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Crumbling Middlepowerness? Italy's Relations with Russia amidst the Russo-Ukrainian War and Geopolitical Tensions

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Abstract

From the 1960s until the 2010s, Italy pursued closer ties with non-Western powers, including the Soviet Union/Russia, while remaining firmly aligned with the West. This balancing act was an important feature of its desired 'middle power' status. However, Italy's decreasing relative power and geopolitical competition have curtailed the already limited scope of international partnerships outside the West. This article challenges the argument that post-2022 Italian foreign policy is solely a tale of continuity. By zooming into Italy's deteriorating relations with Russia, it argues that Rome abandoned an important aspect of its middlepowerness. This was part of a broader foreign policy line that – due to US pressure, Italy's declining global influence, and decisions made by the country's political leadership – led Italy to take a fully subordinate role to US foreign policy and diplomacy. In order to be considered a middle power, Italy would need to retain a degree of autonomy from the great power with which it is allied. Its inability to do this casts doubts on its presumed middlepowerness. Furthermore, Trump's revision of US foreign policy in 2025 has posed a major challenge to Italy's stance on Russia and the Russo-Ukrainian war, and revealed the fallacies of full subordination to Washington.

1. Introduction

Italian foreign policy has been confronted by a double set of challenges since the early 2000s, which have become more severe over time. Firstly, the domestic foundations for an influential Italian external action have been weakening. Italy's relative economic weight has declined sharply: while it was the fifth largest economy in 1993, it had fallen to eighth place by 2010 and to tenth place in 2022, accounting for only 2 percent of global GDP.[1] The Italian economy has been stagnant or in recession for over two decades, facing slumps after both the 2008 financial crisis and the Covid pandemic in 2020. These downturns were followed by very modest and short recovery periods. The weak economic performance was compounded by domestic political instability, demographic decline, an aging population and the structural problems of the Italian economic and governance systems. The Russo-Ukrainian war and the energy crisis of 2022 were

[1] Italy was overtaken especially by non-Western countries, notably China, India and Russia, with Brazil now just behind in eleventh place. If GDP at purchasing power parity is considered, Italy was in twelfth place in 2022, behind Brazil, Indonesia and Turkey as well: see https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/country/by-country/startyear/ltst/endyear/ltst/indicator/NY-GDP-MKTP-CD.

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further external shocks that contributed to keeping the economy stagnant, despite the large inflow of post-Covid EU funds (Il Sole 24 Ore 2024). This lacklustre economic performance further weakened Italy's international soft power, already limited by an inability to propound Italian political perspectives or societal and cultural models (Romero 2016). Indicative in this context is the absence of English-language, worldwide media and communication channels comparable to the BBC, CNN, France24, or Al-Jazeera.

Secondly, in the 2010s new foreign policy challenges emerged in Italy's neighbourhood and key areas of interest, further straining the country's ability to design and implement influential external action. The Arab Spring protests in 2010-2011 led to the collapse of several North African regimes on which Italy (and the EU) had relied to expand economic ties and curb migration. The ensuing instability in the region, most notably following the civil war in Libya, created new security challenges. These challenges were exacerbated by the refugee crisis of 2014-2015, when Italy and Greece were the main countries of 'first arrival' for refugees in the EU. Simultaneously, Italy faced the progressive unravelling of its partnership with Russia, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in the Donbass region. From an economic perspective, this led to a reduction in bilateral trade and investments, even if energy trade continued to flourish. Politically, the crisis between Russia and the West made redundant Italy's earlier diplomatic efforts to bring Moscow closer to the Euro-Atlantic fold (especially in the 2000s, Italy strongly supported the creation of the NATO-Russia Council; see Siddi 2019). Germany and France led negotiations between Russia and Ukraine in the Normandy format (Alcaro and Siddi 2021), while Italy increasingly found itself cornered within the EU and NATO due to its domestic weakness and the structural changes in both international organizations, where Eastward enlargement led to a shift of focus away from Italy's main foreign policy priorities: the Southern neighbourhood and Russia.

In March 2020, shortly after it had left behind the controversial experience of an all-populist government (which included the far-right League and the Five Star Movement and lasted from June 2018 to September 2019), Italy was heavily affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. While the prompt response of the government and the discipline of citizens in respecting lockdowns earned international praise, Italy once again appeared as a troubled EU member in need of external assistance. Indeed, Italy received the largest post-pandemic national recovery package within the EU. Even amidst these external shocks, Italy preserved elements of its 'middle power' foreign policy, which combined NATO and EU membership with autonomous, cooperative policies vis-à-vis non-Western major powers and privileged relations with Arab countries in the Mediterranean region (Siddi 2019). This was exemplified by the persisting energy partnership with Russia, as well as by participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, combined with the growing anti-Chinese orientation of US foreign policy, put Italy under heavy pressure to renounce any residual autonomous action outside its transatlantic alliance, and fully align with the US and the common EU positions.

This article focuses on the period between 2018 and 2025 and shows how, particularly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Italy's foreign policy evolved from its

long-standing middle power approach towards full and exclusive alignment with transatlantic positions, taking a minor partner role in the transatlantic alliance. We argue that, in order to be considered a middle power, Italy would need to retain a degree of autonomy from the great power with which it is allied. Its inability to do this casts doubts on its presumed middlepowerness. The period under investigation starts with the Five Star-League government and encompasses all the major recent crises – the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis. This timespan allows an assessment of Italian foreign policy across different political governments, ranging from the populist-right (the Conte I government) to the centre-left (Conte II) and the right wing (Meloni). The central research puzzle in the article revolves around the issues of middlepowerness and (dis)continuity in Italian foreign policy.

