

Navigating Geopolitical Complexities: Italy's Strategic Challenges and Opportunities in the Mediterranean Basin (2020-2023)

Flavia De Lucia Lumeno¹

Abstract

This study examines Italy's multifaceted role in the Mediterranean region, focusing on its energy dependency as a critical determinant of its geopolitical strategies and diplomatic relations. Italy's position as a major energy importer, with natural gas comprising 38% of its total energy consumption in 2021, fundamentally shapes its regional policies. The research employs a comprehensive geopolitical analysis framework, integrating energy security theories with international relations concepts to elucidate Italy's evolving Mediterranean strategy. The study reveals Italy's significant shift in energy partnerships following the Ukraine conflict, with Algeria replacing Russia as its primary energy provider since September 2022. This transition has led to a reconfiguration of Italy's foreign policy, strengthening ties with North African countries. The analysis extends to Italy's complex relationships with Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia, where energy interests intersect with issues of migration management and regional stability. The study also examines the challenges Italy faces in securing its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and the implications for energy resource exploitation, particularly in light of increased competition from neighboring states. Methodologically, the research combines quantitative analysis of energy trade data with qualitative assessment of diplomatic agreements and geopolitical dynamics. This mixed-method approach provides a nuanced understanding of Italy's strategic positioning in the Mediterranean. The study's original contribution lies in its comprehensive analysis of how Italy's energy needs drive its diplomatic, economic, and strategic decisions in the Mediterranean. It reveals that Italy's capacity to maintain a stable and diversified energy supply remains pivotal to its strategic positioning in this dynamic region. Moreover, it demonstrates how Italy's energy dependencies have led to a complex balancing act between national interests and ethical considerations in its foreign policy.

Keywords: Italy, Mediterranean, Energy Security, Algeria, Turkey, Libya, Egypt, Human Rights

1. Introduction

Italy is a major importer of energy, with a particular reliance on natural gas. In 2021, 77% of Italy's energy requirements were fulfilled through imports, with 40% originating from Russia and 29% from Algeria. Natural gas represents Italy's primary energy source, fulfilling multiple purposes including electricity generation, residential heating and industrial processes. In 2021, natural gas comprised 38% of Italy's total energy consumption. The conflict in Ukraine had a substantial impact on this situation. The imposition of sanctions against Russia resulted in a decrease in natural gas supplies, which subsequently led to an increase in energy costs. In 2023, the retail price of electricity and gas was 76.0% higher than the average price observed two years prior. In December 2023, the consumer price of electricity and gas remained 30.1% higher than in December 2021. Italy has considerably reduced its dependence on Russian natural gas.

As of December 2023, the volume of incoming gas, predominantly from Russia, showed a 90.2% reduction compared to the 2021 import volume. Additionally, the proportion of total gas imports decreased from 40.0% in 2021 to 4.6% in 2023.

In Italy, natural gas is imported via pipeline or in the form of liquefied natural gas (LNG), transported by specialized LNG vessels. The latter is introduced into the network through regasification facilities located in Porto Levante (Rovigo), Livorno and Panigaglia (La Spezia). Furthermore, Italy is connected to five distinct gas

¹Associate Professor of History of International Relations, Professor of Euro-Mediterranean Relations and Contemporary History, Università degli Studi "Niccolò Cusano", Department of Politics, Law and Social Sciences, Via Don Carlo Gnocchi, 3, 00166 Rome, Italy. Email: flavia.delucialumeno@unicusano.it

pipelines. These include Transmed, Greenstream, Transitgas, TAG (Trans-Austria Gas) and TAP (Trans-Adriatic Pipeline). The first pipeline transports Algerian gas, crossing Tunisia and terminating at Mazara del Vallo. The second pipeline connects Libya with the Gela facility in Sicily. The third pipeline links the North-Western European and Italian gas markets, conveying Dutch and Norwegian gas to Piedmont. The fourth pipeline transports Russian gas to the Tarvisio facility in Udine. The fifth pipeline delivers Azeri gas to Melendugno in Apulia.

Russian and Azeri gas reach the Italian market via three pipelines. Russian gas originates in Siberia and passes through Ukraine, eventually reaching the Slovak border. From there, it is transported via Transgas to Austria, where it enters TAG (Trans-Austria Gas), which carries it to the Tarvisio facility in Udine province. In contrast, Azerbaijani gas starts in Baku and crosses Turkey. Successively, the gas is conveyed through TANAP (Trans-Anatolian Pipeline) to Greece, where it enters TAP (Trans-Adriatic Pipeline), which delivers it to Melendugno in Puglia. These three pipelines are crucial for Italy's energy supply, ensuring a secure and diversified gas supply. In 2021, Russia was Italy's primary natural gas supplier, with 29.1 billion cubic metres imported. However, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the proportion of gas from Russia decreased by 61%, reaching 11.2 Bcm in 2022. Algeria is now Italy's second-largest natural gas supplier, with 23.7 billion cubic metres imported in 2022. Azerbaijan ranks third, supplying 10.2 billion cubic metres of gas to Italy in 2022.

The second most significant provider of methane to Italy is Algeria, delivering 23.7 billion cubic meters of gaseous fuel in 2022. Azerbaijan stands as the third most important supplier of natural gas to Italy, furnishing 10.2 billion cubic meters of methane in 2022. The procurement of gas from Holland and Norway demonstrated a remarkable uptick in 2022, with a 241% rise compared to the prior annum. Moreover, LNG (liquefied natural gas), which is conveyed via vessels rather than conduits, also registered substantial expansion in 2022. Specifically, the regasification facility in Panigaglia (La Spezia) increased its throughput twofold, while the installation in Livorno experienced a 70% boost in inbound shipments.

