



**Master's Degree in International Relations**  
**Chair of "History of Italian Foreign Policy"**

***The Politics of Neo-Atlanticism:***  
***Giovanni Gronchi's Presidency and Enrico Mattei's Energy Diplomacy***

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*A chi cammina per il mondo con il cuore pieno di coraggio.*

*Alla mia parte fragile come il cristallo  
e alla mia parte dura come il cemento armato.*

*A me stessa.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The study of Italy's transatlantic alignment and its evolving role in global geopolitics has never been more relevant in today's shifting international order. As recent geopolitical developments challenge traditional alliances and reshape global energy strategies, it becomes essential to reassess Italy's position on the international chessboard. Despite its firm adherence to the transatlantic partnership, Italy has consistently sought to carve out an autonomous space for maneuver, positioning itself as a dynamic and independent actor in global affairs. This duality – alignment with the West and the pursuit of a distinctive strategic approach – has defined the country's foreign policy choices, starting exactly in the second half of the twentieth century. A fundamental driver of this strategy has been Italy's energy diplomacy, which found its most visionary architect in the person of Enrico Mattei, the chairman of ENI – *Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi*.

Mattei's *modus operandi* redefined the Italian approach to energy policy, demonstrating that control over energy resources was not merely an economic necessity but, above all, a powerful instrument of international influence. His innovative policies, based on fair partnerships with resource-rich developing nations – especially in Africa and the Middle East – challenged the dominant structures of the global oil market, previously dictated by the major Western powers. Enrico Mattei's model of cooperation, which has passed into the annals of history as the *Mattei Formula* and has been built on mutual benefit and economic sovereignty, laid the foundation for Italy's distinct role in international affairs, proving that energy policy could serve as a catalyst for both economic growth and diplomatic leverage of the Italian nation.

Parallel to Mattei's strategic vision, Italy's foreign policy starting from the second half of the 1950s and early 1960s was deeply shaped by the interventionism of its third President of the Republic, Giovanni Gronchi. Unlike his predecessors, Gronchi sought to reposition Italy within the Cold War framework by advocating for greater autonomy in international affairs and by fostering dialogue with non-aligned nations. His diplomatic initiatives, including his unprecedented visits to the Soviet Union and Middle Eastern countries like Iran, reflected an ambition to enhance Italy's role as a mediator between East and West. By combining transatlantic loyalty with an independent foreign policy orientation, Gronchi's presidency offered a compelling example of Italy's capacity to act beyond simple alignment with its traditional Western allies.

The presidential election of Giovanni Gronchi in 1955 heavily influenced Italy's foreign policy direction; his presidency signaled an openness to dialogue with leftist forces, both domestically and internationally, which further contributed to a redefinition

of the Italian diplomatic strategy. His vision sought to move beyond the rigid bipolarity of the Cold War dynamics, favoring engagement with non-aligned countries and working on how to boost economic and political relations with nations outside the traditional Western bloc to which Italy has always belonged. This study delves deeper into the concept of *neo-Atlanticism*, which emerged as a key component of Italy's Mediterranean-oriented foreign policy. Differently from strict Atlanticism, which emphasized unconditional alignment with the United States, neo-Atlanticism advocated for a more flexible approach – one that maintained Italy's Western commitments while promoting an autonomous role in international affairs. This was evident in Italy's engagement with the Arab world and its continued efforts to establish itself as a mediator in regional conflict.

It is particularly compelling to inspect how Gronchi redefined and made more explicit the role of the President of the Republic, setting himself apart from his two predecessors with a markedly different approach. Conversely, he exercised an undeniably more dynamic political role, by broadening the discretionary powers of the presidency and actively transforming Italy's political scene. His tenure was characterized by initiatives that went beyond mere ceremonial duties and that are worthy of being explored. He sought to influence the country's political trajectory by promoting new alliances and governance models – most notably, the center-left alliance between the Christian Democracy Party, to which he belonged, and the Socialist Party. His presence was not only impactful within the institutional framework but also resonated deeply in Italian society, as he personally engaged in fostering changes that would leave a lasting imprint on the nation.

One can, indeed, speak of presidential diplomacy, which, to some extent, came into conflict with that of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as the latter remained firmly anchored to strict Atlantic orthodoxy. For this reason, this thesis aims at demonstrating how Gronchi tried to transform the presidency of the Republic into the most representative institution of Italy's newfound international dynamism, despite the fact that, prior to his mandate at the Quirinale, he had never held governmental positions related to foreign affairs. It is as if this lack of direct experience in international diplomacy allowed him to develop a different approach to foreign policy – one that diverged from traditional diplomatic practices.

We will find out how Gronchi's seven-year presidency marked a phase of relative discontinuity in the history of Italian foreign policy, characterized by a renewed ability to maneuver more freely within the framework of the Western alliance. This increased autonomy boosted Italy's influence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, aligning with a strategy aimed at filling the power vacuum left by the declining Anglo-French colonial presence. Starting in the mid-1950s, Italy positioned itself within the first phase

of *distensione* – or *détente* – in the Cold War and gradually regained equal footing with its Western allies, overcoming the humiliation caused by the post-war peace treaty and rekindling its geopolitical inclination and ambitions with a revitalized prominence in the hierarchy of European powers and the two major superpowers.

The years of Giovanni Gronchi's presidency coincided with the Italian economic miracle as well, a period of rapid industrial growth and modernization. On the international stage, the beginning of the de-Stalinization process had ushered in a new era of dialogue between the two Cold War blocs. Economically, the successes of the Marshall Plan and the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) had, overall, fueled the recovery of Western European countries. Amid this transformation, Italy was collocating itself within the broader process of the relaunch of Europe, seeking to consolidate its role in the evolving European project. The emergence of a mass society and the onset of a period of unprecedented economic prosperity were integral to this broader framework, contributing to a shift in the world's perception of Italy. No longer merely seen as a defeated Axis power and underdeveloped nation, Italy was now regaining its credibility.

This thesis then explores the intersection of Italy's neo-Atlanticism, Gronchi's foreign policy activism, and Mattei's energy diplomacy. It argues that these elements were not only defining factors in Italy's postwar geopolitical evolution but also key to understanding its contemporary positioning. By examining the historical roots of Italy's strategic neo-Atlanticist aspirations, this research seeks to highlight how the country has pursued a role that balances Western allegiance with a proactive engagement in global affairs. Thus, this thesis, of a historical nature, is based on thorough and meticulous research of primary sources, or more precisely, archival sources carefully selected from the Historical Archive of the Presidency of the Republic at the Palace of Quirinale. Such sources have been analyzed and contextualized within the historical period under examination, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the events and dynamics that shaped Italy's stance in international relations during Gronchi's mandate.

The sources, which constitute the core of this thesis, have been gathered by tracing some of the most considerable state visits and official trips abroad undertaken by President Gronchi during his seven-year tenure (May 11, 1955 – May 11, 1962); they have been organized thematically in order to provide a structured analysis of his neo-Atlantic approach to foreign policy. This methodological study aims at examining the impact of Gronchi on Italy's diplomatic standing and relations with major world powers; specifically, it investigates how his international visits, diplomatic initiatives, and

meetings shaped the Italian positioning in the global area. To address this, the research is guided by the following central research question:

*“To what extent did President Giovanni Gronchi influence Italian foreign policy and its diplomatic ties with the world’s leading powers, particularly through international engagements, meetings, and other diplomatic interventions?”*

By formulating this research question, the thesis has been structured into three main chapters, each further divided into five subchapters. The first chapter provides a general historical context, outlining the key events that defined the international landscape during Giovanni Gronchi’s presidency. These include Italy’s access to the United Nations along with the signing of the UN Charter (1955), the evolution of the European integration process – particularly the Messina Conference (1955) and the Treaties of Rome (1957) which led to the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) and Euratom – as well as the Berlin question and the complexities of the German reunification. In addition to that, it explores the Italian entry into the Middle East, with a short focus on its engagement with Iran, setting the stage for the subsequent discussion on President Gronchi’s state visit and the agreement between ENI and *NIOC*.

Italian foreign policy during this period was, as a matter of fact, characterized by three fundamental pillars – principles which not only determined Italy’s diplomatic agenda at the time but also provided the basis for its long-term strategic outlook. The commitment to European integration was reflected in Italy’s active participation in shaping European cooperation; meanwhile, the close relationship with the United States underscored Italy’s steady alignment within the Western bloc during the Cold War, ensuring political and economic stability while also allowing room for a degree of diplomatic autonomy. Finally, Italy’s involvement in the Mediterranean and Middle East areas – especially through energy diplomacy inspired by Enrico Mattei – will demonstrate a willingness to carry out independent foreign policy initiatives that balance the Italian transatlantic commitments with broader national economic and strategic interests.

