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**Geographical Factors vs. Geopolitical Agent
in Geopolitical Analysis: Italy's Energy Reorientation
from Russia to Africa after the Invasion of Ukraine**

Master's thesis

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Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on, 30 April 2023

Valerio Ferri

References

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Abstract

This thesis is focused on the Italian energy shift from Russia to Africa aimed at reducing Russian energy imports after the invasion of Ukraine under the Draghi administration. The selected theoretical framework is Neoclassical Geopolitics. This thesis aims to understand what factors led to that specific foreign policy outcome. Attention is devoted to decision-making process resulting from both systemic factors and geopolitical agents' behavior and perceptions. The research path starts with the selection and definition of those structural factors meaningful in the case under observation. After, it covers the identification and characterization of Italy's geopolitical agents, analysis of the Italian strategic culture and geopolitical agents' perceptions, discourse, network of relations, intentions, ambitions, and domestic power structure. In conclusion, the research outcome is presented and discussed in light of role played by geopolitical agents and geographical factors. Geopolitical agents appear decisive in determining a specific foreign policy trajectory and thus in affecting, more or less profoundly depending on the case, the dynamics of international politics. The results of this research provide us with interesting and innovative insights into the role that geopolitical agents play in determining the behavior of a state. This, without wishing to exclude structural factors from analysis, those factors are fundamental but not exhaustive in explaining interactions between states.

Keywords

Neoclassical Geopolitics, Geopolitical Agent, Decision-making, Structural Factors, Foreign Policy, Energy Policy, Italy, Russia, Africa

Název práce

Geografické faktory vs. geopolitický činitel v geopolitické analýze: Energetická reorientace Itálie z Ruska do Afriky po invazi na Ukrajinu

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INTRODUCTION

The present research, forming part of the Geopolitical Studies (GPS) Programme at Charles University in Prague, belongs to the field of Geopolitical Studies. This study has the goal of explaining Italy's energy reorientation towards Africa after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 in the theoretical framework of Neoclassical Geopolitics. In order to reach this objective, the research question is the following: *to what extent did the geopolitical agents play a role in Italy's energy reorientation from Russia to Africa, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine?*

Neoclassical Geopolitics is understood as a conceptual, theoretical, and methodological framework that belongs to the broader scientific domain of Geopolitical Studies. Deeply rooted in the Neoclassical Realist theory, Neoclassical Geopolitics aims to enlarge the Geopolitical Studies' scope by including the variables of geopolitical agents' perceptions and capacities in shaping foreign policy and influencing international politics.

Geopolitical Studies have often been focused on the international arena and the constraints, imperatives, and opportunities it imposes and/or offers to one or more international actors. In many cases, domestic factors have been neglected as irrelevant in front of the factors belonging to the international realm, even when determinism was recognised as a misleading element.

The state, as the most important actor in global politics and thus the main actor observed and studied by Geopolitics, has been often understood as a "black box", an actor blindly reacting to external stimuli in order to gain an advantage over the other actors in a specific context and period. Neoclassical Geopolitics challenges that unidirectional approach by taking into account the domestic sphere. That theoretical change of path is based on the assumption that the international system offers different possible modalities of action, but

how the international stimuli are perceived and interpreted as well as how a state's potential is exploited and foreign policy is decided and implemented ultimately depend on decision-makers' capacities and perceptions.

As regards the dynamic under observation, i.e., the Italian energy reorientation from Russia to Africa after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent Western political and economic reaction, it was selected for three main reasons. Firstly, energy, resources, and trade are arising as central objects of discussion as regards global power competition and international security in both public debate and the academic community. Thus, scientific work on those topics represents an important contribution to the current intellectual debate that is touching, involving, and animating several spheres of our societies and having an important effect on governance, policymaking, culture, and academia.

Secondly, the Russian aggression against Ukraine represents a major ongoing geopolitical crisis because of its location (Europe), its geopolitical implications (it embodies the clash between two great powers, namely Russia, directly involved in ground operations, and the United States, indirectly acting to harm Russia), and its potential outcome in terms of distribution and balance of power (Russia is trying to reshape its share of power in the detriment of the US sphere of influence). Thus, the selected subject for this thesis reflects one of the several effects produced by that crucial geopolitical crisis that is taking place at both regional and global levels.

Thirdly, as an Italian, I can easily access material related to my country's domestic affairs and dynamics, I am more aware of how society, politics, bureaucracy, and decision-making processes work and interact in Italy, and I have a clearer view of the cultural factors shaping and influencing the Italian society and elites. Thus, my nationality, knowledge of

Italian political affairs, and the possibility to navigate material in the Italian language are other motivations behind the choice of this thesis' scope of analysis.

In order to respect the academic standards and provide logical and scientific solidity to the present thesis research, references and a bibliography will be provided within this thesis.

Structure

This thesis is structured in the following manner. In the introduction, I will describe the features and objectives of the thesis by illustrating the theoretical framework of Neoclassical Geopolitics, present the object of research and hypotheses related to the new phase in Italy's energy policy, and outline the context of the thesis.

In the first chapter, I will depict the Italian energy shift from Russia after the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the consequent reorientation towards Africa as well as define the Independent Variable, structured in three factors, namely Structural Modifier (Energy), Italy's Potential, and Strategic Environment (Polarity, Clarity, and Nature)

In the second chapter, devoted to the Intervening Variable, the research path will cover the identification and characterization of Italy's Geopolitical Agents under observation. This will embrace analysis of the Italian strategic culture and geopolitical agents' perceptions, discourse, network of relations, intentions, and ambitions. To conclude this chapter, I will insert the geopolitical agents' capacities into the domestic power structure.

In the conclusion, I will discuss the research outcome resulting from the application of the model of Neoclassical Geopolitics to the Italian energy reorientation from Russia towards Africa and present a theoretical reflection on the role played by geographical factors in the

light of the scientific innovation provided by the study of geopolitical agents' role in foreign policy and international politics. At the very end, I will provide my conclusions as regards my hypotheses.

Theory

As mentioned, the theoretical and methodological framework of this thesis is Neoclassical Geopolitics, a theoretical contribution rooted in Neoclassical Realism or, better said, a theoretical contribution that wants “*to review the neoclassical realist approach and merge it with geopolitical studies trying to forge a joint approach*” (Morgado, 2019).

A brief overview of Neoclassical Realism is needed to make understandable the theoretical and logical considerations behind the Neoclassical Geopolitical approach as well as to give epistemological coherence and solidity to the present research. The Neoclassical Realist theory is based on a clear set of assumptions: state action in the foreign realm is influenced by both domestic and external factors; foreign policy is decided by decision-makers; states have ambitions and interests; those ambitions and interests are proportional to the state's relative potential.

The Neoclassical Realist model devotes attention to the structural factors shaping the *International System* (Independent Variables). Those variables embody the material dimension, belong to the international realm, and depend on the relative state potential. Among others, two structural elements are in the foreground. On one side, (1) *State Potential*, meaning the relative distribution of capabilities among the states, and *Polarity*, that is to say, the number of poles (great powers) within the system at a certain period of time. On the other side, the (2) *Structural Modifiers*, in other words, one or more material

element(s) whose presence or absence in the hands of a state can alter the structure of the entire system, at both the international and regional levels. For instance, the monopoly on a particular technology, an unbalanced offence-defence relation in military capacities, an advantageous geographical position, etc. (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016).

In addition, the Neoclassical Realist theory places emphasis on the role played by two further systemic factors. Firstly, the *Clarity* of a threat presented to the state by the international system, embracing its timeframe and the availability of an adequate policy response. Secondly, the nature of the *Strategic Environment*, which can be permissive or restrictive, and enables the observer to understand a state's foreign policy options and room for strategic manoeuvre (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016).

In the Neoclassical Realist model, four Intervening Variables are taken into account. Those variables embody the immaterial dimension, belong to the domestic realm, and depend on perceptions, interests, and aspirations. Those variables are (1) *Images and Perceptions of State Leaders*, beliefs, images, perceptions, and thoughts of individual decision-makers; (2) *Strategic Culture*, expectations, ambitions, values, opinions, and understanding of the international arena of both elites and society; (3) *State-Society Relation*, forces shaping and influencing the domestic system such as interest groups, political parties, religious movements, criminal organizations, bureaucratic bodies, intelligence agencies, political characters, companies, etc.; (4) *Domestic Institutions*, how domestic relations are crystallized, in both formal (constitutional norms and legal processes) and informal (corruption, influence, network, pressure, etc.) terms (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016).

The Neoclassical Realist model aims to identify the causal mechanisms among its variables to explain the Dependent Variable (*Foreign Policy Outcome*). Being both a foreign policy

and international politics theory, Neoclassical Realism also seeks to understand and explain causal mechanisms and constitutive phenomena in international politics.

If Neoclassical Realism opened the way towards the observation of domestic factors along with international stimuli, Neoclassical Geopolitics aims *“to reinforce the importance of the intervening variables geopolitical agent’s perceptions and capacities in shaping the geopolitical design and other foreign policy outcomes”* (Morgado, 2019).

As Morgado stated, Neoclassical Geopolitics embraces the study of decision-makers or Geopolitical Agents. Such theoretical and methodological innovation represents a further step towards the enlargement, improvement, and completion of Geopolitical Studies’ scope. Indeed, among other “classical” geopolitical factors, the scientific path of Neoclassical Geopolitics cannot ignore *“the methodological task of studying the geopolitical agent’s perceptions and capacities”* (Morgado, 2019) by definition.

An overview of Neoclassical Geopolitics is unavoidable to guarantee adequate epistemological coherence and solidity to the present research, offer a valuable scientific and theoretical contribution to the field of political studies, make understandable and clear the methodological steps that follow one another within this thesis, and test Neoclassical Geopolitics’ explanatory power itself.

Neoclassical Geopolitics is rooted in a specific set of assumptions inspired by Neoclassical Realism, Ethology, and Classical Élités Theory: state action in the foreign realm is influenced by both domestic and external factors; foreign policy is decided by geopolitical agents; states have ambitions and interests; those ambitions and interests are proportional to the relative material state potential; human beings are territorial beings, thus human communities instinctively want to control and secure a certain space; human communities

are hierarchical in nature, thus human societies present the natural necessity of a minority that rules over the majority (Morgado, 2019).

Neoclassical Geopolitics operates as a reducer of complexity. In fact, on one side, the Neoclassical Realist model is composed of an Independent Variable (*International System*) structured in multiple factors (*State Potential, Structural Modifier, Polarity, Nature of Strategic Environment, Clarity of Threat*) and four Intervening Variables (*Images and Perceptions of State Leaders, Strategic Culture, State-Society Relations, Domestic Institutions*). On the other side, the Neoclassical Geopolitical model keeps the first Neoclassical Realist Independent Variable (*International System*) but comprises the four Intervening Variables in one (*Geopolitical Agent's Perceptions and Capacities*) (Morgado, 2022).