Additionally, Italy has established fresh interconnections to enable gas interchange with fellow EU nations and is channeling resources into cutting-edge technologies aimed at diminishing its dependence on natural gas, encompassing offshore wind farms and eco-friendly hydrogen.

Russia's military foray into Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has exerted a profound influence on the dynamics between Mediterranean countries (Meyer 2023). As a result, Europe determined to curtail its reliance on Russian gas and instead pivot towards nations like Algeria, Libya, and Qatar to augment gas imports via pipelines and liquefied natural gas. According to projections from the American Energy Agency, Libya's petroleum and gas reserves in 2021 totaled 48 billion barrels and 2 billion cubic meters, respectively. This constitutes a considerable fraction of the global oil reserve pool, representing roughly 3% of the world's aggregate oil reserves. Furthermore, Libya boasts the fifth-largest methane deposits in Africa. Nevertheless, the nation's volatile domestic political climate precludes assurances of uninterrupted supply. For instance, in recent years, several primary oil extraction locations were forcibly shuttered under various circumstances. These disruptions were orchestrated by militant factions demanding the dissolution of the Tripoli administration in favor of President Bashagha. The scenario is further convoluted by the involvement of private military entities (PMEs), such as Russia's Wagner outfit, in regions housing gas extraction and storage facilities (Mens 2022).

Algeria stands as a crucial nation for methane exports to Europe. Nevertheless, its robust connections with Russia cannot be entirely supplanted by the EU, thus rendering Algeria an unreliable ally. There exists a possibility that gas shipments to Europe via Spain might surge if the rapport between Morocco and Algeria enhances, leading to the reactivation of the Maghreb-Europe gas conduit. The circumstances in the eastern Mediterranean are also highly volatile due to Turkish explorations in the central and eastern Mediterranean, which are creating substantial challenges for the EU (Cerami 2024). These frictions are anticipated to intensify in the coming years. Consequently, although the Mediterranean countries play a vital role in completely substituting Russian hydrocarbons, the stability of numerous nations in the region remains precarious.

Regarding immigration, it is noteworthy that the principal migratory routes to Europe originate from three key areas: the southwestern region of Morocco, southern Libya, and eastern Turkey. The European Union initiated Operation Sophia and subsequently Operation Irini to counter human smuggling into Europe, but these endeavors have achieved limited success due to inadequate consensus among European governments concerning the asylum framework (Panebianco 2020). Moreover, employing military might alone without other forms of regional collaboration has proven ineffective (Cusumano, Riddervolt 2023). In this context, Italy has exhibited a more holistic approach to the migration issue. This encompasses not only fiscal agreements but also bilateral summits with individual states and the implementation of cooperation policies, which collectively represent a multifaceted strategy for tackling the challenges posed by migration (De Lucia Lumeno 2024; Rosina, Fontana 2024).

China and Russia are assuming an increasingly prominent role in the Mediterranean, augmenting the current scenario. China presents a significant economic and strategic rivalry for NATO and the EU (Zou, Isik 2022). Chinese investment in infrastructure projects and telecommunications holds great importance in the Middle East and North Africa, making it the second largest region for Chinese investment with over \$200 billion in 2018. Despite their reliance on Europe, there has been a notable expansion in economic relations between the Maghreb countries and China. Given their shared historical heritage and overlapping roles, Algeria maintains the closest ties with China. Indeed, in 2014, China inked a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Algeria, the first of its kind in the Middle East and North Africa. China's aim is to foster a regional environment that is conducive to advancing its economic and national security interests. This objective is pursued through the exercise of the roles ascribed to China as a South-South collaborator and developer (Zoubir 2022).

The Kremlin harbors strategic ambitions in the Mediterranean for military purposes (Blank, Kim 2021). The nation openly backs the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and has broadened its African footprint through the deployment of the private military entity, Wagner. It is widely speculated that Wagner's involvement extends to extreme measures such as coups in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. Furthermore, Russia ranks among the principal arms suppliers within this geographical zone. Moscow aims to portray itself as an 'alternative paradigm' to former colonial powers (Šćepanović 2021). The growing influence of China and Russia in the Mediterranean presents fresh challenges for the EU and NATO. Both nations are endeavoring to augment their sway in the region, potentially impacting security and stability in the Mediterranean basin (Shlykov, Koldunova 2022).

Despite a diversification of strategies and an expansion of geographical focus, the Italian administration continues to view the Mediterranean as a crucial arena for its international relations (Coticchia, Mazziotti di Celso 2024).

2. Turkey

Turkey's international stance has undergone considerable transformations in recent years, particularly since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) ascended to power in 2003. The AKP, led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, initially sought European Union membership, despite its roots in political Islam and anti-Western ideologies. Subsequently, it adopted a more assertive and autonomous approach that aligned it closer to Russia and China while distancing itself from NATO and the European Union. This shift in Turkish foreign policy was shaped by various factors, including the 2008 financial downturn that eroded Turkey's faith in the West, the Arab Springs that toppled several regimes friendly to Turkey such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, and the Syrian conflict that triggered a humanitarian crisis and escalating instability in the region.

The AKP leveraged these events to promote a novel foreign policy model, grounded in three core principles: to establish Turkey as a pivotal power in the Middle East; to strengthen bonds with Muslim nations; and to champion the rights of Turks globally. This revised foreign policy has profoundly impacted the region, sparking intensified competition between Turkey and Russia, Turkey and the US, and Turkey and the European Union. Turkey has gained prominence in the Middle East, but its growing isolation and unpredictability have become causes for concern. Turkey is intervening in scenarios it deems strategically vital or where its security is imperiled. Such an approach is evident through military campaigns in Syria, presence in Libya and Iraq, and its backing of Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. Turkey has fortified its ties with Russia by acquiring the Russian S-400 missile system and collaborating on projects like the Turk Stream gas pipeline and the Akkuyu nuclear power facility. Consequently, the country's relations with the West, particularly with the United States, the European Union, and NATO, have become strained.