The second chapter will reconstruct President Gronchi’s state visits to the United States and Canada (March 1956), France (April 1956), the Federal Republic of Germany (December 1956), the Soviet Union (February 1960), and Iran (September 1957). By taking into account the most salient speeches, joint communiqués, and some of the preparatory notes drafted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this chapter will address the motivations behind such trips, how they unfolded, and how they fit into the broader international context. What’s more, the analysis of this chapter takes into account

several conversations and interactions with foreign diplomatic representatives, heads of state, and ambassadors as well held at the Quirinale, during which President Giovanni Gronchi's neo-Atlanticist stance manifestly emerged and also mirrored Enrico Mattei's vision of energy independence from the United States, further reinforcing the Italian efforts to assert a more self-reliant role on the global stage.

The third chapter will mainly focus on the figure of Enrico Mattei and his work, which largely coincided with Gronchi's presidency. During these years, significant oil agreements were signed under his leadership, as he pursued a diplomatic strategy that projected Italian national interests abroad. His approach was rooted in a model that promoted the development of countries seeking to break free from the shadows of their colonial past. This primarily applied to the Arab nations of North Africa, where Mattei's vision offered a concrete alternative to traditional Western economic dominance, that is the oil cartel represented by the *Seven Sisters*, by promoting partnerships based on mutual growth and cooperation against the oligopoly. In countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, Italy by means of ENI positioned itself as a reliable partner of these newly independent nations seeking options to neocolonial economic structures.

Beyond the Mediterranean – which was experiencing the effects of the decolonization process –, Mattei's energy diplomacy extended to Iran and Soviet Union as well, where his efforts to establish trade agreements will illustrate how pragmatic he acted by using energy as a tool for fostering détente between the Western and Eastern blocs. Furthermore, the chapter examines how his legacy has been revived in contemporary Italian policy, particularly under the ongoing Meloni government's initiatives in Africa. Echoing Mattei's vision, Italy has been trying to strengthen its energy partnerships with African nations, positioning itself as a key intermediary between Europe and resource-rich developing countries. By drawing parallels between Enrico Mattei's historical model and current geopolitical trends, this final chapter will underscore the lasting impact of his energy diplomacy on Italy's international positioning.

Through the lens of archival research and historical analysis, this study will provide evidence of how Italy, despite its solid transatlantic alignment, aspired to an independent course aimed at expanding its global influence. The investigation of President Gronchi's international engagements, alongside Mattei's energy diplomacy, offers crucial insights into Italy's attempt to outline its role on the world stage. Therefore, this research not only sheds light on a pivotal yet often overlooked phase of Italian foreign policy but also contributes to a more comprehensive reflection on Italy's strategic balancing between Western commitments and autonomous geopolitical ambitions.

## CHAPTER I – Neo-Atlanticism: Redefining Italy’s Foreign Policy After WWII

### 1.1 Post-war Italy: challenges of reconstruction and alignment with the West

The end of World War II marked a period of profound transformation for Italy, which, emerging from the devastation of war, faced overwhelming challenges in rebuilding its economy, infrastructure, and social fabric. In addition to internal reconstruction, the country had to redefine its position within a rapidly evolving international order dominated by the Cold War. This phase was characterized by an intense ideological confrontation between Western capitalism, led by the United States, and Soviet communism, championed by the Soviet Union, as well as the systemic antagonism between the Western and Eastern blocs. This chapter then aims at examining Italy’s post-war context, with a focus on its remarkable transition from the status of a defeated Axis power to a key player in the Western bloc.

In the aftermath of the war, the Italian industrial and agricultural sectors had been devastated, cities lay in ruins, and millions of Italians were displaced or living in poverty. The 1943 armistice and the subsequent Allied liberation, initiated by the Husky Operation, an amphibious landing in Sicily that served as a “stepping-stone for the invasion of mainland Italy and its elimination from the war”,<sup>1</sup> left the political landscape in turmoil. Indeed, the monarchy’s authority was severely weakened, and deep divisions surfaced between leftist and right-wing factions. Such tensions culminated in the institutional referendum of June 2, 1946, when Italians voted in favour of the establishment of the Republic. On the same day, a contingent election selected the members of the Constituent Assembly, tasked with drafting a new Constitution. As the country transitioned to a republic, the responsibility of national reconstruction fell upon a fragile political system burdened by the scars of war.

Internationally, Italy’s status as a defeated Axis power, alongside Nazi Germany and Japan, left it vulnerable to marginalization. The Treaty of Peace signed in February 1947 in Paris by the Italian diplomat Antonio Meli Lupi di Soragna and ratified by the Italian Constituent Assembly in November 1947, imposed significant territorial losses and reparations, further hindering the war-torn country’s economic recovery and fueling widespread resentment against the victorious Allied powers. Meanwhile, the global political landscape was undergoing a profound transformation, as the United States and the Soviet

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<sup>1</sup> M.G. St. Clair, *The Twelfth US Air Force: Tactical and Operational Innovations in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations, 1943–1944* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2007), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13982.9>.

Union emerged as superpowers, each vying to expand its sphere of influence in Europe. In this exact context, Italy's geostrategic location, straddling the Mediterranean and bordering Eastern Europe, made it an asset of geopolitical importance for both blocs.

At this stage, Italian anti-communist political leaders recognized the necessity of aligning with the West to secure economic aid and political stability. Among them, Alcide De Gasperi as a pivotal statesman in post-war Italy, guiding the nation toward European and Atlantic choices. He was the leading figure of the newly established Christian Democracy Party (DC), a Catholic-centered party that arose from the remnants of the pre-war Italian Popular Party (PPI). In the landmark general elections of April 18, 1948, it achieved a decisive victory, securing 48.5% of the vote against the 31% garnered by the Popular Democratic Front, a coalition of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the Italian Socialist Party (PSI).<sup>2</sup> De Gasperi, who had previously served as Foreign Minister under the Bonomi-led government (1944-1945), later assumed the role of President of the Council of Ministers. He quickly became a cornerstone of American foreign policy in Italy, a position which was reinforced by the significant influence played by the Catholic Church in Italian society at the time.<sup>3</sup>

In shaping Italian foreign policy, De Gasperi made a strategic decision by appointing Count Carlo Sforza as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Sforza, a member of the Italian Republic Party, was one of only two diplomats who had resigned in protest following Mussolini's appointment as Prime Minister in 1922, demonstrating his early opposition to Fascism. This appointment "retrospectively" marked a meaningful step toward Italy's alignment with the Western bloc, as he was already well-known for his strong ties to U.S. political circles and his pro-Western stance.<sup>4</sup> During his exile in the United States, he had solidified his anti-fascist credentials, particularly at the Montevideo Congress of the Free Italians on August 17, 1942, where he was tasked with establishing an Italian National Council to "encourage all Italians in the struggle against Fascism".<sup>5</sup> He then assumed leadership of the Mazzini Society, an élite

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<sup>2</sup> Ministero dell'Interno, "Elezioni della Camera dei Deputati del 18 aprile 1948", *Archivio Storico delle Elezioni*, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/index.php?tpel=C&dtel=18/04/1948&es0=S&tpa=I&lev0=0&levsut0=0&m s=S&tpe=A>.

<sup>3</sup> Piero Craveri, *De Gasperi* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Antonio Varsori, *Dalla rinascita al declino: Storia internazionale dell'Italia repubblicana* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2022), pp. 75-90.

<sup>5</sup> N.G. Mavris, *Sforza vs. Sforza: The Free Italian Movement and the Foreign Policy of Its Leader* (University of Michigan: The Dodecanesian League of America, 1943), p. 6, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015069887944&seq=3>.

group founded in 1939 by a small circle of Italian anti-fascists in the U.S., which became instrumental in promoting the Free Italy Movement.

De Gasperi immediately sought U.S. economic assistance to help Italy recover from the devastation of World War II and in June 1947 Sforza declared Italy's intention to participate in the Marshall Plan, which took the name from the American Secretary of State, General George Marshall, and was officially launched in 1948. This initiative was crucial for Italy's reconstruction, aligning with the plan's pillars of "self-help" and "mutual aid" – principles that also underpinned the making of the Atlantic Pact.<sup>6</sup> The Marshall Plan not only provided Italy with substantial financial support – over 1.5 billion dollars (approximately 10% of the total assistance allocated to war-torn Europe) – but also functioned as a political tool in front of the increasing Communist threat. In fact, it cemented the country's alignment with the United States and the broader Western bloc, the *Atlanticism*, a bond further strengthened with Italy's participation in signing the founding act of the North Atlantic Alliance on April 4, 1949, despite not having taken part in the negotiation process owing to British opposition.

