Meloni government's "Mattei plan": towards an African policy for Italy?

In October 2022, during her inaugural speech before the Chamber of Deputies, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni developed the theme of the need for Italy to promote a renewed relationship with Africa, in the form of a "Mattei Plan", described as a virtuous model of collaboration and growth between the European Union (EU) and African nations<sup>1</sup>. This plan is designed to both eradicate the causes of immigration and combat the spread of Islamist radicalism in sub-Saharan Africa.

### Investiture of the Meloni government: the announcement of a "Mattei plan" for Africa

The announcement of a "Mattei plan" is symbolic in several respects. Firstly, it places the Meloni government's external action under the tutelary figure of Enrico Mattei, founder of the national oil and gas company ENI and former commander of the "Green Flames" fighting group during the Second World War<sup>2</sup>. It is this well-known Christian Democrat resistance fighter that Giorgia Meloni, often singled out for her affiliation with the post-fascist political tradition, chose to invoke in an apparent bid to rewrite her own historical pantheon. She thus claimed continuity with a traditional Italian foreign policy line revolving around energy supply, embodied by the

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<sup>1</sup> « IL TESTO. Giorgia Meloni, il discorso integrale per la fiducia alla Camera », *Il Gazzettino*, 25 October 2022.

<sup>2</sup> See Jean-Dominique Durand, « Aux origines du succès de la démocratie chrétienne en Italie au lendemain de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale » in René Girault (ed.), « Lendemain de libération, Lendemain de guerre », *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, n° 39-40, 1995, pp. 16-19.

jewel in Italy's crown of public companies, ENI. Launching a "Mattei plan" also means favoring a projection that somewhat abandons the classic arcana of Italian diplomacy, a *Farnesina* whose administrative viscosity is so strong that it can be perceived as a brake on any form of reformism in foreign policy. We should also note the political reading that underpins this vision of Italy's claim to autonomous room for action with regard to Africa. This approach recalls the virtues of past methods, such as the development-friendly contracts that ENI drew up in the 1950s with countries on the southern shore<sup>3</sup> and expresses the perception not only of the need for stabilization (economic, social, political) in African countries to combat immigration, but also of a jealous competition with France, still alive and well among Italian nationalists<sup>4</sup>. The memory of Enrico Mattei is not neutral in this respect, as it also evokes Franco-Italian rivalries in the Maghreb (*cf.* ENI's support for Algeria during the struggle for independence, the accusations surrounding Enrico Mattei's death in a plane crash in 1962)<sup>5</sup>.

The speech on the 2022 "Mattei Plan" is therefore a political manifesto intended to set a mechanism in motion, and does not correspond to any prior work on writing a detailed strategy, much to the chagrin of many European chancelleries who, for months, have tried to get their hands on a non-existent text, and have been unable to conceive that in the Italian context, the announcement could precede the elaboration<sup>6</sup>. Of course, Giorgia Meloni's inaugural speech has had an impact, but it should be noted that the birth of the plan was to be rather slow, with a decree defining a coordinating structure under the authority of the Prime Minister in November 2023 presented as the concretization of this plan<sup>7</sup>. It was not until the Italy-Africa conference on January 28-29, 2024 that more solid forms of action appeared, even if, once again, this "Mattei plan" is more akin to a form of method than to real planning<sup>8</sup>.

## The context of the 2024 Italy-Africa conference

Between the 2022 declaration and the 2024 conference, a number of decision-makers, from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ENI, did take up the theme, but this was mainly an effort to insert a series of pre-existing policy lines into "Mattei-style" formulations. In this respect, it should be emphasized that ENI is a group in very good economic health and a player on the international stage, and that the Italian government's initiative with regard to Africa may appear in some respects delicate for a company that for several years has been cultivating relative discretion while developing its strategic lines. It is for this reason that mediation work was carried out throughout 2023, with a view to giving substance to a "Mattei plan" that follows ENI's traditional lines. It is worth recalling here that with the war in Ukraine, ENI had to revise a significant part of its global strategy in order to dispense with Russian gas supplies and open up other supply channels. ENI's reorientation towards the South, Africa in particular, had therefore already taken place under the Draghi government, even though it was not yet known as the "Mattei plan"<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Soroor Coliaei-Kawka, « Les relations officielles entre l'Italie et l'Iran de 1950 à 1979 : aspects politiques, économiques et culturels », *Relations internationales*, vol. 172, n° 4, 2017, pp. 81-94.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Bonanni, « Gli errori che Meloni non deve fare nella sua campagna d'Africa », *La Repubblica*, 27 January 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Stéphane Murlane, « La guerre d'Algérie dans les relations franco-italiennes (1958-1962) », *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 2005/1, n° 217, pp. 77-90.

