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## *Stable unpredictability? An assessment of the Italian-Libyan relations*

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# ‘Stable Unpredictability’?

## An assessment of the Italian-Libyan relations

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Since the end of the Cold War, Italy has sought to frame its relations with different southern Mediterranean countries inside various European multilateral initiatives. The Italian foreign policy objective to achieve stability and dependability in such relations has largely been met through the launch of different European Union (EU) framework policies, such as the 1995 Barcelona Process and more recently the 2008 Union for the Mediterranean (Aliboni 1999, Carbone 2008). The Italian diplomacy’s preferred approach, one can thus infer, has been to Europeanise its foreign policy in the Mediterranean area, whenever possible (Balfour 2005)<sup>iii</sup>.

However, there is one particular southern Mediterranean country which so far has proved itself impervious to the Italian preference for embedding bilateral relations in European structures and that is Libya. Tripoli has consistently reneged on the Union’s invitations to join the different EU policies for the Mediterranean area and only belatedly in 2008 accepted to engage in – still ongoing – preparatory talks for a limited EU-Libyan bilateral agreement. Hence, in the absence of formal EU-Libya ties, different Italian governments have over the decades had to resort to structuring relations with this Maghreb country by ways of various Italian-Libyan bilateral agreements. The most recent and all-encompassing bilateral agreement to date is the 2008 Italian-Libyan *Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation* (Treaty of Benghazi) signed by Silvio Berlusconi’s centre-right government. The goal of the Treaty is to provide a qualitative leap in Italian-Libyan relations and create a solid and sustainable partnership between the two countries (Ronzitti 2009).

However, in spite of that the 2008 Treaty of Benghazi has been hailed as the remedy to settle most, if not all, outstanding bilateral grievances, a number of incidents since testify to that the, for Rome, much vaunted stability in its relations with Libya is still elusive. While the erstwhile strong tension derived from the colonial episode appears to have dissipated somewhat among the two countries, there is an underlying pattern of unpredictability about dealings with Colonel Qaddafi which has not changed since he seized power in Libya in 1969. What is more, the failure to achieve stability in Italian-Libyan relations has also had an unwanted side-effect. The considerable political capital invested by the Berlusconi government in the rapprochement with Libya also seems to create certain turbulence with its EU partners, and hence contributing to lesser stability in EU-Italian relations when it comes to determined issues.

This chapter will explore the Italian efforts to achieve stability and predictability in relations with Libya over time, but with special attention to the post-cold war period. The first section will outline the conceptual framework used to analyse Italian-Libyan relations. The second section will provide an overview of the historical evolution of relations. The third section will look at the remarkable continuity which has characterised Italian domestic politics and debates in terms of Italy’s Libya policy. The final section will ponder the outcome of the Italian pursuit for stability in its relations with Libya and how this aim for stability is affecting EU-Italian relations.

### Conceptual framework

Italy’s drive to secure stable relations with Libya arguably holds many elements in common with the thinking of Liberal institutionalism. The Liberal institutionalists, much like Realists, view the international system as characterised by anarchy. Neoliberal thinking holds that in the absence of a world government – or a regional hegemon – to impose order in relations among states, states must

endeavour to find other forms of arrangements to safeguard their preferences and provide a rudimentary set of rules to govern their interaction (Axelrod 1984; Keohane 1984; Stein 1990).

Such arrangements can take on different characteristics, according to the Liberal institutionalist school of thought<sup>iv</sup>. They may be of bilateral or multilateral nature, ad hoc or longer term, and they may include one issue area or multiple. The Neoliberals tend to predict, however, that the longer term and more areas that such arrangements encompass, the more stable the inter-state relations become over time and vice versa. This is because, as this school of thought sees it, reiterated, sustained cooperation over time, based on enlightened self-interest, can give rise to mutual rewards which may over time supplant a concept of interest based on unilateral action and competition (Axelrod 1984)<sup>v</sup>. The frequent repetition of interactions, the development of greater communication and transparency between states in the form of exchanges of information about the objects of cooperation, and the development of rules, regulations, norms and decision-making procedures within which states seek to resolve issues are key, to Neoliberals, for allowing states to mitigate the effects of anarchy – hence conversely fomenting stability – in inter-state relations (Keohane 1984). In other words, Liberal institutionalists argue that international (i.e. inter-state) order can be found in sustained relationships characterised by mutual consent to generalised principles of conduct. In many ways the Institutionalists therefore see the bilateral relation as the primary building block of international relations.

Although Neoliberals are confident that institutionalised arrangements eventually bring about international order and dependability in inter-state dealings they are, however, not unaware of the many obstacles which may impede such cooperative order. One of several obstacles is the game-theory concept of ‘cheating’ or non-compliance in cooperative efforts (Axelrod 1984). In Neoliberal interest-based approaches, however, the problem of cheating tends to be minimised for being considered more one-off isolated exceptions to the rule and, in any case, such behaviour is likely to cease over time. The Liberal institutionalist account differs with classic Realist in not seeing the world as the arena for the classic single-play prisoner’s dilemma, in which the payoff structure makes defection a dominant strategy for both players (Grieco 1988). The Neoliberals argue that, unlike ‘prisoners’ which will only be faced with their cooperation ‘dilemma’ once, states must cooperate on a continued basis in a reiterated multi-play structure. One state’s decision in terms of cooperating or not in one game, therefore, has future consequences in that it might be rewarded or sanctioned by the other player. Engaging in a cooperative arrangement has, according to such view, certain disciplining effects on players and deters non-compliance and defection (Stein 1990).

It can be sustained nonetheless that even in multi-play scenarios cheating may still arise and perhaps is more common the Institutionalists would have it. Game theory provides us with explananda for that defection may be the preferred approach for one player if there are no effective sanctions emitted by the other player for failure to cooperate (Axelrod 1984). Two main forms of cheating are pertinent to the present context. On the one hand, the first player may opt to ‘free-ride’ on the second player and thereby achieve more than its ‘fair’ share of the benefits of cooperation without full reciprocity with the second player. On the other hand, the first player may engage in an open contest in trying to prevail over the second player (i.e. ‘escalation’ or ‘game of Chicken’). In the game of Chicken the first player tries to face down the second player, which can only result in one of the two players relenting. However, it is worth noting that this type of a game is usually only entered into among rational actors when the first player is fairly certain that the second player will back down (Stein 1990). These concepts will help us sort out some of the ups and downs of the Italian-Libyan relationship in the post-Cold War era.