This alignment with the United States and broader Western Europe during the Cold War can be better contextualized through a comparison between the Ancient Greeks and the late Roman Empire made by the Norwegian historian Geir Lundestad, who characterized the U.S. hegemony in post-World War II Europe by introducing the concept of an "Empire by Invitation".<sup>7</sup> In other words, the position of the United States in NATO and, more generally, its dominant position as a superpower with global interests, has often been described as "imperialist"; it should be noted that, unlike a traditional empire that exerts formal control over its subjects, the United States wielded an "informal" yet profound influence – politically, economically and culturally – often linked to that of an imperial power.<sup>8</sup> Washington's involvement in Europe was largely driven by anti-Soviet invitations mainly coming from smaller members of the Alliance, including Italy, which actively endeavoured to consolidate its ties with its most important transatlantic ally.

Indeed, since the signing of the 1943 armistice, Italians aspired to position their country as a key promoter of this American hegemony, albeit with occasional dissent regarding certain

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Statement on the United States Military Assistance Program*, July 6, 1949, in Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, Volume IV, Western Europe (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1949), Document 159, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1949v04/d159>.

<sup>7</sup> Lundestad, Geir. "Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945-1952." *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (September 1986): pp. 263-77.

<sup>8</sup> Alessandro Brogi, *L'Italia e l'egemonia americana nel Mediterraneo* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1996), pp.1-14.

US policies – a subject to be explored further. They were seeking to cultivate a mutual understanding with the U.S., the only former adversary willing to assume the role of a benevolent protector, which appeared as the most favorable alternative to the hegemonic ambitions pertaining to larger neighbouring European states, particularly France and Germany. Italy frequently emphasized to its American ally the dual threats it faced: the internal menace posed by communism and the external challenges emanating from the Mediterranean area. In response, it sought to assert a more active role along NATO's Mediterranean flank, especially after its exclusion from colonial power status. This ambition fostered a shift toward more flexible policies in Arab countries, a hallmark of the *neo-Atlanticist* approach typical of Italian foreign policy starting in the mid-1950s and exemplified by the conduct of the figures of Giovanni Gronchi, Amintore Fanfani, Enrico Mattei, who will be analyzed in the next chapters.

At the same time, the importance of other foreign policy initiatives during this period should not be overlooked: Italy's admission to the final stages of negotiations for the creation of the Council of Europe, culminating in the signing of its founding treaty in May 1949, marked a crucial moment for the Italian commitment to *Europeanism*. The Council, designed to promote democratic principles and human rights across Europe, played a key role in Italy's reintegration into the international community. This event was closely linked to its entry to the Atlantic Alliance as well, highlighting the nation's commitment to the European project and peacekeeping efforts. From that point forward, Italy's membership in these organizations ensured that it could no longer be excluded from any future collaborative efforts, whether within the European context or the broader Western alliance. The nation's integration into these structures was not only a reflection of its geopolitical positioning next to the Western powers but also symbolized its transformation from a defeated Axis power into a respected and influential actor in shaping post-war European order.

Thus, Italy's Atlantic choice can be seen as a consequential and pragmatic response to its urgent need for economic and political stability along with security guarantees against the backdrop of the Cold War. However, as soon as the country regained confidence in the international arena, its foreign policy began to evolve beyond mere alignment with the West: this shift marked the transition to what is usually referred to as *neo-Atlanticism*. This concept, primarily focused on Italy's relations with the United States, signified a deeper dedication to shaping the future of the Western bloc. As a frontline state in the Mediterranean and a key player in European recovery efforts, Italy's leaders recognized the importance of not only securing their place within the Western alliance, but also asserting their role in contributing to the policies and priorities of the Atlantic framework. They understood that the era of the

colonial empires was coming to an end and that the influence of the French and British in regions such as the Middle East was waning.

Instead, Italy championed the cause of decolonization, by positioning itself as a nation no longer tied to colonial and imperial ambitions, as it was required to renounce all claims to its African colonies – Eritrea, Libya, and Somalia – formerly acquired during the so-called European “Scramble for Africa”,<sup>9</sup> along with its fascist-era possessions, namely Ethiopia and the Dodecanese Islands. The 1947 Treaty of Peace basically stripped Italians of these holdings; in order to assess the situation on the ground, a commission composed of representatives from the victorious powers of World War II was formed and tasked with visiting such territories to gather information about the local populations’ desires and attitudes regarding their future. The primary goal was to ensure that the fate of these territories would reflect the will of the people living there, rather than simply the geopolitical interests of the major powers involved – Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union. This process marked a pivotal moment for Italy, as it transitioned from being a colonial power to a proponent of self-determination.

Concurrently, the U.S. administration, having grown disillusioned with the waning influence of traditional European powers such as France and Britain, acknowledged that Italy’s potential as a mediator in the Mediterranean and Middle East; its favourable relationships with several countries in these regions, coupled with its shift toward supporting the dismantling of colonial empires and promoting the rise of independent nations, positioned it as a more effective partner in representing American interests. This was particularly critical in areas where Soviet influence was pervasive, notably Greece, Turkey, and Yugoslavia. Although Italy succeeded in fostering closer ties with these regions, its political achievements were modest; the true measure of its influence lay in its growing economic presence. As a result, it emerged as a key diplomatic player, bridging the Western bloc and former colonial territories. In this way, the neo-Atlanticist strategy transcended mere alignment with the United States, collocating Italy as a proactive participant in shaping post-war international relations.

In this sense, neo-Atlanticism may be grounded on three core principles. First, it sought to reconcile Italy’s need for economic recovery with its aspirations for international rehabilitation. By aligning with the United States, the Italian nation not only secured vital resources but also re-established itself as a legitimate and valuable actor on the global stage, by shedding the stigma of its fascist past. Second, neo-Atlanticism provided a framework for

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<sup>9</sup> Giuseppe Finaldi, *Italian National Identity in the Scramble for Africa: Italy’s African Wars in the Era of Nation-Building, 1870-1900* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009).

addressing domestic political tensions: the Christian Democratic Party, which dominated Italian politics during the immediate post-conflict period, leveraged this policy to counter the influence of the Communist Party, Italy's largest opposition force. Third, neo-Atlanticism enabled Italy to assert a degree of agency within the Western bloc. By emphasizing its strategic importance, it positioned itself as an intermediary between Europe and the broader Mediterranean region, laying the groundwork for a more active foreign policy that, while shaped by external pressures, allowed for some degree of independent action.

The policy of neo-Atlanticism continued to evolve throughout the 1950s and 1960s, driven by shifts in domestic leadership and the changing dynamics of global politics. The presidency of Giovanni Gronchi, along with the economic diplomacy spearheaded by the president of ENI – *Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi*, the Italian State Oil Corporation – Enrico Mattei, played decisive roles in redefining Italy's foreign policy trajectory. Gronchi's leadership characterized a period of rising Italian assertiveness in diplomatic affairs, seeking to balance loyalty to the Western bloc while pursuing a more independent stance on the global stage. This remarkable transformation would not have been possible without the economic miracle that characterized the whole Italian society between the end of the 1950s and the early years of the 1960s, when Italy experienced a deep economic and social development, evolving from a predominantly rural country into a rapidly industrializing nation with a booming economy: this period signaled the advent of a modern consumer society.

For the first time, the ruling class could rely on sustained economic growth as a tangible foundation for Italy's aspirations to assert itself as a mid-level regional power. Accelerating industrialization and social modernization gradually aligned Italy's reality with that of its major European partners, positioning the country as a key player in the evolving European framework. Symbols of this transformation ranged from the introduction of the luxurious "Settebello" electric train, which heralded a new era in rail transport, to more accessible innovations like the Fiat 500 and Fiat 600, affordable cars that could be purchased in installment. The boom in the selling of such cars, along with the construction in 1964 of the "Autostrada del Sole" connecting the northern and southern parts of Italy, sparked a private transport revolution, altering the way in which Italians traveled and lived. The rapid spread of household appliances between 1959 and 1963, such as refrigerators and washing machines, further improved living standards, particularly in Northern and Central Italy, though the South continued to struggle with poverty and unemployment.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Valerio Castronovo, *L'Italia del miracolo economico* (Milano: Mondadori, 2010), pp. 50-2.

This newfound prosperity brought changes in lifestyle, with Italians enjoying weekend outings, picnics, and football matches broadcast on the radio. The image of an economically vibrant and socially dynamic Italy reshaped both domestic politics and the perception of international partners, reflecting a nation in the midst of a complex yet hopeful shift in the nation's foreign policy – one that balanced European integration, Cold War dynamics and pressures, and an emerging inclination to forge a more autonomous path within the broader Atlantic system. This evolving policy framework will be examined in greater detail in the following sections of this thesis, starting with the early 1950s, defined by the death of Stalin in 1953 and a series of noteworthy developments occurred in 1955.

