

The Prodi Government and Italy-US Relations: The Case for Optimism

*Jason W. Davidson**

On 1 March 2006, Italy's centre-right Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi addressed a rare joint session of the United States Congress. Speaking in the midst of a heated domestic electoral campaign, Berlusconi stressed Italy's solidarity with the US, which he referred to as "...the beacon of liberty, of civil and economic progress".¹ At roughly the same time, Oliviero Diliberto, leader of Italy's far-left Italian Communist Party (PDCI, *Comunisti Italiani*), said of Berlusconi's visit "[h]e went there to shake hands that are dripping with blood".² While Berlusconi provided political support for the 2003 Iraq war and his government sent 3,000 Italians to assist the US and its allies after the cessation of formal hostilities, members of the centre-left coalition led by Romano Prodi frequently expressed their view that the Iraq war had been a costly mistake. Given this contrast in statements and positions, many observers were concerned that the April 2006 victory of the centre left

* *Jason W. Davidson* is Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science and International Affairs, University of Mary Washington, Fredericksburg, Virginia.

¹ "Joint Meeting of the House and Senate to Hear an Address by the Honorable Silvio Berlusconi, Prime Minister of the Republic of Italy", *Congressional Record* 152 (March 1, 2006), H454.

² D. Barnett, "Berlusconi flies back to domestic derision", *Agence France Presse*, 2 March 2006.

would negatively impact on relations between Italy and the US. Tobias Jones, writing in *The New Republic*, summarised the post-election conventional wisdom when he wrote of Romano Prodi "[t]he suspicion remains, however, that as an ally, he'll be more like Spain's Jose Luis Zapatero than Great Britain's Tony Blair".³

There are, however, good reasons for optimism on the prospects for relations between Italy and the US under Prodi's government. First, Italy's centre left has a history of responsible, centrist, and largely pro-American policymaking. Far-left elements of Prodi's government will provide a challenge to the moderate line of the centre left – but the far-left challenge is surmountable. Second, US foreign policy has taken a moderate turn since the 2003 Iraq war, which will make a major clash with Italy unlikely. A look at three of the most important issues in contemporary US-Italy relations – Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran – will illustrate the case for optimism regarding the future of relations between Rome and Washington.

Italy: the importance of a moderate centre

Since World War II, Italy's foreign policy has attempted to maintain strong ties with the United States and its European neighbours. While the centre left tends to emphasise Europe more than the centre right, it also has a history of pro-American policy. The centre left demonstrated its pro-American credentials and reliability during the 1999 Kosovo war. Under Left Democrat (*Democratici di Sinistra*) Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema (currently Italy's foreign minister) Italy contributed aircraft to NATO's air campaign and provided essential basing for NATO aircraft.⁴ D'Alema's government persisted in support of the US-led policy despite extreme pressure from far-left coalition members and from the Vatican for a more moderate policy (such as a bombing pause for the Easter holiday).

The composition of Romano Prodi's foreign policy team provides further support for the claim that his government will not veer dramatically away from the US. As mentioned previously, Massimo D'Alema has a history of working with Washington to achieve common goals. Since becoming

³ T. Jones, "Italian Sausage", *The New Republic*, 8 May 2006, p. 12.

⁴ Italy contributed 58 aircraft, making their contribution second only to France and the United States. See I. H. Daalder and M. E. O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly: NATO's War to Save Kosovo* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000) p. 149. *Corriere della Sera* reports that when US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice telephoned D'Alema to congratulate him on becoming foreign minister, she noted D'Alema's "great credibility" during the Kosovo War. (M. Caprara, "Soldati via da Baghdad. Prima riunione mercoledì", 21 May 2006).

foreign minister, he has stressed that Italy favours a stronger Europe as a partner to the US – not a counterweight to it – and has made clear that Rome, like Washington, believes that spreading democracy is a critical component in addressing the challenge of global terrorism.⁵ D'Alema's choice of well-respected moderate advisors, such as Aspen Institute Italia's Marta Dassù, provides further evidence of his intent for continuity in Italian foreign policy.⁶ Arturo Parisi, Prodi's defence minister, is a leading figure of the left's largest centrist party, The Daisy (*La Margherita*). Parisi's undersecretary of defence, Marco Verzaschi, is a former member of Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* party and currently a member of the centrist Udeur (*Unione democratici per l'Europa*) party. Finally, while Romano Prodi's experience as president of the European Commission indicates that his government will be likely to embrace Europe, he has also stated that his vision of Italy's role in Europe in no way precludes a solid relationship with the US – in fact he sees a strong Europe as an important ally of the United States.⁷