As emerges from its theoretical decomposition, Neoclassical Geopolitics challenges the idea that views geopolitics as a subject that does not take into consideration the role played by individual decision-makers. On the contrary, Neoclassical Geopolitics advocates that the behaviour of a state is the result of a set of policies ultimately triggered by the deliberate decisions of geopolitical agents.

In this context, a definition of the geopolitical agent is needed. If we assume that every human community needs and presents a restricted group of individuals equipped with a larger share of power if compared with the rest of the community, i.e., the ruling class or political elite, once we identify that restricted group within a state, we can talk about the geopolitical agent.

The geopolitical agent is a group or an individual in charge of the supreme power. Being the geopolitical agent the ultimate ground of decisional power within the state, we can

identify it with the state itself. Thus, the Geopolitical Agent is a very small circle of individuals occupying top-level positions within every state's leadership. Usually, that restricted group is composed of Presidents, Prime Ministers, Foreign Affairs Ministers, and Defence Ministers but, according to the specific circumstances, also bureaucrats, technocrats, consultants, experts, analysts, military and security officials, and so on, can influence the process of decision-making.

As quoted, the analysis of the International System as the Independent Variable and the examination of the Geopolitical Agents' perceptions and capacities as the Intervening Variable lies at the core of the Neoclassical Geopolitical model. The Independent Variable *"is objective, tangible, its material components of the essence of the political reality can be observed"* (Morgado, 2019). However, those material components cannot have a direct and concrete influence over the international system without the geopolitical agents' perceptions and capacities triggering policy decisions.

Geopolitical agents' perceptions, i.e., *"the beliefs or mental pictures of individual decision-makers"* (Morgado, 2019), are highly personalized and stable, and reflect the geopolitical agent's "consciousness horizon", i.e., *"the mindset of the geopolitical agent, [...] the contours of the cognitive dimension of geopolitical agents"* (Morgado, 2022). They *"provide the researcher with information about how an individual understands a certain event, fact, data, what captures his attention, what does he ignore"* (Morgado, 2019).

As regards geopolitical agents' capacities, we know that foreign policy does not only depend on perceptions but also on abilities in managing, allocating, and optimizing resources or, better said, the geopolitical agents' capacities of transforming the state's potential (tangible means and resources) into state's power (capacity).

However, perceptions and capacities are not impermeable to each other. Indeed, we must recognise that geopolitical agents' capacities are shaped and constrained by their perceptions ("*one cannot act accurately when one cannot perceive accurately*" [Morgado, 2022]). In addition, a further factor influencing geopolitical agents' capacities is the domestic power structure ("*one may well perceive, and may be capable of acting well per se, yet may not have the necessary freedom from the domestic power structure to act*" [Morgado, 2022]). In this framework, attention must be devoted to the divergence and/or convergence between the preferences of the country and the priorities of the geopolitical agents as well as the presence or non-presence of an institutionalized net of political relations that may constrain geopolitical agents' capacities, that may represent a geopolitical continuity. Ultimately, the extent of the state's relative material potential plays a role in constraining the geopolitical agent's capacities ("*a state cannot act beyond its capabilities*" [Morgado, 2022]).

In order to outline the Intervening Variable (*Geopolitical Agent's Perceptions and Capacities*), the model requires two precise methodological steps: (1) identification of geopolitical agents and (2) characterization of the geopolitical agents.

As seen, geopolitical agents form a narrow group of individuals in charge of taking the ultimate and supreme decisions in terms of a state's action and trajectory. Thus, in order to (1) identify the geopolitical agents involved in a precise context of time and space, it is required to observe "*heads of state or heads of government, ministers of foreign affairs, ministers of national defense, and other specific ministers (such as security ministers) who constitute the foreign policy cabinet. Depending on the caliber of the geopolitical agents, the staff and teams of institutional technocrats, clusters of foreign affairs-, defense-, and*

intelligence experts who provide reports and advice may also be influential in the decision-making process” (Morgado, 2022).

The second methodological step consists in analysing and assessing the (2) characterization of the geopolitical agents. It embraces, for example, “(2.1) *an analysis of strategic culture through the study of perceptions of geographical space*, (2.2) *considerations about the coherence of the geopolitical agents’ discourse and an investigation of their network of relations*, and (2.3) *an exploration of the intentions of the geopolitical agents by identifying their ambitions” (Morgado, 2022). In order to accomplish this task, “(2.4) inserting those capacities into the domestic power structure” (Morgado, 2022) is a required step. Further and more specific details about this methodological process will be provided in the chapter about the intervening variables.*

Object and Hypotheses

Since this thesis aims to be a monographic work, a precise definition of the perimeter that limits and defines the object of analysis of the present research is a needed step. The object under observation is the Italian gas imports reorientation from Russia – that was the first importer of gas to Italy – in terms of geopolitical reorientation and supply chain diversification in the period following the Russian violation of the Ukrainian territorial sovereignty on 24th February 2022 and ending with the end of the presidency of the Italian Council of Ministers of Mario Draghi on 22nd October 2023. In that period, Italy reduced its Russian import of gas until almost a total stop to gas proceeding from Russia. This reduction and how was shaped and implemented as a foreign policy tool in the framework of Western sanctions against Russia is the object of the present thesis.

Based on the previous sections, I formulated the following hypotheses that represent possible and competing explanations of the selected foreign policy outcome and its causal mechanisms among variables.

- H1 – Geography played a contextual role, and not a determinant role (even if not negligible), in shaping the Italian energy reorientation from Russia to Africa.
- H2 – Geopolitical agents’ decisions were influenced by Italy’s geopolitical continuity tending towards a Euro-Atlanticist alignment.
- H3 – Geopolitical agents’ decisions were influenced by their establishment-prone individual network, personal aspirations, perceptions, and capacities tending towards a cautious approach to foreign policy.

Contextualization

Even if it was stated that this thesis is a monography, contextualization is a required step in order to give sense to the object under examination.

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict is a diplomatic, political, and military crisis that began *de facto* in February 2014. Since February 2022, clashes between regular troops from the two countries are taking place on Ukrainian soil.

Following the Euromaidan protests, the flight to Russia and the subsequent removal of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich (22 February 2014), several pro-Russian protests spread through Crimea and, at the same time, troops without insignia (the so-called “little green men”) occupied and took control of the main infrastructure and administrative centres in the region (Schreck, 2019). These events were followed by the official dispatch of Russian armed forces to Crimea and on 16 March 2014, after a referendum deemed

invalid by the UN General Assembly with 100 votes in favour, 11 against and 58 abstentions (UN News, 2014), Moscow annexed the peninsula to the Russian Federation.

In April 2014, violent pro-Russian protests erupted in the major cities of Donbass, resulting in a war between the Ukrainian government and secessionist forces, which had meanwhile formed the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics, declared independent on 11 May 2014 following a referendum.

Hostilities between the secessionist pro-Russian militias and the Ukrainian regular troops continued. On 5 September 2014, the presidents of Russia and Ukraine, with the presence of representatives of the two new-formed republics, met in Minsk and signed a protocol to establish a ceasefire, which was, however, repeatedly violated by both sides. To try to stop hostilities in the Donbass again on 12 February 2015, thanks to the mediation of France and Germany, Ukraine and Russia signed a new protocol to establish the ceasefire. Even this second agreement was violated numerous times. Between October and November 2021, Russia initiated a large mobilisation of its armed forces on the Ukrainian border, deploying additional forces in Belarus, Transnistria and Crimea in addition to the Black Sea Fleet. On 21 February 2022, Russia recognised the Donbass People's Republics and three days later began its invasion of Ukraine.

1. THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

In this chapter, I will (1) describe the Italian energy deviation from Russia after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the consequent reorientation towards Africa and (2) briefly characterize the independent variable (*International System*). In addition, in the first section, I will point out the role played by Russia in Africa, which represents an important item in order to understand the systemic dynamics shaping the regional strategic environment in relation to the observed foreign policy outcome.

The first section (i.e., the description of the Italian energy reorientation) embodies a needed step in order to give sense and meaning to the second section (i.e., the definition of the independent variable). In fact, the foreign policy outcome under analysis is not a macro topic (e.g., increase or decrease in an actor's power and influence at the global level and over the long period). On the contrary, it presents a specific and sectorial nature (i.e., it is directly linked to international energy trade, distribution, dependence, and weaponization) and is comprised in a short period of time (i.e., 2021-2022). Thus, tracking the evolution of the Italian energy reorientation from Russia to Africa is required in order to clearly identify and coherently define the independent variable's elements.

1.1 The Italian Energy Shift

During 2022 and 2023, the political and diplomatic relations between Russia and Western countries have been dominated by the tension related to the critical developments in Ukraine. In this context, the Government of the Russian Federation has been showing increasing hostility towards the Western world. This dynamic initiated a growing deterioration between the Russian Federation and countries in the Euro-Atlantic sphere in terms of political and economic relations in the last months.

To get an idea of the tone of Russia's attitude towards the Western world, I quote below part of the Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly by the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on 21st February 2023:

“Responsibility for inciting and escalating the Ukraine conflict as well as the sheer number of casualties lies entirely with the Western elites and, of course, today’s Kiev regime, for which the Ukrainian people are, in fact, not its own people. The current Ukrainian regime is serving not national interests, but the interests of third countries.

The West is using Ukraine as a battering ram against Russia and as a testing range. I am not going to discuss in detail the West’s attempts to turn the war around, or their plans to ramp up military supplies, since everyone is well aware of that. However, there is one circumstance that everyone should be clear about: the longer the range of the Western systems that will be supplied to Ukraine, the further we will have to move the threat away from our borders. This is obvious.

The Western elites make no secret of their goal, which is, I quote, ‘Russia’s strategic defeat’. What does this mean to us? This means they plan to finish us once and for all. In other words, they plan to grow a local conflict into a global confrontation. This is how we understand it and we will respond accordingly, because this represents an existential threat to our country.” (Putin, 2023).

As a response to Russia's political hostility towards the West and the military aggression against Ukraine, the European Union and other Western countries introduced, at various

times and with different degrees, sanctioning measures against the country. Those sanctions affected Russian personalities and entities (with the freezing of assets and a ban on entry into the EU), as well as the financial, trade, energy, transport, technology, and defence sectors through significant bans and restrictions.

In this context, the European Union was faced with a complex decision, the need for a strong balance between the willingness to support Ukraine by targeting the Russian economy and the need to secure the necessary amount of energy for the functioning of the European economies and the needs of its citizens. The European Union, which depended for about 45% of its imports on Russian gas in 2021 (Clifford, 2022), could not apply a total embargo on Russian gas and oil over the short run, as announced on 8 March by the US (White House, 2022). So, the EU decided to adopt a mid-term path to reconfigure its energy security and announced the REPowerEU plan, the first step towards eliminating Russian gas from the European energy mix by 2027 (European Commission, 2022).