A final game theory concept which will help us elucidate on the current state of affairs in terms of the Italian-Libyan relationship against the backdrop of the EU context is the asymmetric duopoly concept captured by ‘oligopolistic’ strategies or ‘alliance formation’. In such a scenario of n-person games (three or more players) the first player manages to co-opt a second player into following its preferred strategy. By doing so the first player stands of achieve the greatest payoff from the cooperation, the second player achieves more modest payoffs, while the other players in the game are left with suboptimal payoffs (*ibid.*). The rationale for the second player to engage, in spite of not

being able to expect great returns from cooperation, is as a consequence of its perception that it will still be relatively better off accepting a lower payoff than no payoff at all if the cooperation was broken off.

We hold that the dogged Italian pursuit for stability in its relations with Libya over the past decades can be well explained by the use of the Liberal institutionalist accounts. Italy's many attempts of establishing cooperative bilateral frameworks with Libya in the past decades point to a profound Neoliberal belief according to which, as we have seen above, cooperation over time creates mutual benefits in terms of transparency and dependability in inter-state dealings by fomenting common rules, standards of behaviour and opening communications. The many bilateral Italian-Libyan agreements to kick-start cooperation over the decades support this perception. Rather than abandoning cooperation with Libya, thinking it to be too difficult given the many false starts, cooperation is reiteratively sought by Rome. The Italian expectation therefore appears to be that, once cooperation is launched, the disciplining feature of multi-plays will restrain Libya and produce the reliable cooperation partner Italy is looking for. The many and fairly frequent attempts to bilateral agreements over the course of almost six decades also indicate that Rome, rather than mistrusting Libya's good faith in terms of cooperation, has doubts as to whether it has found the 'right' cooperation formula with which to unleash the Liberal institutionalist methodology on Libya.

The concepts of free-rider and game of Chicken appear to go some way to help us understand Libya's reaction to the Italian attempts to cooperate. Libya seems over time to have gained considerable trust and/or confidence in Italy's will to cooperate, emboldening Tripoli to interpret the terms of the agreements rather laxly (free-riding) and/or even at times engaging in verbal stand-offs with Rome or Italy's European partners (with Italy as a hostage) on different issues (Chicken). The two countries different interpretations of their cooperative obligations and of their short- vs. long term gains from cooperation may therefore be the factors which most adequately explains the longstanding 'stable unpredictability' in Italian-Libyan relations.

Finally, the asymmetric duopoly which Italy and Libya forms – where often Tripoli seem to be able to impose its dominant strategy and Italy to yield to Libyan preferences – has greater repercussions beyond the bilateral condominium. Some of the Italian-Libyan bilateral dealings leave Italy's European partners unpleasantly surprised at times, as we will see below. Their expectations on Italy may not always see themselves fulfilled. This gives rise to a perception of Italy as a less reliant partner to the EU whenever Libya is involved.

## **The Italian quest for stability**

The relations between Italy and Libya have been complicated and tense for most of their history. The Italian occupation and colonial period between 1912 and 1943 is one of the most important factors which have conditioned the evolution of such relations and it continues to have a bearing on the bilateral relations even today.

After the second world war and Libyan independence, Italy immediately tried to secure its interests in the Maghreb country and prevent further Libyan requests for an investigation on the colonial period (and Italian responsibilities) by negotiating and eventually signing a bilateral cooperation agreement with King Idriss in 1956 (Lablanca 2010). The colonial ghost would, however, return to haunt relations as Colonel Qaddafi assumed power in 1969. One of the first acts of the new regime (1970) was the expulsion of 20,000 Italians settled in Libya and the confiscation of their assets as well as those of Italian companies operating in Libya<sup>vi</sup>. However, in spite of the tension Rome preferred to pursue an inclusive and conciliatory approach towards Libya (Mezran and De Maio 2007: 441). Such an approach was rewarded in that commercial ties resumed before long. In 1972 the Italian energy company ENI formed a joint venture with the Libyan government to exploit Libyan oil; and Italian exports to and investments in Libya soon returned to normalcy.

In 1984 Giulio Andreotti, then Italian minister for Foreign Affairs, and representatives from the Libyan government signed a new bilateral accord. The agreement committed Italy to the building of

a hospital in Libya and to train the local staff as a means to put the colonial years behind the two countries, while Libya promised to pay all the debts it had accumulated over the years with Italian companies in oil. The hopes for a lasting Italian-Libyan rapprochement were, however, to be dampened in 1985 after a terrorist attack at the Rome airport, in which the Libyans denied involvement but still praised. Moreover, in 1986, after several years of escalating tension between Washington and Tripoli, the US bombed two Libyan cities in retaliation for a Libyan terrorist attack against US servicemen stationed in Germany. The Libyan response to the US bombings was to launch two missiles which narrowly missed the Italian island of Lampedusa in 1986 (Coralluzzo 2008: 121; Ronzitti 2009). Italian-Libyan bilateral relations would also be complicated by the Libyan act perpetrated against the 1988 Pan Am flight over Lockerbie and 1989 UTA flight over Chad and Niger, causing the United Nations to impose sanctions on Libya in 1990.

