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## ITALY IN THE EU AFTER BREXIT: CARRYING THROUGH OR TAKING A BET?<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article explores the possible repercussions of Brexit upon Italian foreign policy. Whilst Italy has not modified its foreign policy fundamentally following the result of the 2016 referendum on Brexit, we argue that Brexit has, however, led to a change in the European balance of power. This has exposed Italian foreign policy, which has had to adjust accordingly. Successive Italian governments, from Matteo Renzi's to Giuseppe Conte's first cabinet, have had to rethink, design and implement a new role for Italy among the EU top countries. They had to do so as they faced the common prospect of losing an ally such as the UK, which has often proved instrumental in counterbalancing continental European powers. Nevertheless, we observe that the ruling coalitions differed in their response to Brexit. We argue that a neoclassical realist approach aides in understanding the way in which the Italian response to Brexit has been influenced by two key factors: the need to preserve Italy's status in the European balance of power and the governing coalitions' commitment to delivering their electoral promises. The result is that Italian governments pursued a different approach to Italian foreign policy after Brexit, and the implications are discussed.

### Résumé

Cet article explore les répercussions du Brexit sur la politique étrangère italienne. Bien que l'Italie n'ait pas modifié fondamentalement sa politique étrangère suite au résultat du référendum de 2016 sur Brexit, nous soutenons que le Brexit a cependant entraîné une modification de l'équilibre des pouvoirs au sein de la politique étrangère européenne, entraînant une nécessaire adaptation de la politique étrangère italienne. Les gouvernements italiens successifs ont dû depuis 2016 repenser, concevoir et mettre en œuvre un nouveau rôle pour l'Italie parmi les principaux pays de l'UE. Ils ont dû le faire face à la perspective de perdre un allié tel que le Royaume-Uni, qui s'est souvent révélé être un contrepoids aux puissances de l'Europe continentale. Néanmoins, l'article constate que les coalitions au pouvoir ont réagi différemment au Brexit. En s'appuyant sur une approche réaliste néoclassique, nous analysons ainsi la manière dont la réponse italienne au Brexit en matière de politique étrangère a été influencée par deux facteurs clés : la nécessité de préserver le statut de l'Italie dans le cadre européen, et l'engagement des coalitions au pouvoir à tenir leurs promesses électorales. L'analyse montre comment les gouvernements italiens ont adopté une approche différente de la politique étrangère italienne après le Brexit, et quelles en sont les implications.

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## Introduction

The impact of Brexit on EU member states' foreign policy needs attention. Nonetheless, at least so far, the literature has been silent with respect to the impact of Brexit on EU member states' foreign policy. With very few exceptions, which are almost exclusively concerned with France and Germany (Krotz and Schild 2018; Lavery et al. 2019), a thorough investigation is missing into how fellow EU countries reacted to the prospect of the UK leaving the Union. In this article, we argue that Italy is a case in point, and we will try to show *how* and *why* Italy's foreign policy adjustment has occurred after Brexit. This is important because in the EU political arena the UK has traditionally been perceived as an important ally by Italy and the positions taken by the UK in European affairs have often proved critical for Rome (Chelotti 2010; Telò 2013; Diodato and Niglia 2019, 152). For this reason, we believe we shed light on an empirical puzzle (how to account for the fluctuations in the Italian reaction to Brexit) and contribute to the literature on Italian foreign policy.

It is worth recalling why studying Italy as a single case study is an empirically and theoretically sound research strategy. Italy's foreign policy has substantial empirical relevance: for historical, demographic and economic reasons, Italy qualifies as one of Europe's major players. Admittedly, the status enjoyed by the country hardly matches its capabilities: as argued by Carati and Locatelli (2015), Italy could well be labelled as an overachiever status-inconsistent country (i.e. a state whose reputation is not supported by sufficient military and diplomatic capabilities) (Volgy et al. 2009). Such a mismatch – a long lasting feature of Italy's foreign policy – makes the country 'the least of the great powers' and the 'largest of the small powers' (Andreatta 2001; see also Giacomello and Verbeek 2011; Carbone 2011). This is an uneasy position, which complicates Italy's pursuit of its interests, and forces the country to side with other major powers to enlist their support.