There has been criticism of Turkey's human rights infringements, suppression of dissent, and authoritarian tendencies (Bal 2023). Turkey persists in pursuing the 'Mavi Vatan' doctrine, also known as the Blue Homeland, with the objective of attaining maritime supremacy and projecting its influence in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean zones (Özşahin, Çakmak 2022). This approach is motivated by various factors, such as safeguarding national interests and enhancing regional dominance, despite facing significant criticism. On the energy supply front, Turkey asserted its claims by conducting military maneuvers and drilling activities in the eastern Mediterranean. This resulted in heightened tensions with Cyprus, Greece, and Egypt. In addition to the 2019 accord with the Libyan government in Tripoli to delineate their respective exclusive economic zones in the eastern Mediterranean, Turkey initiated military exercises and drilling operations in the contested region in 2020. Consequently, Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus accused Turkey of infringing upon their sovereign rights. Turkey has adopted a more conciliatory stance, as evidenced by the improved relations with nations that were previously considered challenging partners, like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. The rapprochement with the UAE was realized by the visit of Emir Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan to Turkey in 2022, which was reciprocated by Erdogan's visit to the UAE. The reconciliation with Saudi Arabia was confirmed by the visits of heads of state to their respective countries in 2022. Previously, ties between the two nations had been fraught due

to Ankara's proximity to Qatar and the 2018 assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

Although relations between Turkey and Egypt have ameliorated, they remain at odds on certain issues, such as Libya. For instance, Turkey supports the Government of National Accord in Tripoli, whereas Egypt backs the Government of National Stability.

Turkey's role, and that of its leader Erdogan in particular, has become increasingly pivotal in mediating the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Last year, negotiations conducted by Ankara successfully unblocked the export of grain from Ukrainian ports, thus bolstering Turkey's diplomatic standing within NATO. However, Turkey's position regarding this conflict is ambiguous. On one hand, the country has condemned the Russian invasion and supplied BayraktarTB2 combat drones to Ukraine. On the other hand, it has not implemented the Western sanctions on Russia, in an effort to preserve its economic and energy relations with Moscow. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Erdogan asserted his right to veto Finland and Sweden's NATO membership bid should they fail to meet the conditions stipulated in the memorandum between Stockholm and Ankara. Ankara's position on the Ukraine conflict remains unclear due to robust economic bonds between Turkey and Russia, Turkey's pivotal role in the eastern Mediterranean, and its aspirations to mediate in the ongoing dispute. The long-term consequences of Turkey's stance on the Ukraine war are challenging to forecast at this early juncture. In recent times, the rapport between Turkey and the European Union has become strained. The EU has admonished Turkey for its deteriorating democracy and civil freedoms, particularly following the thwarted coup in 2016 (Thevenin 2021). Concurrently, Turkey's inclination towards a more forceful foreign policy and greater strategic independence has precipitated a clash of geopolitical interests with the EU. This is evident in the controversies regarding Turkish naval maneuvers in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as military campaigns in Syria, Iraq and Libya. Moreover, there is the perception of Turkey occupying a central position between East and West held by Western allies (Shlykov 2024). The European Union halted Turkey's accession talks in 2016 due to the worsening human rights climate in the country. Turkey responded indignantly, accusing the EU of hypocrisy. Relations between Turkey and the European Union (EU) are crucial for the region's security and stability. It is imperative that both parties find a resolution to their disagreements and collaborate to address shared challenges. For instance, they joined forces to manage the migration crisis and combated terrorism collectively.

The EU and Turkey must cooperate to surmount their differences and tackle common issues. The security and stability of the region hinge on the relationship between Turkey and Italy. Italy considers Turkey a vital ally in commerce. In 2022, the aggregate trade between Italy and Turkey amounted to USD 26.4 billion, with Italy ranking as Turkey's fifth largest trade partner. From 2002 to 2022, Italian exports to Turkey have surged from USD 4 billion to over USD 15 billion. Over the past two decades, Italy has secured major public and private contracts in Turkey, including motorways, subways, the third Bosphorus bridge, and the Pininfarina-designed control tower at the new Istanbul airport. More than 1,000 Italian enterprises have invested in Turkey, making Italy Turkey's second biggest trading partner in the European Union, trailing only Germany. Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani visited Ankara to confer with his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu, following the meeting between Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Giorgia Meloni at the G20 in Bali.

A critical issue in the relationship between Italy and Turkey concerns the Libyan dossier, in which both countries have substantial national interests. Turkey's involvement in the Libyan conflict is evident as it has provided backing to the GNA by dispatching armed forces, drones, and armaments. This has resulted in a significant turning point for Tripoli. Italy endeavored to act as a mediator in the conflict by supporting GNA and engaging in dialogue with all stakeholders. Italy has cultivated strong ties with Libya, especially in the energy sector. The intervention of Turkey has further complicated Italy's already intricate position. Regrettably, Turkey's involvement has exacerbated the situation.

Although Turkish action helped halt Haftar's advance, which posed a potential threat to ENI and other Italian interests, the increasing Turkish influence presents a direct challenge to Italy. Italy seeks a stable Libya to manage migration flows and safeguard its energy and security interests. It is striving to mediate between Turkey and Egypt, both of which have conflicting interests in Libya. The recent meeting between Tajani and Çavuşoğlu indicates that Italy and Turkey aim to enhance their relations. The two nations reached an agreement to collaboratively address the Libyan conflict and advance stability and security in the area.