Italy, however, did not share the international community's hard-line stance on Libya and dialogue between the two capitals continued. From 1996 onwards Italy would even intensify its diplomatic initiatives related to Libya. The Italian objective was to lift the circumscribing international embargo on Libya and integrate Libya into the international community. Subsequently, on 4 July 1998 the Italian Foreign Minister Lamberto Dini and his Libyan homologue Omar al-Mountasser signed a 'historic joint document' pledging cooperation and 'expressing Italian regret for the suffering experienced by the Libyan people under colonialism and fascism' (Coralluzzo, 2008: 121). Italy promised to offer funds to projects aimed to de-mine the Libyan desert and build a hospital for mine victims. Libyans on the other hand recognised the right of Italians expelled in 1970 to return. In the same declaration, a mixed Italian-Libyan company, owned by Italian and Libyan firms, was also planned – and then established on 30 May 1999 – to develop joint projects in Libya. Parts of the profit were to be transferred to a fund for the support of operations related to colonial victims and de-mining.

Meanwhile Libyan relations with the West were rapidly improving. In 1999 Libya agreed to render the Lockerbie suspects to a trial in the Netherlands. This diplomatic breakthrough followed years of negotiations with many international leaders involved, including Italian ones. Further rapprochements between Libya and the West came when Qaddafi condemned the 9/11 attacks as acts of terrorism and in 2003 announced its decision to abandon its weapons of mass destruction programme. Finally, complete normalisation was achieved when Tripoli agreed to pay compensation to the families of the victims of the 1988 and 1989 bombings. The UN Security Council therefore voted to lift the sanctions in 2003. Along similar lines, the EU began to make overtures with Tripoli already in 1999, when it offered Libya the possibility of becoming a member of the Barcelona Process. This invitation was, however, declined by Libya<sup>vii</sup>. Tripoli favours bilateral relations with individual European member states over multilateral EU arrangements (Aliboni 2003), in order not to be conditioned by the Union's policies in terms of democracy and human rights. Moreover, it is fair to say that Libya's preference for pursuing bilateral relations with many EU member states enables it to exert greater leverage over the agenda and content of such dialogues. In 2004 the Libyan leader visited the European institutions in Brussels on his first trip to Europe since 1989. This meeting paved the way for an understanding that the basis for a bilateral – as opposed to a multilateral – agreement between EU and Libya could be examined<sup>viii</sup>.

As a result of these events, Dini flew to Tripoli the day after the United Nations suspended the sanctions on Libya (April 1999) and a few months later (December 1999) Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema met with Qaddafi in Tripoli as the first head of a Western government to visit Libya in eight years<sup>ix</sup>. The meetings raised a lot of expectations. Metaphors of Libya becoming Italy's and Europe's bridge to Africa, and Italy becoming Libya's door to Europe became staples of Italian and international press at the time (*The New York Times*, 2 December 1999).

The pursuit of stabilisation in Italian-Libyan relations would continue in 2001 with the then incoming centre-right Berlusconi government. In the following years, ministers of Berlusconi's government (Ruggiero, Frattini, Pisanu) repeatedly met with Qaddafi and their Libyan counterparts; Berlusconi alone flew to Libya even two-three times per year, and several minor agreements on migration were concluded and negotiations for the 2008 Treaty of Benghazi began during these

years. In a very strong show of good will toward Tripoli, the Berlusconi government would also use the Italian EU Presidency in 2004 as a platform to press hard for the lifting of the Union's arms embargo against Libya (*BBC News* 2004). The Prodi government of 2006-2008 continued the negotiations on the Italian-Libyan agreement initiated under Berlusconi's mandate and managed to sign a limited cooperation agreement on migration in 2007. Finally, the normalisation and stabilisation of the Italian-Libyan relations appeared to reach new heights in August 2008, when Berlusconi and Qaddafi signed the Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation<sup>x</sup>. The Treaty of Benghazi, once and for all, tries to settle the long-standing controversy over the compensations owed to Libya as a consequence of the Italian occupation and colonial era. Italy pledged to pay annually \$250 million for 20 years. Other initiatives include the construction of 200 houses, the provision of several scholarships, the rehabilitation of victims of mine explosions and the return of archaeological pieces. In return, Libya commits itself to an extension of the concession to energy company ENI, grant visas to the 1970 exiles and help Italy to control the flows of undocumented migration. No mention was, however, made of the longstanding issues of the repayment of the sums due to Italian companies.

This succession of high-level initiatives can be seen as the high point of the strategy so tenaciously pursued by successive Italian governments, which considered 'the transformation of Libya into a "normal country" and a "privileged partner" to be a decisive step towards the stabilisation of the Maghreb and thus the central Mediterranean' (Coralluzzo 2008: 122).

## **Assessing continuity and change in Italian foreign policy towards Libya**

As shown in the previous section, both centre-right and centre-left governments attempted to stabilise relations with Libya, searching and striking deals with Qaddafi. In the post-cold war period relations were complicated by the international embargo against Libya, but both centre-right and centre-left would work on a dual approach to improve relations. The initial rapprochement occurred under Prodi's and D'Alema's governments (the 1998 Dini-Mountasser communication), and continued under the centre-right administrations. Both coalitions would both lobby the international community for a repeal of the embargo and try to establish a new working Italian-Libyan bilateral agreement with Tripoli. In this section we will analyse more in detail the behaviour of right- and left-wing governments towards Libya to evaluate whether they displayed convergence or divergence of approaches.

The centre-left governments considered Libya as one of their foreign policy priorities, as Romano Prodi admitted in 2006 (*La Repubblica*, 9 August 2006). Moreover, when Prodi was President of the European Commission he strongly advocated a normalisation of the relations between the EU and Libya; the first contacts to bring Qaddafi to Brussels date back to the last months of 1999, and early 2000, but this encountered the opposition of a few member states (including Germany). Finally, the meeting was arranged and Qaddafi's first diplomatic visit outside Africa and Middle East in 15 years has been, significantly, to Brussels and the European Commission – where Prodi acted as a host. An inclusive policy towards Libya, a continuous dialogue with a former "rogue state", are indeed characteristics of a centre-left (and D'Alema's) approach to international politics (Chelotti 2008: 175-8): to obtain stable relations and peace prospects, "it is quite evident that ... including these countries [i.e., Iran, Libya, Syria etc.] results necessary", because "they must be invited to be part of the search for the solution instead of being part of the problem"<sup>xi</sup>.

