

What's left of Italy's foreign policy? One often gets the impression that there's less room for independent initiatives, given the anarchy of the current multipolar system, than there was yesterday when the country was straitjacketed by the orderly and reciprocal Yalta agreement. It's easy to indulge in the rhetoric of decline and reflect, albeit with some complacency, about the final demise of national States and the concept itself of *national interest*. A very linear line of reasoning, almost too linear not to raise at least a few doubts. So Primo Piano Scala c turned to an experienced diplomat, Ambassador Carlo Tripepi. In his in-depth analysis, counterbalanced by his light touch, Tripepi warns us that what's missing today is not room to manoeuvre – which on the contrary has increased – but the capacity to react to developments and instable situations which have robbed *all* international players of their bearings. Including the world's superpowers. Our conversation with Tripepi may provide us all with a set of coordinates which can help to at least point us in the right direction.

First: the complementary nature of the European and Mediterranean dimension of Italy's foreign policy. Not just because of the strategic importance of these two chessboards for Italy, but because Italy plays an *essential and key role*, both as a founding member of the European Union, and as an economic, political and cultural partner for the entire Mediterranean basin. Tripepi's words were tinged with pride as he reminded us that Italy is not, and cannot be considered as a peripheral European State. We'd like to add that recent events appear to confirm the fact that if Italy were marginalised in Europe it would in fact lose the authoritative role which its cultural roots and economic interests have given it in its relations with the Middle East.

Second: the inalienable nature of a national defence industry, notwithstanding the arrogance and, let's admit it, hypocrisy of all kinds of doctrinal orthodoxies, ranging from the supporters of the international division of labour, of the unavoidable need for privatisations, of budget cuts to calm the market, to the many *prophets disarmed* who,

unfortunately, have learnt nothing from Machiavelli. Third, the relationship between technocrats and politicians, a topic as old as democracy itself, recently revived by attempts to put the latter into receivership. Tripepi is, quite rightly, proud of the identity and heritage of the professionalism and proficiency of the diplomatic corps to which he belongs. But he also acknowledges the crucial role which politics is called to play. And yet self-irony remains part of his personality; in fact, as a passing shot he reminds us of the definition a British diplomat, Sir Henry Wotton, gave of his profession in the seventeenth century: "*An ambassador is an honest man sent abroad to lie in the interest of his country.*"

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TRIPEPI

## FOREIGN POLICY IN THE TIME OF THE EU

“Common, sustainable, economic growth is the premise and bedrock on which the Mediterranean can build the oasis of peace we are all striving to create, because economic growth will also generate political stability. Clearly Italy's role is to work to achieve this dream.”

**Telos:** As laymen, we're used to considering international politics as a multilateral confrontation between blocks. We normally think of the international role played by the European Union, or, on a smaller scale, the one played by Italy, as part of the supranational EU structure. Nevertheless, there's still this sinking feeling that Italy's international role has been radically downsized. Does talking of an Italian foreign policy make sense anymore?

**Ambassador Tripepi:** Yes, of course it does. We shouldn't forget that when the blocks really did exist Italy created its own niche as a key player in the Mediterranean political dialogue and carved out a privileged position *vis-à-vis* the main antagonist of that period, the USSR. It's obviously difficult for any country to navigate today's multipolar world (and not unipolar, as we imagined it would be after the fall of the Soviet Union): there's more room to manoeuvre, but situations change and crises explode so quickly that it's difficult for a country, even a *superpower* like the US, to tackle them. As Europeans we need a strong, unitary political player to represent us in a univocal and authoritative manner in all fields, and not just during economic negotiations. And this is what is so *dramatic*: we don't have one. So "*waiting for Godot*" (who, however, in Balzac's *pièce* that inspired Beckett, actually does arrive in the end) Italy can and must continue to play its part. How? *Non sum dignus*. This is a question which, *at the very least*, you should put to the Foreign Minister.

There's been a lot of talk recently about reforming the role of the *bicornes* in order to tackle globalisation. Based on your own experience, could you tell us how the diplomatic corps has evolved in the last twenty years or so? What do you think is the best compromise between traditional political and economic representation and support for the exports and internationalisation of Italian enterprises?

*Bicornes*, what a horrible expression! It's like calling refuse collectors, dustmen... But we have undoubtedly evolved as Italian diplomats. I don't know if we've managed to flawlessly merge our roles of political representation and commercial (and cultural) promotion, but we've come very close; we're just as good as our colleagues – friends or competitors – in other countries. Let me give you my story. While working at the Ministry or in foreign postings abroad, I was responsible for export issues involving a particular sector of the Italian economy. Although I only had a degree in law (and I began my career in the Diplomatic Protocol!), I studied and learnt a *different* job; and while I did, I warmed to it, and perhaps even did it quite well. Then, when I was named an ambassador, I took off my overalls, put on my tailcoat, and became a *bicorne* again (but the classic *grey suit* worn by