3. Egypt

Cairo's international and defense strategy prioritizes fostering alliances with both neighboring and global entities to effectively champion and protect their interests, while preserving autonomy. Although Egypt has adopted a more assertive stance in various global matters, it continues to adhere to the Cold War principle of 'non-

alignment' regarding its partnerships. Egypt actively engages in worldwide and regional affairs, with substantial involvement in addressing key issues such as the Libyan turmoil, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian dispute, and the disagreement with Ethiopia concerning Nile resource management. Recently, Egypt has also bolstered its connections with Turkey and Qatar. Egypt shares a 1,200 km frontier with Libya, predominantly desert and challenging to supervise. For several years, Egypt has demonstrated its interest in Libya by participating in diplomatic endeavors to find a peaceful resolution to the crisis and by offering political and military support to the forces in Cyrenaica. Egypt's stability is vital for the Middle East and North Africa. Egypt's dynamic role in regional affairs is essential to the pursuit of enduring peace and security. Egypt is presently facilitating discussions between the Palestinian factions of Hamas and Fatah, alongside negotiations between Israel and the armed groups operating in the Gaza Strip.

Concurrently, the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has further intensified the divide between Moscow and the Western powers. This polarization has considerably impacted Egyptian foreign policy, which has consistently aimed to maintain stable relationships with both the Kremlin and Washington and Brussels. Egypt and Russia share common stances on regional issues such as Libya and Syria, as well as economic agreements that are politically influenced. In July 2022, the inauguration ceremony for the El Dabaa nuclear power plant was conducted in Egypt. Moscow and Cairo will collaborate on the project until 2028. The Kremlin has committed to finance 85 percent of the facility and to train Egyptian personnel at the Russian headquarters of the energy company Rosatom. Egypt and Russia have established ties in the international cooperation arena. In July 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov undertook an official visit to Egypt, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Congo, with the aim of reaffirming the Kremlin's promise to supply wheat as requested by African countries. The conflict in Ukraine has challenged Egypt's ability to maintain an equilibrium between Moscow and the Western powers. However, the Egyptian administration appears resolute in maintaining a foreign policy of neutrality, despite the escalating instability in the global scene.

It abstained from voting on the UN General Assembly resolution to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council. Additionally, the Al-Sisi administration has preserved cordial ties with the United States. In November 2021, the two nations entered into a fresh 'US-Egyptian Strategic Dialogue' that reaffirms their robust strategic bond, especially in the military domain. In May 2022, the Biden administration approved the sale of radar defense and twelve tactical transport helicopters to Cairo. This is the initial portion of an order for twenty-three aircraft and associated armaments totaling USD 2.6 billion. Moreover, Egypt has strengthened its relationships with European nations. In June 2022, Cairo hosted a series of institutional meetings with European leaders wherein the two blocs reaffirmed their joint commitments to multiple areas. These include combating illegal immigration, stabilizing the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, fighting Islamic terrorism, as well as addressing economic and energy issues. Given their provision of political, economic, and military backing, Egypt finds its strong relations with the US and Europe crucial. Egypt plays a pivotal role in maintaining the stability of the Middle East and North Africa, and its proactive engagement in the region is paramount to achieving sustained peace and security. The historical connection between Italy and Egypt spans over centuries and continues to be driven by shared interests, including security and economic prosperity. Geopolitically, Italy and Egypt are both Mediterranean nations that share a vested interest in promoting stability across the region. The two countries have closely collaborated on several geopolitical matters, such as counter-terrorism efforts, managing migratory flows, and resolving conflicts in the Middle East. Italy is the second largest trading partner in Europe for Egypt, whilst Egypt holds the second spot as Italy's largest trading partner in Africa. The energy sector in both countries sees strong cooperation. There exist robust relations between Italy and Egypt which are expected to remain significant in the coming years. The two nations are united by shared interests and a long history of cooperation. As previously mentioned, Italy stands as the main market for exports from Egypt, in addition to being their second largest trading partner in Europe. In 2022, Egyptian exports to Italy surpassed €2 billion and primarily comprised energy products and manufacturing.

In Egypt, over 130 substantial Italian enterprises operate with contracts valued at USD 2.5 billion. These firms primarily function within the hydrocarbon, energy, textile, construction, mechanical engineering, and banking sectors. Consequently, it is reasonable to anticipate that commercial relations between Egypt and Italy will continue to flourish in the coming years (Canali 2023). Egypt is undergoing remarkable economic expansion, and Italy has proven to be a respected and dependable ally.

Prominent Italian corporations, including Banca Intesa San Paolo, Edison, Eni, Ansaldo, Italcementi, Italgas, Pirelli, Cementir, Techint, Danieli, Gruppo Caltagirone Tecnimont and Telecom, have reinforced economic bonds between the two nations and created numerous employment opportunities in North Africa. Eni, a key partner of Egypt and the country's leading oil and gas producer, has been established in Cairo since 1954. With investments surpassing USD 14 billion in the region, Eni operates in all crucial areas, producing approximately 10.5% of Egypt's hydrocarbons annually and facilitating the growth of its energy sector. Eni's

discovery of two immense gas fields, Nooros and Zohr, has further consolidated its position in Egypt. Zohr stands as the largest gas reservoir in the Mediterranean, boasting a gas capacity of 850 billion cubic metres. Eni is currently engaged in constructing a gas processing facility and a pipeline aimed at transporting the gas to Italy. Egypt has also established agreements with Eni to convert a portion of the gas for electricity generation to be sold to Libya. This arrangement will enhance Libya's power supply and create job opportunities for both nations by operating power plants in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. This is crucial for sustaining the country's industrial progress while ensuring the function of Eni's facilities in Libya that transport gas to Italy via the Greenstream pipeline.