On their side, the centre-right government between 2001 and 2006 tried to continue a policy of stabilisation with Libya. However, they would encounter some problems. Adopting a more Atlanticist foreign policy, and supporting US policy initiatives and positions in the Middle East and in the Mediterranean area, Berlusconi's foreign policy pursued less conciliatory strategies towards "troubled states". Emblematic is the case of Iran, where Berlusconi's government decided not to take part in the group that negotiated over the Iranian nuclear programme, in accordance to US

orientations – despite the explicit Iranian invitation to organize a negotiation table during the second semester of 2003, when Italy held the presidency of the EU (Coralluzzo 2006). Saif el-Islam Qaddafi, son of the Libyan leader and relevant figure within the Libyan political establishment, criticised the Italian government for its pro-Israeli positions and warned about possible Libyan, and Arab, resentments (*La Repubblica*, 19 January 2003). Reconciling with Qaddafi's regime could also be problematic for the centre-right coalition for another reason<sup>xii</sup>. In the aftermath of 9/11 resentment feelings towards the Islamic world were surely not uncommon in parts of the centre-right coalition, especially some politicians of *Legha Nord*. And a serious diplomatic incident indeed happened in February 2006 when an Italian minister, Roberto Calderoli, wore a T-shirt deemed to be Anti-Islamic and the Italian consulate of Benghazi was assaulted by about 1,000 demonstrators. Nevertheless, the search for stability was the main driving factor of Berlusconi's foreign policy towards Libya, which pushed his government to find in any case a solution, a rapprochement with Qaddafi's Libyan regime. In the cases of Calderoli, the Italian government had to step back: in few days the Italian minister was forced to resign. And when in 2008 Libyan authorities protested again for Calderoli's appointment as a new minister in the fourth Berlusconi's government, the diplomatic incident was closed very soon: Calderoli was required to offer again his public apologies.

Over the years<sup>xiii</sup> the relations between Libya and centre-right slowly gained strength, and flourished during the fourth Berlusconi's government, in correspondence also to the changed international situation, and a more multilateral and US foreign policy (Brighi 2007). In 2008 all the previous arrangements and efforts to stabilise and normalise the relations between the two countries reached their apex with the Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation, signed by Berlusconi and Qaddafi. Qaddafi flew to Rome one year later, in June 2009, where, among other events, he delivered a speech in the Senate of the Republic – although it was decided, in the face of a threatened opposition boycott, to move the venue from the main chamber to the lesser Sala Zuccari. He was also invited by Berlusconi to the 2009 L'Aquila G8 summit, under Italian presidency, as Chairman of the African Union.

However, even these two decisions were hardly controversial. The Treaty of Benghazi had been prepared during the previous months by the centre-left governments (Ronzitti 2009): in more than one occasion D'Alema had presented to Qaddafi and Shalgam, Libyan minister for Foreign Affairs, a draft treaty of "friendship and cooperation" (*Corriere della Sera* 10 April 2007; *La Repubblica*, 30 October 2007). In November it was reported that the final details of that treaty were being negotiated (*La Repubblica*, 11 November 2007). As to Qaddafi's visit to Italy, it was proposed by D'Alema already in the late 1999-early 2000.

Both centre-right and centre-left governments have in other words sought good relations with Qaddafi's Libya, and taken many diplomatic initiatives in that sense. Both coalitions strongly favoured the more general Libyan rapprochement with the West. There has thus been a large continuity in the diplomatic initiatives of the Italian governments towards Libya in the last two decades. We argue that this continuity is due to Italy's relatively clear foreign policy preferences, which have to be pursued regardless the political colour of the coalition in power, in particular on three specific issues. First, security issues still play an important part. Libya is a neighbouring country, and the distance between Tripoli and Rome is only 990 km. In 1986 Libya launched two Scud missiles at the island of Lampedusa, and that tract of sea experienced troubled relations and events. Having a stable, "tamed" and nuclear-free Libyan regime in Italy's interest. Second, Italy is Libya's main economic partner. In particular, Italy is highly dependent on energy imports. The necessity for strong and stable relations between the two countries is that "we cannot forget – Silvio Berlusconi said during one of his visits to Qaddafi – that we import 25% of our energy demand from Libya" (*Corriere della Sera*, 29 October 2002). Libya ranks first and third, respectively, among Italy's suppliers of oil and natural gas, today providing about the 30% and 13% respectively of Italian imports in these sectors. In October 2004 the Greenstream pipeline – a natural gas submarine pipeline from Libya to Italy with a capacity of 8, later increased to 11, billion cubic meters of natural gas per year – was inaugurated by Qaddafi and Berlusconi. In October 2007 ENI

managed to extend its contract until 2042 for oil and 2047 for gas. The economic ties are strong even in other sectors: Ansaldo (Finmeccanica Group) won in 2009 an important order worth 541 million Euro – the biggest in this company's history – for rail signalling, telecommunications and power supply systems for the coastal line. Over the years Libya has invested large amount of capitals in Italian companies, such as Capitalia, Fiat, Eni, Unicredit, Juventus, etc. Libya is interested also in creating new modern industrial districts, based in particular on small and medium sized companies. Contacts with the Italian political and economic establishment to learn more on the Italian industrial system have been developed (Ronzitti 2009). Third, good relations with a stable and 'friendly' Libya are essential to control the migration waves coming from the southern shores of the Mediterranean. Security issues are multi-dimensional, and scholars have been warning about possible risks from the South since the mid-80s (Santoro 1988). In this respect, Libya has been accused of being a "funnel" for illegal immigrants from Africa. Not surprisingly, as Berlusconi succinctly summarised, Italo-Libyan agreements, including the Treaty of Benghazi, can be described as "fewer immigrants and more oil" (in Carbone, Coralluzzo 2009: 433).

