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Gaddafi and the troubled relations with Italy

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Italy and the Middle East.  
Geopolitics, Dialogue and  
Power During the Cold  
War

I.B. Tauris

# Gaddafi and the troubled relations with Italy. POST PRINT IRIS

Paolo Soave

## Italy and Libya after the Second World War: A : A new start

Historically, most Italian attempts to achieve the profile of Mediterranean power implied establishing special relations with Libya. In the colonial era the region including Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan was mainly considered as the North African shore (the so-called ‘quarta sponda’),<sup>1</sup> but once the kingdom of Libya achieved its independence Rome started seeing it as a new relevant strategic partner. After the Second World War the demographic presence in North Africa of some Italian communities was a pivotal tool for the new foreign policy practised by Rome, so different from the past and aimed at promoting Mediterranean relations inspired by peaceful coexistence, democracy and multilateral cooperation.<sup>2</sup> The ‘surrender of rights’<sup>3</sup> over the colonies imposed by the peace treaty first forced Italy to search for an old style diplomatic compromise in order to maintain some influence on Libya, the so-called Bevin-Sforza agreement, and then, after its failure, to turn to a post-colonial policy. This change was part of a wider process aimed at reshaping the international role of Italy, no longer able, according to Ambassador Pietro Quaroni, to act as a relevant power.<sup>4</sup> Driving the country towards the Western block, as a national leader Alcide De Gasperi was perfectly aware of the need of a democratic and representative foreign policy, aimed at creating a space of international autonomy, even beyond NATO, urged not only by socialists and communists, but also by the DC and the Catholic world. To some extent, since then, the more Italian foreign policy was sensitive to national political instability, the more it would try to intensify its pro-Third World approach.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the action of the United Nations, the independence of Libya emerged as a consequence of the previous alliance between the UK and Idris es Sanusi, rather than as a starter of a wider process of decolonization, which eventually was delayed for some years. The Cold War, on the contrary, was already forcing the powers to oppose each other geopolitically, and the main Western partners of Italy, the United States and the UK, simply considered Rome no longer able to keep control over an area of increasing strategic relevance for the Mediterranean balance of power. The new kingdom of Libya was a typical case of neocolonialism, soon subject to a strong economic and military Anglo-American influence.<sup>6</sup> As the Cold War contributed to outline the strategic

relevance of the Mediterranean Basin, Italy tried to carry on regional dialogue and cooperation even beyond ideological or strategic barriers.<sup>7</sup> During the 1960s, Italy was once again an appreciated regional partner, an emerging industrial power, with a friendly and sensitive approach to the social and economic needs of backward countries. The Italian formula seemed to be fit for everyone, so after an early sympathy for Israel, as a post-colonial and pro-socialist state, a strong movement supporting the Palestinian issue and the Arab world arose in Italy.<sup>8</sup> However as Arab–Israeli tensions escalated in wars, and Libya was transformed into an Anglo-American military base, the positive Italian regionalism was jeopardized by the globalization of the Cold War.<sup>9</sup> Starting with the Suez Crisis the USSR was involved in Middle East tensions. If regionalism was devoted to preserving unity, the Cold War exploited political tensions favouring local discord. Moreover, Italy was strictly dependent on NATO security and worried by the increasing militarization of the Middle East. American support to Israeli defense was considered in Italy the main reason for the strict relations between countries like Egypt and Syria with the USSR in order to acquire arms supplies. For many reasons Libya was the acid test of the Italian regional approach in opposing Cold War divisive effects, its most advanced attempt and eventually the best result of its foreign policy. As Italy was the bulwark of Western strategic influence in the Mediterranean, Idris was required to oppose Nasser pan-Arabism and acted prudently, avoiding any meaningful engagement in the Arab–Israeli crisis.