Moreover, Egypt's strategic location between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, connecting North Africa and the Middle East, is of paramount importance. This renders Egypt an ideal site for both gas production and exportation. Egypt possesses various infrastructures that establish it as a regional energy hub, such as the Suez Canal, one of the world's most critical sea passages, natural gas liquefaction (LNG) plants situated in Damietta and Port Said, and the Sumed pipeline, linking the port of Suez with the port of Alexandria. The existing infrastructure makes Egypt an optimal location for gas production and export, owing to its abundant natural resources. Consequently, the country has the potential to emerge as a hub for regional gas production and exportation. On 15 January 2023, Eni announced a new gas field discovery in the Nargis-1 exploration well premises, located within the Nargis Offshore Area concession in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, off the coast of Egypt. This discovery brings the aforementioned possibility a step closer to realization.

The discovery was made at a depth of approximately 3,500 meters and is estimated to contain roughly 850 billion cubic meters of gas. Production from the field is scheduled to commence by 2025, helping to meet the natural gas demand of both Egypt and Europe. Egypt is a significant natural gas producer, possessing around 2.21 trillion cubic meters of confirmed reserves and exporting nearly 22 million cubic meters of liquefied natural gas (LNG) in 2022. The recent gas find in Egypt is crucial for both Egypt and Europe, as it will contribute towards meeting their respective natural gas demands, and facilitate the transition towards a more sustainable energy future. Additionally, it will reduce Europe's dependence on Russia for their energy sources (Vitale 2023). The connection between Eni and Egypt is profound, with the relationship of utmost importance to Italian foreign policy. The murder of Italian researcher Giulio Regeni in February 2016 created tension between Italy and Egypt. However, this did not affect Eni's relationship with Egypt, as CEO Claudio Descalzi maintained his visits and negotiations with President Al-Sisi. In December 2016, Descalzi signed new concession agreements at al-Hammad and North Ra's al-Ash. In February and August 2017, he met with President Al-Sisi to establish timelines for the commencement of Zohr production and to eliminate any obstacles that could impede their mutual interests. During the diplomatic crisis between the two nations, the final meeting between Descalzi and Al-Sisi occurred on 27th August 2017, approximately two weeks following the Italian government's decision to dispatch Ambassador Cantini to Cairo and renew official diplomatic relations with Egypt. Italian foreign policy is significantly influenced by events in and around Egypt, hence strengthening trade and other associations between Rome and Cairo play a crucial role in Italy's Mediterranean involvement. The Italian government is increasingly aligning itself with authoritarian regimes in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

This decision is driven by the necessity to protect its immediate political and institutional interests. This was evident in the recent agreements between the European Union and Tunisia, as well as in the case of the Egyptian activist Patrick Zaki, who received a pardon from Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi. Furthermore, the 'International Conference on Development and Migration' held by the Italian government at the Farnesina on 23 July 2023 also highlighted this fact. Representatives from numerous countries from the southern shores of the Mediterranean, the Middle East, the Gulf, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa attended the conference. The affair concerning Patrick Zaki's case underscores the Italian government's inclination to overlook human rights violations in Egypt in exchange for cooperation agreements. The 'International Conference on Development and Migration' aimed to enhance collaboration among Mediterranean nations to address the challenge of illegal immigration. However, it neglected the underlying factors of the issue, such as conflicts, deprivation, and absence of democratic governance in numerous regions across the Mediterranean. The Egypt-Italy relations are increasingly dependent on security coordination. The two nations collaborate to combat arms, drug, and migrant trafficking in the Mediterranean Sea. This alignment of interests, however, diminishes in other geopolitical arenas, such as Libya and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, where the two nations maintain opposing positions.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi characterized the relationship with Italy as 'exceptional' and emphasized the excellent economic, cultural, and human ties between Egypt, its government, and Italy. Italy supported the 'revolution' on 30 June 2013 when the elected president Muḥammad Mursī was ousted by the military, and Al-Sisi's regime has been in power since he served as Minister of Defense. Matteo Renzi, the former Italian Prime Minister, was the first Western leader to meet with the newly-elected Egyptian president and to receive al-Sisi on his first European tour as president. Additionally, Italy has supported Egypt through other

means, such as authorizing exports of arms to Cairo that reached EUR 30.2 million in 2013, with actual exports amounting to EUR 25,467,200 at the embargo's peak in 2014. "Stability first" remains the guiding principle for both the Egyptian and Italian governments. In summary, Italy is attracted to Egypt's market of 90 million people, with an average age of 25 and a population growth rate of 2% per year, representing significant business opportunities for Italian companies. Additionally, the Libyan issue serves as another crucial link between Italian interests and Egypt. Egypt, although having a distinct position different from that of Italy, is a significant player in the region. It is vital for Italy to foster strong relations with Egypt to have influence over ongoing events in Libya and protect national interests. Egypt, although having a distinct position different from that of Italy, is a significant player in the region. Therefore, Italy has a profound interest in Egypt's stability, given its strategic importance to us. Maintaining stability in Egypt is imperative for Italy's security and economy (IlSole24ore 2023).

4.Libya

Italy has persistently endeavored to foster the rebuilding of Libya's national and institutional cohesion in the post-Gaddafi era. The nation backed the Government of National Accord (GNA), which was formed in Skhirat, Morocco in 2015 with United Nations assistance. This backing aligned with Italian and international interests, as its goal was to establish a stable and democratic Libyan administration. The control and diminution of migration flows from Libya to Italian shores have greatly influenced Italian foreign policy and strategy. Italy has forged agreements with the GNA to halt migrant departures from Libya and provided humanitarian aid to those affected by the Libyan conflict. The impact of migration flows from Libya on Italian foreign policy has been considerable. Recent Italian administrations have adopted a short-term approach in Libya, prioritizing political stability over the legitimacy of opposing factions in the conflict. This emphasis has diverted Italy's attention from the ground reality, resulting in a narrowing of the country's role and significance in the peace process. Moreover, the involvement of certain European and regional powers in backing opposing factions has led to a diminishing of Rome's influence in the Libyan situation.

