

# The evolution of Italian presence in Africa: towards an innovative policy approach?

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*During the lunch of honor at the Quirinale Palace held on January 28<sup>th</sup> 2024 to celebrate the Italy-Africa Summit, Italian President Sergio Mattarella concluded his welcome speech by quoting an African proverb: “If you want to go fast, run alone. If you want to go far, go with someone”<sup>1</sup>. These words were meant to capture the spirit in which the Mattei Plan, the new cooperation framework between Italy and African nations proposed by Meloni’s government, was presented. After a long period of disengagement, the Plan puts the continent back on the list of Italy’s political and geopolitical priorities, by advocating a collaboration model aimed at erasing the causes of migration and addressing the ongoing energy crisis, through a non-predatory and incremental approach based on a strategy of “cooperation as equals”.*

## Introduction

Considered by many to be the most ambitious project of the current executive’s foreign policy hitherto<sup>2</sup>, the so-called Mattei Plan is founded on the conviction that “Italy can have a relationship with Africa like no other EU country”<sup>3</sup>. For Rome’s foreign policy, it is structurally necessary to somehow invoke the Mediterranean as a geopolitical scene where to shape its interests and ambitions. The Italian unique conception of the Mediterranean is sometimes referred to as “*wider Mediterranean*”, namely a geographical vision such that the sea is conceived as a geostrategic and geoeconomic continuum, whose borders do not necessarily coincide with the basin’s shores, but instead broaden up to the Atlantic to the West, the Black Sea to the north, the Middle East to the East, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa to the South.

Nonetheless, after the Second World War and the loss of African colonies, Italian foreign policy has been marked by a form of paradoxical neglect for the continent, and the sub-Saharan region in particular, on which Rome’s agency has long been carried out mainly by non-state actors, such as NGOs and Catholic missions, or through the participation to multilateral operations and projects. Despite the lack of a sufficiently large diplomatic network and a comprehensive and coherent strategic policy until the last decade, Italy has nonetheless never turned down its natural tendency towards Africa, whether it was by very specific and personalized bilateral partnerships, or the economic and financial bonds created by both private and state companies’ business activities.

The necessity for Italy to rethink and renovate its relationship with sub-Saharan Africa became compelling in the early 2010s, mainly following the economic recession and the so-called “migrant crisis,” resulting from the Arab spring and the change of interlocutors<sup>4</sup>. The new international and domestic junctures therefore pushed Rome to engage in a reactive policy shift towards Africa, alongside with many other European countries. Announced by Georgia Meloni during her maiden speech in 2022, the so-called Mattei Plan has been promoted as Italy’s most thorough project to claim an autonomous space of action in Africa, as well as its ambition to lead European policy initiatives on the continent. Hence, Italian policy in Africa is characterized

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<sup>1</sup> ANSA, *Mattarella e il detto africano, Ue e Africa insieme lontano*, ANSA (29 Jan. 2024). [https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2024/01/28/mattarella-e-il-detto-africano-ue-e-africa-insieme-lontano\\_c388cedf-96d6-4249-b065-627f7d095d31.html](https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2024/01/28/mattarella-e-il-detto-africano-ue-e-africa-insieme-lontano_c388cedf-96d6-4249-b065-627f7d095d31.html)

<sup>2</sup> Sassi, Francesco. *Energy Cooperation and Africa: Is a Virtuous Model Possible?*, in “Italy’s Africa Policy: Where Are We?”, ISPI (3 Aug. 2023). <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/energy-cooperation-and-africa-is-a-virtuous-model-possible-138292>

<sup>3</sup> Agenzia Nova, *Piano Mattei, Minniti: “L’Italia può avere con l’Africa un rapporto come nessun altro Paese Ue”*, NOVA.news (27 Apr. 2024). <https://www.agenzianova.com/news/piano-mattei-minniti-litalia-puo-avere-con-lafrica-un-rapporto-come-nessun-altro-paese-ue/>

<sup>4</sup> Carbone, Giovanni. *Italy’s return to Africa: between external and domestic drivers*, in *Italian Political Science Review*, vol.53 (2023): 310.

by a progressive evolution from atomized and mostly non-state ventures to the intent to adopt a more coherent strategic posture on the continent, in order to both prove the commitment to meet domestic needs and contingent emergencies and pursue new international ambitions. This article aims to analyze whether and to what extent the outcomes of Italian initiatives in Africa before its more consistent and congruent policy shift towards the continent have influenced the way Rome is now conceiving its renovated agenda in Africa.

