

Sleeping with the enemy: The not-so-constant Italian stance towards Russia

Gabriele Natalizia

SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME

Mara Morini

UNIVERSITY OF GENOA

Abstract

A taken-for-granted assumption within the Italian foreign affairs community argues that the relationship between Rome and Moscow follows a generally cooperative attitude, fostered by strong cultural, economic and political ties. This narrative misses a significant part of the tale, which is at odds with the idea that the good relations with Russia are a 'constant feature' of Italy's foreign policy. Indeed, competitive interaction has frequently emerged, as a number of events in the last decade confirm. To challenge conventional wisdom, the article aims to provide a more nuanced interpretation of the investigated relationship. Focusing on the outcomes of global structural changes on Italian foreign policy, it posits that Rome is more prone to a cooperative stance towards Moscow whenever the international order proves stable. By contrast, its interests gradually diverge from those of its alleged 'natural' partner as the international order becomes increasingly unstable. This hypothesis is tested by an in-depth analysis of Italy's posture towards Russia amidst the crisis of the international liberal order (2008-on). Furthermore, the recurrence of a similar dynamic is verified through a diachronic comparison with two other international orders in crisis, i.e. that of the interwar period (1936-1941) and that of the Cold War (1979-1985).

1. Introduction

Sanctions against Russia happened out of the blue for Italy in 2014, and only after much resistance did Italy align with the choice of its EU partners (Coticchia and Davidson, 2019). The sanctions triggered harsh criticism from the main national trade associations (Confartigianato, 2018; Coldiretti, 2018; Confindustria, 2018) and all Italian governments have evaluated them to be particularly burdensome for the country (Parsi, 2016). Although mostly confined to parliamentary debate, the significance of Italy's participation in NATO's *Enhanced Forward Presence* (EFP) was downplayed by the Renzi government in 2016 (Arnese and Rossi, 2016) but raised protests from the opposition (De Feudis, 2016). Moreover, some creeping tensions in the field of security, energy and EU integration are widening the gap between the interests of Rome and those of Moscow, having remained on the sidelines of the public debate. Recently, medical supplies provided by the Russian military in Italy in the wake of the COVID-19 emergency have raised a vibrant debate. The so-called *From Russia with Love* operation has been accused

of being Putin's trap for the Italian government, which would be part of a broader strategy aimed at urging Italy to request the lifting of EU sanctions against Russia (Iacoboni, 2020; Razov, 2020).

Nevertheless, conventional wisdom diffused among Italian foreign policy (IFP) scholars, experts and practitioners is that Italy's stance towards Russia tends to be cooperative and focused on the pursuit of shared goals, without being influenced by political turnover. Also, growing Russian aggressiveness – which is a substantial part of its revisionist challenge to the liberal order (White House, 2017) – is not perceived as a threat to Italy, either by political elites or by public opinion (Olmastroni, 2017).

The supposed enduring friendly ties between the two powers have been explained through both domestic and external variables based on the asymmetry of international status, the lack of shared borders and the positive effects of long-term factors such as mutual cultural fascination and economic exchanges. However, this narrative misses a significant part of the tale, which is at odds with the idea that the good offices with Moscow represent a 'constant feature' of the IFP. As a matter of fact, competitive interaction has cyclically emerged as a number of events from the last decade confirm.

The article aims to challenge a deeply-rooted belief about the Italian posture towards Russia and provide a more nuanced theoretical framework. Therefore, it posits that intervening changes at the structural level trigger a competitive turn in this relationship. Accordingly, it diachronically compares Rome's stance towards Moscow across three different periods equally marked by the crisis of the international order. In particular, it brings out the competitive downturn between the two countries in the current crisis of the liberal order¹ and verifies the occurrence of a similar dynamic during those crises of the Interwar period (1936-1941)² and of the Cold War (1979-1985).³ The in-depth analysis is based both on primary (strategic documents, international treaties and agreements, governmental websites) and secondary sources (scientific literature, policy reports, newspapers).

2. The 'Russia Factor' in Italian Foreign Policy

Undoubtedly, political, cultural and economic ties between Italy and Russia are rooted in past centuries and trace back to long before the birth of a unitary state in the Peninsula – as a vast historical literature confirms (Berti, 1957). As a result, this topic has mostly been explored by historians, although only a few of them have taken into consideration the post-Cold War era (Nuti, 2011; Bettanin, 2012). Instead, it has generally remained under-investigated in the literature on International relations (IR). In this field of research, few works have paid specific attention to Italy's stance on Russia while others have analysed it in a wider effort to understand the IFP. Instead, their relationship has frequently been the subject of policy reports.

¹ The 2007-2008 crisis has been conventionally identified as the turning point for the liberal order (Parsi, 2018).

² The international order shaped at the Paris Conference definitively fell into crisis between the Italian aggression against Ethiopia and the turn of the war in Europe on a global scale in 1941 (Morgenthau, 1948).