Despite many difficulties, the Italian community still remained the élite of the poor in Libyan society and in 1956 a bilateral agreement gave evidence of the common interest in removing the past and starting a new profitable era, in compliance with the United Nations resolution 388 on post-colonial relations. Italy committed to transfer to the Libyan authorities the former colonial properties as well as to refund Tripoli for colonial and war damages, as Libya acknowledged the social and economic role of the Italians.<sup>10</sup> Hopefully it was the turning point of the bilateral relations, as confirmed a year after with the agreement between ENI, the Italian oil company, and the Libyan government.<sup>11</sup> Eni's chairman, Enrico Mattei, was the most ambitious supporter of the so-called 'neoatlantismo', the new foreign policy pursued by Italy since the mid-1950s and aimed at achieving a wider international autonomy.<sup>12</sup> It was especially turned to the Arab countries and inspired by the need of energy supplies as well as by the search for a wider political consensus after the end of the so-called De Gasperi centrism. Mattei was to some extent an economic nationalist convinced that the development of Italy was not negotiable, even with its allies. To Mattei the 'veto' posed by NATO on relations with anti-Israeli or pro-Soviet countries seemed simply unfit for Italy. In 1957 Mattei was successful in completing with the Shah Reza Pahlavi a revolutionary oil agreement particularly favourable to the producer, a kind of war declaration to the so-called 'seven sisters', the strongest Western oil majors. In the same year Mattei tried to do the same with Libya, which was not as advanced as Iran in the oil industry, but Idris was forced by the Americans to reject the treaty reached by Mattei and Libyan Prime Minister Ben Halim.<sup>13</sup> However, despite the strong influence of Standard Oil of New Jersey, which had discovered a huge oil field in Libya, Mattei was able to take part in the local competition, obtaining a first contract in 1959.<sup>14</sup> Once removed the

past without a serious national debate, Italy was once again on the verge of a new social-economic influence in Libya, providing for new strategic investments, at least until September 1969, when some young officers seized power in Tripoli.<sup>15</sup>

### The advent of Gaddafi: A fi: A junior Nasser

The political change in Libya was commonly considered the consequence of Idris's loss of consensus as well as of emerging of Israeli-Arab tensions after the Six-Day War.<sup>16</sup> According to Henry Kissinger, US national security advisor, the coup had been inspired by the rising Arab nationalism led by Nasser. Kissinger's main concern was focused on US regional influence, no longer able to support the moderate regimes after the reduction of the peripheral engagements imposed by the Nixon doctrine. Gaddafi was imagined to be just more inclined to social reforms than Idris, hostile to moderate Tunisia and less handy for the Western powers.<sup>17</sup> With experience in a British military academy, he was the young, unknown leader of the least relevant country in the Middle East, a son of the desert with permanent injuries from the colonial times and finally a devoted admirer of Nasser.<sup>18</sup> Soon after the coup he announced a reformist program aimed at providing Libya with a common identity and some solid social bases.<sup>19</sup> A new interpretation of the Sharia deprived the old religious elites of any social and political relevance, concentrating in Gaddafi's hands any power over tribes and military forces. The ambition for a non-aligned Libya, freed from any influence, was announced with the Third Way theory.<sup>20</sup> As a tough answer to the failure of decolonization, the first terrific decision taken by Gaddafi was the expulsion of the Americans and the British from their military bases in Wheelus Field and El Adem. He clearly explained that this move was not the end of the relations with the Western powers, but a turning point for a better consideration of the Libyan national interests and for a new international and more autonomous posture.<sup>21</sup> The American ambassador in Libya, Joseph Palmer, suggested a soft reaction: on a long-term perspective, once having achieved some political stabilization, the new leader was expected to become a new ally in order to prevent Soviet influence over the Mediterranean. This point of view was widely shared at the Department of State as well as in Europe.<sup>22</sup> Far from considering the expulsion from Wheelus Field a first step to a new Nasserism, the Nixon administration did not suffer any strategic loss because of the advent of the new ballistic missiles. A soft approach in order to appease Gaddafi as well as Arab nationalism, thus preserving the American economic interests in Libya, was consistent with the preference for a light engagement in the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> However, when in 1970 Gaddafi announced the revolutionary nationalization of the oil industry, the Americans started bawaring of the new Libyan leader.<sup>24</sup> He proved to be the first Arab leader exploiting this resource in foreign policy, then widely followed by the other producers after the Yom Kippur War. Within a few years the increasing oil revenues permitted Gaddafi to purchase a huge amount of arms in order to improve the regional influence of Libya as an emerging country devoted to pan-Arabism. Even more concerning was the fact that the USSR was to become the leading arms supplier of Libya by 1974.<sup>25</sup> Analysts started wondering if Gaddafi would be able to do better than Nasser in establishing an effective