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE PAST RELATIONSHIPS WITH THREE AFRICAN MAJOR PARTNERS

With regard to African policy, Italy has been described as a “relative latecomer”<sup>5</sup>, depicted by a scarce diplomatic and political engagement. Between 1985 and 2014, no Italian Prime Minister traveled to attend bilateral meetings with African counterparts and the country’s diplomatic network counted just 19 embassies and three cultural institutes in the sub-Saharan region<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, in the postcolonial period, the relationship between Rome and the continent was mainly represented by the activities of non-state actors and initiatives such as those of humanitarian NGOs, the Catholic missions carried out by the Community of Sant’Egidio and the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus, as well as the business assets of multinational companies like ENI (*Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi* – National Entity for hydrocarbon), ENEL (*Ente Nazionale per l’energia elettrica* – National Entity for electric power), Fincantieri and Leonardo, the latter two being both industrial groups specialized respectively on shipbuilding and defense and security technology. These actors continue to operate in Africa, contributing, along with the exaggerated rhetoric of “Italians good people,” to portray Italy’s agenda on the continent as free from hidden geopolitical interests and mainly driven by humanitarian and development goals. Even though appearing more as isolated cases rather than parts of a coherent policy framework, it is important to stress that Italian politics has nonetheless engaged bilaterally with African States on several occasions.

The historical relationships between Italy and three African countries in particular — Somalia, Mozambique, and Libya— can provide nuanced lessons for contemporary Italian foreign policy. They highlight Italy’s ongoing evolution in international relations, demonstrating a shift from post-colonial engagement to strategic partnerships, often mediated by economic interests, geopolitical considerations, and normative power dynamics.

- Under Italian socialist PM Bettino Craxi in the 1980s, the Italy-Somalia partnership serves as a blueprint. Italy invested significantly in Somalia’s development, channeling 310 billion lire (700 million dollars) between 1981 and 1984, making Somalia the highest recipient of Italian foreign aid in Africa at the time. Today, the current Italian government seeks to emulate this impactful activism to regain political importance.<sup>7</sup> Craxi’s strategy promoted economic development as a stabilizing force, leveraged historical ties for deeper engagement, and maintained strategic interests in the Horn of Africa amidst Cold War tensions. Unlike other Western countries that limited their involvement to short-term humanitarian aid, Italy opted for an integrated approach, strengthening local governance structures for long-term developmental impacts. Despite significant investment, the Italian-Somalia partnership had its failures, providing cautionary lessons for contemporary foreign aid strategies: the close alliance with Siad Barre led to considerable wastage of public funds. This misuse of aid tarnished Italy’s credibility.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 293. .

<sup>6</sup> Carbone, Giovanni. *Italy’s return to Africa: between external and domestic drivers*, in Italian Political Science Review, vol.53 (2023): : 299.

<sup>7</sup> Dissegna, Un decennio di cooperazione tra Italia e Somalia negli anni ‘80, 47.

<sup>8</sup> Carbone, Giovanni. *Italy’s return to Africa: between external and domestic drivers*, in Italian Political Science Review, vol.53 (2023):, 106.

- In the 1990s, the Community of Sant'Egidio's mediation in Mozambique was a notable chapter in Italy's foreign policy, successfully facilitating the 1992 peace accord between Frelimo and Renamo.<sup>9</sup> This intervention, involving extensive negotiations that began unofficially in 1986, demonstrated the efficacy of quiet diplomacy. The international recognition of Sant'Egidio's success in Mozambique significantly bolstered Italy's global image, portraying it as a proactive peace broker capable of leveraging non-state actors in conflict resolution.<sup>10</sup> The acknowledgment of Sant'Egidio's role by the Italian government and the Vatican highlighted a collaborative model of diplomacy that Italy championed in the post-Cold War era.
- The Italy-Libya partnership, exemplified by the 2010 Friendship Treaty, reflects a strategic dimension of Italy's foreign policy in Africa, emphasizing economic interests and geopolitical stability. This partnership evolved from historical ties and Italy's colonial legacy, transitioning towards a cooperative relationship underpinned by significant economic interdependencies, particularly in the energy sectors. Libya became Italy's foremost oil supplier and a crucial source of natural gas, facilitated by geographical proximity and historical linkages. The partnership aimed to stabilize the region by mitigating migration flows and enhancing maritime security. Economic ties also extended to infrastructure projects, with Italian firms playing significant roles in Libya. However, the relationship exhibited significant vulnerabilities, particularly in the reliance on Gaddafi's authoritarian regime. Gaddafi's downfall during the Arab Spring exposed the risks of Italy's heavy dependence on a single, unstable regime, leading to a temporary disruption in energy supplies and necessitating a rapid realignment of Italy's foreign policy in the region.