Some believe that the moderate stance of Prodi's foreign policy team is irrelevant because the radical left will determine Italy's foreign policy agenda. There is some validity to this argument as Italy's far left has a history of criticism of United States foreign policy and much of the far left has embraced hardcore (*senza se, senza ma*) pacifism. Moreover, the governing coalition's survival will depend on several far-left parties that espouse these ideas: the Refounded Communists (RC, *Rifondazione Comunista*), the Italian Communists, and the Greens (*I Verdi*). The situation is especially precarious in the Senate, where the government commands a majority of only a couple of seats.

While the far left will provide a challenge to the Prodi government, it is not clear that it will dominate the foreign policy agenda. The leaders of the far-left parties are aware that forcing the fall of the government on foreign policy would make the return of the centre right more likely by providing support for the centre right's criticism that the left is incapable of holding a government together and hastening new elections (the RC's withdrawal of

⁵ M. D'Alema, "Diplomacy Al Dente", *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 June 2006. See also Audizione del Ministro D'Alema davanti alle Commissioni Congiunte 3a (affari esteri, emigrazione) del Senato della Repubblica e III (affari esteri e comunitari) della Camera dei Deputati, 14 June 2006 <http://www.esteri.it/ita/6_38_227_01.asp?id=2453&mod=3&min=1>.

⁶ M. Caprara, "Sulla Farnesina volante la squadra dei consiglieri con vocazione bipartisan", *Corriere della Sera*, 17 June 2006.

⁷ R. Prodi with F. Colombo, *Ci Sarà un'Italia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2006) p. 40. See also R. Prodi, "L'Italie doit repartir de l'avant", *Le Monde*, 12 April 2006.

support led to the fall of the 1996-98 Prodi government). In the post-election debate on the Italian mission in Afghanistan (to be discussed later) leaders of the far left have underlined that they will not cause the collapse of the Prodi government in order to achieve their foreign policy objectives.⁸ Because the far left is unable to threaten credibly to bring down the government on foreign policy, the government will probably provide them only with minor palliatives. It is striking that the far left holds none of the key foreign policy posts and that the left's common electoral program provided little discussion of the radical left's perspective on foreign affairs.⁹ The most serious threat from the far left will almost certainly come from "rebels" in the Senate who might defy party leaders to vote against the government. The government will have to work to keep rebellion to a minimum through minor compromises and far-left party leaders will have to work to get their senators to toe the party line.

The United States: moderate, multilateral policies

If the Prodi government had taken office three years ago, there would have been less reason for optimism about relations between Italy and the US. After 11 September 2001, the Bush administration developed a doctrine that envisioned the use of preventive war without the necessary authorisation of the United Nations or even the approval of its allies in NATO. The doctrine was manifest in the US-led Iraq War of 2003, which the Bush administration justified by the Iraqi government's possession of weapons of mass destruction and its ties to terrorist groups. In the wake of the Iraq war the Bush administration's foreign policy has mellowed considerably. The lengthy and violent insurgency that has plagued Iraq since the summer of 2003 seems to have led many within the administration to reconsider the wisdom of preventive war waged without the support of major international institutions.¹⁰

⁸ Another excellent case is the 2 June military parade, which is part of Italy's national holiday. The government responded to the radical left's demands for an end to the annual parade by emphasising the civilian element and the parade went ahead as scheduled. M. Nese, "Rifondazione: abolire la parata del 2 giugno, Parisi: non si tocca", *Corriere della Sera*, 18 May 2006.

⁹ "Per il bene dell'Italia. Programma di Governo 2006-2011", 12 February 2006 <http://www.dsonline.it/allegatidef/programma_def_unione31307.pdf>.