Moreover, there is a further element that contributes to explain the substantial continuity in Italian foreign policy towards Libya. Officials working in the departments of the Italian Foreign Ministry are said to play a (relatively) independent role in the formulation and implementation of the national foreign policy and to greatly contribute to assure a high degree of continuity both during and after the Cold War (Croci 2007; Chelotti and Pizzimenti forthcoming). In particular, its departments and civil servants have traditionally shown a large interest to build stable and good relations with the Arab counter-parts in the Mediterranean area. Indeed "there is an entrenched pro-Arab thrust in the [Italian] Foreign Ministry that continues to operate independently, without waiting for government input" (Romano 2006: 106).

As a result, it comes with no surprise that the Libya issue has hardly been controversial in Italian parliamentary debates since the 1990s. In the few instances where this issue was discussed in the parliament, a bi-partisan consensus emerged. If most of the agreements between the two countries were rarely discussed in the Parliament, the treaty of Benghazi was ratified by the Parliament in February 2009. And the two main Italian political parties, *Popolo della Libertà* (Pdl) e *Partito Democratico* (Pd), both voted largely in favour of it<sup>xiv</sup>.

We have shown a considerable amount of continuity in the diplomatic and political initiatives of both centre-right and centre-left coalitions and parties. Nevertheless, there are some minor differences in the respective approaches to Libya. The criticisms, and the differences in policy, are essentially two. First, there were normal, tactical criticisms, linked to a normal dialectic between majority and opposition. For instance, if D'Alema was largely in favour of the Treaty of Benghazi, he nevertheless criticised the compensations, judged as "too onerous" (*Corriere della Sera*, 4 September 2008). The harder stance the Pd was able to assume about some of Qaddafi's declarations or political moves (for example, when he likened the 1986 US strikes on Libya to Al Qaida's terrorist attacks during Qaddafi's visit in Rome; or the warm welcome the only man convicted in the bombing of 1988 Pan Am Flight received when he returned home to Libya, just before Berlusconi's flight to Tripoli) was due, to a good extent, to the different institutional role of Pd politicians. Second, criticisms were directed to some excesses of Berlusconi's individualistic diplomacy (Brighi 2006). Qaddafi's trip to Italy was condemned by part of the opposition (Pd) largely on the basis of its ostentation and colourful features<sup>xv</sup>. In this vein, a more sober approach would have probably considered the decision to invite him to address the Senate as inappropriate; likewise, the decision to send the air force aerobatics team (*Frecce Tricolori*) to Libya to join the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations marking Qaddafi's military coup was considered a sign of excessive deference and subservience to the Libyan leader.

Finally, a little more complex appears the question of human rights. Radicals (and more recently Idv) were constant and coherent over the years in criticising Libya's poor record, as to begin a hunger strike and to declare Qaddafi's invitation to the Senate as a "madness" (*New York Times*, 11 June 2009). Furthermore, conditions in Libyan detention centres and the treatments of immigrants have been described several times by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Amnesty



International and even Sisd (the domestic intelligence service of Italy), as “terrible” and “inhuman” (Balfour 2005; *La Repubblica*, 3 February 2006). Parts of the centre-left 2006-2008 government criticised indeed the violation of human rights and the management of detention camps in Libya, and some of them even argued that Italy would not expel any more those illegal immigrants to those countries that did not ratify the 1951 Geneva Convention, including Libya. However, these declarations were soon denied by Italian minister for Internal Affairs, Giuliano Amato, who described the collaboration with Libya in this sector as “very good”<sup>xvi</sup>. More recently, centre-left politicians did not criticise the overall agreements with Libya in the immigration field, as some of them were reached by left-wing governments; rather, it was a specific part of them – the question of the asylum seekers and refugees – that was put under scrutiny and condemnation (*Corriere della Sera*, 31 August 2009).

## **Italian-Libyan relations: between stability and unpredictability**

Italy has sought stability and predictability in relations with Libya since the 1970s. In having failed in anchoring Libya inside a multilateral European framework, it has resorted to different bilateral arrangements aimed to stabilise relations. Rome seems almost to have engaged in an unrelenting quest to find that ‘perfect’ bilateral agreement with Libya which would allow Italian-Libyan relations to enter into a mutually beneficial and disciplining Neoliberal-style cooperation. However, the result has been rather mixed, both for Italian-Libyan relations, as well as Italian relations with its European partners.

In terms of strictly Italian-Libya relations, Libyan reactions to the Italian diplomacy have been quite ambiguous. Qaddafi has repeatedly named both Italian centre-left and centre-right politicians as his ‘friends’ (*La Stampa*, 16 December 2004). At the occasion of the signing of the Treaty of Benghazi, the Colonel paid tribute to both his ‘friend Berlusconi’ and ‘those daring men that signed the joint declaration in July 1998, such as Dini, Prodi and D’Alema’ (*La Repubblica*, 1 September 2008). Moreover, in the preamble of the Treaty of Benghazi, Tripoli explicitly recognises the Italian diplomacy’s contribution to the eventual decision to lift the 1990 international embargo against Libya. This is a tribute both to countless Italian politicians’ and diplomats’ relentless pursuit to try to convince their reticent international homologues in favour of the highly unpopular initiative at the time to lift the sanctions (*La Repubblica*, 31 December 1994), as well as to Romano Prodi’s advocacy for normalisation of the relations between the EU and Libya during his stint as the President of the European Commission and to the Berlusconi 2003 EU Presidency. Officials of the Libyan Embassy in Rome have therefore unabashedly praised politicians such as Berlusconi, Prodi, D’Alema, Letta ‘who in these years have worked hard’ to build stronger ties between Italy and Libya (*La Repubblica*, 27 January 2009).