Even Italy, which consumed 76 billion cubic metres of natural gas in 2021 (Ministero della Transizione Ecologica della Repubblica Italiana, 2022), was the third largest destination market for Russian gas and oil exports, and was highly dependent on Russian energy (60% of Russian exports to Italy are mineral resources) (Oldani, 2022; InfoMercatiEsteri, 2022), took place in the game of source diversification. The Italian government's missions to Africa confirmed this orientation. Algeria, for example, supplied Italy with around 21 billion cubic metres in 2021, doubled its volumes and overtook Russia as the leading supplier in January 2022 (Gili, 2022).

1.1.1 A New Chapter in The Italian Energy Policy

In this section, even if the Italian energy reorientation embraced Angola, Congo, Mozambique, Algeria, Qatar, Egypt, and Azerbaijan, I will focus only on the energy trade agreements signed by Italy with Angola, Congo, Mozambique, and Algeria. This selection is based on a rational and well-considered choice. In fact, the present thesis aims to understand the active role of geopolitical agents in shaping, changing, and orientating a State's foreign policy trajectory. Thus, attention is devoted to those bilateral agreements that represent a change in Italy's energy policy trajectory.

On the contrary, being nothing new in energy affairs, thus representing a continuum, Italy's relations with Qatar, Egypt, and Azerbaijan are excluded from this thesis' focus. As mentioned, Neoclassical Geopolitics aims *“to reinforce the importance of the intervening variables geopolitical agent's perceptions and capacities in shaping the geopolitical design and other foreign policy outcomes”* (Morgado, 2019). As a result, particular focus will be devoted to Algeria, a supplier that took rapidly the place of Russia, becoming Italy's first gas supplier in an incredibly short time. However, further research, better if compared, on those longstanding relations where the geopolitical agents' direct intervention appears limited is desirable to develop a comprehensive scientific body.

On 3 April 2022, Eni's CEO Claudio Descalzi, informally nicknamed the “Italian energy minister”, arrived in Algeria to meet with the Maghrebi state's top leaders. Eni's CEO's visit to Algiers was only the first step of an African tour by Italian political authorities. In fact, Descalzi's trip was a precursor to the much more publicised visit on the following 11 April. At that time, alongside Descalzi, were Prime Minister Mario Draghi, Foreign Minister Luigi di Maio, and Ecological Transition Minister Roberto Cingolani, in that occasion, an agreement to increase methane supplies by nine billion cubic metres annually

was announced with President Abdelmadjid Tebboune. It was decided to deliver the Algerian gas partly in liquid form and partly through the Transmed/Enrico Fermi pipeline that cuts through the Sicilian channel reaching Mazzara del Vallo (Adnkronos, 2022; ENI, 2022; Volpe, 2022).

In the space of a few months, similar agreements have been concluded with Angola, Congo, and Mozambique. In addition, new agreements have been signed with Qatar, Egypt, and Azerbaijan, countries where Eni's footprint is nothing new. The countries under observation here are states characterized by political instability and united by the abstention in the UN vote to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine. An unequivocal sign not only of the success of Vladimir Putin's African policy but also of the distance between Western agendas and the perception of priorities in the countries of the African continent (Occorsio, 2022; United Nations, 2022).

Algeria become the keystone of the alternative supply system to that managed by Gazprom, which, after the cut in supplies decided by Moscow, is Italy's leading supplier of methane (Cotugno, 2022). In playing the energy game, Rome has taken advantage of the disagreements between Algiers and Madrid, which arose when the Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez decided to abandon the country's traditional neutrality on the Western Sahara conflict. By opening to the plan for the solution of the Western Sahara issue designed by Morocco, a bitter competitor of Algeria, Spain triggered a diplomatic crisis with Algeria. President Tebboune reacted by freezing banking transactions with Spain. Sonatrach, the Algerian state-owned energy company, decided to revise upwards the price of gas sold to the Spanish energy market, threatening to cut the supplies (Bayar, 2022).

1.1.2 Russia's Role in Africa

Algeria is not only a crucial gas supplier to Italy. It is also a historical partner of the Russian Federation. Since the war of independence that drove out the French and led to the first independent government run by the revolutionary Ahmed Ben Bella, the USSR identified Algeria as an ideal partner in the western Mediterranean. Relations remained close throughout the Cold War. After a brief interlude of understanding with the West following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Bouteflika-Putin couple strengthened relations after the Russian decision to cancel a \$4.5 billion debt incurred by Algiers when the Soviet communists still sat in the Kremlin (Faulconbridge & Ahmed, 2006).

The *quid pro quo* was Algeria's signature on a \$7.5 billion Russian military supply agreement (New Defence Order Strategy, 2020). The defence partnership has deepened over the years and has paid off. In fact, with Russian tanks only a few kilometres from Kyiv, Algeria had not failed to support Russia despite international pressure. Even, between January and February 2023, Algerian and Russian forces performed joint military exercises in Algeria (Aamari, 2023). The partnership between Russia and Algeria has a clear military nature, this feature also characterizes the Russian relationships with Congo, Angola, and Mozambique.

On 25 September 2019, an Antonov An-124 transport aircraft landed on the runway in Nacala, Mozambique, accompanied by a Mil Mi-8 military helicopter. On that occasion, the media spoke of at least 160 Russian military personnel engaged alongside Mozambican forces in the fight against terrorism in the Cabo Delgado region (Martin, 2019). Despite denials by the Russian embassy, just two months later seven Russian mercenaries were killed by Islamist militias in the region. Around the same time, the government of Mozambique adopted a resolution to allow Moscow navy ships to use the country's ports

(Warsaw Institute, 2019). Over the past years, the Russian footprint has shrunk, shifting from the security sector to the exploitation of raw materials, but ties remain important and the presence of Russian mercenaries in the country is still a reality. Even the Republic of Congo, in 2019, decided to rely on Kremlin military specialists to train its armed forces - which largely use Russian-made systems (AfricaNews, 2019).

In Angola, Moscow deploys neither military nor contractors, but relations are nevertheless close and largely based on military supplies. Russia-Angola relations are strong because of both the traditional friendship, which has its roots in the USSR's support for anti-Portuguese independence movements, and President João Lourenço's personal ties with Putin. In the country, the Russians' hook mainly consists of military supplies, there was even a proposal to manufacture Russian weapons on Angolan soil (Tass, 2019).

1.2 The International System

In this section of the first chapter, I will define the independent variable. As stated previously, Neoclassical Geopolitics originates from Neoclassical Realism and the Neoclassical Geopolitical model keeps the first Neoclassical Realist Independent Variable (*International System*). For the purposes of this study, The Independent Variable is structured in three factors, namely *Structural Modifier (Energy)*, *Italy's Potential*, and *Strategic Environment (Polarity, Clarity, and Nature)*.

1.2.1 Energy

Neoclassical Geopolitics devotes particular attention to “structural modifiers” as a component of the independent variable. That category refers to “*the relative distribution of*

capabilities that enable individual states to carry out particular diplomatic and military strategies” and “may increase or decrease the likelihood of conflict” (Taliaferro, 2000).

In February 2022, when Russia launched its offensive against Ukraine, Italy was among the main importers of Russian energy resources. Italy was the third largest destination market for Russian gas and oil exports, Russia was the first energy supplier to Italy, and 60% of Russian exports to Italy were mineral resources (Oldani, 2022; InfoMercatiEsteri, 2022).

The energy production of Italy is limited because of the scarcity of underground fossil resources. In addition, it is more convenient to import minerals from abroad rather than extracting the deposits in Italy. As for nuclear energy, Italy does not produce it. That kind of production was stopped in 1987 *via* referendum.

Italian dependence on foreign sources of supply is nothing new, it is estimated that Italy depends on 73% of foreign energetic sources (La Situazione Energetica Nazionale nel 2020, 2020). As a result, Italy is highly dependent on foreign countries for its energy supplies. That condition makes energy a critical element in Italy’s security that influences and shapes Italian strategy and foreign policy.

1.2.2 Italy’s Potential

The Neoclassical Geopolitical model’s second material factor forming part of its independent variable is the state’s “potential”. State potential is the relative amount of capabilities and resources possessed by a state that creates a possibility for that state in the international arena, it is needed to exercise power.

In terms of relative state potential, Italy is in good, sometimes excellent, material conditions. In other words, most of the tangible and/or observable elements, geography, communications, technology, industry, armed forces, etc. reveal vast potential. The only exception is represented by the dependence on foreign energy resources, a critical weakness for Italy in material terms.

As regards Italy's international role, the country is an important contributor to the international community, it is one of the most important EU and NATO members, belongs to the G7, and its role is broadly recognized. Nevertheless, Italian society has a profound deficiency when it comes to interstate competition. The "Italian model" seems to be more suitable for cooperation rather than competition. That reduces Italy's potential in times of restrictive conditions in the strategic environment.

Nevertheless, profound deficiency emerges from intangible, immaterial, and non-measurable factors, i.e., human and political realms. The increasingly elderly Italian society has convinced itself that it is out of history, interprets the world in economic and post-historical terms, does not conceive interstate competition in the name of survival, turns its gaze to Europe and its wealthy markets, forgetting its Mediterranean dimension imposed by history and geopolitics.

1.2.3 Strategic Environment

Neoclassical Geopolitics includes the strategic environment (subdivided into three subfactors: polarity, clarity, and nature) among its independent variable's factors. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, the blurred signal of change in the strategic environment has become evident. In the light of the Italian energy dependence on Russian exports and Italy's solid positioning within the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union,

the polarity in the context of analysis can be described with the formula 2 + 1, i.e, the US and Russia flanked by the EU in a secondary position. In general terms, China also represents a pole in the strategic environment. However, its role is not predominant in the context under observation.

As regards clarity in that context, Russia's assertiveness in Eastern Europe, revisionist attitude, and anti-Western posture, especially in terms of energy weaponization, represent a clear and evident threat in the strategic environment. At the global level, China also expresses revisionist ambitions, representing a clear threat.

As a result of such clarity in terms of threats, the nature of the strategic environment is rapidly changing from permissiveness to restrictiveness. Indeed, *“the distinction between permissive and restrictive strategic environments relates to the imminence and the magnitude of threats and opportunities that states face. All things being equal, the more imminent the threat (or the more enticing the opportunity) the more restrictive the state's strategic environment is”* (Ripsman et al., 2016).

In this chapter, my goal was to track the Italian energy deviation from Russia and the consequent reorientation towards Africa and outline the independent variable. As seen, the foreign policy outcome under observation represents an important dynamic, being directly linked to the conflict in Ukraine, the main ongoing geopolitical crisis at the global level, with global power implications.