<sup>6</sup> « Governo: Provenzano (Pd), 'Piano Mattei non c'è, solo nuovo potere a p.Chigi. Speriamo nuovo centralino per chiamate dall'Africa' », *Adn Kronos*, 3 November 2023.

<sup>7</sup> « Il Cdm approva il premierato. Meloni: 'Madre di tutte le riforme, basta ribaltoni e governi tecnici' », *La Repubblica*, 3 November 2023.

<sup>8</sup> « 'Piano Mattei, l'Italia cerca un ruolo in Africa », *Milano Finanza*, 27 January 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Andrea Greco, « Gas dall'Africa invece che russo: il piano Eni per l'indipendenza energetica dell'Italia », *La Repubblica*, 14 March 2022.

The Italy-Africa conference in January 2024, however, gives us an opportunity to look back at the development of an African policy by Italy, and its place in the broader context of its foreign policy. For a long time, it seemed particularly difficult to discern a genuine Italian “Africa policy”. While a series of interests and networks linked the country to the African continent, the government’s political action neither claimed nor organized such an approach. Between 2014 and 2016, then Premier Matteo Renzi made three trips to Africa, visiting Mozambique, Congo, Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal<sup>10</sup>. It is therefore the Renzi government that must be credited with the initial initiative and vision on this front since before then, Italy’s African policy was a “non-policy”, the components of which nonetheless enable us to better characterize current action. It should also be noted that others have subsequently taken up the baton, such as Marco Minniti, who, when he was Interior Minister in the Gentiloni government, advocated tackling the problem of immigration at its source, insisting on the conditions for development in Africa.

## The different players in Italy’s relations with Africa

Italy has a number of important anchors on the African continent, which are generally held by non-state players. We have already emphasized that ENI is a major player, due to the importance of its energy policy and trade with supplier countries. Moreover, ENI typifies the strategic role played by companies that embody “state capitalism”. ENI, Leonardo, Fincantieri and ENEL are examples of private companies that are, in fact, controlled by the Treasury through a minority shareholding and that express, at various levels, an “Italian interest”<sup>11</sup>. This specificity is also expressed in the strategic capabilities of these companies, which in most cases exceed those of the supervisory authorities. Whenever the subject of Africa is raised in Italy, ENI systematically comes up for discussion, but other players such as ENEL are also involved when investment projects linked to the Mattei plan are mentioned, particularly with regard to renewable energies.

The importance of other networks should not be underestimated. First and foremost, Italian SMEs have a “natural” exporting vocation, which also extends to the African continent. Behind this somewhat generic expression lies an important economic trend: Italy’s trade balance with Africa is largely in deficit, due to energy imports, particularly gas from Algeria and Libya<sup>12</sup>. However, Italian exports to Africa are on the rise, and are seen as a potential growth driver. The increase in energy imports from Africa, which was particularly marked in 2022 due to the war in Ukraine, also triggered a reflex to seek a rebalancing, *i.e.* the desire to strengthen Italy’s export capacity within this growth in trade, so as to keep pace with the increase in imports. However, these figures need to be put into context: while there was a net increase in imports from Africa between 2020 and 2022 (from 3.9 percent of total imports to 7.3 percent), with exports stagnating at just over 3 percent, the figures remain small. The European Union is by far the main economic projection basin for Italy, accounting for around two thirds of imports and exports<sup>13</sup>. The growth trend in trade with Africa therefore appears to be relatively marginal in relation to Italy’s overall trade, particularly within the EU.

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<sup>10</sup> « Missione in Africa per Renzi, focus su energia e infrastrutture », *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 31 January 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Pierre Darnis, « The Role of Italy’s Strategic Industries in its Foreign Policy », in Giampiero Giacomello, Bertjan Verbeek (ed.), *Italy’s Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century: The New Assertiveness of an Aspiring Middle Power*, Lanham/Boulder/NewYork, Lexington Books, 2011, pp. 197-214.

<sup>12</sup> Emanie Oddi, « Africa e Italia, equilibri economici e partnership nel continente in crescita », *L’Eurispes.it*, October 2023.