As mentioned previously, the UK has traditionally been Italy's main partner and supporter within the EU context. Regardless of the intermittent involvement of the UK in European affairs – especially in momentous times – whenever Italy's interests clashed with other great powers (i.e. France and Germany), Rome has always considered London as a counterweight to the continental powers. After Brexit, France and Germany remained as the only first-tier states in the Union. For this reason, we are interested in investigating the consequences upon Italy's stance towards Paris and Berlin. This is important because Italy has sought to be more

influential in international organizations such as the EU [and the UN](#) since the end of the Cold War (Andreatta 2001; Romero 2016; [Monteleone 2019](#)). Indeed, as we will see in the following pages, Italian governments reacted promptly to the results of the 2016 referendum. Facing a different power constellation at the European level, Italy had to rethink, design and implement a new role among the top EU countries (for an earlier investigation, see Cladi and Locatelli 2020).

Finally, Italy qualifies as a worthy case study because, in contrast to other EU countries, there have been as many as four changes in the ruling cabinet since the referendum in June 2016<sup>2</sup>. At the time of the referendum Matteo Renzi was prime minister, a position he held until his resignation in December 2016. Renzi was succeeded by his fellow party member Paolo Gentiloni (Kirchgaessner 2016). The Gentiloni government only lasted until June 2018, as the result of the national elections held in March proved unfortunate for the Democratic Party (The Guardian 2018). The political landscape changed in the lead up to the elections by the rise of two parties: the League and the Five-Star Movement (Newell 2018). Even though they displayed enormous differences (in their constituencies, as well as in their political platforms), the two parties displayed generally Euro-sceptic and anti-immigration stances (Olmastroni and Pellegata 2018; Mosca and Tronconi 2019). Following months of negotiations, the two parties agreed on supporting a coalition cabinet led by Giuseppe Conte. This was a unique example of a completely populist government (Fabbrini and Zgaga 2019; Garzia 2018; Giannetti et al. 2020). Even more than his predecessors, Conte had to manage an unruly coalition, whose frictions exploded in August 2019, when Matteo Salvini's League withdrew its support to the government. However, Conte successfully managed to forge a new coalition, this time between the Five-Star Movement and the Democratic Party (Horowitz 2019).

Thus, from a methodological perspective, Italy is an interesting case study because it allows us to observe variation at two different levels: long-term variation as a response to Brexit and short-term change depending on the ruling cabinet. All governments shared the same foreign policy goal with reference to Brexit; however, the means used differed significantly from one government to the other. How to account for this behaviour? We will try to answer this question

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<sup>2</sup> [At the time of writing, after following the resignation of Matteo Renzi's Italia Viva ministers resigned, Mr. Conte struggled to enlarge his coalition...but with scant success. He will most likely be succeeded Most likely, he will be succeeded](#) by Mario Draghi (former chairman of the European Central Bank), supported by a grand coalition encompassing all major parties, from Matteo Salvini's Lega, to Forza Italia, the Five Stars Movement and the Democratic Party.

using a neoclassical realist approach. To proceed in an orderly manner, we will first discuss our research design; we will then provide an overview of the main tenets of neoclassical realism and infer the theoretical foundations of the argument; next, we will test our hypothesis on the Italian foreign policy adjustment, with particular reference to the inter-government changes occurred over the years; we will draw our conclusions in the final section.

## **1. Research design**

In this article, we are interested in tackling the following question: to what extent has Brexit impacted upon the Italian stance towards France and Germany? We have opted for a neoclassical realist approach to address this question, so an explanation for our choice is in order. We believe that a neoclassical realist approach allows us to capture the nuances associated with Italian foreign policy after Brexit better than other competing approaches.

