

## **Risk and Opportunity: Italy in the Troubled Mediterranean during the 1970s<sup>1</sup>**

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*During the Seventies, in the stormy Mediterranean theatre, many events endangered NATO's positions all along the Southern flank and threatened to jeopardize the stability in Europe and thus the Détente itself. In this scenario, Italy played a dual role. On the one hand it contributed to increasing the risks of instability with its own internal instability. During the so-called Years of Lead, Italy was affected by social turbulence, political terrorism, and violence, while at the same time going through economic decline and skyrocketing inflation. In the meantime, a sharp increase of votes for the Italian Communist Party (PCI) ignited fears that the PCI might be close to taking power, thus being able to further weaken the Atlantic Alliance by pushing Italy out of it. On the other hand, Italy was pivotal in serving the interests of the Alliance in the Mediterranean, avoiding an alteration of the military balance in Southern Europe by keeping Malta from shifting towards the Soviet Union. The Italian-Maltese agreement signed in August 1980 was the climax of this process. In addition to literature, this paper relies on documents, both edited (Foreign Relations of the United States) and unedited (held by The National Archives in London, the NARA II in Washington D.C., the Gerald Ford Presidential Library in Ann Arbor, the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta, the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome, and the National Archives in Rabat, Malta).*

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### **Introduction**

During the Seventies of the XX Century, the Mediterranean area was in turmoil, due to the numerous events occurring at the time: the Cypriot crisis between Greece and Turkey and the strains it caused inside the Atlantic Alliance; the end of dictatorships in Greece, Portugal and Spain which seemed to give way to instability; the sinister presence of the Soviet fleet; the decision taken by the Greek Government to leave the NATO military command; the ambiguous position of the Maltese Prime Minister Dom Mintoff, swinging between NATO, USSR and Libya; the US withdrawal from the Wheelus base in Libya after the coup led by Muammar Qadhafi. Not only were these events seriously endangering NATO's positions all along the Southern flank; they were also threatening the balance in

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Europe and thus the Détente itself, which was founded on a mutual, if tacit, interest in preserving the status quo between the two blocs in the Continent.<sup>2</sup>

The paper investigates the role played in such scenario by Italy.

Since the early days of the Cold War, Italy's stance in the Western bloc had been marked by a blatant duality. On the one hand, Italy took an active part in building up the Atlantic Alliance: after adhering to it in 1949, Italy contributed to its strengthening by hosting US military bases, facilities and even missiles when needed. On the other hand, Italy had been kept under strict scrutiny by its own allies – the United States above all – because of its political domestic scene. The influence enjoyed by the local communist party (PCI in the Italian acronym, Partito Comunista Italiano) and the large appeal it exerted on the electorate raised doubts about the reliability of the continuing Italian participation in the Western defensive system in the long run.

The present essay explores how such typical dual nature was still a feature of Italian posture inside the Western bloc in a time of increasing turbulence in NATO's Southern flank such as the Seventies were. It therefore investigates both the "communist problem" as seen from Washington, focusing on the crucial turning point of the biennium 1974-1976, and the service Italy provided to the Atlantic Alliance in the Mediterranean at the same time, focusing on the pivotal role Italy played in avoiding an alteration of the military balance in Southern Europe by keeping Malta from shifting towards the Soviet Union and Libya.

The US' preoccupations with the Italian communist problem have long been considered – albeit non extensively – by literature. Framing such preoccupations inside the logic of the Cold War, historians have devoted growing attention to the way subsequent American Administrations dealt with it in the late Forties and with the gradual tilt towards the left of the Italian political system in the early Sixties: James E. Miller somehow paved the way by exploring how Truman and his advisers responded to the risk that the first democratic elections held in Italy in 1948 might result in the victory for the PCI – which in turn would have dramatically altered the borders between East and West placing Italy on the other side of the Iron Curtain (Miller 1983);<sup>3</sup> other historians (mostly Italian) have further widened the knowledge on the topic, either by taking into account other governments' point of view (Varsori 1982, Bernardini 2010, 2011a, 2011b), or by analysing the US' gradual coming to terms with the prospective that the co-optation of the socialists into Italian cabinets could be the best way to contain the communists (Gentiloni Silveri 1998, Nuti 1999). More recently, as archival records were becoming available,<sup>4</sup> scholars have come to research the troubled Seventies and the firm opposition raised in the US government by the PCI's quest for power. And yet, historiography has so far largely overlooked the debate about the Italian situation during the Ford Administration's years and only few studies

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<sup>2</sup>See on the issue: Varsori (2009), Pedaliu (2009), Del Pero et al. (2010).

<sup>3</sup>From the same author see also: Miller (1986).

<sup>4</sup>An exception worth mentioning is the study published in 1991 by the Italian journalist Claudio Gatti. While not based on primary sources, it relies on interviews conducted with former officers of the US government and its ramifications. It provides an extremely acute account of the US's policy towards Italy during the Cold War years by uncovering details that have often been corroborated by documents later available. See Gatti (1991).

encompass – albeit sporadically – the period taken into consideration in this essay (Gentiloni Silveri 2009, Cominelli 2014, Heurtebize 2014, Guarna 2015, Ambrogetti 2016, Vignati 2019).<sup>5</sup> As regards the Mediterranean in the 1970s and the Italian Mediterranean policy, the issue has attracted the attention of an increasing number of Italian historians in the last decades.<sup>6</sup> Regarding specifically the Maltese issue, anyway, really few are the historical publications on the topic. Among them, it is worth mentioning here the recent book written by Gaetano La Nave, which analyses in depth Italian-Maltese relations from the Second World War to the Seventies and the contributions regarding the Italian-Maltese-Libyan triangle at the end of that decade, recently published by one of the two authors of the present essay (Merlati 2020, 2017).