The article zooms into a case study that epitomizes Italy's departure from the middle power approach and the structural (international and domestic) factors driving it: its relationship with Russia. We argue that, in an environment characterized by growing great power competition, middle power actorness is constrained or prevented by great power pressure on smaller allies to align. Specifically, Italy's middle power approach has been constrained by its international alliances, especially its alliance with the United States, a superpower that feels increasingly challenged by competitors (first and foremost China) and is pressuring allies to close ranks, including by limiting the cooperation they may have with its competitors. Italy's relations with China, or its Mediterranean policy, would be other valid case studies to assess the evolution of the country's middlepowerness, as they would reveal how Rome has related to the main non-Western great powers and to an area of central importance to Italian interests. Indeed, recent studies have shown that Italy has cooled its relationship with China primarily due to sustained US pressure (Andornino, Dossi and Caffarena 2025). These findings are consistent with the argument presented in this article that Washington's pressure in recent years has led to a further reduction in Italy's already limited foreign policy autonomy.

The analysis starts with a review of salient literature on the middle power concept and how it can be applied to Italy. Key scholarly works on Italian foreign policy published between 2018 and 2025 are also reviewed. A central theme that emerges from the literature is that of continuity and change in foreign policy. In this article, 'change' or 'shifts' in foreign policy refer to a sustained departure from established foreign policy tenets and practice. These shifts are more than short-term adjustments and are upheld by successive governments. At the same time, shifts and change should be recognized also when they are limited to some important areas (for instance, relations with some great powers), while continuity prevails in other fields of foreign policy. The article focuses on changes in the relationship with Russia and how its evolution has impacted Italy's middlepowerness.

Due to space constraints, the scope of the article is limited to Italian foreign policy towards Russia. This is a relevant case study because Italy's cooperative foreign policy vis-à-vis Moscow was a key aspect of its 'middle power' willingness and ability to act autonomously from its main allies, notably the US, in some strategic fields such as external energy policy and trade. The analysis of the case study relies on official documents, government programmes and statements, press reports, opinion surveys and secondary literature. Other important foreign policy vectors (i.e. relations with the US, China,

Mediterranean policy) are discussed only briefly to elucidate the broader context. Importantly, Italy's foreign policy did not change significantly in several key areas. Rome continued to give paramount importance to European integration and relations with the United States.

2. Theorising 'middlepowerness'

The definition of 'middle power' is contested and has been the subject of controversy among scholars. The diversity of middle power definitions and their use to describe numerous types of states leads to substantial confusion. As Robertson (2017) has argued, power is difficult to measure in international relations, as it is relative, perspectival, dynamic and contextual. Hence, locating the 'middle' point on a scale of power is difficult too. Cooper (2011, 319) notes that the idea of middle ranking states was first popularized in International Relations theory in the 1950s to identify countries that were neither major global powers nor small powers but could still "play a consequential role regionally and exert some degree of influence in global affairs beyond that of small or weak states." Relevant scholarship published during the Cold War saw middlepowerness merely in terms of tactical accommodations made by these 'in-between powers'. This only allowed modest conjectures such as the argument that middle powers prefer to work through multilateral institutions or coalitions of like-minded states rather than act unilaterally. This scholarship also stated that middle powers more often resorted to soft power techniques to compensate for their relative lack of hard sources of power. They focused on policy niches selected on the basis of national interests and the likelihood of being able to achieve tangible outcomes with their limited resources. In the 1990s a new strand of scholarship claimed that middle powers distinguished themselves for their altruistic foreign policy and norms-driven behaviour (Cooper 2011).

Nonetheless, writing at the turn of the century, Chapnik (1999) argued that the term 'middle power' remained deceptively ambiguous and was attributed to countries that displayed an interest in peacekeeping and multilateralism, or to those of medium size and with moderate international influence. Chapnik (1999, 79) maintained that the term was an inconsequential title, but some countries continued to refer to it for status reasons, "as an ideal way to promote national self-worth, and maintain at least the illusion of international influence". Karim (2018) concurs that the term is often related to the question of status. Drawing on role theory, he situates middle power as a concept of international status that countries aim to pursue through the enactment of role conceptions. He makes a conceptual distinction between 'middle-power status' and 'middle-power roles' and argues that role conceptions can analytically connect the status-seeking behaviour of middle powers with their foreign policy agenda. The foreign policies of middle powers tend to be multivectoral, pursuing partnerships across geopolitical dividing lines. Accordingly, Ardhani et al. (2023) claim that middle powers seek to develop their persuasive capabilities through enunciations that appeal to the beliefs and interests of multiple audiences simultaneously.

On the other hand, Jordaan (2003) develops a distinction between emerging and traditional middle powers as a means of giving the concept greater analytical clarity. According to him, all middle powers display foreign policy behaviour that stabilizes and legitimizes the global order, notably through multilateral and cooperative initiatives.

However, emerging and traditional middle powers can be distinguished in terms of their mutually-influencing constitutive and behavioural differences. Constitutively, traditional middle powers are wealthy, stable, egalitarian, social democratic and not regionally influential. Behaviourally, they exhibit a weak and ambivalent regional orientation, constructing identities distinct from powerful states in their regions. Emerging middle powers by contrast are semi-peripheral, materially inegalitarian and recently democratised states that demonstrate regional influence and self-association. Behaviourally, they opt for reformist and not radical global change, and exhibit a strong regional orientation favouring regional integration. However, Efstathopoulos (2023) criticizes Jordaan's conceptualisation, claiming that there is a tendency to adopt a binary distinction between Western middle powers that are conformist in their approach to the liberal international order and Southern middle powers that adopt a reformist stance. Focusing on Australia (as a supposed traditional middle power) and Brazil (as an emergent one), he shows that the two countries are not limited to conformist and reformist middle power agencies respectively. Indeed, they have undergone periods of ambivalence to gradually project new forms of middle power agency. On the other hand, Hurrell (2023) argues that non-Western emerging powers have argued for more 'pluralism' in the global order and for a more 'just' allocation of the benefits of globalization.