The starting point for this discussion is that we broadly agree with a structural realist approach in that the overall trajectory of foreign policy is necessarily shaped by the international strategic environment. Italy adjusted its foreign policy following important changes in the international system such as the end of World War II and the end of the Cold War. In this sense, at least to a certain extent, the Waltzian argument about the primacy of systemic pressures on a state's behaviour (Waltz 1979) is corroborated. Just to illustrate this point, with the end of the Soviet threat, Italy moved from "security consumer" to "security producer", as witnessed by its growing involvement in peace support operations.

For us, the choice of 2016 as a starting point for the analysis is important because we believe that Brexit decisively altered the geopolitical scenario in which Italy could be seen to play an important role. This is because Italy made its contributing to international organizations such as the European Union a key priority of its renewed active post-Cold War strategy (Andreatta 2001). As the absence of the UK in the EU would affect the balance of power in the EU (Krotz and Schield 2018) – or at least it would alter the pattern of alignments (Snyder 1996), Italy had space to rethink its relationship and stance towards France and Germany. Whilst in the EU, the UK made the counter-balancing of a Franco-German tandem in order to prevent them from setting the agenda a key priority of its European diplomatic strategy (Whitman 2016). Such a strategy gave Italy a powerful partner in its relationship with the continental neighbours. Absent

the UK, Italy had to deal with a renewed Franco-German leadership all by itself. New opportunities opened up for Italy in this respect.

Brexit is not the only independent variable that could contribute to explaining foreign policy change. One could also argue that other significant challenges of international resonance beyond Brexit, such as economic recession, migration, a resurgent Russia and the Syrian civil war have tested Italy as it is uniquely exposed, given its geographic proximity to theatres of conflict, its investment in cooperation to tackle global challenges and its active foreign policy approach (Jones 2009; Tocci 2018). However, they do not affect decisively what we are interested in investigating in this article.

We do not downplay the importance that other variables at the international level could have in explaining foreign policy change. The election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016, as well as the rise of China, are also important variables at an international level. Nevertheless, we exclude them for two reasons. Firstly, there has not been a change in the global distribution of power to justify Italy's re-alignment beyond the EU: Italy's relationship with the US and with China has remained unchanged. Secondly, Italy's relationship with the US and with China transcends domestic political variables enough to exclude them as having explanatory power for what we are interested in studying and elucidating in this article, which is Italy's stance towards France and Germany after Brexit.

To further illustrate the point, Italy's commitment to NATO remained unchanged following the election of Donald Trump and despite significant intra-coalition pressures which manifested themselves in 2018, Giuseppe Conte was sworn in as Prime Minister, leading a coalition of populist parties such as the Five Star and the League, that had previously advocated a more pro-Russian line. The Italian prime Minister reassured allies of Italy's commitment to NATO (Ghiglione 2018). It is also clear that European states, Italy not being an exception, look at different international contexts at the same time (Simón 2017), trying to maintain their relative position on both levels. Still, with Italy's relationship with NATO remaining constant and unchanged, we expect Italy's stance towards France and Germany to be influenced primarily by changes in the European balance of power, happening because of Brexit.

Finally, a few considerations are in order concerning the dependent variable. How to operationalize the change in behaviour towards the Franco-German tandem? Deductively, we

argue that Italy has three main strategies available to compensate for the loss of London: the first one is to raise its role within the EU and join the Franco-German leadership. This would imply diplomatic efforts aimed at fostering cooperation with them on current and future EU initiatives, but also increase Italy's visibility as a major player in the EU. The second strategy is to wedge in between France and Germany and form a new tandem with either of them, at the expense of the other. This would imply opposing joint Franco-German initiatives and promote new ones with only one of them. Finally, the third strategy is one of mere opposition to the proposals launched by Paris and Berlin. In order to be effective, this strategy would force Rome to search for new allies after the loss of the UK.

In the following section we will discuss why in our view a neoclassical realist approach is best suited to account for the change in Italian foreign policy vis-à-vis France and Germany after Brexit.