alliance with Moscow, not only a simple partnership, in order to change the balance of power in the Middle East. The answer still remained quite reassuring: Gaddafi was too unpredictable for the Soviets as well as Libya being unable to offer sea facilities to the Soviet Navy.<sup>26</sup> However, after the loss of that strategic presence, the United States had even suffered serious damage of its economic interests in Libya. Having misunderstood Gaddafi, someone at the Department of State as well as at the White House was forced to admit that a new factor of regional instability had arisen.<sup>27</sup> Despite Libya being short of staff to operate its new military systems, Tunisia, Iran and Egypt became aware of the emerging threat to regional stability.<sup>28</sup> The most interesting case was Egypt: Sadat's deep change in foreign policy, with opening to Israel and the United States, made the country no longer a model but a border enemy for Libya. Egyptian military officers declared to be ready to punish Gaddafi with a military initiative in the event of American consent. They were confident that in case of preemptive attack against Tripoli no serious reaction would come from Moscow, and in 1977 the border tension eventually erupted in a short war between Egypt and Libya.<sup>29</sup> Camp David was a turning point: the complete change of the Egyptian approach to the regional dispute forced Libya, fiercely opposing the treaty with Israel, to isolation. Gaddafi reacted by intensifying his support to many forms of radicalism, but what he really achieved was only widespread criticism even by his Italian partners.<sup>30</sup>

### Reshaping relations again: Moro's answer to Gaddafi

The political stability of Libya was a strategic asset for Italian interests, admitted Roberto Gaja, general secretary of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. For him even the military presence of British and American soldiers in Libya was a positive factor of stability.<sup>31</sup> This appraisal was dramatically confirmed when Italy experienced the same hostility.<sup>32</sup> On 21 July 1970, Gaddafi announced the expulsion of about twenty thousand Italians living in Libya. According to the trade advisor of the Italian embassy in Tripoli, Morrone, the general amount of goods seized from the Italians was more than US\$100 million. Moreover, ambassador Folchi noticed that, unlike France, Italy had no Mirage war planes to offer in order to keep Colonel Gaddafi friendly.<sup>33</sup> In expelling Italians, he wanted not to remove the long-term economic relations with Italy but to relaunch them on different bases. As the Italian community still represented the social elite of Libya, it had to pay the consequences of the the new political course, based on the myth of anti-colonialism.<sup>34</sup>

As for the Americans, the Italian reaction was very prudential. Despite the decision happening quite unexpectedly and causing a deep concern, Minister for Foreign Affairs Aldo Moro opted for the moderate way.<sup>35</sup> Italian astonishment was confirmed by the misunderstanding of the Egyptian role: while Moro was hopeful in Nasser's mediation in order to appease Gaddafi, it was clear that Egypt, far from playing as a honest broker, was interested in replacing the Italian influence over Libyan society with its own workers.<sup>36</sup> However Libyan Minister for Foreign Relations Buyasseer clearly explained the new political course to Moro, and that it aimed at removing the treaty of 1956 and opening a new era in bilateral relations.<sup>37</sup> Even the serious

issue of the rights of the expelled Italians was a critical point for Italy, and eventually Rome preferred not to raise new tensions with Tripoli and try to match as much as possible the claims. Unprepared, Moro and most Italian politicians supposed Gaddafi was only pressing Italy in order to obtain new economic advantages and not really pursuing a revolutionary course. As Libya represented the acid test of the new democratic and peaceful Italian foreign policy, no tough reaction was acceptable for a country which had been a former colonial power. Moreover, economic relations with Libya were particularly strategic in order to secure cheap energy supplies for the industrial development. Moro argued that in case of intense economic relations between the two countries it would have been easier to coexist with Gaddafi. On 5 May 1971, Moro was in Tripoli to offer Gaddafi some cooperation for the launch of the Libyan national petrochemical industry, a real turning point in bilateral relations.<sup>38</sup> On 25 February 1974, Jalloud, Gaddafi's closest advisor, signed in Rome a bilateral agreement on scientific and economic cooperation. As Italian oil imports reached thirty million tons a year, a plan for new Libyan refineries was approved by the two governments.<sup>39</sup> ENI became a strategic investor in Libya, as were other private and public Italian companies offering new projects and joint ventures in a country which was short of hospitals, schools, streets and other basic social facilities. However the Moro way in dealing with Gaddafi was not easily accepted in Italy, raising some nationalistic reactions for its supposed weakness. While the advent of Gaddafi, despite the first move, really enhanced bilateral economic advantages, the main problem in experiencing a troubled lasting relationship with him was the lack of political comprehension. For many years, as Italy did not face its past, the Colonel tried to fire the emerging Libyan identity with strong anti-colonial rhetoric, even establishing the so-called 'day of hate' against Italy.