Meanwhile, constructivist scholarship reframes middle power as nothing more than a category created by certain state leaders to advance national interest, thereby negating the usefulness of the concept (Cooper 2011, 329). The constructivist critique, together with disagreements between scholars using the term and their attribution of middlepowerness to a very broad group of countries, highlights the need to clarify how the concept is defined and used in this article. We understand middle powers as actors exerting a considerable degree of influence in at least one key area of international relations – such as the economy, diplomacy, military strength – while not being a great power due to limited resources. This differentiates them from 'undisputed' superpowers such as the United States and China, which exert considerable influence across all areas, or even great powers such as Russia, which leads in nuclear deterrence and some economic sectors (energy and arms exports).

Middle powers use their influence particularly in their neighbourhood, as they tend to lack the resources to project it globally. In their neighbourhood or in specific issue areas, they stand a chance of achieving their goals even when they do not have the consent or support of great powers, especially if they can leverage their alliances or multilateral frameworks. Indeed, activeness in multilateral frameworks (such as United Nations peacekeeping, or other UN-led efforts to stabilise the global order) is a recurrent feature of middle powers (Cooper 2011, 320-321). Middle powers can use their influence to pursue national objectives without excessive subordination or bandwagoning behind allied great powers. In other words, middle powers can be part of alliances led by a great power but retain some room for autonomous policy making and are not completely at the mercy of the superpower's priorities. Turkey's autonomous foreign policy vis-à-vis Syria and the Middle East, which is sometimes at odds with Washington's agenda, is an example of autonomous middle power behaviour of a US ally. Germany's past pursuit of energy partnership with Russia despite US opposition provides another instance. Conversely, we posit that countries adopting a fully subordinate role to a great power and with no

significant autonomy in foreign policy lack the agency and influence to be classified as middle powers.

A highly pertinent question today is how middle powers respond to growing geopolitical rivalry between great powers, also in the light of alliances that tie them to one of the great powers. Giacomello and Verbeek (2024) maintain that the contestation of American hegemony invites states to reconsider their positions and seek specific forms of middle power status – aspiring global powers, regional powers and niche powers (that is, powers that attempt to lead in specific niche sectors, such as peacekeeping or financial services). We contend that this is true especially for middle powers that are not part of an alliance with a superpower: those who are tend to face increasing pressure from the superpower (and other allies bandwagoning behind the superpower) to forgo independent foreign policy initiatives. This latter scenario is indeed the one in which Italy has increasingly found itself since the early 2010s.

Italy can be considered a middle-ranking power based on the size of its economy, despite its now decade-long stagnation. Due to its limited natural and military resources, however, it can only achieve its foreign policy goals by expanding its influence in international organisations and through bilateral relations with larger powers. The concept of middle power (media potenza) became popular in the 1980s and early 1990s (cf. Santoro 1991) to qualify the country at a time when it appeared – to a fair extent, deceptively – to strengthen its relative power, based on data pertaining to economic growth in particular (Romero 2016, p. 5). In fact, economic growth was accompanied by the accumulation of a large public debt that still burdens Italy today. In the early 1990s, a large-scale corruption scandal (known as Mani Pulite, 'clean hands') wiped out the political parties that had governed the country since the late 1940s, most notably the Christian Democratic Party. In a successful attempt to fill the vacuum left by the scandal, media tycoon and populist leader Silvio Berlusconi founded a highly personalistic party and largely monopolized the political scene until the early 2010s, a period in which Italy even fell behind other stagnant European neighbours in terms of growth and competitiveness (Diodato and Niglia, 2019, pp. 1-22).

However, even in this difficult conjuncture, all the essential constituents of Italy's version of middle power remained in place. While being a (founding) member of NATO and the European Economic Community, Italy enjoyed privileged relations with several Arab countries (such as Libya) and Russia thanks to energy deals, trade and political links. Italy also played an important role in multilateral contexts such as the United Nations' UNIFIL mission in Lebanon. The end of the Cold War provided an environment in which Italy could expand its energy ties and trade with Russia, while more and more Italian companies started operating in the country. Successive Italian leaders – both Berlusconi and his centre-left opponents – invested in the relationship with Russia until 2014 and, to an extent, also in 2014-2021 (Siddi 2019). Russia was seen as one of the larger powers with which Rome had solid economic and political contacts; this could prove useful in serving the national interest. Not only did Berlusconi develop a highly personalized relationship with Russian president Vladimir Putin, he also believed that Italy could play a bridging role between Russia and the West. The 2002 summit at Pratica di Mare, which established the NATO-Russia Council, was one of the peaks of this policy (Alcaro 2013). At the same time, Italy was an active supporter of US foreign policy, as witnessed by its

participation in the ISAF mission in Afghanistan and support of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Diodato and Niglia, 2019, pp. 97-141).