These professions of good will notwithstanding, the unpredictability or turbulence in Italian-Libyan relations still continues. First, the colonial legacy is one aspect which continues to impinge negatively on bilateral relations. Numerous incidents attest to this. In 2004, for example, Colonel Gaddafi pledged that the national commemorations held on the 7th of October each year since 1970 would be changed from the ‘day of vengeance against the Italians’ to a ‘day of friendship with the Italian people’<sup>xvii</sup>. However, one year later, in direct reaction to the Cartoon Crisis, the Libya leader reversed his decision, celebrating again the ‘day of vengeance’ and vehemently denounced the crimes committed by Italy during its occupation of the country<sup>xviii</sup>. In 2009, Qaddafi’s arrived to Rome for his official state visit to Italy with a photograph of the Libyan colonial resistance leader Omar Mukhtar pinned to his jacket. In 2010 Qaddafi’s discourse during the 2010 Arab League summit held in Sirte (Libya) – to which Berlusconi was an invited special guest – dwelled considerably on the atrocities committed during the Italian colonial era. On the Italians side several topics related to the colonial era have also yet to be resolved. In 1998 the Italo-Libyan agreement was judged “shameful” by one of the members of *Alleanza Nazionale*, because it “overturns the historical events, affirming that the colonisation harmed Libya” (Mirko Tremaglia, *La Repubblica*,

10 July 1998)<sup>xix</sup>. Although the Italian-Libyan bilateral agreements have frequently mentioned the rights of those Italians expelled from Libya in 1970, only a trickle have so far been granted the right to visit Libya and talks of compensation for property nationalised have lagged behind: the Italian Association of the exiles from Libya has often criticised the state of Italian-Libyan relations and the Italian government for the lack of support and funds (*La Stampa*, 12 October 2005; *La Repubblica*, 14 May 2009; *La Stampa*, 14 June 2009).

Beyond the colonial legacy, there are two other areas in which Italy would like to see increased stability in relations, but also here the record is mixed. Facing an increasing immigration flows since the early 2000s, different Italian governments have attempted to control such fluxes by different means. Libya has become important in Italian immigration control strategies for its condition as a major transit point for undocumented immigrations to Southern Europe, and Italy in particular. In September 2002 a High Level Italian Libyan Security Committee was created to address the issue (Balfour 2005: 128). A first immigration cooperation agreement was concluded in July 2003 and then, modified, it came into effect one year later. Cooperation between Italy and Libya was strengthened in the intelligence service; Italy provided training for Libyan police officers and equipments (guard ships, jeeps, helicopters) for border patrol; and financed the construction of detention camps on the Libyan soil. The agreements reached in the area of migration in 2003 and in 2004 proved to be little effective, nevertheless. A few months after they were signed Italian policy-makers were complaining that Libya was not complying with the rules, and were often blaming Libyan authorities for this (*La Repubblica*, 16 October 2003; *La Stampa*, 27 July 2004). “Qaddafi is the puppeteer”, the leader of the Northern League, Umberto Bossi, lamented (*La Stampa*, 24 October 2003). This state of affairs led to renewed contacts between officials and ministers, which led to the signing of two new protocols on 29 December 2007 between Giuliano Amato, Italian minister of Internal Affairs and Abdurrahman Mohamed Shalgam, Libyan minister for Foreign Affairs. It was now possible to set up joint patrolling squads, which could operate near the Libyan coast. Six Italian naval units had to be temporarily transferred to Libya. Italian officers were put in charge of the Libyan personnel’s training and the maintenance of the means. The 2008 Treaty of Benghazi incorporated these commitments, but cooperation has still not improved. In December 2008, just months after the signing of the Italian-Libyan Treaty, then Foreign Minister Franco Frattini noted that “[w]e [the EU] now need to negotiate a European agreement with Libya, because an agreement with Italy is no longer enough” in terms of controlling the flows of undocumented immigration<sup>xx</sup>. Roberto Maroni, Internal Affairs Minister, has more than once accused Libya of deliberately tolerating the traffic of illegal immigrants (*La Repubblica*, 28 December 2008; *Corriere della Sera*, 1 April 2009) and hence, in essence, free-riding on the Italian-Libya agreements.

Again, in occasion of the August 2010 visit to Italy, Qaddafi – allegedly backed by Italy – declared that the European Union should give Libya at least 5 billion Euro to stop illegal migrations from Africa. This request came after that Italy and Libya reached several agreements on migration over the last decade – which provided Libya with patrol ships and money and seemed to be the final word on that issue. Qaddafi’s gables thus seem to continue.

Italian-Libyan ties in terms of energy have perhaps been the area which has lent itself to greatest degree of pragmatism between the two countries. However, not even this area of recognised mutual benefit for both countries is exempt from unpredictability. In 2009 Qaddafi pronounced that he was becoming favourably disposed toward the idea of re-nationalising the country’s oil and gas interests similarly to what had been done in the early days of the post-1969 regime. The Colonel’s words would trigger the Libyan National Oil Corporation to begin rounds of examining the long-term contracts signed with major oil companies operating in the country such as, for example, Italy’s ENI<sup>xxi</sup>. Such examinations do not seem to have gone much further, but they illustrate the rather precarious situation in which foreign companies find themselves in Libya. The Colonel’s ideas on re-nationalisation in 2009 were, however, not new. They are reminiscent of other occasions when he has advocated similar measures and illustrate Tripoli’s reiterated use of the game of Chicken to exact concessions from energy companies or their respective national governments.

Finally, it should be noted that the dogged Italian pursuit of stability in Italian-Libyan relations