¹⁰ For a more thorough elaboration of this subject, see J. W. Davidson, "What a Difference a War Makes: Transatlantic Relations from Iraq to Iran", *Muslim Public Affairs Journal*, April 2006, p. 1-9.

As the financial costs of the war have soared to \$300 billion and over 2,500 American soldiers have lost their lives in Iraq, the political costs of preventive war have become apparent: in May 2006 only 31 percent of Americans approved of the job George Bush was doing as President.¹¹ As the Brookings Institution's Philip Gordon recently wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, "Although the administration does not like to admit it, US foreign policy is already on a very different trajectory than it was in Bush's first term. The budgetary, political, and diplomatic realities that the first Bush team tried to ignore have begun to set in."¹² Trenchant criticism of the Bush administration's foreign policy from neo-conservative thinkers provides further evidence of the moderate turn in the administration's policy. For example, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich said recently that the Bush administration has "...accepted the lawyer-diplomatic fantasy that talking while North Korea builds bombs and missiles and talking while the Iranians build bombs and missiles is progress. Is the next stage for Condi [US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice] to go dancing with Kim Jong Il?"¹³ The Bush administration's shift away from preventive, unilateral war will make a positive, productive relationship with the Prodi government more likely.

US policy toward Iran's nuclear program is the best illustration of the Bush administration's new, moderate stance. As reports of Iran's clandestine nuclear activity emerged after autumn 2003, the Bush administration allowed the EU-3 (Britain, France, and Germany) to attempt to resolve the dispute diplomatically. The Bush administration has since responded to the Iranian resumption of uranium enrichment by working through the United Nations to pass a resolution encouraging Iran to abandon its enrichment activities. Most strikingly, the Bush administration broke with its 27-year isolationist strategy by offering, on 31 May 2006, to engage in direct negotiations with Iran if Tehran gives up uranium enrichment. While the administration has not ruled out the use of force, it appears that the Bush administration is not preparing for preventive war against Iran.¹⁴ This overall shift in US policy makes it more likely that Washington and Rome will be able to agree on the proper way to solve emerging policy problems.

¹¹ A. Nagourney and M. Thee, "Poll Gives Bush Worst Marks Yet on Major Issues", *The New York Times*, 10 May 2006.

¹² P. H. Gordon, "The End of the Bush Revolution", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2006, p. 75-6.

¹³ M. Abramowitz, "Conservative Anger Grows Over Bush's Foreign Policy", *The Washington Post*, 19 July 2006. See also G. Dinmore, "Neocons accuse Bush of appeasement in face of N Korea and Iran threat", *Financial Times*, 15 July 2006.

¹⁴ H. Cooper, "It's Just Like Iraq, Only Different", *The New York Times*, 4 June 2006.

Important issues in US-Italy relations: Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran

Iraq

Iraq has been the most high-profile issue in US-Italy relations since the April 2006 elections. While Prodi and the centre left opposed the 2003 Iraq war, the difference between their policies on Iraq and those of the Berlusconi government are relatively minor. In March 2005, Prime Minister Berlusconi announced that his government would begin withdrawing the 3,000 Italians participating in Operation Old Babylon beginning in September of that year. In January 2006, Berlusconi's Defence Minister Antonio Martino announced that all Italian troops would be withdrawn from Iraq by the end of 2006. Throughout the process, the Berlusconi government noted, withdrawal would be coordinated with Iraqi authorities and coalition partners and would take into account realities on the ground in Iraq. After the April elections, Prodi government officials explained that they planned to execute their electoral program promise for immediate withdrawal of Italian troops in consultation with the Iraqi government and based on local security conditions.¹⁵ After consultation with the Iraqis and the US government, the Italian government is poised to withdraw its troops from Iraq by November 2006, while it will send a small contingent of civilian advisors to provide training and assistance.¹⁶ In short, there are only minor differences between the previous Berlusconi government and the current Prodi government on Iraq policy.

Afghanistan

The election of the Prodi government also raised the question of Italy's contribution to NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Hardcore pacifist legislators from the far-left parties (RC, PDCI and *Verdi*) called for a complete withdrawal of Italian forces from Afghanistan and threatened to vote against the refinancing of the current mission. The Italian public appeared to support the pacifists: a poll published in the *Corriere della Sera* on 18 July showed that 60 percent of Italians favoured withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁷ On the other

¹⁵ Caprara, "Soldati via da Baghdad". For the statement in the program, see "Per il bene dell'Italia", 12 February 2006, p. 102.