In sum, the engagement with Tripoli highlighted the advantages of diversifying energy sources beyond traditional dependencies, while Craxi's alliance with Somali president Siad Barre showed that partnerships that lack accountability and transparency eventually foster skepticism towards Italian intentions. Lastly, the successful case of the Community of Sant'Egidio's role in brokering the 1992 peace agreement in Mozambique stands as a testament to Italy's ability to utilize its normative power effectively, and therefore of its potential not only to play a proactive role in the diplomatic resolution of conflicts, but especially to mediate between African and European nations and institutions. These three case studies demonstrate the potential and challenges of Italy's foreign policy in Africa, informing the current strategy to better align with contemporary geopolitical and economic realities.

## THE MATTEI PLAN

Starting from the mid-2010s, Italy's new activism on the African continent marked the beginning of a transformation of its foreign policy towards the continent. The first attempts to renovate Italy's approach and relationship with the continent, and specifically with sub-Saharan Africa, date back to the early 2010s, when the Arab Spring incentivized Rome to look beyond North Africa to diversify its energy suppliers, expand its market and deal with migration flows<sup>11</sup>. Between 2014 and 2019, Italian governments therefore inaugurated five new embassies, organized seven bilateral state visits to 12 sub-Saharan states as well as two Ministerial Conferences in 2016 and 2018. Italy also developed a military presence on the continent: in 2013, Rome opened a military base in Djibouti, whereas in 2017 Paolo Gentiloni's

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<sup>9</sup> Frelimo was the political and armed group supported by the eastern bloc throughout the Mozambican civil war (1977-1992) whereas Renamo was its western supported counterpart.

<sup>10</sup> Anouilh, Sant'Egidio au Mozambique : de la charité à la fabrique de la paix, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Carbone Giovanni, *op.cit.*: 299.

government deployed a military training mission consisting of 470 soldiers to Niger, which remains now the only western actor in the country with 250 soldiers, after the recent withdrawal of French, American and German forces.<sup>12</sup>

**The Italian Mattei Plan target countries**

Red = target countries of Mattei Plan      Yellow = Italian main military export  
 xxx = economic interchange with Italy in million euros



Figure 1: A map of countries with Italian Mattei Plan pilot projects in Africa (2024).<sup>13</sup>

Yet, although Italy gave proof of a greater activism on the continent, the initiatives enacted by the country have long been lacking strategic coherence, partly because of the several changes of government that have marked Italian political scene in the last decades.

<sup>12</sup> Camilli, Annalisa. *La camera approva la missione militare in Niger et Audiello, Giorgia, Quello italiano è l'ultimo esercito occidentale rimasto in Niger (e non se ne andrà)*. <https://www.lindipendente.online/2024/05/15/quello-italiano-e-lultimo-esercito-occidentale-rimasto-in-niger-e-non-se-ne-andra/>.

<sup>13</sup> MUR, I principali Paesi target per il Piano Mattei. <https://www.mur.gov.it/it/piano-mattei-ricerca-e-alta-formazione/i-principali-paesi-target-il-piano-mattei>.

Camera dei Deputati, Relazione sulle operazioni autorizzate e svolte per il controllo dell'esportazione, importazione e transito dei materiali di armamento, riferita all'anno 2022. <https://documenti.camera.it/leg19/dossier/pdf/ES0109.pdf>.