³ The bipolar order definitively fell into crisis between the war in Afghanistan and the appointment of Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Gaidar, 2017).

This being said, five major interpretative strands emerge in the literature. A first strand explains Italy's policy towards Russia as linked to the quest for a new role within the Euro-Atlantic community after 1989-1991, as clearly pointed out by Caffarena and Gabusi (2017). According to them, Rome's goal was to emerge as a mediator with former Cold War enemies such as Russia and Libya within a changing international environment. Collina (2008) claims that Italy undertook the pragmatic mission of acting as a bridge between Russia and the EU and NATO ('bridge approach') due to Italy's needs in the energy sector and Russia's opportunity to be gradually accepted in the Western concern. Coralluzzo (2006), for his part, interpreted Italy's mediator role with Russia as the result of the shift from its traditional 'obsession for visibility' to a new 'obsession with mediation', even when such a role is not requested by the states involved.

Besides, a second strand in the literature emphasizes the weight of political leaders and party preferences on Italy's stance towards Russia. In the light of this, Romano (2009), Giacomello and colleagues (2009), as well as Carbone and Coralluzzo (2011), agree that this objective was pursued by Silvio Berlusconi, in particular through his 'personal diplomacy' strategy, based on the scenario of the future integration of Russia into the EU.⁴ More broadly, Diodato and Niglia (2019) write that Berlusconi attempted to put the country in the position of the 'honest broker' in order to reconnect Russia and the West, establishing friendly relations with Vladimir Putin that were maintained even when Berlusconi was not in office.⁵

Ferrari and Pejrano (2011), together with Brighi (2013), illustrate that Berlusconi's appetite for a special relationship with Putin was also pursued to bolster his image at home. This choice requested immaterial costs such as defending the Kremlin from charges of human rights violations in Chechnya, and being subjected to the accusation of being Russia's 'Trojan Horse' in Europe after the Russo-Georgian war (Carbone, 2008). Coticchia and Davidson (2019), for their part, shift the focus on Matteo Renzi, explaining that the conciliatory stance of his Cabinet with Russia was finely tuned to maximize the prime minister's chances of winning the next election. Mikhelidze (2019), finally, points to a recent reconsideration of Russia as a pillar in IFP due to a political-cultural environment open to Putin's geopolitical narratives and to the rise to power of populist and anti-EU parties such as the Five Star Movement and The League in 2018.

The third group of explanations highlight economic and/or cultural reasons. Accordingly, Giusti (2009) considers Rome's search for a strategic partnership with Moscow to be motivated by its Russian gas supply dependence and increasing economic exchanges. Similarly, Carbone (2009) as well as Brighi and Giugni (2016) maintain that all Italian governments have invested in bilateral ties with Moscow, especially in the oil and gas sector. Lastly, De Maio and Fattibene (2016) posit that the lack of historical wounds and conflicting interests in strategic areas encourage Rome to implement a two-track strategy. This approach is based on both the simultaneous maintenance of its Euro-Atlantic commitments and on the search for a partnership with Moscow in the energy market.

⁴ Differently, centre-left governments have been sceptical about Russia's membership in the EU (Romano, 2009).

⁵ Nonetheless, his efforts resulted ephemeral because Germany established privileged relations with the Kremlin in the years of his II-III Cabinets (2001-2006).

Among those studies particularly devoted to the strategic factor, Romano (1994) does not believe in a sincere partnership between Italy and Russia and interprets their interaction as a mutual attempt to exploit the counterpart with the aim of achieving material advantages. They can mimic an alliance to deter other powers from their intentions or to increase their perceived power, as they did for the first time with the Racconigi Bargain (1909). Later, Croci (2005) argues that Italy's interest in undermining the gradual re-balancing of NATO's centre of gravity eastward matched that of Russia at the turn of the millennium. If the former wanted to avoid the weakening of the southern flank of the alliance, the latter aimed at thwarting the gradual 'encirclement' of Western powers. Similarly, Siddi (2019) maintains that Italy's middle power approach shows its commitment in favour of a *détente* in Russia-West relations and its need for the Kremlin's cooperation in contrasting the new security challenges in the Mediterranean basin.

Finally, another group of works more explicitly represent Italy's search for a partnership with Russia as a 'constant' of its foreign policy following a multiplicity of factors. Arbatova (2011) argues that the investigated relationship is marked by a close intertwining of cultural, political and economic contacts shared since the eighteenth century. Indeed, the collapse of the Soviet regime opened up new opportunities for the development of foreign trade and fostered political cooperation on major international issues, leading to the emergence of a 'privileged partnership'. Later, Giusti (2017) confirmed the idea of a privileged relationship between the two countries rooted in history. To her, Rome's cooperative posture towards Moscow has been further relaunched in the wake of four integrated narratives, namely the need to strengthen a lucrative relationship, the Italian diplomatic goal of becoming Russia's gateway to the West, the European strategic interest in avoiding 'closing the door' to Russia, and the tendentially positive feelings of our elite and public opinion towards Moscow. De Maio and Sartori (2018), for their part, state that, after 1991, the political turnover at Palazzo Chigi did not generate significant variations in the Italian ambition to include Russia in the wider European 'family'. On the contrary, Italy continues to try involving Russia in all negotiation tables and strengthening bilateral relations, while respecting the duties connected to its Euro-Atlantic membership. Finally, Alcaro (2013) assesses that cultural infatuation, economic interests and political parentage played a fundamental role in consolidating Rome's closeness to Moscow. Interestingly, the author makes the point that short-term gains push Italy towards Russia, while long-term advantages bring Italy on side with the US on crucial issues but, unfortunately, he does not address the argument.