As relations between Russia and the West began to deteriorate in the late 2000s, Italy attempted to stem this trend by adopting a conciliatory role towards Moscow. Berlusconi advocated a quick resumption of business-as-usual relations after the 2008 Russian-Georgian war. Bilateral trade continued to increase until 2013. The Russian annexation of Crimea and subsequent Western sanctions opened an interim period in which Italy tried to reconcile its adherence to a tougher Western policy towards Moscow with the preservation of its energy and economic interests with Russia. This difficult balancing act could be seen as a more recent variant of the middle power approach. Maintaining a working relationship with Russia was justified by the argument that Italy may need Moscow's support, or at least non-opposition, in the UN Security Council to address crises central to the national interest, most notably Libya (Siddi 2019, p. 132; cf. Coticchia and Davidson 2019).

However, the Libyan crisis revealed the weakness of Italy's international position and the loss of its 'middle power' influence in its neighbourhood. Not only was Rome lukewarm vis-à-vis the Anglo-French initiative to intervene militarily in March 2011, it also failed to play a significant mediation or conflict resolution role, and Italy found itself confronted with a growing influx of refugees (Koenig 2011). Bypassed by its Western allies and largely ignored by other actors in the crisis, Italy reluctantly supported the Western coalition and sought deals with anti-Qadhafi leaders in the hope they would honour existing agreements and preserve Italian commercial interests in Libya (Lombardi 2011). As Libya descended into civil war, irregular migration towards Italy increased, resulting in a refugee reception crisis in 2014-2015. Hence, developments in the Southern neighbourhood started to cast serious doubts on whether Italy could still claim to be a middle power, and exert its influence successfully close to the country's borders. While after 2022 prime minister Giorgia Meloni attempted to reassert Italy's influence through the 'Mattei Plan for Africa', the plan showed a chronic lack of funding, the limited involvement of African partners, and the risk of undermining EU common action and driving competition with other member states (Hanau Santini and Prontera 2025, Simonelli et al. 2024).

Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 and the subsequent confrontation with the West precipitated the crisis of Italy's relations with Moscow. As we shall see, while Italy's foreign policy displayed continuity in its alignment with transatlantic allies, it simultaneously shifted away from well-established cooperation with non-Western powers, first and foremost Russia. This shift, and especially its broader significance for Italy's actorness, tends to be overlooked in much recent scholarly literature.

3. Italian Foreign Policy 2018-2025: continuity, change, decline

Illustrative examples of key themes addressed in recent scholarship on Italian foreign policy between 2018 and 2025 include: the role of evolving domestic politics in influencing it, a debate on shifts in geographical priorities and a specific focus on Italy's stance on the 2022 war in Ukraine and its aftermath. While this literature is rich in theoretical and empirical approaches, it generally tends to make the argument that continuity is the *leitmotiv* of Italian foreign policy across different governments. Some disagreements

emerge only in terms of Italy's evolving geographical priorities. For instance, Coticchia and Moro (2023) argue that the war determined at least a partial re-orientation of Italy's defence priorities from the South to the East and from crisis management to conventional operations as the main focus of the armed forces. Prontera and Lizzi (2023) highlight how the energy crisis after Russia's attack on Ukraine and Western sanctions determined the reorientation of Italian external energy policy towards the Southern Mediterranean and Africa, with Algeria swiftly becoming Italy's main gas supplier. Likewise, Ceccorulli (2023) claims that Italy's shift towards the East is evident in its migration policy, as the reception of thousands of displaced Ukrainians could overshadow the traditional flows from the Mediterranean region. Looking beyond Italy's neighbouring regions, Abbondanza (2023) observes that the rising strategic competition in Asia has led to an expansion of Italy's foreign and defence policy in the Indo-Pacific. Nonetheless, Coticchia and Mazziotti di Celso (2024) argue that the 'Enlarged Mediterranean' continues to be the most crucial region for protecting and promoting national interests. Cerami (2024) maintains that the Eastern Mediterranean is becoming increasingly important for Italy because of its energy resources and growing geopolitical salience. Most of these arguments about the adjustments in geographic priorities do not point to more fundamental changes in Italian foreign policy: in other words, shifts in regional focus are not seen as evidence of changes in Italy's long-term foreign policy tenets.

Likewise, numerous studies focusing on the influence of different government coalitions and party preferences on Italy's external action emphasize foreign policy continuity. While Giurlando (2021) argues that the populist foreign policy of the League and the Five Star Movement marked a rupture with the past, most authors detect substantial continuity with previous and successive governments. In their study of prime ministers' and foreign ministers' programmatic speeches from 2016 to 2022, Gabusi and Caffarena (2024) find notable consistency, internal coherence and continuity in Italy's foreign policy framework, whereas populist narratives remained confined to the domain of rhetoric and exerted minimal influence on foreign policy practice. Likewise, Giugliano (2020) detects no major foreign policy differences across various governments despite divergent rhetoric. He shows that the Five Star-League government (2018-2019) and the Democratic Party-Five Star Movement coalition (2019-2021) aligned with the EU on all issues, despite the former's declared 'sovereignist' turn towards Russia and China. Pugliese et al. (2022) confirm these findings, arguing that even apparently disruptive choices, such as embracing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2019, were actually more about rhetoric than substance. More recently, Coticchia et al. (2025) have provided a subtle analysis of the foreign policy of Italian populist parties. They argue that the post-2022 right-wing coalition of Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy, Matteo Salvini's Lega and Forza Italia leveraged foreign policy for domestic political gain, as shown by Salvini's scepticism toward supporting Ukraine militarily or Meloni's reluctance to commit troops to a potential Western 'coalition of the willing' deployment in Ukraine: both instances reflected Salvini's and Meloni's concern not to alienate the strong domestic pacifist constituency. At the same time, Meloni ensured that Italian foreign policy would not deviate from that of its transatlantic allies, especially the US. Indeed, Meloni largely subordinated Italy's foreign policy to that of Washington; after 2024, her political

affinities with President Donald Trump led her to uphold this stance even while the rift between European allies and the US began to widen (Siddi 2025a).