Info Mercati Esteri. Osservatorio Economico Africa. [https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/public/osservatorio/schede-aree-geografiche/Indicatori%20%20Africa\\_15\\_12\\_2023\\_1702625952.pdf](https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/public/osservatorio/schede-aree-geografiche/Indicatori%20%20Africa_15_12_2023_1702625952.pdf). Hereafter the top 8 African countries for economic interchange with Italy, in mln of euros (01/2023 – 09/2023): Algeria 12 907; Libya 6 736; Tunisia 5 117; Egypt 4 486; South Africa 3 588; Morocco 3 457; Nigeria 2 178; Angola 1 093.

Since 2014 however, Italy has increasingly framed its foreign policy through the lens of the "enlarged Mediterranean," with Africa emerging as an essential partner in safeguarding its national strategic interests. The adoption of bilateral relationships with Sahel countries, coupled with a multilateral approach, has allowed Italy to align its objectives with broader European initiatives while carving out an autonomous role for itself on the continent. This strategic shift was epitomized in May 2021 when the Italian Minister of Defence, Lorenzo Guerini, affirmed that Italy's engagement in Africa—specifically in the Sahel, Horn of Africa, Gulf of Guinea, and Libya—was integral to national security. The convergence of bilateral agreements and multilateral collaboration reflects Italy's broader vision to address both regional instability and its own strategic imperatives.

Italy's involvement in various military missions, such as MISIN (Italian Mission of Support in Niger), MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali), EUCAP SAHEL NIGER (European Union Capacity Building Mission in Niger), EUCAP SAHEL MALI (European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali), Takuba (a European military task force under French command and to assist Malian Armed Forces), and others, underscores its growing political, diplomatic, and military activism in the Sahel in particular. Initially aligning its efforts with France, Italy sought cooperation rather than competition, participating in initiatives like the Takuba Task Force.<sup>14</sup> European policy provided Rome with a platform to re-establish ties with key players like France and Germany. However, once embedded in African affairs, Italy gradually pursued a more independent role to advance its own strategic interests, occasionally creating friction with its French ally. The relationship between Italy and France has been complicated by diverging visions and competition for influence in Africa. In 2019, anti-French sentiment was vocalized by Italian leaders, notably Giorgia Meloni, criticizing France's continued economic exploitation of African countries through mechanisms like the CFA franc and the extraction of resources, such as in Niger.<sup>15</sup> The discourse framed France as an opportunistic power in Africa, while Italy positioned itself as a more equitable and respectful partner. The complicated dynamics with France were further exacerbated by historical precedents, such as Berlusconi's opposition to the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya, which highlighted Italy's reluctance to align with French-led foreign policy ventures in Africa.<sup>16</sup>

Italy's contemporary interventionism on the African continent is relatively new in its structured, continent-wide form, marking a shift away from predominantly bilateral relations. This transformation has been accompanied by a rhetoric that emphasizes respect, disinterest in geopolitical dominance, and a values-driven approach. Italy has sought to present itself as a more trusted ally, capitalizing on its late entry into the colonial race and lack of historical unity to project an image of being less threatening compared to other European powers, especially France. This narrative aligns with Italy's engagements, particularly through military contributions that are often integrated into multilateral missions where Italy has not taken command, seeking to reinforce perceptions of its non-predatory intentions.

A crucial element in Italy's contemporary African policy is the Mattei Plan, which promises a new, non-exploitative model of cooperation. Rooted in the legacy of Enrico Mattei, founder of the Italian energy company ENI, the plan emphasizes a "win-win" strategy that contrasts with traditional European exploitation of African resources. Italy's approach, historically more humanitarian and less interventionist, is presented as less threatening both to competitors and African partners.

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<sup>14</sup> De Castanedo, Inigo. *Task Force Takuba: European Special Forces in the Sahel*. <https://greydynamics.com/task-force-takuba-european-special-forces-in-the-sahel/>

<sup>15</sup> Beraud, Benjamin. *Accusation de Giorgia Meloni contre la France : le franc CFA à l'origine des migrations ?* <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/accusation-de-giorgia-meloni-contre-la-france-le-franc-cfa-lorigine-des-migrations-1454301>

<sup>16</sup> Sarra, Chiara. *Libia, il retroscena di Berlusconi: "Napolitano chiese l'intervento."* <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/libia-retroscena-berlusconi-napolitano-chiese-lintervento-1491601.html>