**Carlo Tripepi** was born in December 1948. By sheer chance in Rome. As a young boy he dreamt of becoming a station master. Then he was derailed and after giving up a promising university career he was selected through a public exam, again by sheer chance, to become a diplomat. Since 1972 he's travelled the world (Africa, Europe, North America) with various postings, just like all diplomats. One distinguishing trait: while working at the foreign office in Rome he has been repeatedly assigned rather abstruse tasks, as an initiate: the COCOM (a sort of inter-allied consultative committee, very popular during the Cold War), control over dual transfer mode (DTM) technologies, the fight against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and, finally, as if this wasn't enough, management of the UAMA: the national unit for weapons export licensing. Despite all this, he has retained his innocence. And, what's more important, he's still free. He's currently the Italian Ambassador to Denmark. But given his age he'll soon be back home, focusing full time on his self-declared vices - trains, oenology and writing Romanesque sonnets; he'll also be spending quality time with his wife, who has patiently followed him during these forty years of wanderings, and their niece - a young girl with pearl-grey eyes. He has no *heirs*: as soon as his two daughters reached the age of reason, they let him know that professionally speaking they intended to do other things in life. Happily, and wisely, they have stuck to their guns.

travelling salesmen remained in my wardrobe). In plain English, our role as diplomats has always been dichotomous, and the ability to adapt is one of the cardinal virtues of Italian diplomats.

During the Eurozone crisis we've become accustomed to considering Italy as a peripheral EU Member State, causing us to forget our Mediterranean dimension. More's the pity, given events in the Arab world and beyond. It's very alarming to see that public debate on these issues is limited to last minute updates about Egypt, Syria and Turkey. Do you think we can establish a single, common interpretation of the situation? Is the juxtaposition between Islamists and secularists still the right way to consider politics in the Islamic world, or should we use other interpretative keys?

Let me start by saying that other Members States in Europe are *peripheral*, Italy certainly isn't. Of course the Mediterranean is still very important not only economically and from a security point of view, but even for the very future of the country. Italy's role is complementary - not conflicting or alternative - to the one we play in the EU as one of its founding members. I wouldn't dramatise the lack of a public debate since it's also a rare commodity in other countries. Our leaders are very clear about what they have to do: I think the real problem is how to keep abreast of developments and emergency situations and react in the best way possible, either alone or in small *ad hoc* groups (what I said earlier about the EU still stands). Undoubtedly, the juxtaposition between Islamists (especially integralists) and secularists does exist. But I believe that to a certain extent it's just the visible aspect of dialectics between old and new generations: the former grew up under an absolute regime (either secular or confessional), while the latter craved democracy and more and more freedom - one of the offshoots of democracy.

Democracy is like a balm for the whole body; however it is complicated, takes time to assimilate, and has trouble being effective in a debilitated body. This explains - and please excuse the nutritional metaphors - why the masses in the Arab-Mediterranean world, which often can't make ends meet (in other words put lunch, *ghada*, and dinner, *asha*, on the table), often find it difficult to metabolise it correctly. In short, common, sustainable economic growth is the premise and bedrock on which the Mediterranean can build the oasis of peace we are all striving to create, because economic growth will also generate political stability. Italy's role is clearly to work to achieve this dream (but the end of the cold war was also a dream).

International politics and industrial policy have always been synergetic, increasingly so at a time when the defence industry plays a strategic role in the survival of the Italian industrial system. However Italy's participation in the Joint Strike Fighter project has shown that it's extremely difficult to reconcile the *raison d'état* of Italian industry, budgetary balance, and the sovereignty of Parliament. Is this another blow to Italy's international credibility? How can we fix this short circuit which often occurs among political priorities and among the Institutions?

Even a medium-sized power like Italy has to have an industrial defence system, despite the fact that we are all forced to become more interdependent in this field due to globalisation (or simply as an effect of the international division of labour, due to economies of scale and gaps in technological know-how). On this point the JSF project is a perfect example. Once we've solved the inevitable problems which emerge with prototypes, the project itself is such an advanced platform that the experts say it will give the participants several decades of supremacy in the air, and interesting industrial returns for those who co-produced it. Unfortunately we (and other countries) have been hit by a really bad crisis, and because resources are scarce, there is a tendency to want to use them for other things in the short term. So the mere fact we've talked about this issue shouldn't portray us as being different or internationally less credible than other countries (such as Canada) which have also questioned this purchase. And remember, defence is not the only industrial system.

Finmeccanica, a group controlled by the Government and a major player in the field of armaments, also includes energy, railway, and transport companies (the three Ansaldo companies); company logic dictates that it has to shed these companies. That's fine if the buyers are Italian: because these are hi-tech activities which an industrially advanced country like Italy should not leave by the wayside after so many excellent companies have been sold to foreigners. So I began to mull over this idea as I'm in this north European capital where they kind of look down their noses Italians (perhaps it's a geographical thing?...), but they have an Italian driverless underground system, running on tracks produced and managed by Italians. And where builders (again, Italian) are working on the civil works of a new underground system, which will be ready in 2018, with an Italian railway system and Italian driverless trains ... Or perhaps, at that point, not any longer Italian.