Literature has therefore analysed separately the two sides of Italian dual stance in the Atlantic Alliance; the attempt is here to put them together, suggesting the hypothesis that the internal fluctuating political scene, the uncertainty determined by the communist question and the overall weakness Italy was projecting throughout the Seventies did not prevent it from effectively contributing to the defence of NATO's position in the Mediterranean area.

More than literature, the main source of the analysis is the original documentation available, both edited and not. The authors' research has been in fact conducted during several years, at The National Archives in London, at the NARA II in Washington D.C., at the Gerald Ford Presidential Library in Ann Arbor, at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta, at the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome and at the National Archives in Rabat (Malta).

### **Shadows of 1948: The United States and the Communist Problem in Italy on the Eve of 1976 Elections**

Since the very beginning of the Cold War, Italy has represented a major source of concern for the United States and its soon-to-be-allies. Besides the obvious circumstances imposed by geography (Italy being situated along the Iron Curtain and bordering with Yugoslavia), it was Italy's peculiar political landscape to elicit such worries. More specifically, it was the vast popularity enjoyed by the local communist party, the strongest of the whole Western world.

Having catalysed during the Second World War a large component of the resistance movement against the nazi-fascism and then given a significant contribution to the founding of the new Republic, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) established itself as one of the main protagonists of the domestic political scene once the democratic system had been formed. After sealing an alliance with

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<sup>5</sup>For a comprehensive and updated examination of the international projection of the Italian communist problem and of the interplay between foreign policy and the internal dimension see: Del Pero and Romero (2018), Pons (2018), Varsori (2022).

<sup>6</sup>Historiography on the Mediterranean policy of Italy also comprehends research studies on the issue of Italy and the Middle East (see, among others: L. Monzali and Soave (2021), Caviglia and Cricco (2006). Regarding specifically the Mediterranean, see in particular: Calandri et al. (2012), Di Nolfo (2010), De Leonardis (2003), Bosco (2009).

the Italian Socialist Party in late 1940s, the PCI ascended to become a major rival to the moderate Christian Democratic Party (Democrazia Cristiana, DC), strong enough to quest for power.

It was not coincidental that the Truman Administration devoted considerable attention to Italy on the eve of the first democratic elections that took place in April 1948; nor it was that, as historiography has thoroughly shown, the first meeting of the newly created NSC was convened to discuss the Italian situation and to define a strategy to contrast the advent of a communist-led government (Miller 1983).

The victory eventually obtained by the DC and the moderate parties at the 1948 elections did not put an end to the communist problem in Italy, as over the following decades the PCI managed to increase its popularity. The decision made by the socialist party at the beginning of the Sixties to embrace Atlantism and Europeanism in order to be admitted joining the government, left the PCI in a privileged position where it could take full advantage of its role as leader of the opposition. In times of turmoil, being the sole party – among those that had fought the nazi-fascism – that could claim to have steadily remained far from responsibilities of government certainly paid off. At the same time, having proved to be capable and efficient when confronted with the task of governing (something that happened locally, in the administration of some of the most important cities of the country, and usually in coalition with the socialists) only made the PCI grow stronger.

As Italy entered the “Long Seventies” torn between terrorism and an eroding support for the mildly reformist policies of the centre-left governments, whilst Détente was unfolding and the US and USSR intensified their dialogue, the communist problem in the country was still upsetting the United States.

The incertitude that dominated Southern Europe and North Africa would cast a long shadow on it, but the alarm in Washington (as well as in London, Paris or Bonn) was due to the events that shook Italian domestic politics in the early Seventies: in 1973, in response to the overthrown of Salvador Allende in Chile, the PCI leader Enrico Berlinguer proposed the so-called historic compromise, a political alliance between the PCI and the DC that in his vision was the only way the communists could expect to attain power in a Western country; in 1974, a referendum on the divisive issue of divorce revealed that the DC had lost its connection with a relevant section of the Italian society; a year later, the regional elections held for the second time in the Republic’s history gave the PCI an astounding 33% of votes. When President Leone decided to dissolve the Parliament and convene the general elections for the late spring of 1976, the alarm reached its peak. It was January 1976, and the prospective of a communist-participated government, as a result of a communist victory at the elections, seemed far from unrealistic. In the following months, the 1976 elections scheduled for June were frequently compared to those held in 1948, as observers tended to consider them equally critical (Cominelli 2014, p. 208).

How the Ford Administration dealt with the communist problem on the eve of the 1976 elections is the question at the core of this first section of the essay. Literature and records held by the National Archives and Records Administration

and by the Ford Presidential Library, combined with those released by the CIA and the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, are of inestimable help in formulating an answer to that question.

Two aspects emerging from primary sources stand out.