Eventually the Moro way was largely successful in strengthening economic relations and in stabilizing the Libyan political scenario. The Italian-Libyan affair gained increasing relevance according to the formula of balanced and integrated cooperation between an industrial power, not invasive and respectful of the local characters, and a backward oil producer. To some extent, it was a case of 'indispensable cooperation' because, on the one hand, Italy could not obtain elsewhere the same cheap conditions in purchasing energy supplies; on the other hand, Libya could not achieve technological assistance and investments avoiding the risk of neocolonialism.<sup>40</sup> In few years Italy and Libya widened the field of their cooperation to culture and technology, and many companies got a role in the Libyan economy and society. In the 1970s, even Fiat, the most important Italian private company, tied up relations with Libya.

The success of Moro's formula was confirmed by two factors. First, for about forty years, all along the Gaddafi era, the Italian governments followed the same political path, deciding to tolerate the Colonel's harsh attacks basically in exchange for good business and stable relations. This point proved to be stronger than the Libyan concern for the fact that Italy was a NATO member which hosted some American military bases that could hit Libya any moment. Secondly, the success of Moro's formula was confirmed by the critics coming from the Western allies. For the Americans the Italian-Libyan special relationship was hardly acceptable, even if considering the need of safe and cheap energy supplies, the moral issue in order to prevent new conflicts with

Tripoli after the colonial era and the general interest in Mediterranean stability.<sup>41</sup> In the 1970s, two points created some concern in the Americans: oil and arms supplies. After the Yom Kippur conflict, the oil consumptions were a matter of solidarity among the Western powers as Kissinger tried to argue promoting a common front of consumers facing the producers. Despite the international crisis, ENI was the only Western company preserved by the Libyan constraints and, according to the Americans, this was a matter of unfair competition or a lack of solidarity among Western companies. Moreover, as Gaddafi was moving towards closer cooperation with the USSR, the Italian bilateral relations with countries unfriendly to the Western block and Israel caused concern.<sup>42</sup> US diplomats outlined in their reports the increasing economic relevance of the bilateral relations between Italy and Libya, offering less attention to the political reasons. They concluded that Gaddafi seemed to appreciate only a point of Italian foreign policy, the friendly approach towards the Arab world, but eventually they underrated the possible contribution to Middle East stability coming from good bilateral relations between Rome and Tripoli.<sup>43</sup> In some talks the Italian executives of the Ministry of Industry and Foreign Affairs were suggested by the American diplomatic staff in Rome to turn the industrial production from oil to atomic energy, in order to avoid a dangerous addiction to Libya.<sup>44</sup> Even more astonishing was the investment of the Libyan Arab Foreign Bank which purchased 9.1 per cent of Fiat shares in December 1976. Cesare Romiti, general manager of the Italian company, explained to the American consul in Turin that Fiat had decided to satisfy the Libyan ambition to take some part in the Western financial world in a moment when the Italian company was short of cash.<sup>45</sup>

Another point of the Italian soft approach to Libya was the availability to sell advanced arms, which was opposed by the Americans in case some US components or patents were involved, in order to prevent any unfriendly use against Israel.<sup>46</sup> Eventually, the Libyan complaints reached Italy.<sup>47</sup> Maybe the most interesting defense of the Italian soft approach to Gaddafi was made by President Giovanni Leone in a summit when he said that by tolerating the Colonel's insolence, Italy was giving evidence of its international responsibility in order to prevent an alliance between the USSR and Libya.<sup>48</sup> Consequently in 1978 Libyan Minister for Foreign Affairs Ali Triki signed in Rome a new agreement of economic and scientific cooperation which opened his country to a new increasing Italian elite represented by Eni's personnel. Sometimes the Italian government was asked by its allies to convince Gaddafi to be more moderate, especially as concerned the Camp David agreement. In this case the failure of diplomatic efforts proved the lack of any Italian political influence over Gaddafi and the distance between Rome and Tripoli in relation to the peace process in the Middle East.<sup>49</sup> Despite the expulsion of the Italian community, the 1970s were a golden age in the bilateral relations between Italy and Libya, economically rather than politically.