## **1.2 1955: a watershed moment for the shaping of Italian foreign policy**

In the reconstruction of Italy's international role, the decision to align with the West served as a fundamental premise. This alignment was found in the pivotal elections of April 18, 1948, the pursuit of a strong partnership between the Christian Democracy and the United States, and Italy's complex adhesion to the Atlantic Pact. The Italian recognition of its role within the evolving structure of the Western European context was equally important, moving away from traditional bilateral relations and embracing a series of multilateral agreements that laid the groundwork for European integration. Consequently, the European choice became a pillar of Italian foreign policy, thus complementing its alliance with the Western powers until its commitment to European integration reached a turning point at the Messina Conference held in June 1955.

As a matter of fact, the year 1955 has been a defining moment in Italy's post-war trajectory, marking its emergence as a more confident actor on the international stage. Such a period saw the country take significant steps in reshaping its foreign policy, balancing its cooperation with the Western bloc, and asserting its growing autonomy within both European and global contexts. This section of the thesis will, therefore, delve into four major events during this year which profoundly influenced Italy's foreign policy direction: its participation in the relaunch of the project of European integration, the Italian admission to the United Nations, the signing of bilateral agreements with the United States, and the election of Giovanni Gronchi as President of the Republic.

Following World War II, Italy's post-war recovery and industrial development were closely linked to the process of relaunch of Europe, which progressed from the Messina Conference in June 1955 to the signing of the Treaties of Rome in March 1957, with the ultimate establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) and the

European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM). The failure of the European Defense Community (EDC) and the European Political Community (EPC), as well as the Paris Agreements of 1954, in fact, seemed to mark a new phase of European integration. This phase was characterized by a renewed Franco-British “entente cordiale”, while Jean Monnet – the chairman of the High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) – still pursued the idea of a supranational institution and the set-up of the Action Committee for the United States of Europe, also known as the Monnet Committee.<sup>11</sup>

During these years, the focus shifted towards the exploitation of nuclear energy, which not only emerged as the energy source of the future – being tested for peaceful purposes by both the U.S. and the USSR – but also held the potential to drive Western Europe’s economic development by providing an alternative to oil. In early 1955, Jean Monnet then came to devise a plan for a European atomic energy community, discussing this initiative with the leaders of the Benelux countries. The latter, in turn, continued to uphold the idea of a European construction with supranational features and revisited the proposal for a broad customs union, a concept first introduced by the 1952 Beyen Plan. Thus, the Monnet and Benelux proposals were integrated into a single memorandum, which, in the spring of 1955, Paul-Henri Spaak, Johan Willem Beyen, and Joseph Bech planned to present to the other ECSC members. This presentation was intended to be made at an upcoming meeting of the foreign ministers belonging to the “Six” – the founding member states of the EEC – which aimed at nominating the French René Mayer as the new president of the High Authority, succeeding Jean Monnet.

Originally scheduled to take place in Brussels, the conference was later moved to Messina, more specifically to Taormina, at the suggestion of Italy’s foreign minister, the Liberal Gaetano Martino. At the same time, efforts were underway, especially by Britain, to move towards the creation of a common European market, a proposal also open to Austria, Britain, Spain, and Switzerland, without undermining the work of pre-existing organizations such as the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) – established after World War II to manage the distribution of U.S. Marshal Plan aid and foster cooperation among its member states. This initiative aimed at facilitating the free movement of labor and expanding investment, particularly beneficial for capital-poor nations. The outcome of the Messina Conference was, finally, the formation of a committee of experts, chaired by Spaak, who was tasked with examining both proposals

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<sup>11</sup> Antonio Varsori, *Dalla rinascita al declino: Storia internazionale dell'Italia repubblicana*, pp. 192-207.

and later on submitted a report that was evaluated positively by the Italian authorities, unlike the French ones.

The latter remained, indeed, highly skeptical and pessimistic about the prospects for European integration; this cautious stance stemmed from the failure of the European Defense Community (EDC) in 1954, when the French Parliament refused to ratify the treaty. While Italy welcomed the report's positive outlook which had been released by the Spaak Committee, it nonetheless emphasized the importance of aligning the goals of the proposed European Economic Community with its national development strategy, the "Schema Vanoni" that was closely tied to the economic progress of the underdeveloped South of Italy.<sup>12</sup> In this context, Washington, though supportive of Europe's economic revitalization, adopted a low-profile approach to avoid any perception of excessive American interference, as it had previously occurred during the EDC negotiations.

Between January and February 1957, European Foreign Ministers convened in Brussels and Paris to negotiate the future Treaty on the European Economic Community. Italian Minister Gaetano Martino secured equal representation for Italy alongside France and West Germany, despite Italy's smaller financial contribution, while also successfully advocating for a phased implementation of the customs union and a more robust common external tariff. The principles initially applied to industrial production were extended to the agricultural sector, and the free movement of labor was established. Additionally, plans were made for the European Social Fund to assist industries facing difficulties due to the common market and for the creation of the European Investment Bank to finance development projects. Such outcomes significantly bolstered Italy's role in European integration while addressing its national economic needs.

On the global stage, Italy achieved a milestone with its official admission to the United Nations in 1955, marking the culmination of an arduous journey toward international reconstruction following the devastation of the World War II. Since the establishment of the Kingdom of the South, set up in the aftermath of the 1943 armistice of Cassibile under the control of the Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories, Italy had been striving for recognition as part of the group of Allied nations that would eventually lay the foundations for the new international organization replacing the defunct *League of Nations*. The league, formerly established under the auspices of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, had failed to prevent another world war, leading to the birth of the United Nations, based on agreements reached during the Dumbarton Oaks conversations

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<sup>12</sup> Pasquale Saraceno, *Gli anni dello schema Vanoni, 1953–1959*, a cura di Piero Barucci (Milano: Giuffrè, 1982).

and at the pivotal Yalta Conference in February 1945, where “the main political negotiations among the allies during the war took place”.<sup>13</sup>

Despite Italy’s efforts, its ambitions were initially thwarted by its status as a defeated Axis power. It was only after the signing of the 1947 Peace Treaty that Italy could formally submit its application for membership in the United Nations. However, its admission was delayed by the onset of the Cold War, which exacerbated tensions between the East and the West. During this period, the Security Council – the UN primary body having the enforcement power – faced a new challenge: the simultaneous candidacies of Cominform countries such as Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania for membership. Their applications were opposed by Western powers, who questioned the democratic legitimacy of their respective governments. In retaliation, the Soviet Union adopted a similar stance toward Italy’s application, repeatedly using its veto power to block its admission, despite the country meeting the criteria for membership. In response, the United States made efforts as early as 1951 to “propose reconsideration of Italy’s application by the Security Council, provided this was felt to be a practicable step”, even suggesting the possibility of amending the UN Charter to grant Italy voting rights in the Trusteeship Council.<sup>14</sup>

The latter has been one of the six principal organs of the United Nations established in 1945 and tasked with overseeing the administration of trust territories – essentially former colonies or lands taken from the defeated nations in World War II. Its primary objective was to promote the development of these territories toward self-governance or independence. Italy had been hitherto participating in the Council’s activities since its inception, even though without having voting rights, given its non-member status. In recognition of the Italian active involvement, the U.S. considered proposing an amendment to Article 86 of the UN Charter to grant Italy full voting rights. Yet, this proposal was deemed impractical, as the process would require approval by two-thirds of the UN General Assembly – the UN deliberative body reflecting the consensus of the international community – and ratification by all five permanent members of the Security Council – including the USSR, which had consistently opposed Italy’s admission.

At this stage, the situation underscored the broader diplomatic efforts by Italy to gain recognition as a legitimate participant in post-war international affairs, given its

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<sup>13</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), pp. 47-71.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Department of State Position Paper, Prepared for Use in Conversations with the Italian Prime Minister (De Gasperi)*, September 24, 1951, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951, The United Nations; The Western Hemisphere, Volume II*, accessed December 28, 2024, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951v02/d252>.

strategic importance in Europe and desire to move beyond its wartime history. By the mid-1950s, both the United States and the Soviet Union recognized that the ongoing stalemate faced by Italy was undermining their international credibility. Consequently, they engaged in diplomatic negotiations to resolve the issue, leading to a breakthrough. During a meeting in Vienna, the two superpowers reached a mutual compromise known as the “Package Deal”, which provided for the simultaneous admission of 16 countries, including Italy and several Eastern European nations, thereby balancing the interests of both blocs amid the ideological divide characterizing the early years of the Cold War.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, on December 14, 1955, the UN General Assembly voted to admit Italy, along with 15 other countries, as full members of the United Nations. This landmark decision not only granted the Italian nation full voting rights in the Trusteeship Council, but also solidified its status as a respected member of the international community. The resolution of this issue reflected a rare moment of cooperation between the two superpowers, symbolizing the beginning of a temporary easing of Cold War tensions that would pass into the annals of history as an early instance of *distensione*, a “first détente”.<sup>16</sup> Following Stalin’s death in 1953, the new Soviet leadership led by Khrushchev sought to present a more cooperative image to the West while consolidating internal power. This shift coincided with the U.S., under the Eisenhower administration, balancing military strength with more cautious engagement. Symbolic efforts toward peace were also made at the Geneva Summit on July 1955 – ten years after the Potsdam Conference –, whose goal was to find common ground on key issues such as nuclear weapons and disarmament, the unification of Germany, and Austria’s neutral status.