The first one has to do with the nature of the threat represented by the PCI in the eyes of the US; in other words, with the way the PCI was perceived at the highest levels of the Administration. In this regard, records show unmistakably that the convictions held by the Secretary of State Henry Kissinger did not enjoy unanimous support inside either the CIA, the National Security Council or the State Department itself. It is a well-known fact that Kissinger made it clear more than once that the United States would not welcome the PCI inclusion into the Italian government. If such event had ever occurred, the United States would have been forced to readjust its policy towards Italy and Europe, even to the point of reconsidering its own commitment to NATO.<sup>7</sup>

Kissinger warnings, conveyed via both public and confidential channels, rested first and foremost upon his – alleged? – preoccupations with the destiny of Italian democracy. To those who might have pointed out that the PCI had fully accepted democracy and its procedures, Kissinger usually responded with what looks like a paradox: the PCI was way more dangerous, not *in spite of* its commitments to democracy, but just *because of* them. Being commonly accepted as a party bound to respect the democratic process only made the PCI more likely to gain respectability and votes among a larger part of Italian society, that would have been repulsed by a self-proclaimed antidemocratic party devoted to building a soviet-like regime.<sup>8</sup> In one occasion, Kissinger admitted that his “colleagues at Harvard” – meaning scholars and intellectuals – had come to the conclusion that the PCI should be “promoted”. “I haven’t yet reached that stage of objectivity” – he promptly added.<sup>9</sup> Another Kissinger’s favourite objection was that not a single communist leader in the countries of Eastern Europe had ever said in the aftermath of the Second World War anything different from what the Italian communist were saying in the Seventies.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>For the content of Kissinger’s declarations and the reaction they raised in Europe, see for instance: Anonymous (1975), Lewis (1975), Shuster (1976).

<sup>8</sup>During a meeting with the Italian President Giovanni Leone in September 1974 Kissinger stated: “frankly we are more worried about a responsible than an irresponsible Communist party, because if they appear responsible they will be a bigger threat to democracy in the long run”. See memorandum of conversation, H. Kissinger, G. Ford and G. Leone, 25 September 1974. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976* (2021). Speaking with the leader of the Portuguese Socialist leader Mário Soares, he reasoned: “luckily, the Portuguese communists did not have a leader like that of the Italian communists, or your position would have been much more difficult”. See memorandum of conversation, H. Kissinger, H. Sonnenfeldt, M. Soares and others, 26 January 1976. Record Group 59, General Records of the Department of State (hereafter RG 59), Office of the Counselor (Helmut Sonnenfeldt), Country and Subject Files, 1973–1976, box 7, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter NARA).

<sup>9</sup>Memorandum of conversation, H. Kissinger, J. den Uyl (Netherlands Prime Minister) and M. van der Stoep (Netherlands Minister of Foreign Affairs), 11 August 1976. RG 59, Records of H. Kissinger, 1973–1977, box 17, NARA.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

Given Kissinger's pivotal role inside the US Administration, there was no chance that any different – cooler – assessment could prevail. Still, this did not stop other officers from expressing their views. Both the CIA in its vast majority (with the significant exceptions of the deputy director Vernon Walters and the agents operating in Rome)<sup>11</sup> and the Policy Planning Staff were inclined to be less pessimistic. After all – they were reasoning – the PCI had participated in the founding of the democratic Republic and, especially after 1968, had showed a substantial amount of autonomy from Moscow. Under the guide of its young leader Enrico Berlinguer it had embraced a political platform that could easily be viewed as social-democratic by Western standards. Communists were unanimously considered competent administrators on a local level; on a national level, PCI leaders were often involved in behind-the-scenes consultations with members of the government regarding delicate economic and financial issues. The analogy between Italy in the Seventies and Eastern Europe on the eve of the sovietisation that Kissinger loved to evoke was simply nonsense, since it clearly disregarded the fact that Italy was not occupied by the Red Army as the Eastern countries had been after the war.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the distance between Kissinger's gloomy vision and the more nuanced conclusions reached by other officers, there was still a common ground in their analyses: it was the shared fear that an actual communists' participation in the Italian government could weaken NATO. Even those who rejected the idea of the Italian communists as mere soviet puppets, and acknowledged the wide autonomy the PCI displayed in relations with Moscow, conceded that its success in getting back to power could affect Italy's participation in the alliance. The least it could be expected was that the PCI would question the need for Italy to do its part in the burden sharing the US were advocating inside the Atlantic Alliance; others feared a more assertive policy that could lead Italy to reconsider the permanence of US troops, bases and facilities over the Italian soil; according to some CIA experts and part of the Armed Forces, it was even plausible that the Italian communists – if ever included in government – would start lobbying for the Italian withdrawn from NATO.<sup>13</sup>

Kissinger for his part tended to be more caustic, as he was when he gathered with Italian Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs while they all were in Helsinki to participate in the ceremony for the signing of the Final Act in August 1975: “we don't care if [the Italian communists] sign onto NATO in blood.

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<sup>11</sup>Letter from V. Walters (Deputy Director, CIA) for G. H. Bush (Director), 2 June 1976. Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/>; Gatti (1991), 141.

<sup>12</sup>Prospects for and Consequences of Increased Communist Influence in Italian Politics, National Intelligence Estimate 24-1-74, 18 July 1974. U.S. Declassified Documents, Thomas Gale Group; Authoritarianism and Militarism in Southern Europe, CIA Research Study, March 1975. Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/>; The Communist Party of Italy: An Analysis and Some Prediction, CIA Research Study, June 1975. U.S. Declassified Documents, Thomas Gale Group; Report by J. Walker of the Policy Planning Staff, If the Communists Come in, 6 April 1976. RG 59, Records of H. Kissinger, 1973–1977, box 19, NARA.