3. Neither too much good nor too much harm

The rhapsodic nature of the debate on Italy-Russia relations has favoured the consolidation of rhetoric about their alleged special relationship. The first analysed strand highlights that Italy's stance towards Russia was primarily based on tactical considerations that lie outside bilateral relations with the counterpart. Instead, the strand that interprets it through domestic political variables has the advantage of incorporating the preferences and policies implemented by Italian leaders towards Russia. However, both of these explanations generally focus their attention on the post-Cold War era, without exploring the possibility of the existence of abiding trends in the relations between the two powers over the decades.

Consciously or not, the other three strands of the literature treat Italy's cooperative stance towards Russia as a sort of 'constant' (or 'permanent') feature of its foreign policy. This concept refers to long-term behaviours fostered by cultural accumulation, factual experiences, or geography and absorbed by the collective imagination of a country (Santoro, 1991; Isernia and Longo, 2017).

Nevertheless, the third group overemphasizes the weight of economy upon foreign policy, without considering that trade tends to 'follow the flag', especially during periods of crisis. The fourth, for its part, does not seem to be aware that some constant Russian interests – such as having influence in the Balkans and the access to warm seas⁶ (Kotkin, 2016) – can persuade it to invade that circle of 'geographic proximity' where Italy cannot afford to keep a low profile (Andreatta, 2001). Instead, the last strand idealizes the Italy-Russia relationship, defining it as 'a rare case where the definition of close traditional ties is not an exaggeration or a tribute to diplomatic etiquette' (Arbatova, 2011, 5). This interpretation misses the fact that significant tensions between the Peninsula and Russia have emerged over the centuries, since before Italian unification⁷, as denounced by some historians (Petracchi, 1993; Bettanin, 2012).

In the light of this article, what appears most important is that the above-mentioned works underestimate the impact of structural factors on Rome's posture towards Moscow. Except for Romano (1994), the last three strands of explanation bring out several instances of proof of cooperation between the two powers, accepting uncritically that Italy would be constantly looking for a partnership with Russia. Hence, they do not contemplate the possibility that some recurring interests might be subverted by the unforeseen and eroded by the inexorable flux of time (Wight, 1970). Furthermore, it must be noted that most of the literature here discussed seems to be generally committed to analysing Italy's preferences and policies towards Russia within a stable international environment. This implies that the level of 'day-to-day decisions' prevails, rather than in 'moments of great crisis', when the criterion of state affairs becomes more problematic (Watson, 1959, 43-44).

Therefore, the article investigates how a structural factor such as the intervening instability of the international order influences relations between States. 'International order' means 'a set of commonly accepted rules that define the limits of permissible action and a balance of power that enforces restraint where rules break down' (Kissinger, 2014, 9). As a result, it is based on the interaction between a normative dimension and a distributive one (Clementi, 2011). 'Instability' is not understood only by a 'negative' perspective, according to which the order is stable because it is peaceful (Waltz, 1964) or 'no state believes it profitable to attempt to change the system' (Gilpin, 1981, 10). Conversely, unstable is every international order suffering from a lack of acceptance by most of the major powers (Kissinger, 1957), a low degree of predictability (Schweller 2016), and uncertain durability (Andreatta, 1997). Thus, instability pertains to 'any state of affairs that [...] would continue to change until reaching some limit or breakdown point of the system' (Deutsch and Singer, 1964, 391).

⁶ Italy has always been concerned that the Black Sea could become a 'Russian lake' and about the presence of the Russian fleet in the Mediterranean Sea (Petracchi, 1993).

⁷ Such as the sizable participation of Italians in the French invasion of Russia (1812), the leading role of the Czarist Empire in the Holy Alliance as guarantor of the status quo derived from the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815) or the Kingdom of Sardinia's contribution to the Crimean War (1853-1856).