<sup>13</sup> See [here](#) – Italian Foreign Affairs Ministry trade data.

Secondly, we must remember the importance of Africa for the Catholic Church. A series of actors based in Italy that we can define as belonging to the “Catholic galaxy” maintain intense relations with African stakeholders. On the political side, the work of the Community of Sant’Egidio should be mentioned, with its practice of genuine parallel diplomacy, which involves maintaining remarkable networks. One of the most significant, but far from unique, examples of this negotiating and influencing action is the case of Mozambique, where Sant’Egidio volunteers made a decisive contribution to the 1992 peace agreements<sup>14</sup>. To give an idea of Sant’Egidio’s importance in the Italian context, it should be recalled that Andrea Riccardi, one of the community’s founders, was Minister for International Cooperation in the Monti government from 2011 to 2013. These few examples illustrate the breadth of support enjoyed by this lay movement linked to the Holy See, which, among its actions, has always had a special focus on peace on the African continent.

The Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus are also a very active congregation on the African continent, which is at the heart of their pastoral work, as evidenced by their founder Luigi Comboni’s motto “O nigriza o morte” (Negritude or death)<sup>15</sup>. The congregation is deeply rooted in Africa, which gives it an excellent understanding of local dynamics and contributes, indirectly, to Italian networks in Africa.

Finally, Italian NGOs are very active in the cooperation sector. Numerous associations, often of Catholic origin, create a territorial fabric that irrigates various projects and initiatives on the African continent. These associations, grouped together under the concept of the “third sector”, also carry specific weight in the Italian political panorama.

We have highlighted how Matteo Renzi distinguished himself with a systematic program of visits to Africa. Another step appears fundamental, that taken by Paolo Gentiloni’s government, which in 2017 decided to send a military training mission to Niger<sup>16</sup>, a mission that despite the 2023 coup is still underway, even if the contingent has been reduced. This military presence is the first sign of Italy’s strategic intent in Africa, with a relatively modest deployment (450 men at most) but one that provides Italian troops with their first direct experience of the African terrain, and also signifies a capacity for expertise of its own for the Italian General Staff.

Another important dimension is Italy’s specific interest, particularly since 2011, in Libya, which in some ways represents a constant preoccupation with Africa, with the diptych of immigration (security) and energy having a direct impact on Italian political life. It should be remembered, however, that the right-wing coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi had an active Libyan policy since the 1990s. Moreover, Berlusconi developed close relations with both Tunisia and Egypt. Thus, in the recent political cycle, a series of bilateral relations gave a foretaste of what would later be presented as the “Mattei Plan”. Another concept much used in Italian foreign policy is the Mediterranean, sometimes referred to as the “wider Mediterranean”<sup>17</sup>.

Traditionally, Italian foreign policy has been marked by two strong anchors: transatlantic and European, the latter defining a fundamental area of integration for the peninsula. Outside these two dimensions, it is the Mediterranean that is often invoked as the receptacle of Italian foreign

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<sup>14</sup> Alessandra Paolini, « Sant’Egidio, che rivoluzione ‘Dal ‘68 stiamo con i poveri’ », *La Repubblica*, 11 February 2018.

<sup>15</sup> « Negritude or death », translation by the author, referring to Garibaldi’s followers slogan during Italian unification: « O Roma o morte ! ».

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Pierre Darnis, « Niger, la missione italiana, un nuovo corso », *Affari Internazionali*, 21 December 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Pierre Darnis, « L’Italie en Méditerranée : projection et défense vis-à-vis de la rive Sud », *Revue Défense nationale*, vol. 822, n° 7, 2019, pp. 136-140.

projection. But the use of this geographical expression is rather peculiar, as it traditionally designates the locus of non-integrated foreign policy, *i.e.* a series of bilateral relations in which Rome plays by the rules of national power. It is a funnel-shaped geographical vision, projecting towards the southern shores of the Mediterranean in a triangle with Italy at its apex, and therefore not considering the basin as a whole from north to south. It is clear, then, that this “enlarged Mediterranean” has long referred to the Mediterranean shore of Africa as a part of the whole continent, a prelude to the African vision expressed in the Mattei plan. From this point of view, it should also be noted that the definition of an African policy by Italy can offer a useful clarification in terms of foreign policy. Indeed, the concept of the Mediterranean as we have just described it is unique to the Italians, and does not overlap with other European visions, in which the Mediterranean is either a vision of north/south inclusion, as in the case of the Union for the Mediterranean, or implies policies for the development of Europe’s Mediterranean regions. There is thus confusion in terms of the definitions and objects of a Mediterranean policy, a misunderstanding that the concept of African policy could do much to dispel.