Before Meloni came to power, the foreign policy of the broad, Draghi-led coalition government (spanning from the Democratic Party to the League) was also seen as being in continuity with established practice. However, the Draghi government (in office between February 2021 and October 2022) was confronted with growing geopolitical turbulence due to Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022. Scholars note that these developments led Draghi to make important foreign policy decisions, such as sending military aid to Ukraine, adopting far-reaching sanctions against Russia, increasing the Italian defence budget and reorienting Italy's energy policy (Fasola and Lucarelli 2024; Prontera and Lizzi 2023). Morini (2023) shows that some of these decisions were criticized by the parties supporting Draghi's government, eventually triggering its collapse. Arms shipments to Ukraine were viewed sceptically by the Five Star Movement, which adopted a pacifist stance (cf. Coticchia and Vignoli 2020), whereas the League expressed various reservations linked to its pro-Russian leanings. Domestic tensions aside, most studies fail to point out that the Draghi government, while following the line of its transatlantic allies, upended decades of cooperative foreign policy towards Russia. While the change in Italy's stance toward Russia was understandable in the light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it can hardly be seen as evidence of foreign policy continuity. Likewise, most studies do not provide a full assessment of the significance of this shift for Italy's middlepowerness. Some imply that Italy's international standing and middle power influence depend on aligning with Western allies, apparently neglecting the non-Western vectors of Italy's middlepowerness (Coticchia et al. 2025).

Downplaying or neglecting the significance of this shift during the Draghi government allows for the argument that continuity has characterized Meloni's foreign policy too. Hence, Bruno and Fazio (2024) argue that the transition from the Draghi to the Meloni administration in 2022 did not lead to any significant change in policies or positions vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine. Similarly, Brighi and Giusti (2023) claim that Giorgia Meloni's populist right-wing government has remained in line with the expectations of Italy's transatlantic partners. While this scholarship is correct in noting continuity between Draghi and Meloni, it omits to say that an important change in Italy's foreign policy occurred a few months before Meloni took office, and that her foreign policy was in continuity with that shift.

Indeed, Fasola and Lucarelli (2024) note some aspects of this shift. They argue that the Meloni government made a strategic decision to accept subordination to the United States, both in its approach to Russia and its response to the Gaza war. Siddi (2025a) argues along similar lines, highlighting how Meloni's subordination to the United States weakened several aspects of Italy's middle power foreign policy – not just relations with Russia, but also with China and Arab countries (due to her pro-Israeli stance). In this regard, it is important to highlight that US foreign policy toward Russia and China evolved substantially in the late 2010s and early 2020s, with the adoption of a more confrontational posture. In Washington, Russia and China were increasingly seen as leaders of a coalition bent on undermining US interests. Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 and China's continued partnership with Moscow, including allegations of Chinese

economic and military support, have cemented this view (Sinkkonen et al. 2022). For Italy, this has a logical consequence: subordination to US foreign policy implies renouncing cooperation with both Russia and China, and hence relinquishing an important aspect of its middlepowerness.

Overall, most recent scholarly literature on Italian foreign policy provides useful insights into continuity across governments and (relatively minor) shifts in specific contexts. However, it only tangentially refers to the main trends in Italy's external action: its declining influence in the international arena and the loss of autonomous room for manoeuver outside a US-dominated transatlantic alliance. Decline and loss of autonomy are both evidence and further drivers of change in Italian foreign policy. This has resulted in Italy's abandonment of important aspects of its 'middle power' foreign policy – out of choice, due to external pressure and lack of resources to sustain it. In turn, the abandonment of middle power ambitions accelerates the decline of Italy's prestige and foreign influence. This is compounded by the relative loss of power of the alliances of which the country is part vis-à-vis the rest of the international community, including both adversaries such as China and Russia and 'non-aligned' actors in the Global South. Most recently, a special issue edited by Diodato and Marchetti (2025) engaged in greater depth than earlier works with Italy's loss of international standing. Transcending the assumption that Italy's international standing and middlepowerness depend (solely) on its Western alliances, contributions to the special issue show how Italy can redefine its international standing by balancing its traditional Western ties with increased engagement with partners in the Global South and the Indo-Pacific.

4. Italy's shifting position on Russia post-2022

The profound crisis of Italy's relations with Russia highlights Rome's shift away from a key aspect of its middle power foreign policy. This shift was driven by a complex interplay of both international and domestic factors following Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022. Externally, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the resolute reaction of Italy's primary allies resulted in structural changes that disrupted Rome's traditionally cooperative stance towards Russia. The constraints imposed by the new context left Italy with limited options to maintain a relatively autonomous foreign policy while managing the crisis. Prime minister Mario Draghi, a strong supporter of Italy's transatlantic focus, decided to fully align with the positions and responses of its transatlantic partners led by the US. This alignment corroborates scholarly literature arguing that Italy tends to closely coordinate its stance on Moscow with its transatlantic allies during periods of instability (Natalizia and Morini 2020, Tarasov et al. 2024). However, the post-2022 shift in Italy's foreign policy towards Russia was much deeper than in earlier crises, for instance compared to its reaction to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, or to the crisis in West-Soviet relations in the early 1980s, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, when Italy's energy trade with Moscow continued and even increased (cf. Siddi 2019). It entailed a swift drop in energy imports from Russia, as well as in bilateral trade. Political relations reached their lowest post-Cold War point as Italy fully endorsed sanctions against Russia – indeed, according to some reports Draghi played an important role in the formulation of the first rounds of sanctions (Pop,

Fleming and Politi 2022) – and Russia included Italy in a list of 'unfriendly countries' (Russian Government 2022).