## 2. A Neo-classical realist analysis of Italy's strategic adjustment after Brexit

In our analysis we assume that third-level variables are as important as domestic factors, if not more. In our explanation, therefore, we exclude a liberal approach to Italian foreign policy. A liberal approach to Italian foreign policy would privilege the importance of domestic variables such as strategic culture, domestic institutions and personal leadership (Rosa 2018; Coticchia and Davidson 2019). Whilst such variables undoubtedly play a role in Italian foreign policy, we do not think that they shape Italian foreign policy to the extent that it allows us to say much about Italy's stance towards France and Germany. We also exclude a social constructivist approach to Italian foreign policy because Italy would continue to follow international norms in its relationship with France and Germany (Pirani 2010). Whilst the populist parties often advocated an anti-liberal stance, which was facilitated by Brexit and played a role in the framing of the governmental interest, the latter, as we will see, is an intervening variable. So, none of these variables was the decisive factor, explaining on its own Italy's relationship with France and Germany.

However, a third-level approach is not sufficient, since the impact of Brexit upon Italian foreign policy is not determined: as we have seen before, Brexit results in a systemic pressure for Italy, as long as it requires a re-alignment within the EU arena, but such a pressure leaves Rome with enough room for manoeuvre to choose among the strategies seen before. We need a model that



specifies the process through which systemic pressures turn into foreign policy choice. A neoclassical realist approach allows us to bring in the domestic factor in a coherent framework: by taking governmental interest as an intervening variable, we believe it is possible to account for the variations occurred in the Italian stance towards France and Germany since 2016.

### *2.1 The importance of domestic factors*

Neo-Classical Realism (Rose 1998; Lobell et al. 2009) provides a welcome extension of the Neo-Realist argument, as it maintains the explanatory primacy of third-level variables (namely, power relations), but it also factors-in domestic level factors, such as the level of executive autonomy over the Parliament (Dyson 2008), strategic culture (Dueck 2008), the voice opportunity of interest groups within the decision-making process (Ripsman 2009), elite perceptions and government instability (Cladi and Webber 2011). Admittedly, such a variety in the choice of second-level variables lends credit to the critique of ad-hocness (see most recently Narizny 2017 and the following correspondence on *International Security*). However, while this might be true for early contributions, motivated by the attempt to adapt realist explanations to deviant cases, later additions to the literature (Schweller 2006; Taliaferro 2009; Ripsman, Lobell and Taliaferro 2016) have provided properly-inferred propositions on how international and domestic factors interact.

Therefore, in line with Neo-Classical Realism, we will hold external pressures acting as independent variable, with domestic factors playing the role of intervening variables (i.e. filtering out, or giving priority to, some of the available foreign policy options). As such, Brexit represents an external pressure, for at least two reasons: firstly, it alters power distribution within the EU, or Europe's *balanced multipolarity*, as Hyde-Price (2007) put it. Secondly, since the consequences of Brexit for European security are yet to be determined, Italian governments have a degree of choice with respect to how they shape their response to it (see also Turpin 2019).

### *2.2 Governmental interest*

What domestic factors contributed to shaping the Italian response to Brexit? As our research design is based on a single case-study, we can rule out the following variables: executive autonomy, government instability and interest groups. These cannot be held to account for

foreign policy variation in the Italian response to Brexit simply because none of them changed. Put differently, executive autonomy remained constant from Renzi to Conte because the Italian parliamentary system has made any executive dependent on parliamentary confidence since its foundation (Kreppel 2009). It would take a constitutional reform to change this variable. As concerns government instability, all the governments under consideration were supported by shaky and controversial coalitions: those led by Renzi and Gentiloni were the remnants of the so-called grand coalition, which encompassed parties from the left to the right of the political spectrum; ironically, things are not so different with the first Conte government, which was supported by just two parties (the Five-Star Movement and the League), but whose relationship – i.e. the capacity to look competent in their role vis-à-vis the counterparts (being them domestic or international), and to be coherent with the electoral manifesto (Cladi and Locatelli 2020).