While efforts were being made at the highest levels to engage in dialogue, European countries like Italy were concurrently taking steps to strengthen their positions within the Western bloc. For Italy, this meant further alignment with the United States, which was reinforced through the signing of bilateral agreements that basically granted the U.S. the right to establish military bases on Italian soil, notably in southern cities like Naples and in northern locations such as Aviano. The former currently hosts the Naval Support Activity (NSA), a critical logistics hub for the U.S. Navy’s Sixth Fleet, while the latter houses the U.S. Air Force’s 31st Fighter Wing and holds a series of B61 nuclear bombs belonging to the United States, but under NATO’s nuclear sharing program as they are stored in underground WS3 Weapon Storage and Security System inside aircraft shelters.

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<sup>15</sup> Antonio Varsori, *Dalla rinascita al declino: Storia internazionale dell’Italia repubblicana*, pp. 181-85.

<sup>16</sup> Guido Formigoni, *Storia d’Italia nella Guerra Fredda (1943-1978)* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2016), pp. 304-12.

This was precisely the result of lengthy and complex negotiations that contributed to the signing of the Bilateral Infrastructure Agreement (BIA) in 1954, which also got to be historically known as the “umbrella agreement”, a document still in force nowadays and whose content is secreted both in Italy and the United States.<sup>17</sup>

This agreement has been allowing Americans to install and deploy all kinds of military facilities in Italy, starting from large air bases to radar or satellite communication facilities. Their discussions with the Italian authorities began in the autumn of 1949 and continued throughout the early 1950s. Despite initial efforts by the U.S. Pentagon to manage negotiations, the U.S. Department of State took over the process through the U.S. Embassy in Rome, recognizing the importance of engaging the Italian government through the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. With regard to the technical aspects and on behalf of the respective Ministers of Defense of both parties, several high-ranking officers from the three branches of the Armed Forces of the two countries were involved in the negotiating process. Moreover, given the political relevance of the matter, the Italian Prime Ministers who succeeded one another during the three-year period – Alcide De Gasperi, Giuseppe Pella, and Mario Scelba, who finally signed the agreement with U.S. Ambassador in Rome Claire Boothe Luce – played a very active part.

Initial talks centered on three main points: the continuation of existing U.S. rights based on previous agreements, the granting of additional rights for communication lines from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the northeastern border in support of U.S. occupation forces in Austria and the city of Trieste, which had been divided in zone A – administered by Italy – and zone B – administered by Tito-led Yugoslavia – following the London Memorandum of Understanding of October 1954. Furthermore, preliminary talks addressed potential financial agreements for covering costs, with Italy expected to contribute to expenses and sometimes even fund the installation and maintenance of military structures. Coordination with NATO defense planning was emphasized, particularly with the Southern European-Western Mediterranean Regional Planning Group including Italy, France, and the United Kingdom. A major concern was that while Italian military officials were generally supportive of the base agreements, political leaders were apprehensive, fearing domestic political fallout, especially with the 1953 elections approaching.

The U.S. Embassy in Rome suggested presenting the bases as NATO facilities rather than exclusively U.S. ones to mitigate Italian political concerns. In this sense, the

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<sup>17</sup> Liliana Saiu, *Basi e strutture militari degli Stati Uniti in Italia: il negoziato, 1949-1954* (Roma: Aracne Editrice, 2014), p. 9.

United States also aimed at moving quickly, with an initial diplomatic approach to Italian Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi and a subsequent focus on securing agreements that would not have required parliamentary ratification. Ultimately, Americans intended to align the military base program with NATO obligations, though challenges remained in ensuring the Italian government's acceptance of the agreements. As a matter of fact, Italy was heavily reliant on American security guarantees, which were seen as vital to countering the Soviet threat, but, on the other hand, willing to assert greater national autonomy in its foreign affairs. In this context, the acceptance of the U.S. military presence on national soil was a critical element of its broader strategy for safeguarding security while navigating the intricacies of its political landscape.

Domestically, the election of Giovanni Gronchi as President of the Republic on April 29, 1955, brought a shift in Italy's political and diplomatic orientation. In addition to ushering in a different political phase characterized by the dialogue between Catholics and Socialists, known as the *opening to the Left*, Gronchi was recognized for his independent and interventionist stance along with his keen interest in cultivating relationships beyond Italy's traditional Western alliances. Under his presidency, Italy entered a new phase of foreign policy that sought to engage both emerging and established powers. This period introduced a more nuanced strategy, blending loyalty to the Atlantic framework with aspirations for a more diversified and autonomous international role. The figure of President Gronchi, as well as his central role in driving this change, will be examined in depth in the following subchapter and, more broadly in the second chapter of this thesis, which will focus on some of his most significant official visits abroad and the interactions he had with foreign Heads of State, Ambassadors, and other diplomatic representatives in Rome during his mandate.

### **1.3 Giovanni Gronchi's election and the historical *opening to the Left***

Giovanni Gronchi's election and his subsequent presidency represented a turning point in Italian post-war history that reflected a period of change in the development of political leadership as well as a more assertive approach to the Italian foreign policy in the Mediterranean. Born in 1887 in Pontedera, in the province of Pisa, Gronchi earned a degree in Letters from the prestigious Scuola Normale Superiore. A veteran of World War I, he co-founded the Popular Party – *Partito Popolare Italiano*, PPI – along with Don Luigi Sturzo in the aftermath of the war in 1919. During the Fascist era, he withdrew from political life and turned his focus to entrepreneurial ventures throughout the 1930s. In 1942, he played a key role in the founding of the Christian Democracy – *Democrazia*

*Cristiana* (DC), the Italian centrist and anti-communist party promoting Catholic social values – and later served as Minister of Industry in Bonomi-led cabinets.

Elected to the Constituent Assembly, Gronchi aligned himself with Amintore Fanfani as the foremost figure of the left-wing within the DC party. He subsequently served as President of the Chamber of Deputies during both the first and second legislatures. Upon assuming the presidency at the Quirinale, Gronchi tried to “imprint a different character” to his role, convinced that he ought to play a direct part in shaping major political decisions, notably those concerning Italy’s international position.<sup>18</sup> In point of fact, his foreign policy vision centered on enhancing Italy’s autonomy, especially in navigating East-West relations, made him adopt a fully interventionist stance in the attempt to maintain the alliance with the United States and assert a more prominent role in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Yet, his ambitions often clashed with the staunchly Atlantist standpoint of other DC leaders, such as Antonio Segni and Gaetano Martino, as well as elements within the Italian diplomatic corps. Notwithstanding this opposition, Gronchi found support in Fanfani’s political outlook and Enrico Mattei’s bold energy diplomacy, topics that will thoroughly explored in the following sections.

As soon as Alcide De Gasperi, the former President of the Council of Ministers and founder of the Christian Democracy retired in 1954, there was the emergence of a new generation of DC leaders identified with leftist tendencies. In fact, in the mid-1950s, the Italian political debate focused on the so-called “opening to the Left” (*apertura a sinistra*), a strategy aimed at incorporating the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) into government coalitions. It stemmed from the belief that long-term political stability could only be achieved by broadening the government’s base to reflect the growing influence of leftist forces within Italian society. Some DC leaders thought that advancing without a centrist coalition government was unfeasible. According to them, what truly mattered was fostering dialogue with the socialist faction of the left rather than the communist one, which remained ideologically resistant to collaboration with democratic institutions.

Therefore, they tried to involve socialists in future parliamentary majorities. This may be seen as a response to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, during which Soviet tanks brutally crushed the anti-communist uprising in “rebellious” Budapest.<sup>19</sup> The event caused a rift between the communists and the socialists in Italy: the former sided with the Soviet Union, labelling the Hungarian insurgents in Budapest as fascists, on the contrary the latter

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<sup>18</sup> Antonio Varsori, *Dalla rinascita al declino: Storia internazionale dell'Italia repubblicana*, pp. 212-24.