Specifically, Italian governments have supported the Government of National Accord (GNA) under Fayez al-Sarraj's leadership, while also maintaining relations with General Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA). Italy's ambiguous stance has hindered its ability to assume a prominent role in the Libyan peace process. Furthermore, the involvement of various European and regional nations backing opposing sides has resulted in Rome's waning influence in the Libyan context. Notably, France showed support for the GNA, while the LNA received backing from Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. The European allies' division made it challenging for Italy to mediate in the Libyan conflict. Overall, recent Italian administrations adopted a short-term strategy in Libya, diverting attention away from ground changes and causing a gradual decline in Rome's influence on the Libyan scenario. Italian foreign policy towards Libya is complex, involving a balance between security, economic, and humanitarian interests. However, Italy is committed to promoting stability and democracy in Libya to enhance the security of both the Mediterranean and Europe. Additionally, Italy maintains economic and energy interests in the country, as it leads both in exporting oil and gas to Libya and in non-energy manufacturing industries, such as foodstuffs, electrical equipment, machinery, and chemicals. This relationship holds significance for Libya. Oil and gas revenues have formed the social contract between the state and Libyan society since the 1960s. Public expenditure on services, the labor market, and all economic activities are founded on the hydrocarbon rent. This income amounts to approximately 70% of Libya's GDP and 95% of its state revenue, rendering the country dependent on hydrocarbons and imports in the absence of an alternative economy. Italy is significantly involved in extracting and exporting hydrocarbons from Libya. Eni, the Italian oil corporation, has been in Libya since 1959 and has aided the development and modernization of extraction methods. In 2018, Eni produced around 31 million barrels of oil and 12.3 billion cubic meters of gas in Libya.

Italy's geographic proximity and the quality of Libyan oil, combined with the presence of gas in the country and Rome's achievement in winning fast-track status for direct gas exports, rendered Italy a stable partner of Libya. The Mellitah Gas Pipeline is an underwater conduit that directly connects Italy and Libya. It transports gas from the offshore Wafa and Bahr al Salam facilities to Sicily. Inaugurated in 2004, it was constructed by an Italian-Libyan consortium and remains one of the most pivotal infrastructure ventures between the two nations. The pipeline serves as an illustration of Italy's strategic significance and role in fostering better relations between the two countries. Italy is the foremost importer of Libyan gas, and the Mellitah pipeline contributes significantly to Italian gas imports. Furthermore, the pipeline plays a crucial role in generating revenue for Libya. It is worth noting that Italy has consistently maintained its support for the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya, primarily due to its economic and security interests in the region. Nevertheless, foreign powers' intervention, especially Haftar's attack on Tripoli in April 2019, caused Italy to alter its approach. Italy officially recognized the Cyrenaica general during the Palermo Summit in November 2018, driven by concerns about possible changes in Libyan leadership and agreements between the two countries. This shift in policy was also influenced by the involvement of other European nations supporting Haftar on Libyan soil, despite the EU's endorsement of the

GNA. The Tripoli government became isolated due to outside powers' military and political support for Haftar. Eventually, Libya's internal conflict escalated into a global civil war.

Europe's passive stance in the matter contributed to the Turkish military's intervention in the Libyan crisis, expanding the conflict into multiple fronts in the Mediterranean. The Turkish military intervention in Libya resulted in a memorandum of understanding between the Turkish government and the GNA. This memorandum defined the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) boundaries with the objective of exploiting the vast hydrocarbon resources in the eastern Mediterranean and aiding the GNA with military support. Immediately after the Turkish action, Italy, Greece and Cyprus rejected it, presenting their position on the matter. Greece and Cyprus condemned the government in Tripoli and offered diplomatic support to Haftar, largely to counter Turkey. Conversely, Italy, with an interest in the new hydrocarbon deposits in the area, immediately opposed Turkish action in Libya. Following the 2020 Berlin conference, the EU decided to launch a naval mission in the Mediterranean (Irin) to enforce the arms embargo on Libya, and also provided training for the Libyan coast guard. However, weapons flow monitoring is restricted to sea arrivals. General Khalifa Haftar receives support by air from the United Arab Emirates and by land on the Egyptian border, which explains Al-Sarraj's criticism of this operation as benefiting his opponent. Nevertheless, Italy was able to retain its importance in the former colony. Italy, among Western countries, was the sole nation to reopen its embassy in Libya.

Italy has consistently maintained contact with the situation in Libya with the aid of Eni's extensive experience in the nation, and the Italian company's broad knowledge of the country's terrain and internal political dynamics. Despite the Turkish-Libyan agreement, Italy retains a keen interest in Libya's energy resources, particularly as a former colony. Eni and Libya signed a memorandum of understanding in June 2023 to collaboratively study and identify opportunities for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting sustainable energy development within the country. It is noteworthy to mention an additional agreement between the Italian multinational and the Libyan National Oil Corporation of Libya (Noc) in January of this year. The aim of this agreement is to boost gas production with a strategic 'Structures A&E' project in two offshore fields, with the objective of supplying energy to both the Libyan market and Europe's gas export. Furthermore, a carbon storage site (CCS) will be established in Mellitah. Russian naval activity in the Mediterranean has recently grown alongside direct military engagement in Ukraine. This has fostered a closer relationship between Italy and Turkey, resulting in the Cavo Dragone-Haddad agreement being signed on 22nd March 2023 in Rome. The agreement tasks Italy with training Libyan special forces. Admiral Giuseppe Cavo Dragone, Chief of Defence Staff for Italy, highlighted the significance of collaboration between Italy and Libya, particularly in military operations, due to the existing regional instability in the wider Mediterranean area. The agreement represents progress towards military cooperation between Italy and Libya and also involves reorganizing the Italian military presence in the African nation. The Italian mission in Libya (MIASIT) could play a technical role in safeguarding Rome's national interests in its former colony. Italian interests in Libya extend beyond energy and immigration, also encompassing politico-military considerations (Dacrema, Varvelli 2020).