By adopting the logic of power transition theory, the crisis represents the peak of growing instability, when power hierarchies and principles of legitimacy on which the order is based are openly put under strain by revisionist states (Colombo, 2014). This phase is marked by the so-called ‘interaction changes’ intended as ‘modifications in the political, economic, and other interactions or processes among the actors in an international system’ (Gilpin, 1981, 43). In the meantime, states are called upon to make crucial decisions that will shape the global outcome of the crisis, such as their future rank within the next order (Colombo, 2014). Indeed, interaction changes frequently result from states’ efforts ‘to accelerate or forestall more fundamental changes in an international system and may presage such changes’ (Gilpin, 1981, 43).⁸

Consequently, the mounting struggle for power is very likely to constitute an influential structural constraint on states – such as Italy (Santoro, 1991) – which are generally classified as middle powers. For most of them, the presence of a stable international order brings increasing opportunities and greater freedom of choice. This strategic context enables some middle powers to take initiatives of their own in regard to the core relationship of international politics, or it allows the playing of crucial roles in regional politics. By contrast, intensified competition between major powers, combined with an increasing polarization of resources, significantly narrows the range of middle powers’ actions (Holbraad, 1984).

Their limited but still substantial power has a twofold implication. On the one side, median states recurrently seek external support from a major power and tend to align with it even if their interests partially diverge. On the other hand, major powers bid for their support (Wight, 2002) and must take their behaviour into account in their key decisions (Handel, 1990). Therefore, middle-sized states tend to side with the conservative power/s or with the revisionist one/s to defend or revise the international order (Organski, 1967). Choosing allies depends on intervening variables, such as a higher compatibility of strategic interests, pre-existing alliances and ideological affinity (Valigi, 2017).

Although the article is not aimed at denying the influence exerted by domestic, tactical or strategic factors on Italian foreign policy, it proposes a structural explanation of Italy’s stance towards Russia. It posits that Rome seems to be more prone to a cooperative stance towards Moscow whenever the international order proves stable and exercises looser constraints over states. Conversely, a condition of growing international instability reveals escalating tensions between the two powers. Therefore, this work pursues a twofold goal: on the one hand, to challenge the taken-for-granted assumption about Italy’s constant cooperative stance towards Russia and, on the other, to provide a more nuanced interpretation of the Italian posture towards its alleged ‘natural’ partner (table 1).

This is neither to say that Italy and Russia have turned into absolute enemies in the past, nor that they will become so in the future. In fact, as Constantino Nigra disclosed in a letter to Pasquale Stanislao Mancini in 1881,⁹ they could do ‘neither too much good nor too much harm’ (Chabod, 1962, 620). Rather, it serves to highlight how Rome’s interests gradually diverge from those of the counterpart when international uncertainty increases.

⁸ In light of the periodization of the article, the systemic changes occurred respectively in 1941-1945 and 1985-1991. Conversely, we cannot speak of a systemic change that has taken shape within the contemporary international order.

⁹ At the time, they were respectively the Italian ambassador in Russia (1876-1882) and the minister of Foreign Affairs (1881-1885).

Table 1. A century of Italy-Russia relations (1920-2020)

Italy's policies towards Russia			
Period	Cooperation within a Stable International Environment	Turning points	Competition within an Unstable International Environment
The Interwar Order (1920-1941)	Recognition of the Bolshevik Government (1921); Agreement on FIAT Activities in the USSR (1931); Italo-Soviet Pact (1933)	Japan and Germany Withdraw from LoN (1933); Italian Aggression against Ethiopia (1935-1936)	Military and Diplomatic Skirmishes during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939); Adhesion to the Anti-Comintern Pact (1937); Italian Expeditionary Corps in Russia (1941)
The Cold War Order (1949-1985)	Joint Communiqué on Italy's POW (1959); PCI Cooperative Posture with Moscow (1949-1977); DC Cooperative Posture with Moscow To Diversify the IFP (1953-1979)	Soviet-Afghan War's Outbreak (1979); Acceleration of the US-USSR Strategic Rivalry (1981)	Participation in the Boycott of Moscow Summer Olympics (1980); Denounce of USSR's Violation of Italian Territorial Waters (1982); Missiles Installation at the Comiso Airport (1983)
The Liberal Order (1991-2020)	Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (1994); NATO-Russia Council established in Rome (2002); Memorandum on the South Stream (2007)	Increasing Competition among the US and the Revisionist Powers since the Financial Crisis (2007-2008) and World Recession (2009)	Adhesion to the Sanctions against Russia (2014); Participation to the EFP (2016); Support to the NATO Membership of Montenegro (2017) and Macedonia (2020)

4. Looking for a *modus vivendi*?

The international order of the interwar period emerged amidst the beginning of the Paris Conference in January 1919 and the entry into force of the Treaty of Versailles in January 1920. It was marked by multipolarity and the absence of clear leadership, because the United Kingdom was lacking in terms of capacity and the United States was not willing to take the lead (Taliaferro et al., 2012). Although the Trotskyist project of the 'permanent revolution' expired in 1922, the Soviet Union was relegated to the sidelines of international diplomacy until 1934, when it joined the League of Nations (LoN) as a permanent member of the Council (Carr, 1969). This choice was justified by the Kremlin's objective to consolidate 'socialism in a single country', which implied the need to be progressively integrated into the international order (Ulam, 1974). Although maintaining a moderate ideological controversy, Fascist Italy established a *modus vivendi* with the USSR.