are also affecting Italy's relations with its European partners and creating some turbulence and unpredictability there. Two recent examples illustrate this situation. First, subsequent Italian-Libyan agreements since early 2000s contain provisions on joint cooperation on undocumented migration. These provisions were not acknowledged by international attention at first, given the Libyan unwillingness for long to collaborate. However, controversy has been spawned as Libya, in the wake of the 2008 Treaty has begun to cooperate on naval patrol and as Italy has begun to provide Libya with surveillance technology and helicopters, reportedly as a ways of impede undocumented immigration (*Australia Business and World News*, 2010). Since 2008 Italian hosted EU-FRONTEX missions patrolling in Libyan waters have escorted numerous boatloads of would-be immigrants back to Libya (i.e. the nearest port)<sup>xxii</sup>. The European Parliament and human rights organisations have been outraged given that the immigrants had not been screened for whether they were asylum seekers or not<sup>xxiii</sup>. Moreover, in June 2009 FRONTEX intercepted a boat carrying an estimated 75 migrants off the Italian coast and deployed a German Puma helicopter to force the migrants back to Libya. Such show of force against immigrants is controversial for many member states, especially when carried out in the name of the EU-27. The new, as of 2010, EU Commissioner of Home Affairs, Cecilia Malmström, has voiced the opinion that 'of course, these people [the migrants] are not criminals, they are in the search for a better life and they have the right to be treated in a dignified way' (*EUObserver* 2010b). This state of affairs has made the President of the Socialist party in the European Parliament, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, to state that 'Italy is breaching international law and quite possibly EU policy' (Party of the European Socialists, 2009). Nyrup Rasmussen was also very critical of both the European Commission and the Council of the EU for not speaking out more forcefully against the Italian immigration practices, arguing that '[a]t the very least the European Commission should announce an investigation into whether the Italy-Libya bilateral agreement, and Italy's actions in returning migrants at sea, is consistent with EU policy' (*ibid.*). In 2010 FRONTEX changed its norms and required the EU member state hosting the FRONTEX mission to take the rescued immigrants to that country for checking whether or not some of them would be entitled to the status of refugee<sup>xxiv</sup>. However, it has not become clear how rigorous the Italian authorities have become in order to comply with such directives. In early March 2010 the Italian Minister for the Interior, Roberto Maroni, defended the Italian policy by saying that the return of undocumented immigrants to Libya has always complied fully with national and international law and that no immigrant has been denied the possibility to apply for asylum (*ASCA* 2010). Nevertheless, human rights watch-groups continue to be concerned.

Second, in February 2010 Switzerland placed 180 Libyan officials, including Qaddafi and many of his family members, on a Schengen 'black list', preventing them from obtaining the necessary visa to enter the territory of all the 25 countries that take part in the system. Libya, in retaliation, shortly thereafter suspended all visa issued to visitors to Libya from Schengen countries<sup>xxv</sup>. Italy, one of the countries affected by the Swiss-Libyan imbroglio, quickly assumed a leading and quite strident role in calling upon Switzerland to withdraw its measures. After a February 2010 trilateral meeting in Rome between Foreign Minister Frattini, and Malta's Deputy Prime Minister and Libya's Foreign Minister Koussa, Frattini would state in a press conference that he considered that the Swiss measures were "abusive", in that they were holding the 25 member Schengen zone "hostage", and that the Alpine country could have avoided the current troubles. The European Union as a whole did, however, not share the Italian stance and simply and neutrally called on Switzerland and Libya to resolve the crisis as soon as possible. However, eventually the Spanish EU Presidency, in the form of Miguel Ángel Moratinos, was drafted, seconded at times by Frattini and others, to mediate between Switzerland and Libya. Controversy in some corners of Europe arose when the EU had to issue an apology to Libya for the inconvenience that the Swiss action had imposed on the Libyan people<sup>xxvi</sup>. Moreover, the Italian and Maltese proposals to circumvent the Schengen area to benefit their bilateral relations with Libya were also not seen as very palatable in the context. Such proposals were interpreted as giving greater value to Libyan relations over the European integration embodied in Schengen<sup>xxvii</sup>. The Italian outplays against neighbouring Switzerland can, in part, be explained by the fact that during the course of the dispute Tripoli

intimated the threat that '[Europe] should also think of these interests and investments in energy because good relations with Libya would help European companies run their businesses in Libya easily' (*SwissInfo* 2010)<sup>xxviii</sup>.

The asymmetric Italian-Libyan duopoly thus creates tensions with Italy's European partners – and with neighbouring Switzerland – in relation to different issues. This in turn may (?) give rise to a perception among Italy's EU partners of Italy being a less stable and dependable interlocutor whenever Libya is involved. Such exceptions can (?) be tolerated by Italy's EU partners, if they are infrequent and do not jeopardize the reputation of the Union or the integration achievements of the European construction (e.g. Schengen). However, Rome will need to pace itself in order not to have to deal with unpredictability in both Italian-Libyan and Italian-EU relations in the future.

## Conclusion

This paper has analysed the relationship between Italy and Libya, paying particular attention to the last fifteen years. Italy has since Libya's independence sought to build stable relations with the Maghreb country: Italian governments of all shades showed a high level of continuity in their relations with Libya. Security and migration issues, economic and energetic interests, attest Libya's continued importance to Italy. When the interests at stake are so clear and relevant, the space for different governments even to interpret them is limited. Libya is a great strategic partner for Italy, as D'Alema still underlined in 2009 (*Corriere della Sera*, 15 May 2009). The domestic consensus on how to deal with Libya is thus strong: an effective working relationship with Tripoli is what Italy aspires to reach

At the same time, we have shown that stability has not always been ensued. Many bilateral cooperation agreements have been signed, but they have not managed to overcome the uncertainties that characterise the links between Rome and Tripoli. Also the 2008 Benghazi Treaty did not produce lasting results, and the illegal migration remains a hot issue between the two countries and a powerful weapon that Libya continues to use. Qaddafi took advantages in several cases of the vulnerability Italy has in some sectors (energy, migration) and did not fully respect Libyan word or scattered seeds of tension between the two countries. In other words, Italian-Libyan relations continue to be characterised, to some extent, by unpredictability.

This unpredictability has been probably slightly tamed over the years: all the bilateral agreements that have been reached have in a certain way forced Libya authorities to collaborate, to learn how to collaborate and to place (limited) trust in their Italian counterparts. The rapprochement of Libya with the West, and the (partial) opening and talks with the EU, may have helped to strengthen these trends.

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<sup>iii</sup> Aliboni (1999: 2) concurs with this assessment, stating that the Barcelona Process has 'provided Italy with a multilateral framework in which it can conduct a Mediterranean policy more significantly than that which it could otherwise carry out bilaterally or even in cooperation with the other Southern European nations'.

<sup>iv</sup> To avoid confusion in the present context we use the term "arrangements" where a Liberal institutionalist would say "institutions". While "arrangement" here subscribes to the Neoliberal version of "institutions" (i.e. structures and mechanisms of social order and cooperation governing the behavior of a set of individuals within a given human collectivity, which essentially denote anything from a formal institutional setting, to a regime or a bilateral agreement), we would not like to give the reader the impression that Italian-Libyan bilateral agreements have given rise to specific institutions to manage relations.

