Italy during the Suez Crisis: the Defence of the Atlantic and European solidarity

by Elena Biondi

The choices made in the first decade of the post-war period transformed Italy into a part of the continental safety frame and they modified its Mediterranean aspirations. The Italian ambition to play a leading role in international politics was frustrated by the limits set by the peace treaty signed in 1947. The Atlantic and the European options implicated, therefore, the restoration of national dignity in the framework of security and western economic development, and finally the recovery of a decision-making role leaving behind the subordinate one. In fact, in 1955, the Italian government took the initiative to relaunch in Messina the European process, interrupted after the failure of the EDC. It collaborated, also, to find a solution for the crisis regarding the management of the relationships within the allies in which the Atlantic Alliance was incurring. The Foreign Minister Martino, co-opted in the Committee of the “Three Wise Men”, preceded to the examination of the possibilities of a renewal of co-operation, considered the intensification of the consultations as the resumption of the solidarity among allies. This involvement in the western initiatives brought Italy to a slow but decisive reintegration in the international community: the admission to the United Nations took place on December 14, 1955. From the allies’ point of view, Italy, from that moment, recovered enough freedom of action to allow itself the exploitation of potentialities that had to be submitted to vigilant control. Under some aspects the clauses of the peace treaty, that were a considerable conditioning, had also favoured an original evolution of Italian politics, especially in the Mediterranean. Up to then the Mediterranean politics had been an indisputable priority for Italy and the renunciation of the colonies, also to the pre-fascist ones, had been lived in dramatic way. Therefore, that circumstance, differently from what could have been imagined, had ended up in facilitating Rome’s government by allowing the development of friendly and commercial relations far from any colonialist connotation. Particularly, the relationships with Egypt showed to be more satisfactory and were also strengthened after Colonel Nasser’s coup. And the fact that the Italian government entertained relations especially with the countries that freed or were freeing themselves, not without contrasts, from the Franco-British control, produced among the European allies a climate of distrust towards Rome. In particular, the suspect fell on the oil activity of Enrico Mattei, that showed to be able to supplant the more seasoned competitors: the important contract for the realisation of the Suez-Cairo pipeline had been won by ENI over a French offer. The increasing economic affairs in Egypt made believe that the Italian dissent for the Anglo-American decision to withdraw the financing of the project of the Aswan dam was an expression of a more and more pro-Egyptian politics. Actually, in a letter addressed to the US Secretary of State, Dulles, on July 25, 1956, Minister Martino expressed worry for the consequences of the missed financing, stating that such action risked to take away Egypt and the whole Middle East from Italian and Western influence. Moreover, with the same letter he asked, the Department of State, for information or useful indications to prepare Nasser’s visit in Italy programmed for the following autumn. This witnessed the interest for the Egyptian situation, an interest that, besides, coincided with the inauguration, in the presence of Nasser and Mattei, of the Suez-Cairo pipeline. The fact that such a circumstance occurred on the eve of the Egyptian decision to answer to the missed American financing of the dam with the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, fed the suspicion that Italy had profited by an anticipation of the manoeuvre and had actually supported it.

The Egyptian initiative provoked negative reactions in most of the countries interested in the transit in the important maritime way. On the contrary, the Italian position showed a less exasperated point of view. In fact, Segni’s government distinguished the nationalisation issue from the right of freedom of navigation, and showed to share only proposals inspired to international law and not to force, an hypothesis that, on the contrary, was not put aside by the Anglo-French. Also in the awareness to affirm contradictory interests, the prevailing choice –
the Atlantic one—was still the reference framework and did not prevent from accrediting a “moderator” position, which could express itself, with a certain elasticity but “always in the framework of western solidarity”\(^8\), as an autonomous diplomatic choice. The usual and blamed routine of the preliminary consultations of the western “directorate”, in which Italy was not included, led to this choice\(^7\). The spirit with which the government of Rome agreed with the conference in London - summoned for legally confirming the international management of the Canal, thus taking it away from the Egyptian administration - was inspired by a closer western collaboration, that was joined to the intention to mediate between the opposite theses\(^8\). Minister Martino envisaged to present to the London government a proposal that considered the Egyptian point of view as well, hence creating an opening in the Anglo-French intransigent position\(^8\). The risk was that this autonomous position, as other signs of dissent, were interpreted as a substantial breaking in the western front: confirming the signal of a “crisis of the Alliance”\(^10\), pre-existing to the Egyptian crisis. Actually, the Italian government stuck to foreign politics priorities fixed a long time before: facing divergent demonstrations of opinion, for which, in London, Italy worked to favour an approach, “in an extreme case” the solidarity with the western countries would have prevailed\(^11\). With these presuppositions, Italy was ready to follow the American line and consented to temporarily set aside its own proposal of “international supervision” over the Egyptian management of the Canal, that was certainly not in conformity with the desires of London and Paris\(^12\). This “reserve” amendment had to be useful, in Italian intentions, in the following phase of the negotiation that was opening in Cairo\(^13\). Despite Italy not being included in the Canal Users’ Association (S.C.U.A.), that was sent in the Egyptian capital to present London’s resolutions, the Italian diplomatic action, with Washington’s agreement, came to being with the Egyptian government in a parallel initiative to the mission guided by minister Menzies\(^14\).