<sup>19</sup> Vladislav M. Zubok, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021), p. 326.

viewed them as workers and students struggling for freedom. This fundamental disagreement further widened the divide between the two factions in Italian politics. Within this context, the left-wing of the Christian Democracy started to envision a potential cooperation with the socialists, recognizing the need to adapt to Italy's evolving socio-political landscape and international context as well. Giovanni Gronchi soon became one of the most prominent members of this progressive wing of the DC, advocating for a broader political alliance to nurture the Italian economic growth and stability.

His rise to the presidency of the Italian Republic in 1955 occurred during a period featured by deep ideological divisions between the Christian Democrats, who dominated the Italian political scene, and the opposition parties, primarily the Italian Communist Party – *Partito Comunista Italiano*, PCI – led by Palmiro Togliatti and the Italian Socialist Party – *Partito Socialista Italiano*, PSI – led by Pietro Nenni. Internal tensions and factional rivalries within the party had begun to surface. The more conservative wing of the DC, led by De Gasperi and later Antonio Segni, had long pursued a centrist policy aligned closely with the U.S. However, a faction within the DC, known as the left-wing or social-Catholic wing, sought to differentiate itself by seeking for a broader political alliance that included leftist forces, particularly the PSI. Gronchi, who was an influential member of this faction, had a vision that diverged from the strictly Atlanticist and anti-communist stance of the conservative Christian Democrats. He believed in pursuing a policy of national autonomy in foreign affairs and fostering reforms that would appeal to the working classes and bridge the gap between the DC and the leftist parties.

This ideological positioning set the stage for his unexpected election on April 29, 1955. The presidential election of 1955 saw an intense contest within the Italian Parliament, as the Christian Democrats, despite being the largest party, faced significant internal division regarding their candidate for the presidency. Indeed, the conservative wing of the DC represented by Segni had initially proposed Cesare Merzagora, a centrist and former President of the Senate, as their candidate. Nevertheless, Gronchi's candidacy gained momentum through the support of the left-leaning factions of the DC, as well as crucial backing from the side of the PCI and PSI. His election was the result of a complex political maneuver. The leftist parties saw in Gronchi an opportunity to weaken the conservative grip on the government and push for more progressive policies. The left-wing faction of the DC viewed his candidacy as a chance to realign the party's direction and broaden its electoral base by appealing to a wider spectrum of the Italian population, including the working-class voters traditionally aligned with the left.

Thus, on April 29, 1955, after several rounds of voting, Gronchi was elected President of the Republic with a significant majority, much to the surprise and dismay of the conservative elements within the DC and their international allies. His election was interpreted as a political change that could lead to greater dialogue with the left and a more independent foreign policy. That is the reason why his presidency started to be associated with the above-mentioned “opening to the Left”, which, as a matter of fact, was not merely a tactical move but reflected a deeper ideological shift. In the context of this shift, his relationship with Fanfani looked both collaborative and strained. While recognizing the need for broader political alliances to safeguard Italy’s future, Gronchi’s more independent foreign policy stance clashed with Fanfani’s Atlanticist one, which prioritized Italy’s partnership with the United States and NATO.

President Gronchi managed to adopt a more expansive interpretation of his presidential role compared to his predecessors – namely Enrico De Nicola (1946-1948) and Luigi Einaudi (1948-1955). A proponent of what has been previously described as *neo-Atlanticism*, he considered himself entrusted with a leading responsibility in shaping national foreign policy. While firmly remaining within the framework of the Western alliance, Gronchi sought to assert greater Italian autonomy, positioning the country as an active player on global stage. His foreign policy initiatives, however, often sparked controversy. His visit to the Soviet Union in 1960, for instance, drew heavy criticism by both the United States and conservative factions within the Christian Democracy party, including figures like Fanfani himself or the first woman to serve as the American Ambassador to Rome from 1953 to 1955, Ms. Clare Boothe Luce.

They perceived this visit as a betrayal of Italy’s Atlantic commitments, as it diverged from the party’s traditionally pro-Western stance. Concerning President Gronchi’s intentions in the Middle East, he was prompted to propose an ambitious initiative against the backdrop of the escalation of the Suez Crisis and the subsequent Anglo-French military intervention. He envisioned Italy playing a leading role in fostering a European consortium for the promotion of development and stability in the Middle East, which ultimately did not come to fruition owing to the disapproval of Foreign Affairs Minister Martino. These development, and their broader implications, will be further addressed in the second chapter of this thesis, which traces Gronchi’s series of institutional visits abroad through official documents and sources.

Last but not least, an increasingly close connection emerged between Gronchi’s Mediterranean ambitions and those of Fanfani, aligning closely with Enrico Mattei’s strategic initiative and entrepreneurial designs. As chairman of ENI, he pursued an

innovative strategy, focused on establishing agreements with oil-producing countries that prioritized their economic interests and development. His approach was well-received by these nations, as it coincided with their growing dissatisfaction over the exploitative policies imposed by the dominant international oil giants, the so called *Seven Sisters*, that will be explored later in the third chapter of this thesis. Such strategy repeatedly brought Mattei into conflict with major oil corporations and segments of the U.S. government which maintained close ties with them. Over time, his policies drew him increasingly closer to the left-wing faction of the Christian Democracy and aligned with Gronchi's neo-Atlantic vision. A more comprehensive analysis of his figure and his "foresight" for the economic future of Italy will be provided in the next sections.<sup>20</sup>

#### **1.4 The emergence of Neo-Atlanticism in Italy's Mediterranean vocation**

While Atlanticism and Europeanism, as previously discussed, were the two cornerstone principles of Italian foreign policy, it is equally true that Italy sought to shape distinct policy directions mirroring its historical, geographical, and political identity. A prime example of this is Italy's Mediterranean policy, where the role of Christian Democracy proved pivotal. The idea of Italy as a bridge between East and West, along with its enduring civilizing mission rooted in Roman tradition, provided an ideological framework for engaging with the Mediterranean region. In the period following World War II, Italy faced a complex geopolitical landscape: geographically situated at the heart of the Mediterranean Sea, the country held a strategic position between the Western and Eastern blocs during the Cold War. Economically and politically, it needed to rebuild itself while aligning to the Western powers guided by the United States.

The late 1940s and early 1950s defined a new direction in Italy's Mediterranean policy, as the rejection of the Bevin-Sforza compromise in 1949 – which had suggested a trusteeship arrangement under international supervision for the future of Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia – prompted De Gasperi government to embrace pro-independence positions for its former colonies. The Italian Foreign Minister Carlo Sforza championed a pragmatic vision of fostering economic and commercial ties in the region, as a means of counterbalancing Anglo-French dominance. While Italy sought to assert itself in regional defense initiatives like the Middle East Defense Organization (MEDO) initially proposed under the U.S. Truman administration and seen as an "imperialist" attempt by Egypt, its ultimate exclusion from it inadvertently strengthened its reputation among Arabs.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Benito Li Vigni, *Enrico Mattei. L'uomo del futuro che inventò la rinascita italiana* (Milano: Ed. Riuniti, 2022).

<sup>21</sup> Alessandro Brogi, *L'Italia e l'egemonia americana nel Mediterraneo*, p. 64.

At first, the Christian Democrats adhered to a policy of close alignment with the United States, reflecting a staunchly Atlanticist orientation. Yet, by the mid-1950s, the new strategic vision touched upon in the prior sections of this thesis and termed *neo-Atlanticism* began to take shape, seeking to balance Italy's Atlantic commitments with a more actively dedicated role in the Mediterranean and closer relations with non-aligned nations. Amid a period of détente in international relations, when signs of increased Italian autonomy began to grow, President Gronchi positioned himself as the foremost proponent of a new policy emphasizing the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and the peoples of former European colonies. He strived to reaffirm Italy's role as a Latin nation performing a "bridging function" among different civilizations, offering a more tangible vision than the traditional perception of the country as simply an "outpost" of Western civilization.<sup>22</sup>

In a 1951 Senate debate on Italian foreign policy, Alcide De Gasperi himself had argued that Italy's geographic, political, religious, historical, and cultural characteristics positioned it as a natural "bridge" between Western European civilization and the diverse cultures of the Mediterranean; in his opinion, this role defined Italy's historical mission.<sup>23</sup> What's more, there was growing reflection on Italy's relationship with the Islamic world, acknowledging two key realities: the collapse of the colonial system that had previously dominated European powers and the rise of Arab and African nationalism. Within this precise scenario, European and Western interest in the Mediterranean region exponentially grew with the primary objective of stopping it from falling under Soviet influence or, more broadly, from becoming aligned with the international communist ideology.