By the way Gaddafi himself contributed to the increasing isolation of Libya supporting international terrorism, especially after the attack in Fiumicino airport, on December 1973.<sup>50</sup> The Libyan leader broadly compromised the Italian effort to promote Libya as a reliable partner for the Western countries and eventually only Rome continued to appreciate the political stability imposed by Gaddafi.<sup>51</sup>



## Troubled years: T s: Terrorism and the global Cold War on the Italian–Libyan special relationship

The emergence of international terrorism inspired by the Arab–Israeli tensions was a serious issue for Italian foreign policy in the Mediterranean, especially in order to stay consistently on the same course regarding the regional interests with the Western strategic alliance. While in the 1970s Nixon and Carter pursued a soft way in dealing with Gaddafi and matched quite well with Italian tolerance of the Libyan regime, after 1981 President Reagan imposed a turning point, arguing that terrorism was the other face of the Cold War. As the bipolar confrontation was on the verge of a possible turn because of the crisis of the USSR, fighting the states supporting terrorism and indirectly tied to Moscow, especially for the purchase of arms, gave Reagan the chance to relaunch the international profile of the United States and impose some pressure on the Soviets.<sup>52</sup> As Reagan was oriented to end the detente and win the Cold War, his doctrine really oriented the foreign and security policy turning to a global approach to regional issues, from the Middle East to Latin America.<sup>53</sup> According to Westad's interpretation, Reagan widely contributed to globalizing the Cold War.<sup>54</sup> In the Middle East the Americans experienced the lowest point of their influence in October 1983, when the slaughter of marines in Lebanon caused by an 'act of war using the medium of terrorism', according to George Shultz, brought Reagan to call back the troops from that country.<sup>55</sup> The Middle East had slowly slipped into the Cold War starting from the Suez Crisis. As the only stable alliance in the region was the US–Israeli one, the Arabs tried to exploit the bipolar confrontation in order to gain some advantages. However no Arab leader was able to establish a real political and strategic alliance with the USSR, and even arms supplies, which came particularly copiously from Moscow, never forced the balance of power and, eventually, the peace process in favour of the Arabs.<sup>56</sup> The same happened for Gaddafi, who was never considered by Soviet leaders a reliable partner, as American intelligence assumed.<sup>57</sup> Combining a hostile approach towards the United States with a huge amount of Soviet arms, he was automatically enrolled in the list of enemies.<sup>58</sup> Even if only a minor troublemaker, Libya became a test case for the United States, and Reagan was particularly capable in exploiting the wave of national indignation for the long series of terroristic attacks against civil targets, as the polls led by *ABC* and the *Washington Post* clearly showed.<sup>59</sup> Against Libya the United States practised every aspect of coercive diplomacy, from diplomatic isolation to sanctions and eventually the use of force.<sup>60</sup> Since 1981 the US administration had adopted some economic measures in order to cut the Libyan oil revenues which financed the purchase of arms.<sup>61</sup> The sanctions were harshly debated by American and European oil companies, fiercely opposed by Gaddafi and, eventually, Reagan proved unwilling to wait a long time in order to take some advantage from the economic constraints on Libya. The next step of the escalation, the use of force, was debated inside the administration between the 'hawks' gathered around George Shultz and the 'doves' led by Caspar Weinberger, but eventually approved as 'preemptive and retaliatory strikes against terrorists'.<sup>62</sup> Before the use of force other moves involving the CIA were taken by the administration in order to create some pressure on Gaddafi and eventually provoke his political downfall.<sup>63</sup>