For these reasons, we will attribute explanatory power to the only variable that changed when the first Conte government was sworn in following the 2018 Italian general elections: the governmental interest of the ruling coalition (Pohl et al. 2016). In a nutshell, we argue that the Italian response to Brexit has been shaped by the need, shared by all governments, to look credible in their pledge to keep up to their electoral promises. This implies in turn two requisites – i.e. the capacity to look competent in their role vis-à-vis the counterparts (being them domestic or international), and to be coherent with the electoral manifesto (Cladi and Locatelli 2020).

So, what can we say about these political views – i.e., how can we operationalize this variable? Both Renzi and Gentiloni had a clear vision of Europe and the Italian role within the EU – a pro-EU vision anticipated and supported by the Democratic Party’s founding father Romano Prodi. As Sonia Lucarelli (2015, 56) aptly notes, the Democratic Party’s landslide victory at the European Parliament elections was indicative of the electors’ appreciation of “the position assumed by the party, of a proud Europeanist Italy eager to set things straight in order to be able to make its voice heard in a united Europe”. With a slight departure from this vision, Matteo Renzi assumed a more critical stance towards the EU, mostly with a view to gain more concessions in terms of migration and austerity policies (Coticchia and Davidson 2019, 140-141). However, Renzi’s rhetoric was not replicated by his successor: in fact, Gentiloni’s leadership style was less assertive and its foreign policy was informed by the traditional approach based on diplomacy and negotiations within multilateral institutions (Felsen 2018).

In contrast, the political manifesto supporting the first Conte government was clearly hostile to the EU. Admittedly, the harsh anti-European rhetoric of the Five-Star Movement and the League did not translate into actual policy. In this view, Mr. Conte's declarations resembled Matteo Renzi's style: an assertive rhetoric aimed at obtaining concessions from the EU and other partners (an example of that was the European Council held on July 2018, when the Italian Prime Minister called for a more even burden sharing among Member States, but received only half-hearted commitments). Nonetheless, the main claim of the Five-Star Movement was to bring about a 'government of change' (*Contratto per il governo del cambiamento* 2018) – so compelling the newly formed government to stress its radical novelty as well as to set different foreign policy priorities compared to the past.

In conclusion, our model foresees an external challenge for the Italian decision makers, given by the potential loss of influence within the European institutional setting. The actual response was affected by the ruling elite's orientation as expressed in their political manifesto. So, while Renzi epitomized a pro-European view with an oppositional stance, Gentiloni embodied the traditional pro-European, diplomatic approach; finally, Conte represents an anti-European, conflict-prone constituency. In the next paragraph, we will see how these orientations shaped Italy's European foreign policy.

### **3. Brexit and its consequences for Italian foreign policy**

Brexit generated the concern, for Italy, that lack of involvement in the shaping of the new European security scenario was a possibility. Three options, as discussed above, opened up to policymakers in Rome: joining France and Germany as European leaders, siding with one of them while replacing the other, or counterbalancing the Paris-Berlin axis. Quite interestingly, over time Italy has displayed two of these behaviours. As argued in the previous paragraph, we trace shifts in foreign policy orientation to the political platform of the ruling coalition.

The governments of Renzi and Gentiloni pursued the first strategy, namely to join France and Germany in an effort to create a triumvirate. Arguably, Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni had a different style in respect of how they sought to achieve their aim. Renzi, for instance, displayed a harsher rhetoric towards the EU, seeking to align himself with sentiment in the Italian public (Coticchia and Davidson 2019; Felsen 2018; Camera dei deputati 2016c). Both Renzi and Gentiloni were very active in the diplomatic front. Following the Brexit referendum,

Renzi sought to leave a mark on the Franco-German relationship. Just a few months after the June vote, in August 2016, Renzi welcomed Angela Merkel and Francois Hollande to the symbolic Ventotene Island, the first main post Brexit summit following the Brexit referendum (Camporini and Marrone 2016). The meeting was nothing more than a rhetorical display of prestige, since the summit did not lead to any substantial decision. However, Renzi used the opportunity to state the need for important economic reforms as the process of European integration would not stop with Brexit (Gallori 2016). In so doing, Renzi tried to launch a message to two different audiences: at the domestic level, it strengthened his own figure as a world-class leader; at the EU level, it was signaling Italy's willingness to be a reliable partner, worth being taken seriously as a leader in the Union.