After the *de facto* recognition of the Bolshevik government in 1921, the progressive instauration of the Fascist regime did not thwart a rapprochement between the two countries. At the outset of its pragmatic foreign policy, Italy was the third state to recognize the USSR *de jure* in 1924 (Petracchi, 1993). Later, Italy's approach towards the Soviet Union was driven by its willingness to foster economic and diplomatic

cooperation. In 1931, a credit agreement was signed between the two governments and FIAT started its industrial activities in the USSR. Moreover, both Rome and Moscow found a common interest in publicly promoting the image of a cooperative attitude between two 'anti-capitalistic' countries (Bettanin, 2012). The Italian cooperative stance towards the USSR reached its peak with the *Pact of Friendship, Neutrality and Non-aggression* in 1933 (Petracchi, 1993).¹⁰ Its signature overlapped with Adolf Hitler's rise to power, which was viewed with concern not only by Moscow, but also by Rome due to the Nazi Party's claim to unite the German people by including the Austrian and Italy's South Tyrolean populations (Mammarella and Cacace, 2006).

Shortly thereafter, Rome contributed to the definitive destabilization of the Inter-war order that was already experiencing the first Japanese and German revisionist policies (Taliaferro et al., 2012).¹¹ In fact, its aggression against Ethiopia in 1935-1936 constituted a violation of the principle of territorial integrity (art. 10) of the LoN Covenant (League of Nations, 1919), proved the ineffectiveness of the collective security principle (art. 16) and, more generally, undermined the legitimacy of the post-War equilibrium (Morgenthau, 1948). As a result, Italy progressively aligned with Germany. This choice was fostered by the Nazis' *Neuordnung* project, which contemplated Rome's sphere of influence over the Mediterranean basin and by the ideological affinity of the two countries (Nolte, 1988).

The occupation of Ethiopia was fiercely opposed by Moscow because it clashed with its commitment to defend the LoN after 1934, its new willingness to strengthen its relationship with London and its leadership role of the 'popular fronts' (Strang, 2013). In the meantime, it gradually backed Italy to align with Germany. Galeazzo Ciano¹² signed the Rome-Berlin Axis in 1936 and joined the Anti-Comintern Pact in 1937. These choices clashed directly with the maintenance of a cooperative posture towards the USSR. The first proof of this political shift belongs to the Spanish civil war, when the two powers found themselves on opposing sides (Mammarella and Cacace, 2006). Moreover, their relationship did not improve in the following years. In 1937, Moscow accused Rome of the sinking of some Soviet ships plying the Mediterranean by covert submarine and air attacks and, as a response, it expelled Italian peasants from the Soviet Caucasus and closed all the Italian consulates in the USSR (Petracchi, 1993). In 1938, commercial relations plummeted to almost nothing¹³ (Issraelyan and Kutakov, 1967).

Although Italy intensified its alliance with the Third Reich,¹⁴ Mussolini perceived the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939) negatively for a twofold reason. On the one hand, he considered it a threat to Italy's ambition to play the role of mediator between the two powers. On the other hand, the Italian dictator was convinced that the Pact might be extended to South Eastern Europe, undermining his ambitions in the region. Rome's reaction was not long in coming. It encouraged the Romanian government to take a firm

¹⁰ The Italo-Soviet Pact was considered to be complementary to the Four-Power Pact, signed by Italy, UK, France and Germany in the same year (Melograni, 1965).

¹¹ Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931 and together with Germany withdrew from the League of Nations in 1933.

¹² He was the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs (1936-1943) and Mussolini's son-in-law.

¹³ Italy's exports to the Soviet Union dropped from 9 million lire in 1937 to 1 million lire in 1938, and its imports from 105 to 7 million lire.

¹⁴ The following steps were the Pact of Steel (1939) and the Tripartite Pact (1940).

line on Bessarabia, promising assistance in the event of an attack, and hosted in Venice a meeting with the Hungarian Foreign affairs minister to contemplate the future of the Balkans (Pons and Romano, 2000). After the beginning of the Winter War,¹⁵ Palazzo Venezia fostered an anti-Soviet media campaign and supplied Helsinki with weapons (Petracchi, 1993).

The evolution of the war in Europe triggered a change in the Nazi plan towards the USSR. At the beginning of June 1941, Mussolini offered Hitler an army corps and created the Italian Expeditionary Corps in Russia, which joined *Operation Barbarossa* (Issraelyan and Kutakov, 1967). In his diary, Ciano (1996, 895) remembered that ‘the idea of a war against Russia is in itself popular, inasmuch as the date of the fall of Bolshevism would be counted among the most important in civilization’. However, he immediately noticed that this choice lacked an ‘undeniable’ and ‘convincing’ reason, with the exception of Berlin’s military calculation.