<sup>13</sup>Prospects for and Consequences of Increased Communist Influence in Italian Politics, cit.; If the Communists Come in, cit.; NSSM 242–US Policy toward Italy. National Security Council Institutional Files, box 44, Gerald Ford Presidential Library.

Having the communists in the Government of Italy would be completely incompatible with continued membership in the Alliance".<sup>14</sup>

Another side of the problem, however leading to the same conclusion that the PCI participation in Italian government would be detrimental for NATO and the US, was taken into consideration by the Counselor of the Department of State Helmut Sonnenfeldt. It did not matter how far the Italian communists had gone in their search for autonomy from the USSR; it did not matter how deeply Moscow's resented the PCI and its stance towards the Breznev Doctrine or Soviet dissidents. Once a Communist Party had ever taken power in a Western country that was part of NATO, that fact *per se* would have altered the delicate balance established in Europe between East and West, and thus disrupted Détente and jeopardized the core of US' interests.<sup>15</sup>

Against such dark background, the second interesting aspect of the US policy towards Italy emerging from records concerns the initiatives envisioned and undertaken in order to prevent the Italian communists from entering the national cabinet.

The leverages available to the scope, and in general to influence the Italian political scene, were diligently assessed by the Ambassador to Rome John Volpe in a telegram he sent in August 1975 to the Assistant Secretary of State Arthur Hartman. Firmly convinced that the United States should take action, he emphasized the importance of reinforcing the Italian Christian-democrats, the socialists and the moderate parties that represented the only viable alternative to the communists.<sup>16</sup>

The most vexed and controversial among the measures suggested by the Ambassador was the need to provide friendly parties with financial support. Here overt actions met covert action. It is widely known that the US had carried out a covert program of financial aid in favour of the anti-communist forces from the early stages of the Cold War until the late Sixties, when the Johnson Administration cut it off. It is also very well documented that the financial support was resumed – and extended in its scope – in the early Seventies due to the pressing of the then US Ambassador in Rome Graham Martin.<sup>17</sup>

What was unknown until recently, and has only been revealed by newly released documents, is that following the shock caused by the outcome of the regional elections in 1975 a new covert action program was launched. In its original formulation, the program was estimated to cost \$4.87 million and was

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<sup>14</sup>Memorandum of conversation, H. Kissinger, G. Ford, A. Moro (Italian Prime Minister), M. Rumor (Italian Foreign Minister) and others, 1<sup>st</sup> August 1975. RG 59, Records of H. Kissinger, 1973–1977, box 12, NARA.

<sup>15</sup>Letter from H. Sonnenfeldt for H. Kissinger, 12 January 1976. RG 59, Office of the Counselor (H. Sonnenfeldt), Country and Subject Files, 1973–1976, box 4, NARA.

<sup>16</sup>Telegram from J. Volpe for A. Hartman (Assistant Secretary of State), 22 August 1975. National Security Adviser Presidential Country Files for Europe and Canada, box 9, Gerald Ford Presidential Library.

<sup>17</sup>As historiography has abundantly shown, Martin obtained almost total autonomy in handling the funds made available by the US government, and he handed part of them to Vito Miceli of the Italian secret service, someone who was known to be near the neofascists of the MSI. See for all: Guarna (2015), pp. 262–264.

aimed at “support[ing] the democratic parties”, “increase[ing] contact and support for non-political Italian groups and individuals including media, government, business, professional, farming and labor”, at seeking the support of Western Europe to US objective and at “denigrat[ing] the Italian Communist Party”.<sup>18</sup> Both in its goals and its means, it was therefore consistent with what Volpe had suggested and with similar programs previously implemented in Italy.

President Ford approved the proposed program on December 1975, but its application had to be almost immediately suspended in January 1976. The Committee of the House of Representatives chaired by Otis G. Pike was just concluding its inquiry about the intelligence activities. The final report it produced would not be officially released (it would be later published in the UK) (CIA 1977), but large extracts from it were leaked to the press. The public outcry caused by the information it contained about Martin’s covert aid to Italians prompted the Administration to set the new program aside.<sup>19</sup>

In May, however, as the negative publicity seemed to fade and the fateful 1976 elections approached, President Ford himself directed that the program be reconsidered. He later approved a scaled-down covert action program that had been worked out by the CIA and discussed (albeit not unanimously supported) by all the offices involved. Due to the constraints imposed by the imminence of the elections, the revised new program had a limited purpose, being intended to only “influenc[e] a small percentage of the voters to decrease the total PCI vote by 1% to 3%”. Still, it represented a remarkable departure in the US policy towards the Italian communist problem. Contrary to what had been done in the past, it did not provide any financial support to Italian political forces. It rather consisted in a massive, unprecedented operation of propaganda, deception, and fabricated stories that the US intelligence was supposed to orchestrate in order to discredit the PCI.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, the core of the debate inside the US Administration had been shifted from “what to do to keep the communists out of Government” to “what to do in case we fail and the communists come in”. Such process was set in motion by the NSSM 242 whereby in May 1976 President Ford “directed a priority review of U.S. policy toward Italy in the near-term”, that should “consider U.S. policy and options [...] in the event that national elections in Italy result in the participation of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in the Italian government”.<sup>21</sup>

The review requested by President Ford turned out to be useless, as the outcome of the elections finally held in June kept the doors of the Italian cabinet

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<sup>18</sup>Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) to President Ford, 29 November 1975, in (2021) *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, 360.