Despite some rhetorical differences, successive Italian governments attempted to uphold dialogue and cooperation with Russia between 2018 and 2021. For instance, the short-lived Five Star-League government (2018-2019) adopted a pro-Russian rhetoric. Its programmatic document 'Contract for the Government of Change' framed Russia as a potential partner in resolving regional conflicts rather than a threat, and proposed the lifting of sanctions to reestablish Moscow as a strategic partner (Movimento Cinque Stelle and Lega 2018). Improving the relationship with Russia would allow the government to prioritise Italy's southern borders. Prime minister Conte further clarified the position towards Russia in his programmatic speech at the Italian Parliament in June 2018: "We will be in favour of opening up to Russia, a Russia that has consolidated its international role in various geopolitical crises in recent years. We will be promoters of a revision of the sanctions system, starting with those that risk mortifying Russian civil society' (Camera dei Deputati 2018).

Despite this rhetoric, the Five Star-League government consistently voted in favour of EU sanctions against Russia (Pagella Politica 2022). With the exception of smaller EU countries such as Hungary and Austria, Italy's position was too isolated within the EU to lead to the lifting of sanctions and substantial improvement in relations with Moscow. Pressure from the United States also played an important role and *de facto* constrained Italy's policy options (Sky TG24 2018). As a result, the actual policies of the Five Star-League government towards Russia did not differ much from those of its predecessors, or from the contemporary practice of key EU member states such as Germany and France. Italy maintained a strategic energy relationship and, despite some adjustments and loss in trade due to the post-2014 sanctions (see Siddi 2019), it continued to do business with Moscow. This approach did not change substantially when the more openly pro-Russian League left the government in September 2019 and the Five Star Movement formed a new coalition with the centre-left Democratic Party (as well as smaller centrist and left-wing parties), which lasted until February 2021. Russia also continued with its policy of courting Italy, as exemplified by the much publicised airlift of Russian aid to Italy during the early stages of the Coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 (Foy and Peel 2020).

The national unity government led by Mario Draghi from February 2021 focused on strengthening relations with Washington and consolidating Italy's image as a reliable transatlantic partner. However, at first it did not seem eager to change its approach towards Russia. This stance began to harden in March 2021, with the arrest of an Italian navy captain accused of spying on behalf of Russia and the expulsion of two Russian diplomats. The government publicly denounced this episode, thereby attracting the attention of the national and international press (Carrer 2021). Even so, as Russia concentrated troops at its border with Ukraine in the autumn of 2021, Draghi maintained a cautious approach. In mid-December 2021, he argued that Russia was not disengaging from the West and Putin apparently wanted "to explore all the possibilities of diplomacy to reach a balanced solution" (cited in Roberts 2021); hence he called on the West to engage with Russia.

Draghi's stance changed radically when Russia launched a large-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022. In the months following the attack, he actively participated in shaping the EU's efforts to impose sanctions on Moscow and attempted to reduce Italy's imports of Russian energy drastically. Draghi cultivated Italy's image as a supporter of Ukraine and of EU unity in the war, as illustrated by his symbolic June 2022 trip to Kyiv with French president Emmanuel Macron, German chancellor Olaf Scholz and Romanian president Klaus Iohannis (Sauer 2022). On the other hand, his government's diplomatic proposal for a resolution of the war in Ukraine received little international attention and was soon put aside, showing that Italy lacked any substantial influence in the conflict independent of its transatlantic allies (Alcaro and Mikhelidze 2022). Draghi's mandate as Italy's prime minister was cut short by growing domestic infighting as the end of the parliamentary term neared. Draghi's stance on the war and sanctions was seen as one of the reasons for his government's demise, particularly as he lost the support of the League, Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the Five Star Movement, parties that were either perceived as pro-Russia (the League and Berlusconi) or as critical of arms supplies to Ukraine (the Five Stars) (Bastasin 2022). However, Italy did not abandon Draghi's hard line on Russia after his departure.

Initially, the formation of the right-wing coalition government led by Giorgia Meloni in October 2022 raised concerns about Italy's alignment with Western allies due to the presence of the League and Berlusconi within her right-wing coalition. Meloni herself had condemned the EU's post-2014 sanctions against Russia on numerous occasions (Ricciardi 2022) and praised Putin as a defender of European values and Christian identity in her autobiography, published in 2021 (Meloni 2021). Nevertheless, Meloni's government did not alter Draghi's Russia policy. While in 2021 Meloni had embraced an almost pacifist narrative that focused on a diplomatic agreement with Russia and the rejection of sanctions, after the invasion her narrative changed radically. She switched to supporting sanctions, voted in favour of military aid to Ukraine, and advocated ending Italy's energy dependence on Russia. She also supported Ukraine's application to join the EU, agreeing to the opening of accession talks in December 2023, continued to send military support to Ukraine (notably the powerful SAMP/T air-defence system) and, together with other G7 countries, signed a bilateral security pact with Kyiv (Alcaro and Tocci 2024, 9). Her government largely mirrored its predecessor's stance in opposing Russia's aggression and upholding Ukraine's sovereignty. Meloni emphasized Italy's alignment with the EU and NATO on these matters (cf. Fasola and Lucarelli 2024, 205).