<sup>v</sup> Realists, in contrast, see international anarchy as fostering competition and conflict among states and therefore inhibits the willingness to cooperate under most circumstances (Grieco 1988).

<sup>vi</sup> Moreover, in 1973 there was a terrorist attack perpetrated by a radical Palestinian Group at the Rome Airport, which although not aimed at Italians, killed and injured several. The attacks were presumably financed by Libyan money.

<sup>vii</sup> Although Libya attends Barcelona Process, now UfM, meetings as an observer and special guest of the EU Presidency.

<sup>viii</sup> Such consultations began in 2008.

<sup>ix</sup> Not surprisingly, the last major foreign leader to visit Colonel Qaddafi was Giulio Andreotti, then Italian Prime Minister, in 1991.

<sup>x</sup> The Treaty was then ratified by Italy on 3 February 2009 and by Libya on 1 March 2009.

<sup>xi</sup> Audition of the minister of Foreign Affairs, D'Alema, at the Joint Commissions for Foreign and Communitarian affairs (Chamber of Deputies) and for Foreign affairs and Immigration (Senate of the Republic), 31 July 2006.

<sup>xii</sup> Another obstacle would be the constant Libyan request of a thorough and unequivocal condemnation of the Italian colonialist past. An important party within the centre-right coalition, *Alleanza Nazionale*, had an overt nationalist stance: the 1998 Italo-Libyan agreement was judged "shameful" by one of its member, because it "overturns the historical events, affirming that the colonisation harmed Libya" (*La Repubblica*, 10 July 1998). However, the nationalistic rhetoric of the centre-right coalition considerably watered down over the years, and a decade later Berlusconi had no problem in "expressing our [i.e., Italian] sorrow for the deep wounds we have caused you and your families many years ago" at the signing ceremony of the Treaty of Benghazi (Carbobe, Coralluzzo 2009: 433).

<sup>xiii</sup> Already in 1994 Qaddafi had welcomed the rise of Berlusconi very positively, affirming that "we are born to understand each other" (*La Stampa*, 2 June 1994). Few months later, the minister for Foreign Affairs, Antonio Martino, alone among his foreign counterparts in a very unpopular battle at that time, was strongly advocating the lifting of sanctions against Libya, because they were destabilising the Mediterranean area and were little effective (*La Repubblica*, 31 December 1994).

<sup>xiv</sup> In the Chamber of Deputies, 413 members of Parliaments (MPs) voted in favour; only 63 (9 from Pd, 2 from Pdl) expressed their negative vote, and 37 abstained. In the Senate, the numbers are the following: out of 266 votes, 232

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voted in favour, 22 against (6 from Pd, including former EU commissioner, Emma Bonino) and 12 abstained. Above all, only two minor parties opposed the ratification of the Treaty: the centrist catholic party, Udc, and the centrist (but left-leaning) and anti-corruption party, Idv. Furthermore, most of MPs from Pd who voted against the ratification of the treaty came from those groups of Radicals that have been elected, under an agreement between the two parties, in list with the Pd.

<sup>xv</sup> See, for instance: the archive photograph provocatively attached to the lapel of Qaddafi's military uniform showing the arrest of an anti-Italy guerrilla fighter and national hero, Omar al-Mukhtar; Qaddafi's demand to meet with 700 Italian women from the worlds of politics, industry, and culture; his bizarre requests for the organisation of his Beduin tent etc. New criticism and ostentation would repeat in the August 2010 Qaddafi's visit to Italy: the Libyan leader made a speech before 500 girls paid to listen to him, where he invited Europe to embrace Islam.

<sup>xvi</sup> The two politicians were: the minister for Social solidarity, Paolo Ferrero, and the undersecretary of the ministry of Internal Affairs with the delegation to migration, Marcella Lucidi (*La Repubblica*, 25 May 2006).

<sup>xvii</sup> On the 7th of October 1970 all the Italians resident in Libya were expelled.

<sup>xviii</sup> The Cartoon Crisis is....

<sup>xix</sup> However, the nationalistic rhetoric of the centre-right coalition considerably watered down over the years, and Berlusconi had no problem in "expressing our [i.e., Italian] sorrow for the deep wounds we have caused you and your families many years ago" (Carbone, Coralluzzo 2009: 433).

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[http://www.libyaninvestment.com/2009/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=14616&catid=42:libya-news&Itemid=168](http://www.libyaninvestment.com/2009/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=14616&catid=42:libya-news&Itemid=168)

<sup>xxi</sup> <http://oilprice.com/Finance/the-markets/Libya-Courting-Oil-Gas-Investors-but-Faces-a-Tough-Sell-Following-Recent-Government-Fiascos.html>

<sup>xxii</sup> In this context, it should be noted that Libya has never signed the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention and has been accused of abuses on immigrants returned by European countries.

<sup>xxiii</sup> This dubious repatriation policy – which was meant to reassure the anti-immigration Northern League – has been criticized by opposition parties, as well as the Catholic Church, the Council of Europe and the UN High Commission for Refugee (Carbone and Coralluzzo 2009: 434).

<sup>xxiv</sup> This change has motivated Malta to no longer take part of FRONTEX missions.

<sup>xxv</sup> The Schengen area is composed of the member states of the EU (except for Ireland, Great Britain, Romania, Bulgaria and Cyprus) and Iceland, Norway and Switzerland.

<sup>xxvi</sup> <http://www.earthtimes.org/articles/show/311325.italy-attacks-switzerland-on-libya-eu-avoids-criticism--summary.html#ixzz0ijBs3wEp>

<sup>xxvii</sup> <http://www.libyaonline.com/news/details.php?id=12729>

<sup>xxviii</sup> Adding to this notion of feeling under threat, Italian Minister of Interior Roberto Maroni noted in February 2010 that if the row was not solved 'there is a risk that Libya slows down its crackdown on illegal immigration' (*EUObserver* 2010a).