<sup>19</sup>Memorandum prepared for the 40 Committee, 2 February 1976, in (2021) *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, 362.

<sup>20</sup>Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) to President Ford, 22 May 1976, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, 370. The program had received full or mild support from the CIA and the Department of State, whilst the General Attorney, the Defence Department, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Operation Advisory Group expressed many reserves, mainly due to concerns related to the risks of new leaks.

<sup>21</sup>National Security Study Memorandum 242. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976* (2021), 367.

locked for the communists. This suited the US government, that just few days after the ballots were closed joined its main partners at the G7 meeting of Puerto Rico. There, the US and its Western allies agreed to make any financial aid to Italy contingent upon the communists' exclusion from the next Italian government (Varsori 2008). The communists would in fact remain outside the cabinet, although they abstained from voting against it and even joined the parliamentary majority in 1978. By then, the new US Administration led by President Jimmy Carter had chosen a path that avoided any form of interference in Italian domestic situation, while at the same time reiterating the US government's preference for any solution that would have kept the communists out of power (Njølstad 2002). The way to neutralize the communist problem in Italy was eventually found by the Italians themselves. From 1976 to 1979 the Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti engaged Berlinguer's party in an exhausting cooperation with the government that was certainly crucial in substantially decreasing the support it had previously enjoyed. Meanwhile, the newly elected leader of the Italian Socialist Party, Bettino Craxi, resurrected the centre-left formula as an alternative to the historic compromise by breaking all his party's ties with the communists and by relaunching the alliance with the christian-democrats (Varsori and Acquaviva 2022). Finally, in 1979 Andreotti jumped at the chances offered by the evolving international scene to push the PCI back to the opposition, by adhering to both the European Monetary System and to the so-called NATO's "double-track decision". Such choices were too much for the Italian communists to accept, so they had no chance but to break their cooperation with christian-democrats and put the historic compromise to rest.

### **The Italian "Mediterranean Role" and the 1980 Agreement with Malta**

If Italian internal instability in the Seventies and the consequent risk of the PCI taking power were reasons for great concern between the Western allies, completely different considerations should be made in relation to the bigger picture of Italy's role in the Mediterranean in the framework of the Atlantic Alliance.

A useful starting point for an analysis of this issue could be a Report dedicated to the Italian Mediterranean policy by Ronald Arculus, British Ambassador to Rome from 1979 to 1982. In his 1981 Report to the Foreign Office, significantly entitled "Italy and the Mediterranean", the UK Ambassador emphasized the role Italy was playing in the Mediterranean at that time and in the opinion of the Ambassador, Italian policy towards Malta with the agreement signed by Italy and Malta in August 1980 best exemplified the priority of the Italian Mediterranean policy as well as the useful contribution it could provide to Western interests in the area.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>R. Arculus (British Embassy, Rome) to Lord Carrington, *Report Italy and the Mediterranean*, 18 June 1981. FCO 9/3210, The National Archives of the UK.

The long path of the Italian Maltese relations during the Seventies, concluding in the 1980 agreement, will be then the focus of this second section of the essay aimed to better explore the Italian Mediterranean policy and its contribution to the Western security system.

Part of the British Empire since 1814, the island of Malta gained independence in 1964. However British troops' stay in the island did not stop then. It is worth recalling Simon C. Smith's words in the review *Contemporary British History*: "There is growing recognition that the end of formal empire did not equate with the ending of ties between the imperial power and its erstwhile dependencies [...]. Indeed, while September 1964 marked the constitutional separation of Britain and Malta, there remained strong residual links in the military, strategic, economic, and financial spheres that persisted beyond formal independence" (Smith 2022).

In the same year of 1964, in fact, London and La Valletta signed the Mutual Defence and Assistance Agreement which allowed British forces to stay in Malta for the following ten years and provided for the amount of 50 million pounds in economic assistance to the island for the same period.

It was the labour party leader Dom Mintoff, elected Prime Minister in 1971, who decided to renegotiate that agreement in the framework of his increasing distancing from the West and the Atlantic Alliance, which was the distinctive feature of his foreign policy since the moment he won the election. It should be borne in mind that two of his most clamorous earlier decisions aimed to carve out for Malta a more independent space between the two blocs: Dom Mintoff denied requests for Sixth Fleet visits, vetoing the use of port facilities<sup>23</sup> and immediately after the election expelled from Malta Italian Commander Gino Birindelli, Commander of the NATO naval base on the island, declaring him *persona non grata*.<sup>24</sup>

As inevitable, Dom Mintoff's political stance caused a lot of concern among the Western allies, first of all in the United States. Behind his stated neutral position, in fact, it was impossible not to recognise the great danger of Soviet (and Libyan) expansion in the area. For the Western allies it seemed then to be compelling to prevent Moscow from acquiring air and naval bases, as well as facilities on the island, a crucial Mediterranean crossroads.<sup>25</sup>

"With no more British presence on Malta – the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs U. Alexis Johnson said to Henry Kissinger at the Senior Review Group Meeting of October 5, 1971 – Mintoff could turn to Libya or the Soviet Union. He may have gotten money from Qadhafi [...]" Kissinger's reply is crystal clear: "I would like to make a couple of observations. First, we obviously have a significant interest in Malta. Second, we want to keep the Soviets out [...]. Third, we are not willing to let Libya come in if this can be prevented at a manageable cost".<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Malta, 29 June 1971. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976* (2012), 228.