Arguably, the extent of Russia's violations of international law since February 2022 and the decisive response of Italy's allies, the US *in primis*, left Draghi and Meloni no option but to abandon the long-term 'middle power' policy of seeking cooperation and an energy partnership with Russia. However, Italy's subordination to US foreign policy and abandonment of its 'middle power' policies did not stop at relations with Russia. Following Hamas's terror attack on 7 October 2023 and Israel's disproportionate military response, Meloni's government fully aligned with the muscular, pro-Israel approach led by the US and the United Kingdom. Both the Italian government and the mainstream public media (which in Italy are traditionally influenced by the ruling coalitions through managerial appointments) depicted an almost exclusively pro-Israeli representation of events. This was difficult to reconcile with the country's traditionally more balanced

approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict (Fasola and Lucarelli 2024, 206) and friendly stance towards the Arab World – another important aspect of Italy's 'middlepowerness', which inter alia facilitated its leading role in some multilateral conflict management framework, notably the UNIFIL mission. Only after months of fighting in Gaza, and under domestic pressure from public opinion and political opposition, did the Meloni government express token support for a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel (Euronews 2024).

The shared, central element in Meloni's stance on Ukraine and Gaza was a pragmatic, and at times expedient alignment with the United States. As Alcaro and Tocci (2024) argue, Meloni's transatlantic foreign policy was the product of contingent factors such as a strongly Atlanticist US administration and Italy's need for EU cash (as well as the lack of strong competition for the leadership of Europe's far right, which allowed Meloni to pursue a moderate course without facing pressure from the right). The pursuit of a transatlanticist foreign policy earned Meloni the praise of Italy's allies and possibly induced them to refrain from criticism when her government engaged in culture wars, anti-migration and anti-LGBTQI+ campaigns, attacks on media freedom, and attempts to centralise power domestically (Alcaro and Tocci 2024, 13-15).

Economic considerations also played an important role in Meloni foreign policy choices (Alcaro and Tocci 2024). Italy's economic constraints and need for continued EU support, especially in the form of the post-pandemic recovery funds, resulted in pragmatic considerations driving Italy's alignment with the US and European allies in their confrontation with Russia. Washington and other Western allies praised Meloni's stance (see for instance Madhani et al. 2023) not for her leadership or diplomatic initiatives, but rather for the lack thereof: considering Meloni's pre-2022 pro-Russian sentiments and Italy's long-standing friendly relationship with Russia, they had expected a more problematic approach. Instead, prime minister Meloni immediately fell in line and made sure that some of her recalcitrant coalition allies followed suit. The Meloni government embraced a subordinate role in the transatlantic alliance while renouncing ambitions of substantive autonomous foreign policy initiatives (Fasola and Lucarelli 2024; Siddi 2025a).[2] Hence, both economic weakness and geopolitical entanglements restricted Italy's options, and particularly the potential to conduct an autonomous foreign policy.

An analysis of Italian public opinion corroborates the argument that Draghi's and Meloni's stance on Russia and the Russo-Ukrainian war was influenced more by economic and geopolitical pressure than by public opinion. Italian citizens did not support important aspects of the government's line, in particular military support to Ukraine. On the one hand, Moscow's invasion of Ukraine had a significant impact on Italian public opinion regarding Russia. IPSOS (2024) polls showed that, in 2022, 36 percent of Italians perceived Russia as the greatest global threat, a substantial increase from the 8 percent recorded in 2021. Concurrently, 74 percent of Italians favoured providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine. However, only 32 percent of Italians supported arms deliveries. A poll from March 2024 revealed that only 45 percent of Italians supported sanctions against Russia, a decrease from 57 percent a year earlier, while 38 percent

[2] Fasola and Lucarelli (2024, 206) speak of an Italian role that is "strictly subordinated to US leadership and conducted in full awareness of national constraints".

opposed sanctions and 17 percent remained neutral (IPSOS, 2024). Meanwhile, a Pew survey showed that 40 percent of Italians prioritised maintaining access to Russian oil and gas reserves over adopting a confrontational stance towards Moscow (Foigan et al. 2023).

Isernia et al.'s (2024) systematic analysis of numerous polls on Italians' opinions concerning the Russo-Ukrainian war between January 2022 and June 2023 reveals that Italians were worried about the conflict, but other issues such as climate change, the economic situation and immigration were perceived as more urgent (ibid., 4). Italian public opinion was less supportive than in most other EU and NATO countries of sanctions against Russia and especially of arms deliveries to Ukraine, which were endorsed by less than 40 percent of respondents. Over time, a compromise was increasingly seen as the only means of ending the war, while pluralities and sometimes majorities believed that Ukraine should make territorial concessions to Russia (ibid., 8-9). It is also because of limited public opinion endorsement of its policies that the Meloni government opted to channel its support to Ukraine by stealth, shrouding especially military supplies in secrecy. It also publicly opposed Ukraine's use of weapons provided by Italy against targets on Russian territory, even as other Western countries adopted a more permissive approach on this issue.

Following Trump's re-election in 2024, Meloni relied on her ideological proximity to and personal relationship with the US President to mediate disagreements between Washington and the European Union and maintain a common position on Russia and the Russo-Ukrainian war. However, as Trump discontinued US military support to Ukraine and opened direct negotiation channels with Russia, differences between Washington and its European allies complicated Meloni's strategy. Meloni began to walk a difficult diplomatic line in which she apparently sided with European allies but did not support their more ambitious initiatives – such as the idea of deploying troops of a European 'coalition of the willing' to Ukraine – and repeatedly praised Trump's diplomacy (Siddi 2025b). This further marginalized Italy within the transatlantic alliance, where Rome is exposed to the risk of being perceived as unreliable by European partners and is simultaneously ignored by the Trump administration, which does not seem to value Meloni's attempts to bridge transatlantic differences.