5. An Atlantic loyalty combined with friendship with the USSR?

The Cold War order gradually took shape between the wartime conferences¹⁶ and the Soviet Union’s achievement of nuclear parity in 1949 (Gaddis, 2005). As a result, it was characterized by a strong balance of power in the military dimension and, at the same time, by the United States hegemony in the economic one (Kindleberger, 1996). The US-USSR strategic competition not only marked the security dynamics at the global level, but had a pervasive impact also on the regional and local ones (Aron, 1962). Each superpower took the leadership of a given institutionalized system of alliances – the so-called ‘blocs’ – within which it imposed constraints on the foreign policy of the states that belonged to it (Colombo, 2010). In the light of this perimeter, Italy recognized its subordinate role to the US but, in the meantime, it exploited its strategic weight to obtain a certain degree of autonomy (Nuti, 2011). In particular, it was able to maintain a relationship with the Soviet Union, mainly in order to enhance its position with Western partners (Bagnato, 2003).

The post-War relations between Rome and Moscow were definitively normalized with Stalin’s death in 1953, Italy’s admission to the United Nations in 1955 and the Joint Communiqué on the issue of Italian war prisoners in 1959 (Bettanin, 2012). From then on, Italy showed political nonchalance in developing commercial relations with the USSR, as proved by the economic agreements signed by ENI and Finsider in 1960 and by the agreement reached by FIAT for the construction of a car-assembling plant in the Soviet city of Tolyatti¹⁷ in 1965 (Bagnato 2003). Furthermore, Rome’s cooperative attitude towards the Soviet Union was favoured, on the one hand, by the deeply rooted political relations of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) with Moscow and, on the other hand, by the will of Christian Democracy-led governments to diversify the IFP from that of the Western allies on non-crucial issues (Bettanin, 2012). During the *détente* (1969-1979), Italy’s international posture was further inspired by both an absolute Atlantic loyalty and

¹⁵ It was fought by the USSR and Finland between November 1939 and March 1940.

¹⁶ Among them, the conferences of Terranova (1941), Tehran (1943), Dumbarton Oaks (1944), San Francisco (1945), Yalta (1945), Potsdam (1945).

¹⁷ Called after the Secretary of the Italian Communist Party Palmiro Togliatti.

the quest for a friendly relationship with the USSR. The good relations between the two powers culminated with the 1969 deal between ENI and the USSR Ministry of Foreign Trade for a twenty-year Russian natural gas supply to the amount of 6 billion cubic meters per annum.¹⁸

However, the outbreak of the Soviet-Afghan War in 1979, together with a sharp increase in the strategic rivalry between the US and the USSR enhanced by the arrival of Ronald Reagan in 1981 and the Soviet economic decline in the eighties, undermined the bipolar order (Gaidar, 2017). This led to the beginning of a new period of intense awakening of tensions and conflicts around the world (Halliday, 1989). Italy had been deeply integrated into the structures of the Western alliance since 1949 and its loyalty to the United States was never a matter of question.

Therefore, its stance towards the USSR was not insensitive to this change. As evidence of this, Jimmy Carter's decision to boycott the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics gained the official support of the Italian government, which did not allow athletes serving in its military corps to attend the Games.¹⁹ Furthermore, the so-called 'second' Cold War allowed Italy to resume its international prestige. From 1979, the Italian government clarified its willingness to host the new NATO missiles to the great surprise of its Allies. It took the lead very early during the negotiations for the deployment of new weapon systems aimed at contrasting the continuing military build-up of the Warsaw Pact countries. In fact, the increasing capability of the latter in nuclear systems threatened Western Europe through the deployment of the Soviet SS-20 missiles. Furthermore, this choice was confirmed by the Craxi government, which allowed the installation of the Pershing and Cruise missiles at the Comiso Military Airport in 1983, raising violent protests from the Kremlin (Nutti, 2011).

Moreover, the new posture of the Italian government towards the Kremlin became clear when a nuclear-powered Soviet submarine was detected by the Italian submarine *Leonardo Da Vinci* in the Gulf of Taranto in 1982. Hence, the Italian Defence Minister Lelio Lagorio called the USSR Ambassador to denounce this violation of Italian territorial waters (Lagorio, 2005). In the same year, Italy participated in the Multinational Force in Lebanon with the ITALCON mission. Therefore, a major Italian force composed of 2,300 troopers of the Folgore Brigade and Bersaglieri regiments was deployed abroad for the first time since the end of WWII (Nutti, 2011). Although this choice was not explicitly directed against the USSR, it contributed to reaffirm Italy's special relations with the US, as well as its willingness to play a more decisive role in an area in which Moscow was traditionally engaged (Lagorio, 2005).

Finally, the 'second' Cold War restricted any room for political manoeuvre also for the PCI. As secretary, Enrico Berlinguer had already brought out the creeping frictions with Moscow that existed since the Prague Spring by opting for the historic compromise with Christian Democracy in 1976 and by launching the 'Eurocommunism' project in 1977. Although the PCI sided with Moscow in the Euromissile crisis, the Soviet-Afghan war and the 1981 military coup in Poland increased once more its distance from the

¹⁸ Moscow was granted a loan of USD 200 million for the procurement of pipelines and equipment for the gas industry from Italian companies (Gazprom, 2009).