Since her arrival to Chigi Palace in 2022, Giorgia Meloni focused her executive's foreign policy on the African sector of the "wider Mediterranean", turning her attention especially to the Sahelian region and the Horn of Africa, as well as traveling multiple times to Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt, often accompanied by the Chief executive of ENI, Claudio Descalzi<sup>17</sup>. Building on the legacy of Draghi's government, Algeria has become the first supplier of gas to Italy from 22% to 40% of the total gas imports to Italy.<sup>18</sup> In Libya, ENI has signed an historic contract for 8 billion euros to exploit two off-shore gas deposit.<sup>19</sup> In Tunisia the activism of Giorgia Meloni is witnessed by her four visits, with the last one consisting in 100 million euros to Tunisian authorities to block immigration departures.<sup>20</sup> Finally in Egypt, her visit resulted in a joint EU 7.4 billion euros with a focus on migration management and the designation of Egypt as a safe country to repatriate migrants.<sup>21</sup> It is in such a context that the formulation of Italian new strategy for Africa takes place, presented in January 2024 in Rome under the tutelary figure of Enrico Mattei, founder of ENI and known for his anticolonial and antifascist positions.

Inaugurated in Rome on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January under the theme "A *bridge for common growth*", the two-day Italy-Africa Summit 2024 is the first meeting between Italian and African representatives not held at ministerial level. The attendance of 21 African Heads of State and Government, in addition to Foreign Ministers and top representatives of international organizations such the European Union, the United Nations, the World Bank, IMF and OECD, is to be considered one of the determining factors of the summit's political success. In a geopolitical scenario in which the Western presence is increasingly discredited in Africa, Meloni's government has managed to bolster its international posture not only by displaying its ability to bring together important stakeholders from the continent, but also by presenting the Mattei Plan, further proving Italy's ambition to lead European policy tools and initiatives thanks to the adoption of a new approach to the relations with African governments. Prime Minister Meloni has been clear about it during both her welcome and closing speeches: enough with the narrative about Africa being a poor continent and the logic of strategic interests pursued behind the cover of development and humanitarian aid. Rome has concrete domestic and international reasons for seeking solid relations with Africa, presented as rich in business and investment opportunities. This is why the new cooperation model aims at being built on an equal, non-predatory basis so that it can be the beginning of a long-term partnership. With a starting fund of (just) "5.5 billion euros in grants, credits or guarantees"<sup>22</sup>, the Mattei Plan is therefore aimed mainly at controlling migratory flows and finding alternative energy suppliers through what it is portrayed as a win-win collaboration in the framework of the continent's industrial, infrastructural and technological development. Therefore, the project overall does not deviate drastically from the two traditional directives that have guided Italian foreign policy to date, the "diplomacy of growth" and the rhetoric of "help them at their home". What seems to be changing is rather the approach with which the ventures will be implemented, based on joint planning of targets and the synergy with the activities of other international actors, such as the EU, the US, Turkey and the Gulf States.

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<sup>17</sup> Pavia, Alissa. *Italy's Mediterranean pivot: What's driving Meloni's ambitious plan with Africa*, New Atlanticist (5 Feb. 2024). <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/italys-mediterranean-pivot-whats-driving-melonis-ambitious-plan-with-africa/>

<sup>18</sup> Carboni, Kevin. *L'Algeria conta sempre di più per le forniture di gas all'Italia*. <https://www.wired.it/article/algeria-gas-italia/#:~:text=L'Algeria%20C3%A8%20sempre%20pi%C3%B9,e%20diversificazione%20elettrica%20dell'Italia>