Roughly in the same period, Italy also displayed a degree of foreign policy activism – although quite clumsily – with an initiative aimed at boosting the then-dormant EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The so-called Gentiloni-Pinotti proposal, named after the then Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence, was circulated in advance of the Bratislava summit, to be held in September 2016 (Documentazione per le Commissioni 2016, 28-31; [Camera dei deputati 2016b, pp. 41869-41870](#)). What is striking about the initiative [is that](#) many of its proposals to strengthen European defence capabilities were remarkably similar to a joint draft circulated by France and Germany in [the summer](#). It is no wonder then that the Italian documents did not receive much attention from other capitals (Krotz and Schield 2018; Kempin and Kunz 2017; Deschaux-Dutard 2019). Despite the fact that these initiatives proved inconsequential for Italy, however, they clearly meant that Rome wanted to avoid being left out-of-the action by France and Germany ([Camera dei Deputati 2017b](#)).

Renzi's term in office abruptly came to an end a few months later, in December 2016, and he was succeeded by fellow PD leader Paolo Gentiloni. The latter's answer to the renewed Franco-German partnership followed the example set by Renzi. This complies with the long-lasting tradition of Italian diplomacy, launching and hosting multilateral summits to gain prestige (Cladi and Locatelli 2019). During Gentiloni's time in office, important diplomatic meetings took place in Italy such as the G-7 Summit in Taormina in May 2017 (D'Ignotti 2017). Moreover, Gentiloni sought to prove Italy's credentials as a committed member of the EU when celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaties of Rome during a ceremony held in Rome on 25 March 2017. Reflecting on the event, Gentiloni focused on the importance of the meeting in terms of the opportunity that it provided to drive forward the process of European integration

(Gentiloni 2018, 82-89). Noting that France and Germany had different visions for the future of the European integration project, Gentiloni emphasized the role that Italy could play: ‘this situation opens up an evident room [for Italy] ... Our national interest and our vision of the European project allow us to play a role that is even higher than the one we have as a third country of the Eurozone’ (Gentiloni 2018, 93).

Gentiloni’s strategy aimed at joining the Franco-German tandem is also witnessed by the decision to participate in the French European Intervention Initiative (EII) – a new flexible asset, working beside the EU framework, aimed at building a multilateral intervention force. When President Macron first presented the initiative in public, in September 2017, it openly invited nine EU states, including Italy. For Rome, joining in would mean accepting the French lead, but Gentiloni eventually came to the conclusion that being excluded would be much worse for Italy than following France’s lead.

To sum up, similarly to Renzi, Gentiloni had the aspiration for Italy to be on equal footing with France and Germany, making the most of the opportunity to exploit the divisions among them. Moreover, as Fabbrini and Zgaga (2019, 287) have argued, Gentiloni’s own style in dealing with other European leaders, averse to head-on clashes, was seen as ‘a guarantee of Italy’s reliability’.

The first Conte government, replacing Gentiloni’s following the 2018 Italian general election, had a more skeptical view of the EU. Whilst Conte has generally avoided embracing his Euro-skeptic supporters’ anti-EU rhetoric, he has been critical of the EU institutions as well other member states on several occasions ([Senato della Repubblica 2018a, p. 13](#); [Senato della Repubblica 2018b, pp. 6-12](#), [Senato della Repubblica 2018c, pp. 8-12](#))<sup>3</sup>. Conte’s position followed the 58-page joint pact or ‘contract’, in which more EU help was demanded (*Contratto per il governo del cambiamento* 2018), calling for effective relocation of asylum-seekers EU wide and stronger cooperation to fight people-smuggling gangs (BBC 2018). [The first Conte government’s focus on immigration and making sure Italy could play an important role in the EU on this matter emerged as priorities quite quickly \(Camera dei Deputati 2018a\)](#).