<sup>24</sup>Malta espelle Birindelli, Riunita la Nato a Bruxelles, *Corriere della Sera*, 26 June 1971.

<sup>25</sup>See for example, National Security Study Memorandum 135, 17 July 1971. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976* (2012), 229; Response to National Security Study Memorandum 135, 3 August 1971. *Ibid.*, doc. 232.

<sup>26</sup>Minutes of a Senior Review Group Meeting, 5 October 1971. *Ibid.*, doc. 236.

It was in this framework that at the end of 1971 a deep crisis in Anglo-Maltese relations took place, following Dom Mintoff's election; the crisis was determined by the different perspectives the governments in London and in La Valletta had on the terms of the renegotiation of the Mutual Defence and Assistance agreement – particularly regarding its economic terms – and was destined to have significant consequences for the entire Atlantic Alliance. The Italian government made a decisive contribution as mediator between the two sides. The Italian mediation in 1972 could be considered an early sign of the more important role the Italian government would play in that Mediterranean theatre at the end of the Seventies and the beginning of the Eighties.<sup>27</sup>

On February 12, 1972, the Italian Prime Minister Emilio Colombo sent a long letter to President Richard Nixon, observing how dangerous a break in the Anglo-Maltese negotiations could be, as it could offer the Soviet Union the chance to increase its presence in the Mediterranean Sea: “As representatives of Countries aware of their responsibilities for maintaining the balance of power and influence in the Mediterranean Sea [...], we must be aware of the necessity not to worsen the actual yet thorny situation [...]. Well knowing the importance of maintaining Malta's loyalty to the West, I think we must make one more effort to avoid a break that could produce more onerous financial obligations” (Bosco 2009, p. 278).<sup>28</sup>

Rome was the city where, between January and March 1972, many meetings between the UK Defence Secretary Lord Carrington, Dom Mintoff and the NATO General Secretary Joseph Luns took place, in the presence of the Italian Foreign Minister Aldo Moro. On each occasion, leaving Italy, Dom Mintoff stated his appreciation of the Italian mediation. The Italian Ambassador to London, Raimondo Manzini, also played an important role in the whole negotiation process, as emerges from the Italian and the American diplomatic documents.<sup>29</sup> Enrico Serra, one of the main analysts of the issue of Italian diplomacy in an historical perspective dedicated many pages to the important role of mediator Raimondo Manzini played (Serra 2001, p. 91).

Also thanks to Italian mediation, after nine months of negotiations, the United Kingdom and Malta signed a 7-year agreement in London on March 26, 1972, allowing for the United Kingdom's continued use of military facilities in Malta in exchange for a yearly payment. Italy and other Atlantic Alliance countries contributed with a one-off payment. Malta agreed that neither Soviet nor Warsaw Pact forces would be allowed to establish bases on Malta or use its military facilities.

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<sup>27</sup>On the issue of Italian-Maltese relations during the Cold War see the recent book of La Nave (2022).

<sup>28</sup>See also references to the letter in Memorandum From H. Sonnenfeldt of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig), 23 February 1972. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976* (2012), 246.

<sup>29</sup>See the meetings of 14-15 and 19-21 January, 7-8 February and 8-9 March. 1972. *Testi e documenti sulla politica estera dell'Italia*. Roma: Ministero degli Affari Esteri (<https://www.farnesina.ipzs.it/biblioteca/testiDocumenti/4>). See also Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom, 14 January 1972. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976* (2012), 244.

The second half of the 1970s opened a new period in Malta's foreign policy giving one more chance for an incisive Italian role in that crucial Mediterranean area.

In 1976 Dom Mintoff decided that after the British retreat in 1979 Malta would take a neutral stance in international politics and he asked for international assistance to ensure that neutrality. Italy had then the chance to replace London as Malta's protector and so exercise what the Italian Ambassador and historian Sergio Romano defined as a "Western proxy" (Romano 2002, p. 199).

From 1976 to 1980, all the main actors of Italian foreign policy – Moro, Andreotti, Forlani, Rumor, Cossiga, Colombo – were engaged in negotiating and defining a Maltese neutrality policy with Dom Mintoff. From the reading of the MAE documentation we know it was a really demanding process, requiring "perseverance"<sup>30</sup> and at times "tedious and frustrating".<sup>31</sup>

The EEC delegated Italy and France to examine the issues connected with the Maltese neutrality project. As emerged from primary sources and from the invaluable testimony of Edgar Mizzi, a main actor of Maltese Foreign Policy<sup>32</sup>, the negotiations had a dual aim: on the one hand, a multilateral assurance of Maltese neutrality by Italy, France and also Libya and Algeria that could give Malta a stronger stability in the framework of the Cold War; on the other hand, a project of multilateral economic assistance to help Malta after the British retreat. In this case the project would also involve Germany. The economic aspect of the negotiations was the most important for Dom Mintoff who demanded an enormous amount of financial assistance as a prerequisite for any other agreement.<sup>33</sup>

It was a difficult process, characterized by many stops and starts. At every stall Dom Mintoff's more or less veiled threat was always the same: that of leaving the European negotiations and putting Malta in Libyan hands.