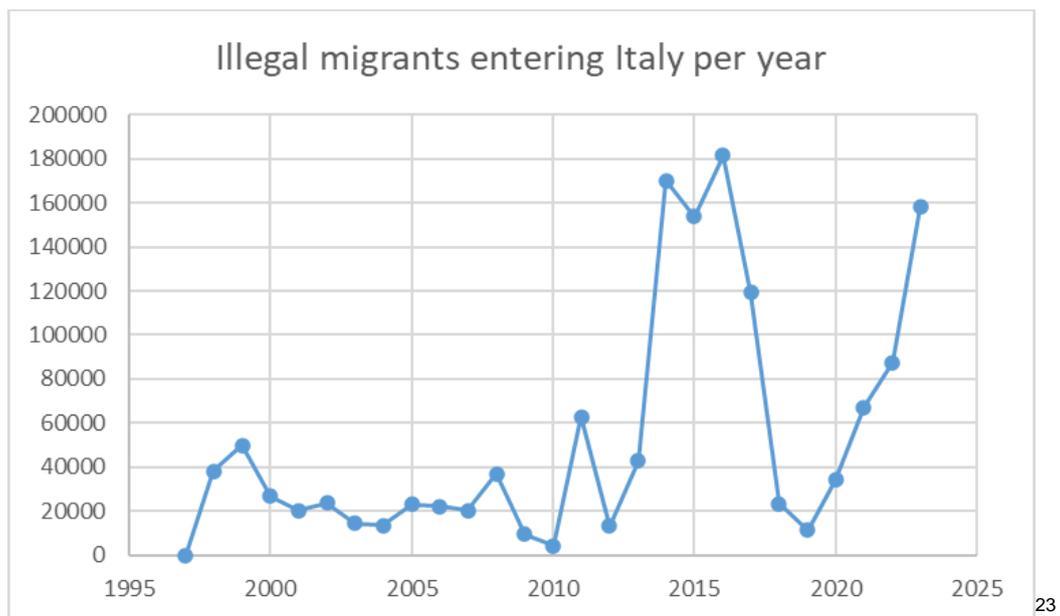
<sup>19</sup> ANSA. *Meloni a Tripoli, patto sul gas e trattativa sui migranti*. <https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2023/01/28/meloni-intesa-italia-libia-per-potenziare-guardia-costiera-fc86d2f8-f92e-4c5e-b14d-d132752b17af.html>

<sup>20</sup> Affari Internazionale. *Che cosa prevede l'accordo tra Unione Europea e Tunisia*. <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/memorandum-ue-tunisia-accordo-migranti/>

<sup>21</sup> De La Feld, Simone. *Cosa prevede l'accordo da 7,4 miliardi con l'Egitto, il più sostanzioso mai siglato dall'UE*. <https://www.eunews.it/2024/03/18/accordo-ue-egitto-migranti-meloni/>

<sup>22</sup> Fattibene, Daniele, Manservisi, Stefano. *The Mattei Plan for Africa: A Turning Point for Italy's Development Cooperation Policy?*, Istituto Affari Internazionali (10 Mar. 2024): 1.

Italian politics has fluctuated between welcoming and securitarian positions regarding African migration, with most parties linking migration to security concerns. Before 2011, migration numbers were relatively low, and Berlusconi's government, despite passing the Bossi-Fini law in 2002—which criminalized illegal immigration—projected Italy as a Catholic, welcoming country. However, the rise in migration post-2011 shifted the narrative. Matteo Salvini's Lega capitalized on anti-immigration rhetoric, pushing for stronger borders, while Giorgia Meloni proposed extreme measures like a naval blockade off Libya. The center-left Democratic Party also adopted a securitarian stance in 2017 when Interior Minister Minniti brokered an agreement with Libya, providing funds and patrol boats to stem migrant flows. This reduced arrivals from 180,000 in 2016 to 120,000 in 2017. When Salvini became Interior Minister in 2018, he pursued harsher measures, reducing landings to under 20,000 by 2019, largely by criminalizing NGOs rescuing migrants in international waters. His 2019 security decree imposed severe fines on these NGOs and allowed ship seizures, even blocking them from disembarking in Italy—a move that has led to ongoing legal proceedings against him. Under Giorgia Meloni's leadership, the approach became more pragmatic. Her government opted to prolong the process of NGO landings by assigning northern Italian ports to delay disembarkation. However, this tactic did little to curb the significant resurgence in migrant arrivals. That is the reason why Mrs Meloni is touting a transalpine 'model', having signed an agreement with Tirana at the end of 2023 to outsource asylum applications. Two detention centers have been built in Albania, at Italy's expense, with a capacity of 3,000 people. Migrants rescued by Italian military vessels in international waters will be held there. Furthermore, while tackling illegal immigration, Giorgia Meloni's government has reopened the flow of legal labor immigration after a twelve-year hiatus: the so-called 'flow decree' provides for the regular entry of some 452,000 workers between 2023 and 2025, being the first real reopening of the borders to regular workers since 2011.