The perspective of a military confrontation in the Mediterranean between the two most relevant strategic partners of Italy caused deep concern in the Craxi government. The socialist leader and his Minister for Foreign Affairs, Andreotti, were trying to relaunch some international activism and one of the most relevant points was the Italian contribution to the peace process in the Middle East.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, in the years of the so-called second Cold War, Craxi had proved to be a reliable strategic ally accepting the deployment in Italy of new missiles in Comiso, quite close to Libya, causing new disappointment in Gaddafi. Despite his hostile rhetoric against Italian strategic subordination to the United States, the Colonel was always involved in the regional dialogue and cooperation pursued by Rome. An escalation between Americans and Libyans in the Mediterranean would have been particularly dangerous for Italy. As Giulio Andreotti was able to get Gaddafi's trust introducing the theme of some Italian economic reparatory act for the past, in 1984 he was asked by the Libyan leader to mediate with Reagan in order to remove the tensions between Tripoli and Washington.<sup>65</sup> To some extent, as Andreotti recognized, Gaddafi relied on Italian mediation to avoid the international isolation imposed by the Americans. Concerning this, Reagan and Shultz replied to Andreotti to be no longer interested in Gaddafi's words but only in some evidence of goodwill coming from Tripoli, starting from condemnation of terrorism against American targets.<sup>66</sup> Andreotti, who acted as mediator without conviction, was always very careful in balancing the alliance with the United States with the Italian interest for Libya as regional partner. At the same time he was available to use his influence over Gaddafi in order to facilitate the secret mission in Libya of the American ambassador to the Holy See, William Wilson. The mission eventually did not succeed in preserving American oil interests in Libya and caused some embarrassment in Reagan's administration when it was unveiled by Gaddafi. It clearly showed that the White House's approach in dealing with the Libyan leader was not so monolithic as officially stated by Reagan and Shultz.<sup>67</sup>

However the Italian effort to maintain the same course of foreign policy with the United States and Libya was harshly tested from 1985 to 1986. In October 1985 the Sigonella crisis pushed Italian and US forces to the verge of a conflict over the capture of the terrorists responsible for the hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* and the murder of the American citizen Leon Klinghoffer.<sup>68</sup> The two allies clearly had divergent attitudes towards the terrorists and Mediterranean security. The difference between the American global approach defined by the Cold War was tackled by the Italian regional way, aimed at preserving relations with all actors, especially Arafat's PLO and Egypt. Despite the tensions Craxi and Reagan soon restored good personal relations, and the American administration admitted the existence of different ways in dealing with violence, and that the diplomatic one was the way pursued by Italy. Moreover, the Americans recognized that Craxi had been successful with Italian public opinion in posing the Sigonella crisis in terms of national sovereignty. Unusually for an Italian leader, he was acting in such a proud and effective way that ambassador Raab suggested considering him as a long-term partner.<sup>69</sup> Once again the Middle East and the Mediterranean represented the geopolitical preferred area for some Italian autonomy.

Less than a year later, a somewhat similar crisis occurred again involving Libya and the United States. After new terroristic attacks, from the end of 1985 to 1986, Reagan

definitely decided to strike against Gaddafi.<sup>70</sup> The final step of the escalation was announced by the American decision to conduct some naval drills on March, close to the disputed Sidra waters.<sup>71</sup> After the attacks at Vienna and Fiumicino airports in December 1985, with some evidence of Libyan responsibility, the Italian government had more difficulties in carrying on its moderate and regional policy and eventually was forced by the events to follow Washington by way of the embargo on Tripoli, even if only partially practised.<sup>72</sup> Craxi and Andreotti tried in any possible way to avoid a military clash in the Mediterranean. Both opposing actors were hard for Italian diplomacy to handle. Gaddafi was really worried by the prospects of an American military attack, but as he was not about to repudiate his foreign policy, he was just trying to avoid international isolation. When he asked the Maltese premier, Bonnici, to involve Italy in a wide Mediterranean peace conference, even Craxi meant to subordinate this possible way out for Libya upon a formal condemnation of terrorism, and this initiative fell down.<sup>73</sup> While the socialist leader was not particularly tolerant of the Colonel and refused to restore high-level relations with Libya, the talks between the diplomat Alessandro Quaroni and Jalloud contributed to securing economic bilateralism for better moments.<sup>74</sup> In order to enhance the Italian position in the Mediterranean, Craxi visited a prominent leader and a respected partner of the Americans, Mubarak.<sup>75</sup> The talks with the Americans definitely failed when in March 1986 George Shultz was in Rome. The serious difference between the global approach of the United States and the regional vision of Italy emerged once again as in the Sigonella crisis and finally the Secretary of State ironically wished Italy good luck in trying to soften Gaddafi through diplomacy.<sup>76</sup>