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, this point was nicely captured by Forza Italia Congresswoman Laura Ravetto ahead of the EU Council in June 2018: in her remarks to President Conte’s speech, she claimed that her party had “reservations about the muscular tones used, which [...] may eventually give Spain the possibility to steal our role in the triangulation with France and Germany” (Camera dei Deputati 2018a, pp. 10-11) (authors’ translation).

As concerns Italy's foreign policy towards the EU, the first Conte government did not disrupt Italy's credentials as a European partner as feared by many (Marrone 2018). On PESCO, for instance, Conte agreed that the process of European defence integration should continue and backed the evolution of the EU as a security actor (Parlamento Europeo 2019). In so doing, Italy backed the Franco-German willingness to do more for European defence (Traugott 2018). Italy committed itself to participating in 21 PESCO projects in 2018, proving the most active member state alongside France (Marrone and Sartori 2019). Of particular note is the fact that Italy began cooperating with France on 12 projects and with Germany on 9 projects (European Council 2018). Italy, like Germany, also took the lead in 4 projects. In so doing, the first Conte government showed remarkable continuity with its predecessors, who had already committed themselves to strengthening CSDP.

Nevertheless, priorities differed: due to the different political platform of its ruling coalition (formed by Luigi di Maio's 5-Star Movement and Matteo Salvini's Lega), the Conte government radically changed its posture towards the Franco-German tandem, in particular following to increasing tensions with France<sup>4</sup>. The diplomatic row between Italy and France was arguably the tip of the iceberg: differing views have emerged between Italy and France since the Brexit referendum, notably on issues such as Libya's future, the merger between Fincantieri and STX and the refugee crisis. In June 2018, as the first Conte government was sworn in, the approach towards France began to differ in two ways. Firstly, it depicted President Macron as a bogeyman with a view to improving domestic political consensus. Secondly, it purposefully heightened tensions, leading France to recall its ambassador in Rome (BBC 2019). [Following these tensions, the Conte I cabinet reversed his predecessors' decision to join the EII, arguing that before joining the initiative France should make its proposal more coherent with PESCO – an argument mildly criticized by the Democratic Party \(Camera dei Deputati 2018b, pp. 55, 60-61\).](#)

Whilst this strategy could be seen as unreasonable, our neoclassical realist model can help to analyse it. On the one hand, Italy's adversarial stance towards France depended on the attempt to delay the influence of the renewed Franco-German tandem. On the other hand, it resulted

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<sup>4</sup> France at that time was criticized mostly by the M5S. On the other hand, the Lega, with other right-wing parties, was critical of a purported German hegemony in Europe (see for instance, Camera dei Deputati 2016a; Camera dei Deputati 2017a).

from the battle for consensus between the parties making up the governmental coalition (Darnis 2019, 4).

The Conte II cabinet was sworn in on 5<sup>th</sup> September 2019 and it was supported by a different coalition between the Five Star movement and the centre-left Democratic Party. The influence of the Democratic Party contributed to bringing relations with the EU, France and Germany back on track. The normalization of Italy's relations with the continental partners was confirmed a few weeks later by President Macron and President Steinmeier, who paid a diplomatic visit in Rome (Darnis 2020: 10).

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few diplomatic successes suggest a normalization of Italy's approach to its EU partners: one few diplomatic successes suggest a normalization of Italy's approach to its EU partners: one was the announcement, in September 2019, that Italy would join the French-led EII (Ministero della Difesa 2019), in a sudden twist from the early decision to opt out in June 2018. Interestingly enough, deputy secretary for Foreign Affairs Angelo Tofalo, questioned about it in the Parliament Question Time, made no reference to the reasons that previously made the government suspicious of the EII, nor provided any evidence that the initiative developed coherently with PESCO (Camera dei deputati 2020). Another is the German offer to include Italy in the E-3 on Libya in mid-February 2020. While Libya remains a critical file for Italy (partly due to the lack of strategic vision, partly for diverging interests with France), the rift between Rome and Paris seems to be fixed, as witnessed by the decision by both countries to resume diplomatic talks aimed at forging a Quirinal treaty (i.e. an agreement resembling the Franco-German Elisée Treaty) (Darnis 2020: 11)