Nonetheless, the Mattei Plan and the genuine intentions behind it leave more than one question hanging. To assess the credibility of the Mattei Plan and, consequently, Rome's reliance as the new European leading country for the relationship with the continent, it is indeed necessary to consider to what extent Italy's displayed interests towards an equal and lasting partnership with African nations can coincide with the instruments currently available for the

<sup>23</sup> Graphs done by the authors using source from the Italian ministry of interior.

implementation of the Plan and with other Italian interests that have nothing or very little to do with those of its African partners. In other words, what some analysts fear along with some African representatives is that in the short-term the Italy-Africa Summit will turn out to benefit the political interest of Italy in the framework of the then upcoming European elections. Giving proof to Italian voters of active commitment in tackling irregular immigration, as well as in diversifying energy sources, is key for Meloni's government as it is for her party. This kind of consideration further strengthens the criticisms of lack of transparency directed towards the Mattei Plan. During the summit, the Chair of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki, lamented the lack of input from African leadership in the project's formulation and stressed not only the need to implement the intentions displayed by the Italian executive in Rome in a thorough and consistent manner, but also the autonomy of the African Union in deciding its international partners, therefore highlighting the non-exclusiveness of African relations with the Western "block"<sup>24</sup>. The Mattei Plan, in fact, is still vague: it has more the shape of a method than of a strategic plan of action, and it is not adequately funded yet. On the one hand, this approach does not rush African leaders and leaves more room for their participation in the planification of the projects to enact; on the other, an integration of the Plan will be needed "as the initial pool of resources are not enough to develop a continent-wide strategy"<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, considering the limited involvement of Italian and African civil societies during the summit, the project's approach seems to focus primarily on leaders-to-leaders relations, therefore not including in the design and implementation phases a great number of actors that could prove essential to the renovation of Italy-Africa non-patronizing relationship. Lastly, the choice to focus on fossil energy to boost investments on the continent is a "somewhat dated vision"<sup>26</sup>, not aligned to Europe's Green Deal objectives aiming for climate neutrality by 2050.

## CONCLUSION

Meloni's government project seeks to introduce a real shift in the Italian approach to the African continent and more broadly to Rome's foreign policy and international stand. After a long period of disengagement and neglect for Africa, Rome has been demonstrating the ambition to adapt its foreign policy to the Italian unique geoeconomic and geostrategic conception of the "wider Mediterranean", which conceives the continent as a natural priority of Italy's external projection. Apparently again aware of its strategic geographic position and historical relationships with African nations, Italy is now trying to deepen its efforts towards the continent to both respond to specific domestic political needs and strengthen its position within the European Union with regards to Africa-oriented policy initiatives. Nonetheless, Meloni's government must now deepen its efforts towards forward-looking perspectives of partnership.

At the bottom line, the Mattei Plan is an ambitious project with the potential to give Italy the role of a key player in European-African relations. However, as it moves from conception to implementation, a central question remains: will Italy's image on the continent shift, and if so, will it evolve into a perception of Italy as a genuine, equal partner in Africa? This remains to be seen, particularly as the Plan confronts the challenge of balancing Italy's strategic interests with its rhetorical commitment to ethical partnership.

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<sup>24</sup> Simonelli, Filippo, Fantappiè, Maria Luisa, Goretti, Leo. *The Italy-Africa Summit 2024 and the Mattei Plan: Towards Cooperation between Equals?*, Istituto Affari Internazionali (11 Mar. 2024): 3.

<sup>25</sup> Simonelli, Filippo, Fantappiè, Maria Luisa, Goretti, Leo. *The Italy-Africa Summit 2024 and the Mattei Plan: Towards Cooperation between Equals?*, Istituto Affari Internazionali (11 Mar. 2024): 3.

<sup>26</sup> Quartapelle, Lia. *Oltre il piano Mattei: la ricerca di una politica italiana per l'Africa*, European Council on Foreign Relations (22 Jan. 2024). <https://ecfr.eu/rome/article/oltre-il-piano-mattei-la-ricerca-di-una-politica-italiana-per-lafrica/>