The unified reconstitution of the armed forces serves as the foundation for stabilizing Libya and blocking external interference by powers that undermine Italy's already weak influence. The Italian decision to train the special forces of the Government of National Unity (GNU) has been deemed a risky move by many, potentially worsening relations between Tripoli and Tobruk. In reality, this agreement is a response to the 'unitary' military policy demanded by Washington and is also backed by partners who oppose the current conception of the stabilization process in Libya, including Turkey. The aim of the United States is to weaken the relationship between Russia and the Libyan National Army (LNA). Since 2015, the Mediterranean has become an achievable objective for Russia. This situation represents a threat to NATO, as the Kremlin would be able to acquire a naval base in Cyrenaica, which could potentially destabilize the balance in the central and eastern Mediterranean. Consequently, the prospect of reuniting the Libyan Armed Forces is considered a viable solution to prevent Russia from expanding its presence in Libya. This solution is endorsed by Rome, Ankara, London, Paris, and Washington. Although Italy, Turkey, England, France, and the United States have different stances on the Libyan crisis, they share the goal of removing Russia from Libya. Establishing unified military units in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica is also crucial for destabilizing the Fezzan region, which is located in Libya's southern province and is a hub for arms and human trafficking, as well as home to significant oil and mining installations (Del Monte 2023).

5. Algeria

In 2023, Algeria emerged as one of Italy's key energy allies. The Ukrainian conflict, coupled with the subsequent energy crisis, has complicated Italy's endeavors to resolve long-standing regional disparities with Algeria. Nevertheless, Italy must assert its geopolitical interests to establish itself as a dominant maritime force in the Mediterranean. Italy and Algeria have collaborated on various fronts for decades, with Eni operating on Algerian terrain since 1981. However, bilateral relations between Italy and Algeria have intensified only since the conflict in

Ukraine. The Italian administration is striving for energy autonomy and cooperating with the southern Mediterranean coast. Consequently, they have initiated a series of joint ventures with the Algerian government, encompassing various sectors. These initiatives span diverse fields, including energy provision, defense, heavy industry, and aerospace. The accords, inked in January between Italy and Algeria, signify a substantial progression in the bilateral relations between these two nations.

These agreements will assist in boosting Italy's energy self-reliance and further cement its position as a leading maritime power within the Mediterranean. The bond between Italy and Algeria has strengthened markedly, and their levels of interdependence have grown, particularly concerning Italy's energy resource provision. Since September 2022, Algeria has become Italy's primary energy provider. Eni and Sonatrach signed numerous strategic accords in January 2023. The objective of Mr. De Scalzi, the Administrator of the Italian entity, includes expanding the export capacity from Algeria to Europe, developing renewable energy, and implementing new energy efficiency initiatives to achieve zero gas supplies from Russia by 2025. These agreements suggest that the connection between Eni and Sonatrach will intensify in the coming years. Italy's current situation is intricate. In March 2018, a North African country declared its exclusive economic zone, which is in close proximity to Sardinia's territorial waters, just 12 miles off the Italian coast. However, Italy heavily relies on Algeria, which has now become its primary supplier of gas. The delimitation of exclusive economic zones (EEZs) between countries with opposite or adjacent coastlines must be based on international law and preceded by an agreement between such nations, as stated in Article 74 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Italian law no. 91 of 14 June 2021 permits Italy to commence negotiations for the establishment of its EEZ; however, conclusive agreements have not yet been reached with neighboring nations. Italy possesses an extensive Mediterranean coastline and shares maritime borders with various countries, such as France, Spain, Malta, Tunisia, Libya, and Albania. According to Law No. 91 of 2021, Italy is obligated to initiate talks with neighboring countries to establish their EEZs. The negotiations are presently ongoing, but it remains uncertain when a final resolution will be achieved. The delay in achieving the EEZ agreement is detrimentally affecting Italy. Firstly, Italy is unable to fully utilize the marine resources within its exclusive economic zone. Secondly, Italy lacks complete sovereignty over its territorial waters. Italy must expedite negotiations with its neighboring countries to arrive at a definitive agreement on the delimitation of the EEZ (Esposito 2023).

However, with the current international order, Algiers exerts a more dominant position over Italy than it did a few years ago, thus making it increasingly challenging for Italy to assert its interests. Additionally, Sonatrach intends to commence further off-shore drilling within the Algerian-Provençal basin, highlighting the significance of energy supply through control and efficient exploitation of the available resources. However, an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) holds additional value beyond its potential for energy resources, facilitating the expansion of fishing basins, logistical services, migration routes and providing protection for borders, critical infrastructure and defense mechanisms. Italy must reach agreements to define its exclusive economic zone. However, it needs to avoid tense situations with Algeria, which is a crucial partner in terms of energy stability.