The escalation forced even Italy to consider Libya as a potential threat for its security, especially in order to secure a few thousands Italians who were working in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica.<sup>77</sup> However, the most relevant political and diplomatic effort sustained by the Italian government in order to prevent the final step of force was with Europe. The European Community was very late in becoming aware of the crisis and in general about terrorism. Apart from the cultural and political differences in approaching the issue of political violence, the Twelve were moving towards regional dialogue with the Arabs in order to define a common Mediterranean space.<sup>78</sup> In a few months some meetings were devoted by the ministers of foreign affairs to the issue of terrorism. On 14 April 1986, the Twelve produced their best effort recognizing the Libyan threat and adopting progressive measures to isolate Tripoli and force Gaddafi to repudiate terrorism. The European solution was focused on an international conference, including the Mediterranean actors as well as the most relevant extra-European powers.<sup>79</sup>

The common effort was too late and not particularly effective, according to the United States. After having visited the most important European capitals, Vernon Walters, Reagan's envoy, was in Italy just in time to talk with Craxi and Andreotti after the meeting in the Hague and some hours before the American attack.<sup>80</sup> Walters's task was not to debate with the European allies as to how to deal with Gaddafi, but just to inform them that the United States would attack Libya soon. The European tour of Walters was not easy: Margaret Thatcher hardly accepted to allow the American planes to leave from British bases in order to reach Libya. Andreotti and Craxi used rational arguments trying to convince the Americans to postpone military action: the use of force could escalate new tensions in the Mediterranean, creating new troubles for

Italy. Moreover, despite his unpredictable or hostile behaviour, Gaddafi was providing the Libyan stability, and the Americans had not prepared a political alternative. The prospect of anarchy, as well as a stronger alliance between Tripoli and Moscow in case of political survival of Gaddafi, were even worse. American indifference to the fate of Gaddafi and the Libyan leadership sounded really stunning to the Italians. Craxi and Andreotti tried also to play the European card emphasizing the results of the Hague summit, but the Americans proved not to be particularly interested in preserving at least a formal role for the European Community in the Mediterranean crisis. Walters said only that the Americans had the evidence of Libyan responsibility for the *La Belle* disco terroristic attack in Berlin, a 'smoking gun', and that the announced military action was only aimed at punishing Gaddafi.

The goal was particularly limited, even in military or strategic terms, and the lack of European solidarity was considered quite disappointing by Walters. The last appeal posed by Andreotti was a plea for more time in order to secure the positions of the Italians who were in Libya. Many years after, the real purpose of the Italian government was unveiled: its intelligence warned Gaddafi of the imminent attack, maybe to save his life.<sup>81</sup> This further move aimed at preserving bilateral relations was not so meaningful: Gaddafi was personally aware of the American military threat, which had been announced by the Soviets. In the same hours, the American air raid came like a new case of the old 'gunboat diplomacy' pursued in the Mediterranean in the early 1980s.<sup>82</sup> Far from removing the causes of terrorism as well as to provoke the collapse of Gaddafi's regime, the air raid was a slap in the face to the European allies who had pursued a diplomatic solution of the crisis, which Shultz admitted.<sup>83</sup> It was also a move to test the Soviet reaction in the global Cold War: from Moscow came only a formal condemnation of the American conduct, as expected by Reagan.

Apparently Italy suffered the most: deeply humbled by the lack of any Libyan defense under the American bombing, Gaddafi reacted by trying to launch some missile towards the Loran station on the Italian island of Lampedusa. More paradoxical than stunning, the Libyan leader searched for an easy political relaunch against a partner who was too moderate for a tough reaction and at the same time too much interested in preserving at any cost the bilateral relations with Tripoli. In doing so the failure of the Libyan missile attack contributed to its political aim, as Craxi decided not to retaliate.<sup>84</sup> As the American escalation and its culminating point in April 1986 dropped Italian-Libyan relations to their lowest level after the expulsion of the Italian community in 1970, the interest for arguing economic cooperation survived both in Rome and in Tripoli.

Despite some scholars have argued that Reagan led the first war on terror many years before 11 September 2001, soon after the raid on Libya the American interest in pursuing this goal collapsed.<sup>85</sup> According to its Political Affairs' General Direction of the Ministry for Foreign Relations, Italy had to move beyond American protection and pursue the lifting of the economic embargo in order to relaunch bilateral relations with Libya. The only change before the crisis was the emphasis posed for the first time by the Craxi government on the Libyan responsibilities in causing Mediterranean instability, as confirmed during the Tokyo summit in May 1986. However Craxi and Andreotti argued with their Western allies about the opportunity to ease the economic embargo in order to bring Tripoli to repudiate terrorism.<sup>86</sup> Far from removing the sanctions,

the Americans started admitting that Gaddafi was a long-term problem and proved to be more available to cooperate with the Europeans in order to face the Libyan threat with diplomatic or economic means.<sup>87</sup> Once again Italy acted, promoting a Libyan redemption, at least until the airliner explosion over Lockerbie, in December 1988, which definitely confined Gaddafi to international condemnation and isolation.