5. Conclusions

This article has highlighted Italy's declining international influence and the abandonment of a central tenet of its middlepowerness, its cooperative relationship with Russia. Its departure from this tenet has entailed an exclusive focus on playing a supporting role in the Western alliance, subordinated to US interests in particular. While some of the structural conditions driving this shift had been in place earlier, the crisis unleashed by Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022 was a powerful 'accelerator'. From a theoretical perspective, Italy's case shows that, in an environment characterised by geopolitical turbulence and growing great power competition, middle powers come under stronger pressure from great powers to align; this is particularly true if a middle power is well-entrenched in an international alliance largely steered and controlled by a superpower. Italy's domestic weakness further reduced Rome's capability and willingness to resist this pressure and maintain some room for autonomous foreign policy initiative.

While Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine and domestic circumstances left successive Italian governments with hardly any alternative, it is important to note that Italy's post-2022 stance on Russia involves substantial change, not only compared with relations during the three post-Cold War decades, but also with the late Soviet period. The unravelling of the energy relationship, for instance, reversed a policy that Italy had pursued since the 1960s.

Arguably, the demise of its long-standing partnership with Russia is the main, but not the only aspect of the crisis in Italy's middle power foreign policy. Together with the loss of key partners in North Africa after the Arab Spring, the withdrawal from the Belt and Road initiative and the relative decline of Italy's global economic power (see also Andornino et al. 2025, Siddi 2025a), the deep crisis in relations with Russia has seriously challenged Italy's ambitions to be a middle power with some room for independent action. Among the pillars of Italy's middle power status conceptualised in scholarly literature, a focus on European integration, the quest for cooperation with North African countries, and aspects of a multilateral approach (such as the important role in the UNIFIL mission) persist. However, especially after 2022, Italy has embraced a subordinate role in a US-dominated Western alliance that currently leaves little room for autonomous foreign policy making, let alone partnership with non-Western major powers.

The problems of this approach were exposed most clearly after Donald Trump's re-election to the White House and his sudden decision to depart from the transatlantic policy of consistently supporting Ukraine. Italy, like other European NATO allies, found itself scrambling for options to replace US military and diplomatic support to Kyiv, with limited prospects of success in the short term. The intrinsic problem of subordination and delegation of diplomatic and military leadership to Washington were thus revealed when the US changed its position regardless of European allies' interests. The Meloni government had to deal with the challenge of preserving good relations with the ideologically and politically close Trump administration while simultaneously showing solidarity with European allies and Ukraine (Peretti 2025). Meloni attempted to prevent a rift in US-EU relations, but this conundrum appeared unsolvable as Trump upheld an intransigent policy line vis-à-vis Kyiv, epitomised by the suspension of US military aid in early March 2025.

Moreover, in August 2025 Trump welcomed Putin to Alaska to discuss ending the Russo-Ukrainian war and improving US-Russia relations. Trump's initiative departed from the earlier Western policy of isolating Russia and helping Ukraine achieve victory on the battlefield: Trump's move de facto sidelined European allies and their strategy towards the crisis. European allies continued to appease Trump as he breached international law by bombing Iran in June 2025 and by using military force against Venezuela and kidnapping its President, Nicolas Maduro, in January 2026. The failure of this appeasement strategy, championed by Meloni *in primis*, is ever more evident at the time of writing, as Trump has turned to making territorial demands on Greenland, an associated overseas territory of the EU on which EU and NATO member Denmark retains sovereignty (Alemanno 2026). As several EU countries and the United Kingdom sent small military contingents to the island, Trump publicly condemned them and announced the imposition of new tariffs on them. In light of these developments, Meloni's strategy of

subordinating to the US while trying to solve disagreements between Trump and European allies appears in tatters. Italy plays a marginal role in an increasingly fraught transatlantic alliance and does not have any leverage in negotiations concerning Ukraine; it has downgraded its relationship with China, and faces a hostile Russia and an increasingly confrontational US stance.

While Western and Italian scholarship tends to draw a positive assessment of Italy's renewed transatlantic alignment after 2022, they have not sufficiently explored the critical implications that this may have for autonomous policy making and for Italy's capability to defend its national interests when they differ from allies' interests or priorities. Many scholars highlight continuity in Italian foreign policy, but they tend to neglect that some important vectors – such as policies towards Russia and China – have changed or are changing due to geopolitical circumstances and allies' pressure. There is little debate on the fact that the policies of key allies, especially the US, have changed significantly in recent years, and that aligning with them inevitably entails change. While in the early 2010s being a US ally was compatible with economic partnership with China and Russia, this is no longer the case. Under Trump, even Italy's support of European integration may become difficult to reconcile with a close alliance with Washington.

With the policy line adopted by the Meloni government, Italy's stance on Russia, the Russo-Ukrainian war and other central geopolitical issues can change only as a result of changes in the US posture. Trump's reformulation of US policy on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict may act as a litmus test for Meloni's foreign policy course and her adherence to a pro-Ukrainian stance. Furthermore, Trump has pursued narrowly defined US national interests and exacerbated geopolitical tensions. This leaves Italy with the inevitable choice between following the line dictated by Washington, with hardly any chance of influencing it, and returning to a more autonomous 'middle power' foreign policy that leverages European alliances and multilateral cooperation to pursue national and European interests. Even if a ceasefire is achieved in Ukraine and West-Russia tensions subside, Italy is unlikely to return fully to its cooperative policy towards Russia because its economic and political foundations have been damaged severely. However, rather than relying on Trump's confused diplomacy toward Russia and the Russo-Ukrainian war, which may lead to decisions being made over Europe's head, Italy could more actively contribute to a direct, if sober, European diplomatic channel with Russia.

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