Italian negotiators defined Dom Mintoff's approach to deal making as "policy of blackmail"<sup>34</sup>, "policy of usury"<sup>35</sup> and "strategy of sending messages"<sup>36</sup>. This approach is an undisputed element of continuity from 1976 to 1980. We can repeatedly see the threat of becoming closer to Libya in Dom Mintoff's letters to Andreotti in 1977<sup>37</sup>, to Carter in 1978<sup>38</sup>, as well as in his words of September 1978

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<sup>30</sup>MAE note, no date, Il governo italiano per Malta post '79. Fondo Consigliere diplomatico alla presidenza del Consiglio, Malta, Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS).

<sup>31</sup>Letter n. 2562, Ambassador E. Da Rin to A. Forlani, 5 August 1978. Fondo Consigliere diplomatico alla presidenza del Consiglio, Malta, ACS.

<sup>32</sup>E. Mizzi was Attorney General. See Mizzi (1995).

<sup>33</sup>MAE note no date, Il governo italiano per Malta post '79, cit.

<sup>34</sup>MAE note, 12 September 1977. Fondo Consigliere diplomatico alla presidenza del Consiglio, Malta, ACS.

<sup>35</sup>Letter n. 2562, Ambassador E. Da Rin to A. Forlani, 5 August 1978, cit.

<sup>36</sup>MAE telegram n. 790224/0169 from Malta (La Marte) to Rome, 24 February. Fondo Consigliere diplomatico alla presidenza del Consiglio, Malta, ACS.

<sup>37</sup>Letter from D. Mintoff to G. Andreotti, 8 September 1977 and letter from D. Mintoff to G. Andreotti, 14 June 1978. Fondo Consigliere diplomatico alla presidenza del Consiglio, Malta, ACS.

<sup>38</sup>Letter to D. Mintoff to J. Carter, 18 April 1978, in telegram to La Valletta Embassy, 22 April 1978. NLC-16-101-6-22-2 CREST SYSTEM, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

when in Strasbourg he offended the European negotiators, accusing them of “arrogance” and “lethargy”.<sup>39</sup>

In 1980, after four years of negotiations, it seemed impossible to reach the multilateral agreement France and Italy had sought. So, in spring 1980 bilateral negotiations between Italy and Malta alone accelerated. This opened the path to the bilateral agreement Italy and Malta signed in La Valletta on August 2, 1980, under which Italy alone would assure Malta’s neutrality with an additional protocol that provided direct economic assistance.

Turning to the reasons for the acceleration of the bilateral Italian-Maltese negotiations, we can underline a number of aspects. On the one hand, as regards France – as Olivier Stirn, Undersecretary at the Quai d’Orsay told Giuseppe Zamberletti, Undersecretary at the Italian Foreign Ministry – the French feared Dom Mintoff’s unreliability as well as Qadhafi’s ambiguities, but also, they refused to “act in international affairs following Italian political initiatives”, because of the “pride of a big power” (Zamberletti 1995, p. 33).

On the other hand, regarding the triangle between Italy, Malta, and Libya, the hypothesis formulated by the author to account for the acceleration of the Italian-Maltese negotiation is connected with the status of Libyan-Maltese relations at that time.<sup>40</sup> In other words, an in-depth study of the available Maltese and Italian sources led the author to suggest that it was more due to a Maltese initiative than an Italian one that the negotiations moved from a multilateral to a bilateral dimension. The hypothesis, which only the availability of more documentation could confirm, is that the deterioration of Libyan-Maltese relations in the Spring of 1980 led Dom Mintoff to decide to conclude the agreement with the Italian government only. It is worth mentioning here not only the underlying incompatibility between the two leaders, Dom Mintoff on the one hand and Qadhafi on the other. Most significantly, in the Spring of 1980 the Maltese government had to confront the major issue of the cessation of an important commercial and economic agreement with Libya, under which Qadhafi’s Libya had guaranteed oil at a discounted price to Malta for many years. The numerous attempts by the Maltese government to renew the agreement failed, so contributing to a deterioration in the relationship between the two countries. Perhaps more than that, it was the old quarrel on the delimitation of territorial waters which generated tensions between Tripoli and La Valletta. The sources conserved at the National Archives in Rabat can throw some light on that. In May 1980, in fact, the two governments exchanged diplomatic notes by which the Libyans denounced Maltese concessions for oil exploitation on a part of the continental shelf belonging to Libya and threatened serious consequences, despite Maltese rebuttals of the accusations.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>MAE telegram n. 56499, Consiglio d’Europa- Discorso Mintoff ad Assemblea Consultiva, 28 September 1978, *Fondo Consigliere diplomatico alla presidenza del Consiglio*, Malta, ACS.

<sup>40</sup>On the Italian-Libyan-Maltese triangle see Merlati (2020, 2017).

<sup>41</sup>Verbal Note, Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Popular Committee of the Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, 21 May 1980 and Verbal Note, Secretariat of the Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya to the Maltese Embassy in Tripoli, 10 May 1980. DOI/111/80, Malta Libya dispute on oil exploration, Department of Information, Rabat National Archives.