The Italian energy reorientation took place in the context of a Western-wide response to Russian aggressivity on the international stage and moved its steps from a context of deep economic interconnection and interdependence between Italy and Russia, especially in

energy terms. That double-folded triggering dynamic is one of the starting points for my theoretical reflection and the application of the Neoclassical Geopolitical model.

2. ITALY'S GEOPOLITICAL AGENTS AND THEIR GEOPOLITICAL DESIGN

As stated, in this research, I attempt to observe and analyse the Italian energy deviation from Russia and the consequent energy reorientation towards Africa. In this chapter, following the methodological and theoretical model of neoclassical geopolitics presented in the previous sections, the goal is to define how the domestic variables impact and shape foreign policy outcomes. Better said, the objective is to detect the centrality of the intervening variables by explaining them as the possible collateral causes of the investigated foreign policy outcome.

Here, the research path will cover the (1) identification of Italy's geopolitical agents involved in that process and (2) characterization of those geopolitical agents. The geopolitical agents' characterization analysis embraces the (2.1) analysis of the Italian strategic culture and geopolitical agents' perceptions, the (2.2) analysis of the coherence of the geopolitical agents' discourse and scrutiny of their network of relations, and the (2.3) analysis of intentions and ambitions of the geopolitical agents. The characterization step is concluded by (2.4) inserting the geopolitical agents' capacities into the domestic power structure.

2.1 Identification of Italy's Geopolitical Agents (2021-2022)

This research's timeline covers Draghi's Cabinet. Mario Draghi was nominated Prime Minister of the Italian Republic on 13th February 2021 and was substituted by the newly nominated Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni on 22nd October 2022. Thus, the geopolitical agents taken into account in the present research are the most prominent political actors during the Draghi government timeframe and obviously Draghi himself.

This choice of selecting Draghi and some ministers of his government is based on the constitutional structure of the Italian Republic. In fact, according to Article 92¹ of the Italian Constitution, executive power is a prerogative of the President of the Council of Ministers and the Ministers. The choice of selecting the Head of the State is based on the Italian Constitution as well. Indeed, according to Article 92, the President of the Italian Republic has the power of nominating the President of the Council of Ministers and the Ministers and, according to Article 87², represents the nation, holds elections, signs international treaties, is the commander-in-chief of the Italian armed forces and the head of the Italian Superior Council of Judiciary. In addition, I will take into account the CEO of Eni, Italian energy giant *de facto* controlled by the Ministry of Economy and Finance and one of the main vectors of Italy's energy foreign policy.

As regards experts, who are one of the categories pertaining to the geopolitical agents, they are not a subject of attention in this thesis. This choice is based on the absence of complete and consistent public documentation on Italy's energy shift after the Russian invasion of Ukraine available. It is legitimate to think that a body of documentation (reports, analyses, papers, etc.) on the subject exists, even if probably fragmented, but it is inaccessible due to both temporal factors (the process under analysis has not come to an end) and security reasons (the issue is very delicate for Italy).

¹ “The Government of the Republic consists of the President of the Council of Ministers and the Ministers, who together constitute the Council of Ministers. The President of the Republic appoints the President of the Council of Ministers and, on the proposal of the latter, the Ministers”. La Costituzione, Parte II, Titolo III, Sezione I, Art. 92

² “The President of the Republic is the Head of State and represents national unity. He may send messages to the Chambers. He calls for elections to the new Houses and schedules their first meeting. He authorises the submission to the Houses of Parliament of Government-initiated bills. He enacts laws and issues decrees having the force of law and regulations. It calls popular referendums in the cases provided for by the Constitution. It appoints State officials in the cases indicated by law. He accredits and receives diplomatic representatives and ratifies international treaties, subject, when necessary, to authorisation by the Houses of Parliament. He has command of the Armed Forces, presides over the Supreme Defence Council constituted in accordance with the law, declares a state of war decided by the Houses of Parliament. He presides over the Supreme Council of the Judiciary. He may grant pardons and commute sentences. It confers the honours of the Republic”. La Costituzione, Parte II, Titolo II, Art. 87

Italian geopolitical agents between 2021 and 2022 include the following individuals:

- Sergio Mattarella, President of the Italian Republic (2015-ongoing);
- Mario Draghi, President of the Council of Ministers of the Italian Republic (2021-2022);
- Luigi Di Maio, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (2019-2022);
- Roberto Cingolani, Minister of Ecological Transition (2021-2022);
- Claudio Descalzi, CEO of Eni (2014-ongoing).

2.2 Characterization of Italy's Geopolitical Agents (2021-2022)

The selected individuals represent the key geopolitical agents in the period under consideration (Draghi's Cabinet, 2021-2022), precisely in terms of foreign policy and energy policy.

2.2.1 Analysis of the Italian Strategic Culture and Perceptions of the Geopolitical Agents

In order to contextualize and understand the Italian strategic culture, it is needed to trace back briefly the evolution of the Italian Republic's foreign policy approach through recent history. As I will describe, the alignment with the US through a strong and solid positioning within the Atlantic sphere is the prominent feature characterizing the Italian geopolitical trajectory through time.

After the fall of the Italian fascist regime, the Italian foreign policy was characterized by the role played by two Italian politicians, Alcide De Gasperi and Carlo Sforza. De Gasperi

was the first Prime Minister of the Italian Republic from 1946 to 1953 and an exponent of the Christian Democracy party. He is remembered for his government approach known as “centrism” based on the centrality of the Christian Democracy and the support of the Italian Liberal Party, Italian Republican Party, and Italian Socialist Democratic Party.

Under the first De Gasperi Cabinet, the leftist forces’ role was contained, especially in foreign affairs. Indeed, De Gasperi resigned as Prime Minister after six months of government in 1947, just after meeting the US President Truman in Washington, due to the political split within the Italian Socialist Party, and against the will of the Italian Communist Party, both were part of the executive as forces that fought against the fascist regime. As a result, Pietro Nenni, a socialist leader, lost his portfolio as Italy’s Foreign Affairs Minister.

De Gasperi was nominated Prime Minister again, the socialist Pietro Nenni was substituted with the republican Carlo Sforza. Again, the government lasted six months, De Gasperi presented his resignation after declaring that the cooperation between Christian Democracy, Communist Party, and Socialist Party was not anymore adequate to rule the country.

De Gasperi and Sforza, the first trained in Catholic universalism and the second in Mazzini’s humanitarianism, can be considered the two fathers of the Italian Republic’s foreign policy. Their approach, after 75 years, still characterizes Italy’s strategic culture and trajectory in the international system.

In the same months, the Cold War took shape. In that period, moved by their democratic spirit and aware of the new international balances, De Gasperi and Sforza laid the basis of Italy’s international position by firmly anchoring the country in the Atlanticist sphere. The

“iron curtain” dividing Europe entered Italian domestic affairs with the exclusion of the socialists and communists from the government.

After the failed fascist experience, De Gasperi and Sforza wanted to relaunch Italy’s role in the world. The new trajectory of Italian foreign policy was no more tending to national greatness through revisionist ambitions of the international order, but rather oriented towards the contribution to the creation of a peaceful and cooperative international system through multilateralism. De Gasperi and Sforza committed themselves to the reintegration of Italy into the new system of international relations. Without hesitation, they opted for Italy’s clear Atlantic positioning and promotion of European cooperation.

In the 1950s, the Italian Republic, as a promoter of multilateralism, stumbled when it came to the defence of its national interests, still a legacy of its role as a defeated nation. However, in that period, a new generation of leaders put Italy on the right track, the Christian democratic Prime Minister Antonio Segni and the liberal Foreign Minister Antonio Martino, aligned Italy alongside the United States in the Suez crisis, in opposition to France and the United Kingdom. In addition, in 1957, Rome hosted the signature of the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community, one of the most important European treaties. The political legacy of De Gasperi and Sforza is evident here.

In the 1960s, the understanding between Italy and the United States gained further momentum thanks to three outstanding protagonists: US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Italian Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani, and Italian Foreign Affairs Minister Antonio Segni. Kennedy supported the “enlargement of the democratic base” of the Italian state, in other words, the involvement of the Socialist Party in the government to isolate the Communist Party, giving place to the so-called “organic centre-left”. Due to the international context of opposition between the Western and Communist blocs, that move

was a delicate operation. It was successful thanks to the shift of Antonio Segni, considered by Washington as a guarantee of the Italian Atlantic positioning, from the Foreign Affairs Ministry to the Presidency of the Republic.

That new chapter was characterized by the organic centre-left governments led by Aldo Moro, Christian democratic leader. The socialist democratic Giuseppe Saragat, another man of proven Atlantic conviction, was appointed as Foreign Affairs Minister.

In this period, Italy adopted an approach to foreign policy that can be called “critical Atlanticism”. While Italy continued, albeit with less conviction, the centre-left experience, the United States with Nixon as President turned to the right. In 1971, the season of Bretton Woods and the gold-dollar parity ended, opening the crisis of economic and financial multilateralism.

In 1979, the first elections for the European Parliament took place. It was an important attempt to reopen the politicization of the European integration process, until then economic in nature. Italy used the European stage to relaunch its role as a facilitator and promoter of multilateralism. In 1981, in front of that assembly the Colombo-Genscher Act, named after the two Foreign Affairs Ministers of Germany and Italy, was presented. It aimed to relaunch the idea of a truly political European integration, with great attention to cooperation in foreign affairs and security policy.

Throughout the 1980s, the most critical dossier of Italian foreign policy was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in that framework Italian Atlanticism was put to the test. In 1985, the crisis of Sigonella took place, the NATO base in Sigonella was surrounded by Italian soldiers to force the US soldiers to allow a civilian plane carrying Palestinian terrorists

who killed a paraplegic American Jew on an Italian cruise ship to fly. That opened a delicate diplomatic crisis between Rome and Washington.

The 1990s were characterized by the implosion of the Italian ruling class under the blows of judicial investigations. The establishment of a new political scenario by new political forces is considered the beginning of the “second republic”. The 2000s were characterized by almost a decade of centre-right governments led by Silvio Berlusconi.

Berlusconi had a strong tendency to support the US foreign policy. His project for Italy was to turn the country into a “bridge between Washington and Moscow”. In 2002, in Pratica di Mare, near Rome, NATO countries organized a meeting where, for the first time, Russian President Vladimir Putin was invited, putting a symbolic end to the confrontation of the Cold War. In addition, Berlusconi advocated for Turkey’s accession to the European Union.