¹⁹ The others participated under a neutral flag with the Olympic anthem played at each ceremony.

Eastern bloc. Therefore, Berlinguer affirmed that the October Revolution had exhausted its driving force and that he felt safer being within the Atlantic Pact (Gozzini, 2017).

6. Such a 'privileged' relationship?

The liberal international order that stemmed from the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR is generally considered to be unipolar and hegemonic, being based both on the power preponderance and on the leadership of the US (Deudney and Ikenberry, 1999). Although downgraded in the international hierarchy of power and prestige, the Russian Federation maintained a significant role after the intervening systemic change. Its persistent strength, whose main indicators were military capacity (especially nuclear), geopolitical weight and natural resources, made it the equal of any great power other than the US and an enduring potential threat to the European continent. Therefore, it remained a top priority for Washington and for its allies (Task Force on Russia and US National Interests 2011), among which Rome was prominent. The intervening changes in the international environment, made a low-profile foreign policy style no longer sustainable (Isernia and Longo, 2017; Monteleone, 2019). Among other policies, Italy outlined the political project to act as a 'bridge' (Collina, 2008) between Russia and the West.

The post-Cold War relationship between the two countries was officially launched with the 1994 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (Camera dei Deputati, 1995). Subsequently, Italy fostered a gradual integration of Russia in the Euro-Atlantic community, as confirmed by its sponsorship of Moscow's inclusion in the Contact Group on the Balkan wars. However, it is generally agreed upon that the most important success of the Italian approach towards Russia was reached with the 2002 NATO Summit in Rome. In fact, Silvio Berlusconi played a major role in the launch of the NATO-Russia Council (NCR) (NATO, 2002) and of the so-called 'Pratica di Mare spirit'.²⁰ It paved the way for a new age of cooperation and for Italy's upgrade to a pivotal diplomatic role (Diodato and Niglia, 2019). In 2006, Romano Prodi pushed ahead with negotiations to build another pipeline network that would directly link Italy with Russia, bypassing the transit countries. As a result, ENI and Gazprom signed a memorandum of understanding for the construction of the South Stream pipeline in 2007 (ENI, 2007). Finally, Italy moderated US pressures for Ukraine and Georgia to be given *Membership Action Plans* at the NATO Summit in Bucharest (NATO, 2008), in order to avoid such a step increasing friction with Russia (Gallis, 2008).²¹

In the light of these events, the 2007-2008 financial crisis and the following world recession represented a watershed for the shift of the liberal order towards instability (Colombo, 2014), as confirmed by the growing competition between its main guarantor, the United States, with some revisionist powers, including Russia (White House, 2017). In the wake of this event, Rome's posture towards Moscow did not suddenly turn into a competitive one. Mario Monti renewed support for the South Stream project and signed new economic agreements during his visit to Moscow in 2012 (Russian Government,

²⁰ The summit was held in the Pratica di Mare Air Base.

²¹ Russia harshly denounced the dangers of the US-led international order at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, while the US began negotiating the deployment of a missile defence shield in Poland and Czech Republic and recognized Kosovo's declaration of independence (Natalizia and Valigi, 2020).

2012). Similarly, Enrico Letta was the sole EU leader to participate in the opening of the Russian Winter Olympic Games in Sochi when the 2014 Ukrainian revolution was ongoing (Letta, 2014). However, Italy's membership both in NATO and in the EU and the definitive authoritarian turn of the Russian regime since 2012 (Freedom House, 2013) have limited Rome's room for maneuver with Moscow.

As a result, Italy accepted the launch of the European Monitoring Mission in Georgia after the 2008 Georgian-Russian war, supported the launch of the European Eastern Partnership in 2009, and adhered to almost all of the EU initiatives under the project (Mikhelidze, 2017).²² Furthermore, Matteo Renzi's cabinet did not recognize the legitimacy of Crimea's status referendum, but condemned Russia for the annexation of the Ukrainian region and agreed on suspending its participation in the G8 and on the EU sanctions against it (Coticchia and Davidson, 2019).

All these policies were implemented to contrast the Kremlin's growing aggressiveness and to thwart the definitive restoration of its influence over its 'near abroad' (Stefanachi, 2018). Afterwards, Rome's choices pointed to its firm alignment to the Western field, the secondary nature of its relationship with the supposed 'privileged' partner and the decline of the 'bridge approach'.

In the light of Russia's counter-sanctions, which negatively affected the Italian exportations of agri-foods, machinery and mechanical equipment (Giumelli, 2018; Morini, 2020), as well as its decision to abandon the South Stream project,²³ differently from the Nord Stream 2 project with Germany, Rome's stance towards Moscow has undergone a gradual structural revision including in the energy sector. As a result, ENI has improved its diversification strategy aimed at making Italy more independent from the Russian gas supply. In particular, its efforts turned to the exploration of offshore reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean area, where it made a world class supergiant gas discovery at its Zohr Prospect in the deep waters of Egypt in 2015 (ENI, 2015).