6. Tunisia

On 6th June 2023, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni made an official journey to Tunisia, where she convened with President Kaïs Saïed and Prime Minister Najla Bouden. The agenda primarily revolved around the migration dossier and Italian assistance in finding ways to resolve the economic crisis that has plagued the North African nation for a decade now. Additionally, given Tunisia's central role in the energy flow from Algeria, the issue was also discussed. The economic turmoil in Tunisia has resulted in a surge in migration to Italy. To prevent potential destabilization of the region and its migration patterns, Tunisia must address the long-standing socio-political and economic strife it has faced. In mid-2023, approximately 52,000 migrants arrived in Italy from Tunisia, with a sharp increase from around 21,000 in 2022 and 15,000 in 2021[1]. To tackle the issue of migration in Italy, it is necessary to address poverty, terrorism, climate change, and health challenges in the migrants' countries of origin. Therefore, we must take action at the root causes. The political situation in Tunisia is bleak. Over the last two years, the president has consolidated power, suspending parliament, dissolving the government and eliminating the opposition, whom he has labelled as 'enemies of the people'. Additionally, the judiciary is under the control of the president, and attacks on freedom of expression and press are becoming more frequent.

To divert public attention from these concerns, Saïed has commenced a crusade against unauthorized immigrants from the sub-Saharan region. To avert Tunisia's financial breakdown, Italy is taking action. It is endeavoring to obtain the €450 million that is anticipated from the European Union. On the other hand, Italy is requesting that the Tunisian president accept a portion of the reforms required by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which would allow for the release of the initial tranches of the £1.4 billion loan that the international institution is obligated to distribute to Tunisia. Italy is encouraging its European counterparts, as well as others, to locate a resolution to the Tunisian problem. This issue was reiterated at both the most recent European Council

meeting and the G7 summit in Japan. The potential economic collapse of Tunisia could negatively impact Italy and potentially result in increased illegal migration to Italy. Thus, Italy is strongly motivated to prevent an economic collapse in Tunisia and is actively seeking a solution to the Tunisian crisis while urging cooperation from its European partners. From an energy perspective, Italy is also invested in avoiding Tunisia's collapse. The European Commission has sanctioned the creation of ElMed, a maritime electrical connection stretching approximately 800 km between Italy and Tunisia. It is worth noting that those waters are also traversed by the TransMed gas pipeline running from Algeria to the Italian shoreline. The collapse of the former French protectorate could endanger energy relations between Italy and North Africa. The ElMed project is a crucial infrastructure for Italy, reducing its dependence on Russian gas and enhancing its energy security. The TransMed pipeline serves as one of Italy's primary natural gas supply routes, and a collapse in Tunisia would threaten Italy's supply security. Therefore, Italy possesses a strategic interest in supporting Tunisia and avoiding its economic demise.

7. Conclusions

Italy's position in the Mediterranean is characterized by a complex interplay of energy dependencies, geopolitical tensions, and strategic alliances. The ongoing energy transition and the reduction in Russian gas imports, triggered by the war in Ukraine, have resulted in a significant reconfiguration of Italy's foreign policy, notably strengthening ties with Algeria and Libya. This shift underscores Italy's paramount need to maintain a stable and diversified energy supply, which remains pivotal to its strategic positioning in this dynamic region.

The study reveals that Italy's relationships with key Mediterranean states, including Turkey, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt, are profoundly shaped by its dependence on external energy sources. This dependence has led to a delicate balancing act between energy security, migration control, and human rights considerations. The case of the 2017 Accord of Understanding with Libya exemplifies this complexity, where national interests sometimes take precedence over ethical reflections.

A critical challenge for Italy lies in the delimitation of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the Mediterranean. The expansion of EEZs without mutual agreement among Mediterranean countries has created tensions, particularly with Algeria. This situation is further complicated by Italy's increased reliance on Algeria for gas supply following the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, potentially weakening Italy's negotiating position.

The research also highlights the importance of strategic infrastructure projects, such as the ElMed electrical connection with Tunisia and the TransMed gas pipeline, in enhancing Italy's energy security and regional influence. These projects underscore the interconnectedness of energy policy and regional stability, particularly in the context of potential economic instability in countries like Tunisia.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the broader understanding of energy geopolitics and middle power diplomacy in a multipolar regional system. It demonstrates how energy dependencies can shape foreign policy decisions and regional alliances, often leading to complex trade-offs between national interests and ethical considerations. The research also highlights the limitations of international maritime law in resolving EEZ disputes when geopolitical and energy interests are at stake.

The study's findings have significant policy implications. Italy should prioritize the finalization of EEZ agreements with neighboring countries to secure its maritime resources and strengthen its regional position. Enhanced diplomatic efforts are needed to balance energy security needs with ethical considerations in relationships with countries like Libya and Egypt. Moreover, Italy must invest in diversifying energy sources and routes to reduce vulnerability to geopolitical shifts. Strengthening cooperation with EU partners to develop a cohesive Mediterranean policy that addresses shared challenges of energy security and migration is also crucial.

While this study offers valuable insights into Italy's Mediterranean strategy, it is limited by the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. Future research should focus on the long-term implications of Italy's energy transition on its regional relationships and explore the potential for renewable energy cooperation in the Mediterranean basin. Additionally, a comparative analysis of other Mediterranean countries' strategies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of regional dynamics.

Italy's experience in navigating the complex Mediterranean geopolitical landscape offers valuable lessons for other middle powers dealing with energy security challenges. The study highlights the growing importance of the Mediterranean in global energy geopolitics and the need for balanced, multifaceted foreign policies in an era of energy transition and regional instability. As global powers like China and Russia increase their presence in the Mediterranean, Italy's ability to maintain its influence while balancing diverse interests will have implications beyond the region, potentially informing broader discussions on energy security and regional cooperation in other parts of the world.

In conclusion, Italy's future role in the Mediterranean will largely depend on its ability to maintain a stable and diversified energy supply while adeptly managing complex diplomatic relationships. The country's success in this endeavor will have significant implications not only for its own strategic positioning but also for the broader stability and security of the Mediterranean region.

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