After the 2008 crisis, Italy’s role as an international player waned. Due to the financial crisis, the priorities of the Italian governments have been economic in nature and mainly directed at European affairs. Moreover, from 2011 to 2018, Italy had technical governments due to parliamentary balances incapable of expressing defined political majorities, hence governments with little inclination to make choices of a proper political nature. Italy’s international backwardness is exemplified by the Italian absence in the Libyan scenario after the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in 2011, notwithstanding geographical proximity and the deep mutual political and energy ties between Rome and Tripoli (Benigni, 2021; Bonvincini & Colombo, 2011; Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, 2008; Romano, 2013).

Apart from a brief parenthesis of foreign policy influenced by the populist ideology of the 5 Star Movement (in 2019, Italy signed a Memorandum of Understanding with China on the Belt and Road Initiative and, in 2020, Russian troops entered Italian territory for an undefined cooperative action against covid). The covid-19 crisis between 2020 and 2022 has given Italy new (geo)political impetus, albeit linked to the temporary issue of sanitary measures, medical supplies, and vaccines. But the element that set Italy in motion again as a geopolitical actor was the Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory. This crisis has put the geopolitical and geostrategic imperatives imposed by the increasingly evident fragmentation of the international system back at the centre of Rome's political agenda.

Returning to the observation of Italy's geopolitical agents, we can start investigating the geopolitical agents' perception of the strategic environment in order to map their "consciousness horizon". If the model was applied by Morgado to the geopolitical trajectory of Brazil (2022), thus, devoting attention to the geopolitical agents' perception of space, here I will focus on the assessment of the perceptions that the geopolitical agents have about the geopolitical and geostrategic confrontation between the US-led West and Russia in foreign policy decision-making.

The hypothetical causal relation is that if the geopolitical agents are not clearly aware of the geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics, trends, imperatives, and opportunities offered and/or imposed by the international system, and if they implement ruinous foreign policy choices (measurable by observing the enlargement or contraction of the country's international influence), then we can consider those geopolitical agents as "geomisguided", i.e., "*misguided in terms of their sense of space*" (Mogado, 2022), or in this case, in terms of their understanding of geopolitical affairs.

- *Sergio Mattarella*

Sergio Mattarella, the current President of the Italian Republic, has a long experience and deep ties with the establishment. He graduated in Law in 1964, taught Parliamentary Law at the Faculty of Law of the University of Palermo until 1983, when he joined the Chamber of Deputies. His political commitment originated within the Catholic and reformist movements. Elected deputy for the Christian democrats in 1983, he was a member of the Chamber of Deputies until 2008.

In those seven legislatures, he was a member of the Constitutional Affairs Commission, the Foreign Affairs Commission, the Legislation Committee, the Bicameral Commission for Institutional Reforms, the Parliamentary Commission of Investigation on Terrorism, the Parliamentary Commission of Investigation on the Mafia, the Jurisdictional Commission of the Chamber of Deputies, and the Presidential Council of Administrative Justice.

From 1987 to 1989 Sergio Mattarella was Minister for Relations with Parliament, from 1989 to 1990 he was Minister of Education, from 1998 to 1999 he was Vice-President of the Council of Ministers, from 1999 to 2001 he was Minister of Defence. In 2015, Sergio Mattarella was elected the 12th President of the Italian Republic and, in 2022, he was re-elected President of the Italian Republic (Presidenza della Repubblica Italiana, n.d.).

Apart from his role as Head of State, Sergio Mattarella's years as Minister of Defence (1999-2001) represent Mattarella's most "geopolitical" experience. Indeed, in that period, Italy participated as an active partner in the framework of the peacekeeping missions deployed by the United Nations and NATO, especially in the Balkans. In addition, at that time, Italy was among the most convinced supporters of the European Security and Defence Policy and promoters of the first European army corps. As regards geopolitical

agents' perception of geopolitics and the consequent foreign policy decision-making orientation, in the case of Sergio Mattarella, appears evident continuity of the traditional Italian alignment with the US-led Western world, especially as an actor committed to promoting multilateralism and cooperation.

- *Mario Draghi*

Mario Draghi, former Italian Prime Minister, has a vast experience as an economist and banker at the institutional level. After studying economics in Rome and then at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he started his academic career. From 1981 to 1991, Draghi was professor of International Economics at the University of Florence. In that period, he worked in management positions at the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank. In 1990, he became an economic consultant at the Bank of Italy. From 1991 to 2001, he was Director General of the Ministry of the Treasury. From 2002 to 2005, he was Vice-President for Europe at Goldman Sachs and, from 2005 to 2011, Governor at the Bank of Italy. In 2011, he was appointed to the Presidency of the European Central Bank, remaining in office until 2019 (Treccani, n.d.).

In 2021, Giuseppe Conte, after the crisis of his second government, composed of leftist parties, resigned from the Presidency of the Council of Ministers in the midst of the Covid crisis. Thus, the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella, entrusted Mario Draghi with the task of forming a new high-profile government to deal with the emergencies arising from the Covid crisis. After meeting all the Italian parties, he took office as Prime Minister, creating a "national unity" government supported by the majority of the political forces and composed of both politicians and technocrats. In his inaugural speech to the Parliament, Draghi described his executive as "*firmly Atlanticist and Europeanist*" (Askaneews, 2021).

Mario Draghi, chosen to lead Italy out of the Covid crisis, being a figure from outside politics, capable of bringing all the political components of parliament around the same table, and with an internationally recognised professional and institutional background, in February 2022 found himself facing another international crisis, the invasion of Ukraine. In this context, his government action was in line with Italy's traditional posture as a member of the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union, resulting in a firm condemnation of Russia's aggression.

The crisis in Ukraine was Mario Draghi's "geopolitical" test. Despite his evident background as an economist, he was able to overcome the "economicist"³ worldview by demonstrating geopolitical sensitivity. Mario Draghi has made no secret of his desire to show Italy close to the positions of the Western world in strategic terms, at the cost of breaking with Italy's primary importer of hydrocarbons.

Mario Draghi declared that

"if they [the EU institutions] propose a gas embargo and if the European Union is uniform on this, we will be happy to follow, whatever instrument we consider most important and effective to allow peace. This is what we want. We wonder if the price of gas can be traded for peace. Faced with these two things, what do we prefer: peace or staying quiet with the air conditioning on all summer?" (Draghi, 2022).

³ "The vulgate recites firmly: it is economic interest that guides the choices of chancelleries and rulers, it is the mercantilist approach that shapes the moves of nations and empires" (Fabbri, 2020)

In the summer 2022, Draghi's Cabinet entered a political crisis, triggered by the 5-Stars Movement's break of the government pact for a "grand coalition" of national unity. Interestingly, the 5-Stars Movement is the Italian political force with the most critical opinion about aid measures to Ukraine. In the past, this party has embraced anti-NATO positions. His actual leader, Giuseppe Conte, was Prime Minister when he signed the Memorandum of Understanding with China to include Italy in the Belt and Road Initiative in 2019. In 2020, in the midst of the Covid crisis, his government allowed the entrance of Russian troops on Italian soil (the first and last time Russian troops entered NATO territory) with the justification of cooperating against the pandemic.

- *Luigi Di Maio*

Luigi Di Maio, former Foreign Affairs Minister, has a limited institutional and professional background. Since 2007, he was a 5-Stars Movement activist. In 2013, he was elected in the Chamber of Deputies in the lists of the 5-Stars Movement. From 2013 to 2018, he was Vice-President of the Chamber of Deputies and, in the meantime, also a member of Commission XIV, dealing with European Union affairs.

In the 2018 political elections, he was re-elected in the Italian Parliament. To overcome a political stalemate, the 5-Stars Movement reached an agreement with the League, right-wing party led by Matteo Salvini, and identified the jurist and lawyer Giuseppe Conte as Prime Minister, creating a populist⁴ government. From 2018 to 2019, Di Maio was Vice-President of the Council of Ministers and Minister of Economic Development, Labour, and Social Policies. In 2019, the League, on the wave of the broad consensus obtained in the

⁴ "Over the past few years, there has been a rift between the political elite and civil society. The people are in the first article of the Constitution, you cannot think of doing politics by feeding the rift between the political ruling class and the people. I am populist to the extent that we are aware of this rift and are acting to heal it" (Conte, 2018)

local and European elections, opened a government crisis. The goal of this move was to go to new elections. However, after this crisis, Giuseppe Conte formed a new government composed of the 5-Stars Movement, the Democratic Party, left-wing party, and other minoritarian forces.

In 2021, the second Conte government went into crisis and lost the majority in the Parliament, and Mario Draghi was nominated as Prime Minister. From 2019 to 2022, Luigi Di Maio was Foreign Affairs Minister, appointed by the second Conte government and then confirmed by the Draghi government. After the government crisis triggered by the 5-Stars Movement, he left the 5-Stars Movement and formed a small independent parliamentary group. In the 2022 general elections, he presented a small centre-left list, which did not reach the 3% threshold (Treccani, n.d.). In April 2023, he was appointed as the EU Special Representative for the Gulf. In an official communication to the representatives of the EU Member States, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell declared Di Maio “*the best-suited candidate*” for that role (Il Corriere della Sera, 2023).

It can be argued that Luigi Di Maio does not have a strong professional or academic background. He is not even a university graduate. His political path has been characterized by a change of attitude from radicalism to pragmatism, from populism to institutionalism. This change is evident in his political career. From an exponent of a populist party with strong anti-establishment and anti-European Union demands as well as critical to the US foreign policy and NATO, he turned into the Foreign Affairs Minister of a declared Atlanticist and Europeanist government and after a high official of the European Union.

- *Roberto Cingolani*

Roberto Cingolani is an Italian physicist, who graduated in Physics from the University of Bari in 1985. From 1988 to 1991, he was a member of the research team at the Max Planck Institute in Stuttgart, from 1997 to 1998, was professor at the University of Tokyo and, from 1998 to 2000, was professor at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering at the University of Richmond in Virginia, from 2000 to 2005, was professor of General Physics at the Department of Materials Science at the University of Lecce.

In 2005, Roberto Cingolani was nominated Director of the Italian Institute of Technology in Genoa, a position he held until 2019, when he assumed the position of Head of Technological Innovation of Leonardo, the main Italian company in the sector of aerospace, security, and defence. From 2021 to 2022, he was Minister of Ecological Transition in the Draghi government. Since 2022, he has been an energy adviser for the Meloni government (Treccani, n.d.). In April 2023, his transversal position resulted in his appointment as CEO of Leonardo, the leading Italian defence, aerospace, and security company, whose largest shareholder is the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance, by the Meloni government (Fraiooli, 2023).

Given his deep academic and institutional experience, Roberto Cingolani clearly has a technocrat profile. The interesting aspect of his political journey is surely his move from a minister in the Draghi government to an adviser for the Meloni government and after the CEO of Leonardo nominated by the Meloni cabinet, a step that highlights, even more, his nature as a technocrat and his distance from ideology.