### The “Mattei plan”: a realistic foreign policy?

As emphasized previously, the priority that the Meloni government assigns to “African policy” is a continuation of previous policies and is in line with various parameters. Remarkably, this announcement on Africa was made in Giorgia Meloni’s inaugural speech. One of the refrains of the Mattei plan, repeated at the Italy-Africa conference on January 29 is that this policy must contribute to fostering the development of African countries in order to create the conditions of “non-immigration” for the populations concerned. The surge in migration and the sense of urgency felt in Italy since 2013 as a result of migrant landings from the Sicilian Channel provide the contingent framework for this policy, with the classic idea of treating the migratory problem at its source<sup>18</sup>. But while the migration surge is the most explicit motivation for this plan, other dimensions must also be noted. Italy presents itself as a country which, not being linked to a colonial past in Africa, can be perceived as a much more neutral party than other European countries, France in particular. Whereas France is negatively perceived in Africa at the moment, Italy can develop a political offer which, if not fundamentally original, at least has the virtue of not being burdened by representations of a past judged in a negative light. This formulation of an African policy may also appear as a form of substitution, or even competition, with a France that is in retreat on the African continent, the perception of a rivalry with France being a classic feature of Italian nationalism<sup>19</sup>.

Paradoxically, however, Italy is not the neutral player it says it is. The Meloni government’s nationalism harks back to an older tradition, namely that of Italian nationalism, which from the time of Italy’s unity has flaunted its colonial pretensions, particularly in Africa, a policy brought to a climax under fascism. While the post-World War II period marked a sharp discontinuity with previous policies, with the Meloni government, this heritage of an “African policy” is clearly resurfacing, as a manifestation of an ideological baggage with ancient roots, but also of a power policy that had been muted in post-war Italy<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> « Migranti, vertice Italia Africa. Meloni: ‘Il Piano Mattei parte da 5,5 miliardi’ », *Il Sole 24 Ore-Online*, 29 January 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Pierre Darnis, *Les relations entre la France et l’Italie et le renouvellement du jeu européen*, L’Harmattan, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Silvio Berardi, « ‘L’Europe pour l’Afrique, l’Afrique pour l’Europe’. L’œuvre de Paolo D’Agostino Orsini di Camerota », *Afrique contemporaine*, vol. 276, n° 2, 2023, pp. 63-83.

The “Mattei Plan” is a gradual process. It was born as a political declaration with no programmatic basis and took shape as an instrument of political coordination at government level, a “steering committee” defined by decree. It was then launched at the January 2024 conference without much substance, but with some interesting elements. The first is the Europeanization of this effort towards Africa, which expresses a will to contribute to the various initiatives underway, in particular that of the *Global Gateway*. The second is the high-level participation of various African players, both state and multilateral, who generally welcome the approach while calling for it to be built in consultation. From this point of view, the statement made by Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairman of the African Union Commission, at the opening of the January 29 conference in Rome seems significant: he declared that although the Africans would have liked to have been consulted beforehand, they were nevertheless willing to work with Italy and Europe<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, the vagueness of the “Mattei plan” may appear to the Africans to be a relatively opportune working ground as long as they are not provided with turnkey solutions. The Italian approach, sometimes considered approximate by European partners because it does not produce strategic documents, has the advantage of not rushing African counterparts.

Thus, between the Europeanization of this plan, considered absolutely necessary to make it viable – a dimension on which the President of the Italian Republic, Sergio Mattarella, particularly insists by underlining the multilateral and European approach<sup>22</sup> – and the friendly reminder from the Africans of the need for prior dialogue, we see an interesting boundary emerging for an initiative that initially nationalistic initiatives wanted to limit to a more narrow destiny.

One of the issues at stake at the January 29 conference in Rome was Italy’s ability to step up to the plate to meet the agenda presented. Italy has put on the table a sum of 5.5 billion euros by recovering budgets from the Italian Climate Fund and development aid programs. It is a concrete initiative, but a relatively modest one when you consider the needs. Speaking in Rome, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, pointed out that the European plan for Africa, the *Global Gateway*, envisages 150 billion euros of investment<sup>23</sup>, a way of pointing to orders of magnitude.