But, the support to a dialogue between the parts badly reconciled with the military preparation, preliminary to an action of force, that the European allies were openly preparing\(^15\). A choice that shattered that solidarity so many times invoked: the absence of Martino from the ordinary session of the Atlantic Council of September 4 was immediately interpreted by the French government as an Italian reservation to Anglo-French military measures, reservation that after all was not a surprise as in London the Italian position had perfectly been understood\(^16\). Around this event, that by itself had a relative meaning, a number of conjectures on the Anglo-French intention to exploit the authority of the Atlantic Council was instigated, that is attributing an extraordinary character to the Atlantic meeting, hence, threatening, somehow, the negotiations in progress in Egypt\(^17\). The ambassador Pietro Quarioni saw in this, the will “to jeopardise” the allies in the action of pressure against Nasser. And in Rome there was agreement on the fact that “to give the impression to the Afro-Asian countries that a possible Anglo-French Strafexpedition in Egypt was a direct emanation of the NATO as a whole occurring under its order, was not in the West’s interest”\(^18\). By doing so, Italy exposed itself to the pointed remarks of the English press that condemned the presuppositions of a politics exclusively finalised to oil and commercial affairs\(^19\). This was a prevailing opinion also at an official level. In fact, Selwyn Lloyd, collaterally to the Atlantic Council, announced, to the Italian representative, the intention of his own government to bring up, together with Rome’s, the matter of the payment of the rights of transit of the Canal. Italy—as well as the United States—had consented to pay for the transit in the Canal to the Egyptian corporation, thus jeopardising the perception of a western front that was unanimously hostile to Egypt’s management\(^20\). The Italian ambassador in Washington, Manlio Brosio, did not see any contradiction in the Italian behaviour and declared without uncertainty that Italians were showing to be “faithful Westerners and Atlantics”\(^21\), as the alignment with the American government was evident. But also under this aspect, Italian politics exposed itself to the disapproval of Paris in particular: despite the fact that the matter of the tolls was part of the Italian trade relations routine with Egypt, ruled by a system of clearing\(^22\), it showed—from the Anglo-French point of view—not to be fully in agreement with the finalities of the organisation of international management, the S.C.U.A., launched after the failure of the Egyptian negotiations. Hence, Italian fidelity was measured on this further discrepancy. The distrust for its pro-Arab attitude brought again to the explicit accusation to want “to sabotage” London’s resolutions\(^23\). As the Italian circles found themselves at the centre of the polemics, it was not difficult for them to understand to be the target of a resentment that had an anti-American character\(^24\).

This character also seemed to pervade the relaunch of Europe: the Egyptian crisis ended up having the effect of a driving force for the negotiations in progress\(^25\). If until then, the negotiation had run up against the French preliminary question of the Overseas Territories\(^26\), the Egyptian crisis, as a “favourable circumstance”\(^27\), had increased the pressures towards the integration effort. Unlike Rome’s government, the other European cabinets had shown to understand the Anglo-French worries
concerning the “Egyptian danger” and they trusted that the integration was the solution to an Atlantic crisis, which was at that time clear to the whole world\textsuperscript{28}. The European solution was an alternative choice to the Atlantic pole, shaping itself as an “autonomous force”\textsuperscript{29}. At the end of September, considering the repercussions derived by the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, the Mollet government underlined the urgency to conclude the Eura-
tom treaty \textsuperscript{30}. But, the Italian judgement of this French demonstration of European “relance” was not very flattering; it was only a political expedient to distract the French public opinion from the recent diplomatic failures\textsuperscript{31}:

“For the French, today, the Atlantic solidarity and the European solidarity mean this: Egypt has challenged the supremacy of the west; it must be put back in its place… (…) The French think that if today there was Europe there would be also Italian and German troops next to theirs in Algeria and Cyprus. A crusade atmosphere in which Europe and the Atlantic community should globally oppose itself to the whole world that is called coloured.”\textsuperscript{32}

Despite the presuppositions, the meeting in Paris (October 20, 1956) of the six countries of the “Small Europe” did not disclose any certain European perspective yet, as at that moment, on the Egyptian horizon, French priorities came first. While the European negotiation was still suspended, the French government, together with Great Brit-
aín, secretly met the Israeli representatives in Sévres on October 22, to plan the military intervention in the Canal area\textsuperscript{33}. The Anglo-French action took place without any consultation, without taking into consideration the bonds of the alliance for which the Atlantic solidarity had been invoked for the whole summer. Facing these circumstances, the Italian government assumed a prudent but firm behav-
iour, thus finding in the dramatic situation the pri-
mary need, that is that of “uniting the three Great Powers that today are deeply separated.” The Soviet threat was such to justify solidarity also in case of dissent.

For the first time Italy participated at the pro-
cedings of the United Nations Assembly, but in extraordinary international circumstances: the Egyptian crises showed to be linked to the Hungarian one, and Italy had to play the role of “full moral re-
sponsible of the West”\textsuperscript{34}. The Italian delegation supported the “cease-fire” resolution (November 2) and sustained the creation of the “United Nations emergency force” (UNEF). The negative experience of the Middle-East crisis and the concomitant drama of the Hungarian situation brought to a re-
quest of prompt restoration of western solidarity. In this sense, the conviction of the Soviet repression of Hungarian democratic aspirations was supported, with strong interventions. The Anglo-French ag-
ression too, was the object of blame: context and motivations, however, distinguished the two crises, and no solidarity was given to the Egyptian cause\textsuperscript{35}. The Italian diplomatic initiative was carried on in frequent contacts with the different delegations, while the American administration delayed the normalisation of the relations with the two allies, thus dangerously amplifying their isolation\textsuperscript{36}. Marti-
tino had the aim “to look beyond Suez”\textsuperscript{37} and not to exasperate the already deep contrast: for this purpose as well, the Italian delegation at the United Nations denied its support to the November 24 motion promoted by the Afro-Asian countries\textsuperscript{38}, in which the persistent Anglo-French breach of the November 2, recommendation was deplored. The “invigorating effects of fear”, that made the Atlantic solidarity the only “factor of peace, security and progress” - Martino wrote to Dulles - had to be used for the consolidation of the tie\textsuperscript{39}. The same conclusion was reached at the Italo-German summit (December 6-9), during which the two parts recog-
nised to be united in an “active neutrality”, as the events of the Middle East crisis had shown. The awareness of the necessity of a “unanimous co-
operation” among all the allies grew and it under-
lined the urgency and the opportunity to proceed towards an integrated Europe that had to be a “moral” force, more than an economic and military one. This Europe had the duty to bring balance within world politics – not as a “third power” - and to contribute to the maintenance and to the spread of western principles\textsuperscript{40}. With this wish “to look to-
wards the future rather than towards the past”, the interallied meetings of the so-called “diplomatic week” in Paris were, therefore, important appoint-
ments. Together with the promotion of the WEU reform\textsuperscript{41}, Italy also asked for an intensification of European and Atlantic consultations, as demanded by the Committee of the “Three Wise Man”, too. This contribution, destined to clear up the relations and to eliminate the fears on the break-up of the Atlantic alliance, was sincerely appreciated by the American administration\textsuperscript{42}. The co-ordination of western politics, as the French ambassador Fou-
ques-Duparc noticed as well, was only the premise to underline “the need for an European relaunch”\textsuperscript{43}; this represented the real purpose of the Italian ini-
tiative, which was also an answer to a public opinion sufficiently awakened by recent events\textsuperscript{44}.

The EEC formula, approved and launched in Rome in March 1957, aimed to fill the hiatus pro-
voked by the colonial crisis both in terms of contin-
guinal relationships, and as in the French case, in reference to the new power relations. Therefore, it was a new situation from which to start, in order to face the consequences that the Suez crisis had em-
phasised in the Mediterranean, in the East-West re-
the framework of the Atlantic Alliance as well.