Needless to say, the Coronavirus crisis has altered this complex situation: being one of the first countries to be hit hard by COVID-19, Italy turned to the EU for financial assistance. While some in the Italian political arena lamented an initial lack of solidarity on the side of EU institutions and member states alike, France and Germany sided with Italy and proposed a joint recovery initiative. Moreover, thanks to the German (and to an extent French) leadership, in July 2020 the European Council found an uneasy agreement on the Commission's Next Generation EU Package. On that occasion, Italy and a handful of southern European countries had to face the staunch opposition of the so-called "frugal" states. However, after four days of

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intense negotiations, the final agreement reflected the Italian desiderata (Pirozzi 2020). Both in terms of rhetoric and substance, Mr. Conte's approach in July 2020 seemed much more cooperative towards France and Germany than the previous year – with clear diplomatic benefits for the country as a whole.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to investigate the impact of Brexit upon Italian foreign policy. We believe Italy qualified as an important case study to begin with. It is a country that has pursued an active foreign policy since the end of the Cold War, particularly willing to be an influential actor in international organizations in the EU. It is a country which has often sought to punch above its weight, making the most of its relationship with the UK to counterbalance the influence of the Franco-German tandem in the EU. Moreover, Italy has continued to suffer from chronic domestic instability, with [virtually five](#) governmental changes taking place since 2016. However, what made Italy more compelling and even unique as a case study was the fact that it is the only European country which has been ruled by totally populist parties after Brexit. For these reasons, we delved into an analysis of Italian foreign policy adjustment after Brexit.

Our findings show that, as France and Germany renewed their commitment to a strong bilateral relationship after Brexit, different governmental coalitions pursued different strategies. Put differently, Italian governments' stances towards France and Germany differed markedly. Renzi and Gentiloni, heading centre-left governments, sought to create a triumvirate with France and Germany. They sought to obtain recognition of Italy's weight and importance in European politics, seeking to avoid that Italy would be left behind. Conversely, the first Conte government, ruling with a coalition that included populist parties such as the League and the Five Star Movement, the first of its kind, opted for a more adversarial stance towards France and, to an extent, Germany. Whilst there was continuity in terms of Italy's commitment to EU defence projects such as PESCO, issues such as the EU budget rules and migration among others, tended to dominate Italy's stance. Therefore, in its attempt to make sure its voice would be heard, the first Conte government openly tried to contain the influence of France and Germany in Europe. This approach changed after Matteo Salvini's *Lega* was replaced by the Democratic Party as a coalition partner. Subsequently, the ensuing Conte II cabinet then developed a more cooperative stance towards France and Germany – one that was more clearly in line with the previous centre-left governments.

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In order to account for this variation, we opted for a neoclassical realist approach. In our explanation, Brexit was the independent variable, having an effect on Italy's relations with France and Germany. This was intermediated by an intervening variable at the domestic level: governmental interest, understood as the government's commitment to make good on its electoral promises.

To conclude, future research could seek to expand upon case studies of EU countries' strategic adjustment after Brexit. At the moment, we believe Italy remains a special case in point for a variety of reasons: firstly, because it is the first country of its kind where a totally populist government was formed after Brexit (Conte I). In this view, we believe our results may contribute to the growing literature on populist governments' foreign policy. As no other country in Europe shared Italy's political trajectory so soon after Brexit, generalisation is not possible. Whilst this conclusion puts us in the 'you cannot generalise from a single case' camp (Flybjerg 2006, p. 219) we believe that in the future Italy could become an interesting point of comparison as more evidence becomes available in the EU of countries with populist parties in government. Secondly, government instability makes Italy hardly comparable to any other country. However, the short duration of the cabinets under exam allowed us to observe variation in the intervening variable in a short span of time – something currently impossible for any other country. Through the lens of neoclassical realism, we believe we have highlighted the role of governmental interests. Therefore, future research may test this hypothesis on other case studies relying on a longer time-frame.

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