This political deliberation regarding the necessity for a more distinct Mediterranean policy for Italy highlighted the need for greater independence in foreign affairs, a matter which became a central focus for both the Christian Democrats and the Italian government. As is well known, the concept of neo-Atlanticism has a distinctive history, first introduced by Giuseppe Pella during a speech delivered to the House Foreign Affairs Committee and at a press conference in 1957. However, it was Amintore Fanfani, who became the primary advocate of this policy shift, with President Giovanni Gronchi playing a crucial supporting role. Neo-Atlanticism was, therefore, envisioned as a strategy to balance Italy's Atlantic commitments with a more assertive foreign policy right in the Mediterranean and aimed

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<sup>22</sup> Antonio Varsori and Federico Mazzei, *Giovanni Gronchi e la politica estera italiana (1955-1962)* (Pisa: Pacini Editore Srl e Fondazione Piaggio, 2017), pp. 65-9.

<sup>23</sup> Alcide De Gasperi, *Scritti e discorsi politici*. Vol. IV, *Alcide De Gasperi e la stabilizzazione della Repubblica 1948-1954* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2009), p. 894.

at charting the course between Western alliances and the increasingly important non-aligned world represented by former colonies.

The neo-Atlanticists advocated for expanding the scope of the North Atlantic Treaty beyond military and defense matters, urging the inclusion of “economic collaboration” as outlined in Article 2.<sup>24</sup> Their goal was to establish a broader framework for international cooperation, one that extended Italy’s foreign policy influence both regionally and globally. They were seeking to engage nations worldwide, above all those which were on the cusp of gaining independence, under the principles of equity and economic development. A wave of decolonization was sweeping across North Africa, where countries such as Libya became independent in 1951 under King Idris I, and Morocco and Tunisia achieved independence from France in 1956, charting new paths as sovereign states. Similarly, the British faced challenges in Egypt, which was established as a republic in 1952, and Cyprus, where the EOKA paramilitary group sought “enosis”, the integration of Cyprus with Greece, in response to the Turkish “taksim”, the idea of splitting the island and uniting the Cypriot Turkish part with Turkey.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, Italy strived to better represent the interests of the Atlantic Pact in regions where the traditional Franco-British power dynamics risked undermining the West’s appeal to the people and states of the world. It was believed that this shift would reflect a more adaptive and flexible foreign policy, responsive to the evolving international landscape. The May 1958 elections, in contrast to those of 1953 which had been a setback for the Christian Democrats who had experienced a drop in their share of the vote, signaled a notable resurgence of the DC. It reinforced the view that it was the only political force capable of ensuring stability in Italy’s international positioning. The elections also saw increased support for the Socialist and Social Democratic parties, while the Republicans, the Monarchist National Party (*Partito Nazionale Monarchico*, PNM), the Italian Liberal Party (*Partito Liberale Italiano*, PLI) along with the members of the right-wing Italian Social Movement (*Movimento Sociale Italiano*, MSI) suffered electoral losses.

As soon as Amintore Fanfani, leader of the “Democratic Initiative” faction – *Iniziativa Democratica*, the left wing of the Christian Democracy party – was entrusted with shaping national policy in 1958, he placed significant emphasis on foreign affairs

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<sup>24</sup> North Atlantic Treaty, Article 2, April 4, 1949, [https://www.nato.int/cps/cz/natohq/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/cz/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm).

<sup>25</sup> Isabelle Calleja Ragonesi, *Democracy in Southern Europe: Colonialism, International Relations and Europeanization. From Malta to Cyprus* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), p. 33.

during his tenure as both Prime Minister and Foreign Minister.<sup>26</sup> He viewed foreign policy as a keystone of his government's agenda and was driven by his inclination to strengthen political stability amid criticism from the communist opposition, which accused the Christian Democrats of being overly aligned with American interests. At the same time, in response to criticisms of the neo-Atlanticist approach, which argued that it might weaken Western unity, Fanfani firmly reiterated, "Our commitment to the Atlantic Alliance is unequivocal. That alliance remains the lodestar of Italian foreign policy".<sup>27</sup>

The Mediterranean, a region of particular interest to Fanfani, gained renewed attention from the international community at a critical juncture: during the vote of confidence in the Italian government, following the coup in Iraq and the subsequent American intervention in Lebanon and British involvement in Jordan. In his programmatic speech to the Chamber of Deputies on July 9, Fanfani reaffirmed Italy's steadfast commitment to its core foreign policy principles of Europeanism and Atlanticism. He further pointed out that Italy sought to play an active role in fostering relations with the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa as well as Israel and preventing any Soviet moves, stating: "We will propose to make increasingly active the relations between these countries as Italy's contribution to expanding the area of prosperity and, thereby, strengthening the prospects of freedom along the Mediterranean shores".<sup>28</sup>

Fanfani's approach aimed at elevating Italy's international standing through an independent and proactive diplomatic strategy. A series of shifts in the international landscape seemed to present Italy with new opportunities for action, as a matter of fact. The stabilization of the two blocs, marked by West Germany's entry into NATO and the formation of the Warsaw Pact in 1955, clarified the respective spheres of influence, thereby opening avenues for dialogue. This change in the international order, coupled with the major events of 1955 mentioned earlier, created a window for Italy to redefine its role in the international relations. Fanfani sought to position Italy as a champion of deeper European integration, particularly promoting stronger ties within the "Six" as well as Great Britain, while simultaneously advancing an active involvement in global diplomacy, specifically in developing stronger ties in the Mediterranean area and with Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt.

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<sup>26</sup> Evelina Martelli, *L'altro atlantismo. Fanfani e la politica estera italiana 1958-1963* (Milano: Guerini, 2008), pp. 13-26.

<sup>27</sup> Paolo Cacace, *Vent'anni di politica estera italiana (1943-1963)* (Milano: Editori Riuniti, 1987), p. 504.

<sup>28</sup> Evelina Martelli, *L'altro atlantismo. Fanfani e la politica estera italiana 1958-1963*, pp. 26-41.

Italy's meaningful diplomatic in the Mediterranean, undertaken independently of Atlantic frameworks, came in February 1953 with Defense Minister Randolfo Pacciardi's visit to Egypt. This effort aimed at challenging the subordinate position imposed on Italy by American hegemony and the waning yet persistent British leverage in the region. The strained relations between Cairo and London at the same time positioned Italy's move as an attempt at mediation, particularly as the United States began to shift away from viewing Egypt as central to its regional strategy. The Italian Foreign Ministry, buoyed by a markedly optimistic evaluation of the mission's outcomes, anticipated a near-future role for Italy as a mediator between the leading Arab nationalist state and the Western bloc. Thus, the Italian Catholic left, moving beyond colonialism, saw the Eurafrican relationship as a mutually dependent partnership that could foster economic and political collaboration, with the Italian nation playing that mediating "bridge" role.

Indeed, amid escalating tensions in the Mediterranean basin and the visible signs of the old colonial empires' disintegration, Arab dynamism and U.S. dominance may be considered as the main drivers of this neo-Atlantist strategy at the core of the Italian Mediterranean policy. This often adopted also a critical stance toward traditional European powers such as France and Britain – the latter was grappling with the full repercussions of its imperial overreach –, especially in view of events like the Suez Crisis occurred in 1956 and triggered by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal, in which both French and British powers were holding significant shares. The crisis exposed the assertiveness of Arab nations, symbolized by their "desire" to reclaim sovereignty over vital strategic assets, in direct opposition to British and French efforts to maintain influence in key global regions. For the European powers, controlling Suez was crucial in countering Soviet expansion in the region.<sup>29</sup>

However, Nasser's pursue of a non-alignment policy, refusing to join either the Western or Soviet blocs, eventually clashed with Western expectations of loyalty in the Cold War context. In this sense, Italy's approach to positioning itself as an interlocutor with Arab and African nations aimed not only at advancing its own national interests but also at representing Western ones. It highlighted a deliberate distancing from the colonialist policies of certain European powers, counterbalanced by closer alignment with the United States. Washington, as the superpower capable of asserting authority over European competitors in the Mediterranean, allowed Italy to carve out a distinct role in the

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<sup>29</sup> William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 4th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2009), pp. 308-16.

region. Fostering cooperation with newly independent nations while avoiding the stigma of former colonialism was the main objective. In this framework, President Gronchi along with ENI's chairman – the Italian State Oil Corporation, *Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi*, – Enrico Mattei sought to redefine Italy's foreign policy by emphasizing national interests, economic diplomacy, and greater independence from the U.S.