- *Claudio Descalzi*

Claudio Descalzi is a business executive. He graduated in physics from the University of Milan and built most of his career within the Eni group, which he joined in 1981 as a field engineer. He then obtained several roles within the company including Project Manager for the Development of Activities in the Northern Sea, Libya, Nigeria, and Congo; Director for the Africa, Middle East, and China Geographical Area; and General Manager of Exploration & Production. In 2014, Claudio Descalzi was appointed as the CEO of Eni, he was reconfirmed in that position in 2017, 2020, and 2023. He was also a member of the National Petroleum Council from 2016 to 2017 (Treccani, n.d.).

Certainly, Claudio Descalzi epitomizes the figure of the technocrat. He is an executive of a largely state-controlled Italian economic giant who has climbed the corporate ladder. It is interesting to note his bipartisan position, far from the ideological and electoral competition of political parties. In fact, he was appointed as the CEO of Eni by the Renzi cabinet (centre-left) and rumours were made about his possible appointment as minister in the Meloni cabinet (centre-right). In April 2023, the Meloni government confirmed his position as CEO of Eni (ANSA, 2023).

Moreover, because of the unquestionable geopolitical nature of the industry in which he operates and his longstanding international experience, it is reasonable to assume that Claudio Descalzi's understanding of geopolitical affairs is broad. As CEO of Eni, Descalzi signs contracts with foreign energy companies. This is a task that implies a strong awareness of the geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics concatenated with the global energy supply chain and interstate competition over resources and markets.

As mentioned, the Italian alignment with the Euro-Atlantic world embodies the compass in Italy's tradition of foreign policy. Such a posture is rooted in the emergence of the Italian Republic as an international actor with the legacy of a defeated nation as well as the intention of reshaping its role as a reliable partner in the eyes of its allies and a cooperative middle-power in the multilateral contexts.

Confirmation of this trend can be found not only in the observation of Italy's recent history but also in the "White Book for International Security and Defence" (2015), the main strategic document defining the strategic trajectory of the country. It was presented in 2015 and outlines Italy's objectives in the realm of international security. Those goals converge on the ultimate objective of ensuring a more secure nation, a more secure Euro-Atlantic space, a more secure Euro-Mediterranean region, and a more stable and secure global system.

According to that document,

"the Euro-Atlantic region represents the core of national interests and, as such, its security is the country's top priority. The constitutional dictate of defending the homeland as the sacred duty of every citizen, therefore, is also operationalized through the broader defence of peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region. Within the framework of this architecture, full and convinced national membership in the Atlantic Alliance and the development of a process of progressive integration of the Defences of the countries of the European Union are the keystones for the protection, also for the future, of national security and defence and entail not only benefits but also precise obligations and burdens" (Ministry of Defence, 2015).

In sum, after a look at the Italian geopolitical agents' characterization in terms of geopolitical sense, an alignment between Italy's traditional post-World War II foreign policy trajectory inaugurated by Alcide De Gasperi and Carlo Sforza and the approach of the agents taken into account seems evident. Certainly, with the nuances and diversities resulting from different individualities. That aspect will be analysed in a more comprehensive way in the next sections.

2.2.2 Analysis of the Coherence of the Geopolitical Agents' Discourse and their Network of Relations

As regards political discourse, no defined ideological positions were expressed by the Italian geopolitical agents. In fact, their discourse never referred to a precise ideological field or political party. On the contrary, it was centred on the institutional dimension embodied by their roles. That feature is the result of the absence of a proper ideological background as regards several components of the Council of Ministers as well as the heterogeneous ideological composition of the parliamentary majority that supported Mario Draghi.

However, ideology as *“the basis of a social group's self-image, [...] its identity, actions, aims, norms and values, and resources as well as its relations to other social groups”* (Van Djik, 2007) is a dimension impossible to be avoided due to its necessary nature in terms of narration and justification of certain choices and according to specific needs and contingencies. That is evident in the characterization of ideology itself, indeed, *“any ideology is plastic and can be adapted, or radically changed, its cultural nature is the central aspect in the discourse”* (Morgado, 2022). In the case of the Draghi government, we can identify a specific ideological tendency that ended up transforming and changing almost all the Italian political forces.

Draghi narrowed the ideological scope of the Italian parties. The 2018 political elections were characterized by a radical polarization over the European Union. In the midst of Brexit, political forces such as the 5-Stars Movement or the League proposed a strong anti-Euro and anti-European Union narrative, the so-called “Italexit” was at the centre of the Italian public debate. With Mario Draghi, with respect to the European institutions, the range of positions has shrunk to one: adhesion with conviction to the European Union (Rizzo, 2018; Lanaro, 2017; Morra, 2020; Prestigiacomo, 2020).

The same trend was evident as regarded the public debt and the State’s role in the economy (yes to “good debt” to save companies and create economic development) or the foreign policy trajectory (no more chasing different actors, including China and Russia, but solid Atlanticism), and so on.

This ideological reorientation is the result of Draghi’s approach based on pragmatism, rather than political ideology. As stated, Draghi is a technocrat, not a politician. However, even pragmatism is the result of a specific worldview and was the bond holding different parties together. The worldview offered by Draghi was shaped by the convergence of three different political cultures, namely, liberalism, conservatism, and democratic socialism. As stated, ideologies have their own evolution, are not monolithic, so they change by the interaction of external and environmental factors with internal evolution of thinking (Preiti, 2021; Petrini, 2021).

Again, in geopolitical terms, what emerges is the perpetuation of the traditional Italian orientation towards Euro-Atlanticism, reinforced by the transversal ideological and political characterization of the Draghi government. A feature confirmed by the political discourse of Italy’s geopolitical agents and their network of political ties as well as their interests or aspirations.

Below are some key quotations that crystallise the geopolitical agent's perspective and discourse in the realm of geopolitics.

Mario Draghi's words to the Senate during his confidence speech to the government:

“This government will be firmly Europeanist and Atlanticist, in line with Italy's historical anchoring: the European Union, the Atlantic Alliance, and the United Nations. Anchoring that we have chosen since the post-war period, on a path that has brought well-being, security, and international prestige. Our vocation for effective multilateralism is deep, founded on the irreplaceable role of the United Nations. Our attention and projection toward areas of natural priority interest, such as the Balkans, the ‘enlarged Mediterranean’, with particular attention to Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean, and Africa, remain strong. The most recent years have seen a growing push to build networks of privileged bilateral and multilateral relationships in Europe. It is precisely the pandemic that has revealed the need to pursue a more intense exchange with partners with whom our economy is more integrated. For Italy, this will entail the need to better structure and strengthen the strategic and indispensable relationship with France and Germany. But it will also require consolidating cooperation with states with which we share a specific Mediterranean sensibility and the sharing of issues such as the environment and migration: Spain, Greece, Malta, and Cyprus. We will also continue to work for a more virtuous dialogue between the European Union and Turkey” (Draghi, 2021).

Another example is Sergio Mattarella's year-end speech delivered in December 2022:

“The year 2022 was the year of the insane war unleashed by the Russian Federation. The response of Italy, Europe, and the West was full support for the attacked country and the Ukrainian people, who are courageously defending their freedom and rights. If this was the year of war, we must focus our efforts so that 2023 will be the year of the end of hostilities, of the silencing of weapons, of the halting of this inhuman trail of blood, death, and suffering. Peace is a foundational part of the European identity and, since the beginning of the conflict, Europe has been seeking glimmers to achieve it in justice and freedom. [...] And it is in this scenario, in many ways unprecedented, that we measure the value and relevance of our strategic choices: Europe, the Western choice, our alliances. Our primary responsibility in the area we call the ‘enlarged Mediterranean’, our privileged relationship with Africa” (Mattarella, 2022).

It is possible to state that the political discourse has a clear Euro-Atlantic characterization and, not secondary in this research, references to Africa as well as the “enlarged Mediterranean”. Thus, what emerges is a political discourse rooted in Italy's Euro-Atlantic continuity that, as seen, is the main feature of Italian foreign policy over the long run. That trajectory, in the last decades, has dangerously taken on the appearance of an anti-national policy, mainly in its short-sighted inattention to the Mediterranean space and, in general, to the South. The willingness to focus only on European affairs, with emphasis on the economic sphere, is a move that is undoubtedly the result of the economic crisis but also

poorly attentive to the evident Italian geographic orientation (and thus geopolitical imperative), that points southward.

However, the references to Africa and the Mediterranean demonstrate Italy's renewed attention to Mediterranean affairs. This is confirmed by the Italian energy policy choices under analysis in this thesis. A posture that, while not prevalent, has nonetheless characterized Italian foreign policy throughout recent history. Not coincidentally, Italy was considered the most pro-Arab of the Western nations precisely because of its friendly relations with the countries of the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

In addition, the focus on the so-called "enlarged Mediterranean", the main geopolitical formulation defining the perimeter of strategic and security interest for Italy, a space that stretches from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean and from the Horn of Africa to the Black Sea (De Giorgi, n.d.), is an extremely interesting item. This element reinforces the assumption of an adequate, though probably not extensive and complete, sensibility for geopolitics on the part of Italian geopolitical agents under observation.

As regards the *geopolitical agents' network*, an investigation over personal ties, with attention to personal objectives and interests, is required.

Sergio Mattarella, the current Head of State, has a long political career behind him. He always belonged to the Christian Democratic forces and was nominated minister several times. During the first republic, the Christian Democracy was the ruling party, governing uninterruptedly for the entire length of the first republic. In addition, that party was considered by the United States a reliable anti-communist force, the guarantee of Italy's solid Atlantic positioning. Thus, Sergio Mattarella has a massive and influential network of power both domestically and internally.

In any case, after the expiry of his first term as President of the Italian Republic, Sergio Mattarella made no secret of his willingness to retire to private life given his age (in 2022 he was 80 years old). In 2022, he was re-elected by the Italian Parliament to the Presidency of the Republic after having given his willingness to return to the office given the previous inconclusive votes and therefore the impossibility of finding a new Head of State.

As already mentioned, Mario Draghi's experience is extensive, which implies a broad and high-level network of relations. As seen, Mario Draghi is not a proper politician, on the contrary, he is a technocrat. Thus, his network is not defined by a specific ideological area but is transversal.

As a banker, Mario Draghi has ties with international finance. For instance, he is a member of the Group of Thirty, an international association composed of bankers, economists, and academics that investigates economic and financial issues by examining the consequences of economic, monetary, and fiscal policies. Mario Draghi also participated in the Bilderberg Meeting, the annual conference hosting Western government leaders, experts, business officials, and academics. However, the last time he attended the Bilderberg Meeting was in 2009 (Piras, 2022). In addition, Mario Draghi was Executive Director of the World Bank until 1990 and then became Director General of the Italian Treasury from 1991 to 2001. The Italian economist was then appointed Governor of the European Central Bank from 2011 to 2019.