In the meantime, Rome's interests progressively diverged from those of Moscow in an increasing number of strategic issues. In the Balkans, Italy was among the main sponsors of growing EU cooperation with Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, in order to strengthen its traditional influence in the Adriatic-Ionian region (MAECI, 2017; 2018). In the same vein, it fostered the recent NATO membership of Montenegro and North Macedonia.²⁴ Russia, for its part, silently opposed the first integration not only to avoid losing its economic influence in the region, but also because it considers this process as parallel to that of acceding to NATO (IISS, 2019). Moreover, Italy confirmed its commitment to securing NATO's eastern flank, by sending 140 soldiers to Latvia. The Alliance's *Enhanced Forward Presence* in Poland and the Baltics was promptly accused by the Kremlin of constructing 'new lines of division in Europe, instead of deep, solid relations as good neighbours' (De Feudis, 2016). Finally, the most important case of emerging contrasts between the two countries concerns Libya. Here, Rome has fiercely supported the internationally recognized government of Tripoli and the 'one Libya' solution, just as it has tried to maintain a central role in the crisis by countering the interference of actors from outside the central Mediterranean, such as Russia

²² Among them, the visa liberalization for Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

²³ However, the Kremlin explored a new southern route to Europe via Turkey (Reed and Kanter, 2014).

²⁴ Respectively obtained in 2017 and 2020.

and Turkey (MAECI, 2019). By contrast, Moscow openly supports Tobruk, it has favoured the entry of the Russian mercenaries in the Libyan theatre of crisis alongside the warlord Khalifa Haftar, and it is, *de facto*, backing the option of splitting the country, therefore guaranteeing the strengthening of its position in the Mediterranean basin (Biagini, 2020).

7. Conclusions

The main goal of this article was to challenge a taken-for-granted belief about the IFP, such as Rome's alleged constant cooperative posture towards Moscow. Therefore, it investigates a century of relations between these powers, providing both theoretical and empirical insights.

The study of the Italian stance towards Russia underlines the weight of the structural factor on states' foreign policy in the long term. It proves that a certain kind of cooperation can take place between states belonging to different systems of alliance, distinguished by some conflicting strategic interests or marked by deep ideological differences in the presence of international stability. By contrast, it shows that the occurrence of a gradual shift in the global distribution of power and prestige and the consequential increase in international competition usually reverses this tide.

Furthermore, the investigation of the IFP in 1936-1941, 1979-1985 and 2008-2020 appears useful also to improve IR knowledge of middle powers' behaviour. It confirms their inclination, as in the case of Italy, to align with a major ally, such as the Third Reich or the US, in the face of a global crisis and to assume a competitive posture against the states – the USSR or the Russian Federation – belonging to the opposite side. At the same time, the diachronic comparison confirms that, when there is stable international order, they seemed to be more prone to cooperate with the counterpart.

The in-depth analysis shows that during the first part of the Interwar period, Italy was among the first states to recognize the Soviet government and to establish friendly relations with it, culminating in the Italo-Soviet Pact. Similarly, Rome developed economic relations with Moscow during the fifties and the sixties, reaching a peak with the 1969 deal for the shipment of Soviet gas to Italy. Finally, it presented itself as a 'bridge' between the West and the Russian Federation in the post-Cold War, playing a fundamental role in the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council.

Conversely, the diachronic comparison proves that instability of the international order calls into question the common belief about Italy's constant cooperative attitude towards Russia. After 1936, Rome's gradual alignment with Berlin fostered a competitive turn. It was not surprising that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact further worsened this shift because it posed a threat to its role as mediator and its interests in the Balkans. Similarly, at the turn of the eighties, Italy exploited the evolution of the international scenario to relaunch its prestige, particularly by playing a major role in the 'Euromissile crisis'. Finally, an increasing number of Rome's policies have clashed with Moscow's interests during the last decade. In particular, Palazzo Chigi aligned itself with Western powers regarding the 2014 sanctions, favoured the integration of the Balkans into the Euro-Atlantic security system and countered the Russian proxy in the Libyan theatre of crisis.

To conclude, we are aware of not having included in the present study another interesting case, namely that of the declining phase of European equilibrium before the

Great War. We opted for this solution because at the end of the crisis Rome entered the conflict on the same side as Petrograd, and this choice could be partially distortive. In a nutshell, it must be remembered that the secret Racconigi Bargain was immediately tempered by a new Austro-Italian agreement on the interpretation of article 7 of the Triple Alliance, that Rome's interest was thwarting both the Austrian and the Russian influence in the Balkans at the beginning of the century and, finally, that its vital interest in Fiume and Dalmatia was considered unacceptable by the then Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Sazonov (Vigezzi, 1966; Biagini, 1983).

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