¹⁶ M. Caprara, "D'Alema-Rice, freddezza sull'Iraq 'Ma la nostra partnership è forte'", *Corriere della Sera*, 17 June 2006.

¹⁷ R. Mannheimer, "Gli elettori di Polo e Unione favorevoli al ritiro delle truppe", *Corriere della Sera*, 18 July 2006.

hand, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer has pressed the Prodi government to augment Italy's mission in Afghanistan. The centre left has stressed that the Italian mission is legitimate – because the intervention was sanctioned by the United Nations – and, they argue, it is providing an important contribution toward an essential security mission. Defence Minister Parisi recently wrote that

...in Afghanistan we are and we feel part of a shared commitment, executed by NATO, in compliance with a United Nations mandate. In that theatre NATO is proving itself and its capacity to operate in a remote area and with a global vision, putting its own structures and forces at the disposal of the construction of an order and a peace led by the UN.¹⁸

Moreover, leaders of the far-left parties, such as Oliviero Diliberto (PDCI), Fausto Bertinotti (RC) and Paolo Cento (*Verdi*), stated publicly that they would not cause the government to fall if they did not achieve an Italian withdrawal from Afghanistan.¹⁹ The Prodi government ultimately triumphed on 28 July 2006 by attaching a confidence motion to the bill refinancing the Italian mission to Afghanistan. The far-left "rebels" announced that they continue to oppose the mission but decided not to vote against the bill.²⁰ The Prodi government's willingness to face down the far-left pacifists with a confidence vote provides evidence that the government is committed to a moderate, pro-US policy line – even when a moderate line is costly.

Iran

Iran is the toughest emerging issue in US-Italy relations. While the US is clearly at the heart of the Iranian nuclear issue, Italy will be important also as it is Iran's leading trading partner in Europe, a member of the G-8, and an important voice in the European Union. Washington's offer of direct negotiations with Tehran and the absence of planning or talk of preventive

¹⁸ A. Parisi, "Né indifferenti né isolazionisti", *Corriere della Sera*, 14 June 2006 (translated by author).

¹⁹ M. Caprara, "Vertice di maggioranza sulle missione estere", *Corriere della Sera*, 13 June 2006; M. T. Meli, "Afghanistan: Rifondazione si adegua alla missione (e sfida pacifisti e Diliberto)", *Corriere della Sera*, 14 June 2006; M. Caprara, "Afghanistan, verso il voto di fiducia", *Corriere della Sera*, 20 June 2006.

²⁰ G. Casadio, "Afghanistan, prima fiducia oggi voto finale del Senato", *La Repubblica*, 28 June 2006.

war, as outlined previously, was well received in Rome. Foreign Minister D'Alema has expressed his view that the moment is not ripe for economic sanctions but he has not ruled them out either.²¹ If Tehran rejects the June 2006 offer of incentives in exchange for suspending uranium enrichment (they have said they will respond in late August), the Prodi government would be more likely to support economic sanctions.

Conclusion: the Iranian challenge

In sum, a good case can be made for optimism about relations between Italy and the US under the Prodi government. The centre left has a history of pro-American policy and the far left will probably not dominate Italian foreign policymaking. Moreover, the Bush administration has moved toward more moderate policies since the Iraq war, bringing it closer to the likely preferences of the Prodi government. On Iraq and Afghanistan, the Prodi government is following a policy path laid out by the previous government of Silvio Berlusconi. The real test for relations between Italy and the US in the near future will most likely be Iran. As leaders in Rome and Washington try to resolve the evolving Iranian nuclear problem and maintain strong Italo-American relations, they will be most likely to succeed if the Prodi government can continue to keep the far left from significantly impacting policy and if the Bush administration continues to emphasize multilateral, non-violent solutions to major international security problems.

²¹ "D'Alema a Berlino: 'Non è il momento di sanzioni all'Iran'", *Corriere della Sera*, 29 June 2006.