The plan will therefore only become effective if Italy succeeds in encouraging other institutions to step up funding. This possible extension raises a number of questions. In its initial phase, the “Mattei Plan” was managed almost exclusively by the office of the head of the Italian government. Its positive evolution requires, at national level, the full involvement of the diplomatic network, but also the close association of non-governmental players particularly connected to Africa. The internal challenge is certainly to adopt a federative, concerted approach that can also mobilize all non-state players. What is more, if it is to work, such a plan cannot remain Italian, and must necessarily become Europeanized. The conference held in Rome on January seemed to be a step in this direction, but it remains to be seen whether the Italian government and administration will succeed in creating a positive dynamic with European and international institutions. Giorgia Meloni has often been criticized for having good tactical

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<sup>21</sup> « Italie : Meloni dévoile son plan de développement pour l’Afrique », Africanews.com, 29 January 2024.

<sup>22</sup> See president Sergio Mattarella’s [speech](#) on the opening of Italy-Africa Summit on January 28, 2024.

<sup>23</sup> Andrea Bonanni, « Il Piano con le gambe corte », *La Repubblica*, 30 January 2024.

positioning, which derives from being the head of the Italian government coalition, but for then being held back by the limits of a power exercised through a restricted circle of people, which then fails to work organically with Italian institutions and administrations.

Launching the “Mattei plan” in 2022 appears to be an interpretation of a national past carried out to fit in with the aspirations of the Meloni government. The reaffirmation of an Italian national primacy in the context of a classical historical vision channels realism in foreign policy, putting states at the center of attention. This initial vision subsequently evolved in the run-up to the January 2024 summit, with the necessary inclusion of both Italian non-governmental players and representatives of European and international institutions. For the Meloni government, strengthening its own national positions may appear to be a logical priority, stemming from a nationalist vision and a European method in which Italy intends to assert itself in order to carry weight. However, this mechanistic vision of national necessity can become counter-productive when multilateral processes require coalitions and convergences at levels lower than those of the head of government, or even sub-ministerial, as is the case in the integrated context of the European Union.

In a way, the method seems to have succeeded, as the political objective of the Italy-Africa summit conference has certainly been achieved: to establish Italy as a political interlocutor for the development of relations between Africa and Europe. But the tactical goal will only be consolidated as a real success if it is translated into an agenda that is both concrete and ambitious.

### **Conclusion: a pragmatic approach to Italy’s new Africa policy**

The Mattei Plan for Africa represents a real challenge in this respect. The initial operation was a great success, with 26 African heads of state and government and numerous ministerial delegations in Rome. To go beyond the few pilot projects announced with Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Côte d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Kenya, Congo and Mozambique, it will be necessary to create a dynamic that requires the ability to play at all levels, particularly within the framework of the European Union.

During a recent visit to Cairo, Giorgia Meloni confirmed this “project-based” approach when presenting ten memorandums of understanding, a series of initiatives that appear in strong continuity with Italy’s bilateral policy towards Egypt. On the other hand, the trip was organized together with the president of the European Commission Ursula Von der Leyen, which indicates a clear will to play both the Italian and the European levels<sup>24</sup>.

On the French side, it may be striking to hear in Rome a series of African political leaders taking a stand in French in the Senate, even though the French presence was reduced to an ambassador invited as an observer, on a par with his G7 colleagues. But given the current rather bitter historical phase for the French presence in Africa, not to take offense and to adopt a

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<sup>24</sup> See Patrizia De Rubertis, « Egitto, 7,4 miliardi da Ue e Meloni per salvare Al-Sisi », *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 17 March 2024.

discreetly constructive approach may be the right posture. The African diplomats present in Rome seem open to the approach and have no interest in any Franco-Italian or intra-European rivalries. The pressure exerted by non-European players such as China and Russia is making itself felt, and should push the Europeans towards much-needed cooperation to avoid being marginalized. The Mattei plan can only exist if it is truly Europeanized, in which case it could provide an interesting platform for the Union as a whole. Italy's rise to prominence in African politics could also serve European interests, as the Union's policies often suffer from a lack of embodiment that makes them unattractive. Italy has been able to deploy the splendor of its republican palaces to lend some sparkle to the operation, an important element of diplomatic language.

In the current context of competition, if not adversity, with powers such as Russia and China, but also in the face of Turkish and Emirati activism, it would be advisable to strengthen common European approaches, and a possible denationalized Italian approach must be considered pragmatically, if not constructively, by the other member states of the Union.





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