Draghi's relations with the Catholic world are nothing new, he studied in a prestigious Catholic high school in Rome. In 2009, he published an article on *L'Osservatore Romano*, a daily newspaper owned by the Holy See, embracing the contents of the encyclical "*Caritas in Veritate*" by Pope Benedict XVI (Draghi, 2009). In 2019, Mario Draghi was nominated member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, one of the ten Pontifical

academies, established with the task of promoting the study of social sciences and the dialogue between the Catholic Church and experts in economics and political science.

His relations with both centre-right and centre-left as well as his low interest in politics are evident. Apart from Mario Draghi's "national unity" government, he worked with seven Italian governments as an advisor, from centre-right to centre-left. In addition, he was nominated President of the European Central Bank by the European Council, an institution composed of the EU Prime Ministers and Heads of State, when Italy was ruled by a centre-right executive. After his government, despite his convenient position and the calls by the Italian centrist parties (the so-called "Third Pole") for a second Draghi-led government, Mario Draghi did not show political aspirations and left politics.

Luigi Di Maio, having entered politics within the ranks of the 5-Stars Movement, born as a radical anti-establishment movement, has a narrow institutional and elitist network. However, in the position of Foreign Affairs Minister in the Draghi government, it is possible to assume that he was able to develop a consistent net of important relations. Indeed, in 2023, he was nominated as Special Representative of the European Union for the Gulf Countries.

In 2022, after leaving the 5-Star Movement and founding a small centrist party, Luigi Di Maio was not re-elected and disappeared from the Italian political scene. What emerges from Di Maio's political history is the effort to establish himself within the Italian and international political elites. Therefore, Luigi Di Maio has logically attempted to imprint his activities as Foreign Affairs Minister with a moderate guise and adopted a political stance in line with the traditional Italian foreign posture, leaving behind his anti-establishment past.

As for Roberto Cingolani, Minister of Energy Transition at the time of the Draghi government, his academic and institutional network is vast. Surely his goal is to confirm his position as a technocrat away from the ideological and electoral competition between parties. This is evident from the fact that he was appointed as a government energy consultant and after as CEO of Leonardo by the Meloni government.

Observing Claudio Descalzi, CEO of Eni, a similar conclusion can be reached. His network is certainly wide and deeply permeable to political circles. His position has a first-rate strategic weight, above all in light of the country's energy dependence on foreign suppliers. But, in addition to having always kept to the side-lines of the political debate without ever taking ideological positions, his aspiration to continue his commitment to Eni is evident. In fact, he was confirmed as CEO of Eni by the Meloni cabinet in April 2023. Among other things, rumours about a potential appointment of Claudio Descalzi as Energy Minister in the Meloni government have been made, without any denial on his part but also without any express confirmation of interest in occupying that position (Tizian & Fittipaldi, 2022).

To conclude this section on the characterization of the Italian geopolitical agents taken into consideration, it is evident that networks of a clear ideological nature and with radical objectives and ideological aspirations of either a nationalist or anti-national nature are absent. What emerges, observing both the network and the aspirations of the geopolitical agents, is the will to affirm or confirm themselves as part of the establishment and promote the Italian national interest in a cooperative and multilateral fashion. In geopolitical terms, this translates into the desire to align the country with the Western world, continuing Italy's traditional line of foreign policy.

2.2.3 Analysis of the Intentions and Ambitions of the Geopolitical Agents

The previous sections show that the intentions of Italy's geopolitical agents were aligned with the traditional foreign policy trajectory adopted by Italy in the last 70 years. Thus, they acted in order to confirm Italy's role as a reliable member of the Euro-Atlantic architecture, without any revisionist objective. At the same time, references to the Mediterranean region and Africa suggest the will to relaunch Italy's southward projection.

The ambition of relaunching Italy's image as a reliable Atlantic ally found fertile ground in front of the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis. In fact, the Russian invasion of Ukraine offered the occasion to reshape Italy's relations with Russia.

As already highlighted in the previous sections, Italy was strongly linked to Russia in economic terms. In fact, Italy was the third largest destination market for Russian gas and oil exports, Russia was the largest energy supplier to Italy and 60% of Russian exports to Italy were mineral resources (Oldani, 2022; InfoMercatiEsteri, 2022).

At the time, Italy had just emerged from a politically turbulent period, especially in the eyes of foreign observers. On the wave of Brexit, the 2018 political elections followed an extremely polarised campaign regarding Italy's membership in the European Union. Those elections led to the creation of the first Conte government, a government that did not give a reliable image to European and US circles. This government was composed of the two forces that had embraced the most radical anti-European positions, the League and the 5-Stars Movement.

In 2019, the League was the object of a scandal that revealed a negotiation between the party and the Kremlin over an oil deal, the stakes were Russian funding for the party ahead of the 2019 European elections. In the same year, at the initiative of Prime Minister

Giuseppe Conte, Italy signed a Memorandum of Understanding with China to enter the Belt and Road Initiative. That is not all, in fact, Giuseppe Conte at the time forged close ties with US President Donald Trump, a president disliked by the European establishment for his unilateral-oriented policy, distancing the United States from the European Union.

The first Conte government fell in 2019 and a new majority was formed. This time the government was formed by the 5 Star Movement and the Democratic Party, with other left and centre-left minority forces. After the outbreak of Covid-19, the government activities were absorbed in the pandemic crisis, overshadowing any ideological issues. In 2021, a government crisis was triggered by Italia Viva, the most moderate and centrist force in the government. This crisis led to the fall of the second Conte government, resulting in the formation of a new “national unity” majority led by Mario Draghi.

The newly formed government started with solid international recognition. Indeed, Mario Draghi can be considered one of the most internationally influential Italians, especially given his recognition in the European Union thanks to his activity as President of the European Central Bank during the period of the financial crisis. On the basis of this premise, the expectations of Western states with regard to Italy were certainly positive.

The Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2022 was a decisive moment in defining Italy’s position as regards the Euro-Atlantic world. It is legitimate to think that this event gave space to the political ambitions of the government and the personal aspirations of its members, both oriented towards sending a reassuring signal to the Western establishment.

2.2.4 Insertion of the Geopolitical Agents' Capacities into the Domestic Power Structure

At the domestic level, several forces influence the decision-making process in Italy. Those forces are internal as well as external. This double-folded presence is the obvious result of the condition of “limited sovereignty” of the country inherited from the defeat of the Axis forces at the end of the Second World War.

To have a clear overview, I list the actors with a prominent power within the system and the declining ones:

- *Influential actors:* US, EU, Vatican State, Presidency of the Republic, judiciary power, energy sector (ENI, ENEL), industrial sector (Confindustria), financial sector, intelligence, security forces, army, organized crime.
- *Declining actors:* syndicates, academia, newspapers, Parliament, regions.

As a result of the presence and role of those actors (sovereignty is also “*a sphere of social actions and reactions, a living and plural body that through sovereignty produces itself*”⁵ [Galli, 2019]), we can identify three main dynamics: (1) centrifugal tendency, every power group tends towards its specific interest.

As Sabino Cassese, Judge Emeritus of the Italian Constitutional Court, said:

“The Italian state has had a different model of development: the public opinion, the political class, the bureaucracy seem to move each on its own, not in an orderly sequence [...]. There has been a lack of a political-administrative class [...] with a strong vocation for public service, nourished by robust ideals and good education, selected according to

⁵ “Sovereignty is a point, the unity, the apex of command, a political will that lays down the law; but at the same time it is a closed line, a geometric figure, the perimeter of the legal and institutional order in force, of the space in which the law spreads; and at the same time it is a solid, a sphere of social actions and reactions, a living and plural body that through sovereignty produces itself” (Galli, 2019)

criteria of class or merit, devoted mainly to the management of the state”
(Cassese, 2014).

The other two dynamics are the direct result of that condition: (2) internal stabilization (fragmentation keeps a “balance of power” within the system, competing interests and spaces of power limit every radical change within the system and reinforcing the role of stabilization-oriented actors to the detriment of change-oriented ones) and (3) external stabilization (the US keeps Italy in its sphere of influence, Rome cannot decide over its foreign policy in total autonomy; the US influences all the choices of the actors equipped with decision-making power and advantages the actors supported by and supporting in turn the US).

In that context, we can identify two main actors that interact in order to maintain the status quo in Italy, the United States and the Presidency of the Republic. The first, as the hegemon power, through its diplomatic corps, political representatives, and intelligence service, provides directives to Italy. The latter plays historically the role of receiver of those external inputs and guarantor of compliance with them. The President of the Italian Republic is the authority that nominates the government, controls the armed forces, and influences the judiciary power. Thanks to those prerogatives the Presidency of the Republic defines the strategic positioning of the country. Thus, the United States has exerted and continues to exert strong pressure during the election of the President of the Republic to ensure that the Head of State is a reliable figure from the American perspective.

In terms of power, Mario Draghi's government enjoyed a wide margin of manoeuvre due to two crucial factors. First, although Italy is a parliamentary republic, parliament is an actor that has experienced a period of downsizing of its powers. Indeed, for more than a decade, the Italian parliament was unable to express clear-cut governmental majorities, tush political governments, having to rely on compromise majorities and technocratic governments. In this framework, a decade of parliamentarian crisis and fragile executives undermined the role of that institution.

Moreover, in the specific case of the Draghi government, the "national unity" majority had put the parties in a position where they could not exploit the narrative advantage typical of the government-opposition dichotomy. The parliament followed the government's directives almost entirely, it had no alternative. The only option could have been to trigger an unresolvable political crisis and go to elections. This did not seem a convenient way forward for the parties, who would have shown irresponsibility in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, and for the parliamentarians, who would have lost their salaries.

The second element that gave the Draghi government ample room for manoeuvre was the direct link between Head of State Sergio Mattarella and Prime Minister Mario Draghi. It is no coincidence that it was Sergio Mattarella who wanted Mario Draghi as Prime Minister in order to heal the ongoing parliamentary crisis and that Sergio Mattarella himself rejected Mario Draghi's resignation after the 5-Stars Movement failed to vote for a government's measure, the first sign of the "parties revolt" against Mario Draghi.

Given the geopolitical agents on the ground and the geography of power that drives the domestic decision-making process in Italy and thus defines its foreign policy trajectory, it is evident that an alignment with the United States and the Western world appears a foregone, almost mathematical option. A strong US influence on the national system, a

Head of State aligned with Washington (as the Italian tradition wants), and a Prime Minister with a large majority, strongly linked to the President of the Republic, and deeply embedded in the circles of the Western establishment leave no room for revisionist, or at least non-aligned, moves in foreign policy.

Finally, one last actor must be considered in this section, namely Eni. Given the scarcity of energy production in Italy and the critical dependence on foreign suppliers, the energy sector has major importance. That translates into the ability to wield a certain amount of power by Eni executives.