### After the Cold War: F : From isolation to rehabilitation

In the 1990s the Libyan position was no longer sustainable, as Gaddafi had lost any international support. In bad conditions the ties with Italy assumed high relevance in order to secure the Libyan political stability, as Craxi clearly showed when he declared that Italy was ready to take responsibilities for its colonial crimes.<sup>88</sup> In 1991, Andreotti's goodwill proposal turned to commitment to removing the mines from Libya and giving information about the deportees, in exchange for Gaddafi's pledge to repudiate the production of chemical weapons. Even if reluctantly, Italy respected United Nations resolution 748 which since 31 March, 1992, extended the embargo to force Libya to deliver the individuals responsible for Lockerbie.<sup>89</sup>

Even in the so-called 'Seconda Repubblica', with a new party system emerging from the action led by the judiciary against the old political forces, Italy started working towards a slow removal of the severe conditions that could push Gaddafi's regime into economic crisis and eventually political instability. In 1996 the Prodi government authorized ENI to sign a new agreement for a gas pipeline as the first step of a new era of economic investments. Inaugurated in 2004 by Berlusconi and Gaddafi, Greenstream, the longest sea pipeline in the Mediterranean, is a physical link aimed at definitely stabilizing economic integration between Libya and Italy, whatever the changing political conditions.<sup>90</sup>

Giving evidence of realism, the Colonel contributed to overcoming the worst moment delivering the perpetrators of Lockerbie in 1999, repudiating mass destruction weapons and opposing the spread of Al Qaeda in his country. A stunning, full rehabilitation occurred when he was upgraded to strategic partner of the European Union to contain migratory flows across the Mediterranean. Representing the African Union, Gaddafi was received in Brussels by Romano Prodi, chair of the European Commission, in April 2004.<sup>91</sup> In 2008 these positive conditions led Italy to the special relationship with Libya through a new general deal of friendship and economic cooperation signed by Berlusconi and Gaddafi, which was eventually suspended by Rome in 2011 under the Western military campaign promoted to remove the Colonel.<sup>92</sup> Since then Italy is still searching for a new stability in Libya as a condition for restoring the special relationship with Tripoli and for a safer Mediterranean.

## Conclusion

From the 1970s to the 1990s, relations between Italy and Libya were widely influenced by the Gaddafi's unpredictable behaviour. Trying to promote himself as a new

Nasser and Libya as new regional power, on one hand he got the economic advantages from the bilateral relations with Italy and, on the other hand, he exploited the political weakness of Rome and its weak participation into NATO. As economic relations improved through those years, shaping ‘indispensable cooperation’ and a sort of complementarity between an industrial power and an energy supplier, the political dialogue was almost nonsense, and Gaddafi appreciated only the Italian sympathy for the Arab world. The soft approach introduced by Moro since 1970 remained the best answer to Gaddafi’s tough rethoric in order to preserve economic relations and prevent new threats in the years of emerging international terrorism and Cold War confrontation. The political misunderstanding between Tripoli and Rome was a matter of post-colonialism rather than real decolonization. While Italy never elaborated its past in national terms and simply tried to go beyond, Gaddafi never cast off the historical heritage and instead exploited it in order to define a common Libyan identity. These contradictions turned into a crisis when the superpowers interfered in the Mediterranean, making Gaddafi isolated and forcing Italy to take some distance from Tripoli. Despite some personal changes, there was a stunning continuity in Italy’s moderate approach to the Colonel, practised by every government even beyond the Cold War with the ‘Seconda Repubblica’ and its new parties. The history of the economic interpenetration between these two countries was clearly successful, one of the most relevant for the Italian foreign policy in the second post-war period. Moreover, it contributed to the stability of the Mediterranean at least until 2011, when long-term Italian fears about a post-Gaddafi scenario were confirmed.

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