In the author's opinion, the tension in Maltese-Libyan relations led Dom Mintoff to look for a more rapid conclusion of the negotiations with the Italians, who – he knew – were in any case willing to reach an agreement, even if it were bilateral in nature. Already in 1978, in fact, the Italian Foreign Minister Arnaldo Forlani had made known its intention to “deal with the issues of an active collaboration between Malta and Italy, bilaterally if necessary”, should it have proved impossible to find a multilateral agreement.<sup>42</sup>

From the month of July 1980 relations between Malta and Lybia degenerated, leading to the crisis known as the Medina crisis.<sup>43</sup> In the meantime, as I mentioned before, in La Valletta Giuseppe Zamberletti signed the neutrality agreement with Malta on behalf of the Italian government.<sup>44</sup>

That was the end of a long path and represented, in Zamberletti's view, a great chapter of Italian foreign policy, from then on more prestigious also towards NATO's allies. “My belief – Zamberletti wrote in his memoirs – was that the agreement with Malta was inaugurating for Italy the chance for a more active and incisive Mediterranean policy” (Zamberletti 1995, p. 10).

On September 15 an exchange of diplomatic notes finalized the agreement. On the same day, before the Italian Parliament, Foreign Minister Emilio Colombo explained the path of the previous years as well as the content of the agreement, underlining how important it was in the framework of Italy's Mediterranean policy:

“The agreement with the Maltese government is framed in the constant political orientation of Italy aimed at contributing to the consolidation of peaceful relations between Mediterranean countries. This aim represents a vital interest for Italy, which finds itself in such a crucial area. In effect, it is an area with a central geopolitical connotation and it is the crossroads of relationships between the Continents. Thus, the importance of the Italian “Mediterranean role”, which constitutes an essential element of Italy's participation in the European Community and, in more general terms, in international affairs.” (Accordo Italia-Malta 1981, p. 289).

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<sup>42</sup>Inpol to Forlani, Ansa, Roma, 21 July 1980, Fondo Consigliere diplomatico alla presidenza del Consiglio, Malta, ACS.

<sup>43</sup>The crisis originated from the Dom Mintoff's decision of authorizing drillings in the contested maritime area of Medina. See Malta-Libya Oil Saga. Texaco hopes for resumption of oil drilling on Medina, *The Times of Malta*, 27 August 1980; Malta's stand on oil drilling dispute, *The Times of Malta*, 28 August 1980; Libyan helicopter personnel withdraw from Malta, *The Times of Malta*, 28 August 1980; Malta stunned by serious turn in relations with Libya, *The Times of Malta*, 29 August 1980.

<sup>44</sup>Malta declared its neutrality by adhering to a policy of nonalignment and by refusing to participate in any military alliance and to allow foreign military bases or facilities in Maltese territory. Italy recognised Malta's neutrality, declared to respect the sovereignty, unity, independence, neutrality, and integrity of Malta and to act in conformity therewith in all respect. A financial protocol was added to the agreement that provided direct economic assistance amounting to \$12 million per year.

## Conclusions

In his aforementioned 1981 Report to the Foreign Office, the British Ambassador Ronald Arculus wrote: “Italy claims a special role in the Mediterranean and relations with the other Mediterranean countries form an increasingly important part of Italy’s foreign policy [...]. Italy’s Mediterranean policy has defects – he added – but Italy can serve as a useful link between Western Europe and Italy’s neighbours in the area.”<sup>45</sup>

The Ambassador emphasized how different Italy’s position was from that of countries such as Britain or the Federal Republic of Germany. “Her South is closer to Tunisia than to Turin: Naples and Rome are Mediterranean cities even if Milan is not. Italian governments can readily understand Egypt’s or Algeria’s industrial and agricultural problems. Italian advice, entrepreneurs and middlemen can be acceptable where British, French and Germans are less so.” In conclusion, Arculus underlined how the Italians could “help to blur the distinction between North and South, between Western Europe and its Mediterranean neighbours, between the developed and developing countries to the advantage of the community”. “In focusing her attention on the Mediterranean, therefore – he wrote – Italy has claimed with some justice to be serving both her own interests and those of the Alliance [...]. The Italians are condemned to a Mediterranean destiny and are framing a policy which takes account of this.”<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps in a too generous way, in 1981 the British Ambassador to Rome listed Italian Mediterranean policy’s purposes, advantages and merits and underlined how well that policy could serve Western interests in the long run.

Arculus’ conclusions are broadly confirmed – while with a less enthusiastic tone – by what has emerged in the previous pages. The essay discussed the worries raised abroad by the unresolved communist question and the efforts made by the United States to prevent the PCI from joining the Italian government, but at the same time it illustrated the line of continuity by which, during the Seventies, Italy acted in the Mediterranean. Such parallel enlightens how little the internal instability and political crisis influenced Italy’s Mediterranean role and the service Rome could provide for the Atlantic Alliance. Notwithstanding its domestic turbulence, Italy successfully contributed to preventing Soviet and Libyan expansion in the Mediterranean theatre, firstly mediating between Malta and the United Kingdom and, later, ensuring Malta’s neutrality.

The Italian-Maltese agreement of 1980 was the climax of this process and opened a new decade in which Italy consolidated its role in the Mediterranean area, while finally overcoming the “communist problem” on the domestic level.

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<sup>45</sup>R. Arculus (British Embassy, Rome) to Lord Carrington, *Report Italy and the Mediterranean*, 18 June 1981. FCO 9/3210, cit.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

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