Eni represents the major vector of the Italian energy policy, indeed, Eni's CEO signs contracts with foreign energy companies. However, the decision is political and belongs to the government. Just as a piece of information that crystallizes this power relation, Eni's largest shareholder is the Ministry of Economy and Finance (Eni, n.d.).

In addition, Eni's CEO is appointed by the Italian Council of Ministers (Claudio Descalzi was appointed by the centre-left Renzi government for the first time and re-appointed by the centre-right Meloni government in 2023). Moreover, the CEO's international decisions are an informal but overt expression of the executive. Indeed, Prime Minister, Energy Minister, and/or Foreign Affairs Minister attend meetings with foreign partners and are present during the negotiations between Eni and foreign actors and decision-making phases.

CONCLUSIONS: GEOGRAPHICAL FACTORS VS. GEOPOLITICAL AGENTS

In this conclusive chapter, I will describe the research outcome resulting from the application of the model of Neoclassical Geopolitics to the Italian energy shift from Russia after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the consequent reorientation towards Africa. In addition, I will present a theoretical reflection on the role played by geographical factors in light of the scientific innovation provided by the study of geopolitical agents' role in geopolitics. At the very end, I will provide my conclusions regarding my hypotheses.

The first section (i.e., the description of the research outcome resulting from the application of the Neoclassical Geopolitical model) embodies a needed step in order to give sense and meaning to the second section (i.e., the theoretical reflection about geographical factors and geopolitical agents). In fact, the foreign policy outcome under analysis and the relative research results are the basis of a theoretical conclusion that aims to provide further scientific solidity to the study of geopolitical agents and their role.

With this thesis, I aim to identify and explain the causes behind the Italian energy reorientation from Russia to Africa after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In order to do so, the primary argument put to the test is that geopolitical agents played a crucial role outside geographical determinism or, as stated by the structural realist theory of international relations, the stimuli generated by the international system. This is confirmed by observing the outcome of foreign policy taken into consideration through the application of the model of Neoclassical Geopolitics.

Starting with the Independent Variable (*International System*), we can identify those factors playing an undoubtedly important role, the so-called structural factors. Firstly, the

structural modifier, in our case energy resources (Italy is over 70% dependent on foreign energy imports), clearly depicts the Italian imperative to secure sources of energy supply.

Secondly, the *state potential*, the relative factor that virtually and, to an imperfect degree, materially determines a state's capabilities in terms of power. In the Italian case, the state potential is not in a state of tremendous deficiency. However, if we observe Italy from the energy perspective what emerges is the lack of energy resources, the low levels of domestic production, and the fragile dependence on imports from other countries. As a result, in terms of energy, the country appears weak and critically dependent on exporting countries.

Thirdly, the *strategic environment*, divided into its three sub-factors, namely *polarity, clarity, and nature*. With regard to polarity, the two main poles in the context of the Ukraine crisis and its various international implications are two, the United States and Russia. About clarity, the Russian threat to the Western world and the US-led international order is evident and clear. Regarding nature, as a result of the Russian aggressivity as well as all the revisionist ambitions of various powers that oppose the US global hegemony, the international system is rapidly shifting from a permissive to a restrictive nature.

Thus, looking at the factors that together make up the Independent Variable, it is reasonable to conclude that certain fundamental dynamics arise from it:

- *Structural modifier*: Italy cannot refrain from seeking suppliers of energy resources (we must remember that Russia is rich in them).
- *State potential*: Italy, despite its respectable potential, is uncovered on the energy side. Therefore, its share of power is reduced in a context that sees energy

resources as a structural modifier, as is the case with the international implications of the war in Ukraine.

- *Strategic environment*: the Russian-US *polarisation* imposes a choice of field, in the Italian case the choice is constrained, Italy is part of Washington's sphere of influence (one's sphere of influence is not actively chosen by an actor that is part of it but is imposed by a hegemon). The *clarity* in terms of threat is obvious, in material and narrative terms, Russia openly opposes the US and its sphere of influence. As a result, the strategic environment is increasingly *restrictive in nature*, leaving states with less and less room for manoeuvre.

At first glance, these dynamics might lead us to think that Italy's energy reorientation from Russia to Africa is the result of stimuli imposed by the international system on Italy. That is, Italy needs energy resources, its belonging to the US sphere of influence requires it to abandon Russian energy supplies, and the nature of the strategic environment reinforces these constraints. There is no denying that this logical step makes sense but is certainly partial and incomplete. At this point, the theoretical formulation underlying Neoclassical Geopolitics comes into play. In fact, Neoclassical Geopolitics aims "*to reinforce the importance of the intervening variables* geopolitical agent's perceptions and capacities *in shaping the geopolitical design and other foreign policy outcomes*" (Morgado, 2019).

Thus, Neoclassical Geopolitics questions the specific characteristics that a given foreign policy outcome or geopolitical design takes on. Neoclassical Geopolitics emphasises the question "*How, when, and by which means is the agent pursuing his action?*" (Morgado, 2019). It then goes a step further beyond the structural factors behind certain choices by investigating the reasons for the specific characteristics of those choices, independent from

the structural factor. A given goal can be achieved in different ways independently from the causes driving an agent to try to achieve that goal. And it is precisely for this reason that the model of Neoclassical Geopolitics proposes the Intervening Variable *Geopolitical Agent's Perceptions and Capacities*.

In the case of Italy's energy reorientation from Russia to Africa after the invasion of Ukraine, Geopolitical Agent's Perceptions and Capacities play a key role. They provide us with deep insight into the motivations behind such a foreign policy outcome. In fact, precise decision-making dynamics emerge after the attentive analysis of the geopolitical agents. As a result, additional explanatory power adds to the factors belonging to the Independent Variable *International System*.

As this thesis shows, *strategic culture* matches international politics and foreign policy *perceptions* of the Italian geopolitical agents, giving impetus to geopolitical continuity (i.e., Italy's Atlantic orientation as a means of revitalizing the country's international role). Their *discourse and network* are aligned with this geopolitical continuity; likewise, their political and personal *ambitions*. That is not all, in fact, when we insert the capabilities of geopolitical agents into the domestic power structure, the outcome is a reinforcement of their *capabilities* in the direction of the mentioned geopolitical continuity. These are the factors that define why the specifics of Italy's energy redirection from Russia to Africa.

In addition, to conclude the first section, it is interesting to observe a case that embodies a counterfactual scenario. Namely, the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between China and Italy on the Belt and Road Initiative in 2019. Italy was the first EU country and the only G7 member to sign such a treaty with China.

At the time, the government was headed by Giuseppe Conte, now leader of the 5-Stars Movement and critic of Italy's alignment with the US in the ongoing confrontation with Russia. Signing the Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative is a move in contradiction with Italy's traditional trajectory of Atlantic alignment (here, one could speak about a case of "geopolitical non-continuity"). A question arises about the active role played by geopolitical agents in similar cases. At the same time, a question arises about the explanatory power of a research model that considers international stimuli as the only reason behind a specific foreign policy choice. It does not seem a coincidence that an anti-establishment and veiledly anti-Western government signed a Memorandum of Understanding with China, inconsistent with the constraints imposed by the Italian belonging to NATO.

In addition, in April 2023, rumours about a potential abandonment of the Belt and Road Initiative by the Meloni government emerged after a trip by officials from the Ministry of Enterprise and Made in Italy to Taiwan (Albanese & Speciale, 2023). In the election campaign, Giorgia Meloni described the Italian membership in the Chinese project as "*a big mistake*" (AffariItaliani, 2022). The Italy-China Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative will expire in a year. If the agreement will be not renewed, this case would give further explanatory power to the role of geopolitical agents in changing a State's foreign policy trajectory. This merits further research.

As stated, Neoclassical Geopolitics is understood as a conceptual, theoretical, and methodological framework that belongs to the broader scientific domain of Geopolitical Studies. Deeply rooted in the Neoclassical Realist theory, Neoclassical Geopolitics aims to enlarge the Geopolitical Studies' scope by including the variables of geopolitical agents' perceptions and capacities in shaping and/or influencing international politics.

Geopolitical Studies have often been focused on the international arena and the constraints, imperatives, and opportunities, especially those geographical in nature, it imposes and/or offers to one or more international actors. In many cases, domestic factors have been neglected as irrelevant in front of the factors belonging to the geographical dimension, even when geographical determinism was recognised as a misleading element.

In this brief conclusive reflection, based on the observed case of Italy's energy reorientation from Russia to Africa, I want to focus on the geographic dimension and the geographic factors that stand out in order to understand the extent to which these factors can determine the trajectory of an international actor.

Italy is a peninsular country that lies in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, is anchored to the European continent, and is projected in the direction of the African continent. It is no coincidence that Italy is often referred to as a "bridge between Europe and Africa". Moreover, if we consider the geohistorical method, that is, the "*mental procedure resulting from the interconnection between History and Geography*" (Morgado, 2017), it is inevitable to note that the polities that have controlled the Italian peninsula throughout history have sought to project their influence southward (from the Roman Empire, which geographically encompassed the Mediterranean basin, to Italian colonialism, which was expressly African-oriented, ending up with the Meloni's "Mattei Plan for Africa").

Once these elements are established, when applied to the case under observation, they appear poorly explanatory. In fact, apart from providing (indispensable) geographical context, that is, telling us that obviously Italy acts in the Euro-African space as a result of its geographical position, they have little explanatory power when compared with the factors highlighted by the model of Neoclassical Geopolitics. Especially when we ask about particular aspects of Italy's new African energy policy, the geographical factor does

not correspond to a complete answer. For instance, Italy has signed an agreement with Mozambique to buy and sell energy resources, even if that African country does not pertain to the areas subject to Italian colonialism and geographically is at the opposite end of the African land mass from Italy.

The result of this thesis provides us with awareness about the different but nonetheless important role of two spheres (domestic and external) that interact in determining the trajectory of a state. This awareness resulting from the innovative Neoclassical Geopolitical approach provides the toolkit of Geopolitical Studies with additional means to understand power dynamics broadly and deeply at the international level. This emerges from the confirmation of my hypotheses.

As regards H1, it was confirmed by the application of the model of Neoclassical Geopolitics. Indeed, the conclusion shows that geography played a contextual role (even if not negligible), rather than a determinant one. On the contrary, it was shown how determinant was the role of the geopolitical agents in shaping the foreign policy under observation.

H2 was also confirmed. In fact, coherence between Italy's historical trend of Euro-Atlantic alignment and the Italian energy deviation from Russia and the subsequent reorientation towards Africa determined by the geopolitical agents is evident.

With regard to H3, this thesis confirms it. Indeed, the Italian foreign policy decision following the posture of the US-led Western world appears perfectly in line with the geopolitical agents' networks, aspirations, perceptions, and capacities.

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