Italy's post-war economic recovery was fundamentally tied to securing access to energy resources and markets in the Mediterranean, Africa, and the Middle East. At the forefront of this effort was the establishment of ENI, led by the earlier mentioned Mattei, whose leadership played a crucial role in advancing Italy's energy diplomacy. President Gronchi's approach was rooted in the idea that Italy's geopolitical interests reached beyond simple alignment with NATO and included cultivating relationships with emerging nations across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. A core component of his Mediterranean strategy was his emphasis on dialogue with both Western and Eastern bloc countries. While Italy remained firmly committed to its NATO obligations, Gronchi endeavored to ease Cold War tensions through diplomatic engagement and economic cooperation. His support for Enrico Mattei's energy diplomacy exemplified this strategy, as he worked to reinforce the Italian ties with African and Middle Eastern countries.

### **1.5 Neo-Atlanticism according to Enrico Mattei: energy policy and strategy**

Italy's aspiration for economic prominence in the Middle East hinged on becoming part of the major oil-producing network. In 1954, the Italian State Oil Corporation ENI's chairman Enrico Mattei pursued efforts to join the Abadan consortium in Iran, an initiative led by prominent American oil companies at the invitation of the Shah, who aimed to revive Iran's oil exports and recover from the severe economic damage caused by the Anglo-American boycott, which had been imposed in response to Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq's 1951 nationalization of the oil industry. This boycott had isolated Iran from global markets, and the consortium represented a critical step toward reintegrating Iranian oil into the world economy. This kind of efforts by Mattei, which reflect Italy's broader ambitions, will be examined in the subsequent paragraphs.

As a matter of fact, the central figure in Italy's neo-Atlanticist policy along with President Giovanni Gronchi has been Mattei himself, who got to be distinguished for his strategy to secure energy independence for Italy by negotiation directly with oil-producing countries, often bypassing the established dominance of Anglo-American oil companies. Among the architects of Italy's post-war economic miracle, his main role as chairman of ENI positioned him as an essential agent in transforming Italy from a nation ravaged by

war to a energy-independent powerhouse central to Europe's industrial revival. Born in 1906 in Acqualagna, a town in the province of Pesaro, Mattei was the son of a Carabinieri non-commissioned officer and demonstrated an entrepreneurial spirit since an early age when he had founded a business in the chemical sector.

During World War II, he became actively involved in the Resistance and later joined the Christian Democracy. After the liberation of Italy, he was appointed to lead the AGIP – *Agenzia Generale Italiana Petroli* – an oil agency originally established under the fascist regime to manage the country's energy policy, with the initial goal of overseeing its liquidation. However, as a strong advocate of state intervention in the economy and closely aligned with the left wing of the Christian Democracy, Mattei instead focused on revitalizing AGIP until ENI was founded in 1953 and he shifted his focus to the international oil market. His efforts were also bolstered by the discovery of natural gas reserves in the Po Valley, which he leveraged to strengthen Italy's energy independence.

In the immediate years following the end of World War II, the Italian government since the first moment under the leadership of Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi, was well determined to rebuild the nation. Yet, it faced several fundamental obstacles, among which the need for energy resources, primarily oil, which was paramount for Italy to recover industrially and economically. At that time, Italy was heavily dependent on foreign oil imports, a situation that made it vulnerable to the geopolitical struggles of the Cold War. The major oil companies, known as the *Seven Sisters*, already controlled much of the global supply and operated with little regard for the needs of Italy. Such a context created an opportunity for a bold leader like Enrico Mattei to reshape Italy's energy landscape.

He seized that opportunity with his keen understanding of the global oil market. Mattei was, in fact, driven by a vision of Italian energy independence and industrial growth; he recognized that oil was not just a commodity, but a critical instrument of power and influence in the global geopolitical order. As a result, he tried to break the monopoly of the aforementioned *Seven Sisters*, the powerful consortium of Western oil companies that dominated the global energy market. He found himself operating in an oil industry with a profoundly political dimension, forced to fight on a global scale against a power structure that was keeping both Italy and himself on the sidelines. But how could he carve out the place Italy deserved in a system that had only grown stronger after the war? In this sense, Mattei's approach was a fusion of entrepreneurial action and political struggle: building a great and historical enterprise which is still active nowadays.

In this context, as noted by Marcello Colitti – an eminent expert in energy markets and a senior ENI executive with a forty-year career at the Italian oil giant – Mattei's

“natural anti-colonialism” only grew stronger, as it aligned with the necessity of securing a foothold in the closed world of the oil industry. Unlike the traditional Western oil powers, which sought to preserve their dominance through exclusive agreements and rigid control over production, Mattei championed a radically different model, offering producing nations a far greater share revenues than the *Seven Sisters*. His outreach to the developing countries of the *Third World*, thus, became a cornerstone of his business strategy and “rebel culture”, shaped by his deep sensitivity to the arrogance of the powerful and by his past as a partisan, fighting against entrenched systems of control.<sup>30</sup>

This defiant spirit fueled his challenge to the Western oil oligopoly and his push to establish ENI as an independent force capable of reshaping global energy relations. By forging direct partnerships with post-colonial states in North Africa and the Middle East, as we will see, he provided them with an alternative to Western oil cartels, reinforcing their economic sovereignty while simultaneously advancing Italy’s geopolitical influence in line with the neo-Atlanticist stance pursued by President Gronchi. In this very context, during an interview with the American broadcaster NBC, Enrico Mattei was asked about ENI’s difficulties with Western oil companies. Without hesitation, he clearly stated that it seemed absurd to him that, in the name of Western solidarity and unity, Italy was expected to pay oil prices that “allowed for windfall profits of around 40% on selling prices”.<sup>31</sup>

Mattei was basically referring to the fact that the dominant oil companies – the *Seven Sisters* – had set crude oil prices at artificially high levels, ensuring that their profit margins remained exceptionally large, sometimes reaching up to 40% over the actual market value. He argued that these inflated prices were not just an economic burden for Italy but also a structural obstacle to its growth. Italy, he stressed, could not afford to keep paying such excessive costs, as this would hinder its industrial development and expansion. High oil prices, in his view, had direct repercussions on the country’s broader modernization efforts, limiting its ability to compete globally and restricting the industrialization process that was crucial for Italy’s post-war economic resurgence.

To this kind of accusation, the United States would later add further criticism, accusing Mattei of contributing to the Soviet objective of disrupting global oil prices by purchasing petroleum at rates lower than the standard market price. This controversy stemmed from ENI’s landmark agreement with the Soviet Union in 1959, which at the time caused a significant uproar – a topic that this thesis will explore in detail later. Mattei

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<sup>30</sup> Marcello Colitti, *ENI. Cronache dall'interno di un'azienda* (Milano: EGEA, 2008), pp. 78-9.

<sup>31</sup> Enrico Mattei, *Scritti e discorsi 1945-1962* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2022), p. 813.

continued to defend his actions by explaining that, in this case, Italy had not paid for Soviet oil in foreign currency but rather through the products of Italian labor such as synthetic rubber, petrochemical plants, and oil pipeline pumping stations, among other industrial goods. This barter system, pioneered by ENI in its dealings with the Soviet Union, was not an isolated initiative but rather a model that Enrico Mattei envisioned applying to other countries as well. By circumventing the traditional cash-based transactions dominated by Western oil giants, such an approach would allow Italy to secure energy resources while simultaneously promoting its industrial exports abroad.

Moreover, the Middle East, the stage for the neo-Atlanticist foreign policy initiated by Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani with strong interventionist diplomatic engagement by President Giovanni Gronchi, was not only home to vast oil reserves but also plagued by a complex set of political challenges. These issues, deeply intertwined with the oil industry itself, underscored the geopolitical tensions between oil-producing nations, the Western oil giants that held lucrative concessions, and the consuming countries reliant on Middle Eastern energy supplies. Mattei here recognized the fundamentally different interests of these three key players. As he pointed out, international concessionary oil companies had “serious reasons to fear any radical change in the political organization of the Middle East that could lead to the revocation of concessions or the worsening of highly favorable contractual conditions which were already reached”.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, the stability of these regimes was important to maintain the advantageous agreements that guaranteed Western dominance over Middle Eastern oil. However, Mattei advocated for a different approach; he argued that the only sustainable way forward was to reconcile the demands of all stakeholders involved, ensuring that oil remained a secure element of shared prosperity”. This perspective stood in stark contrast to the monopolistic practices of the Seven Sisters, whose grip on the global oil market often disregarded the interests of the producing nations. Against this backdrop, Mattei and ENI attempted to implement a radically alternative model based on equitable partnerships rather than mere resource extraction. As will be examined in the following sections, this vision was put into practice in North African countries such as Morocco and Tunisia, as well as Iran, where ENI reached innovative agreements that granted oil producers a greater share of profits than traditional Western contracts, by challenging the dominant power structures of the international oil industry’s schemes.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 598.

## **CHAPTER II – Gronchi's Seven-Year Mandate and Presidential Diplomacy**

### **2.1 Strengthening transatlantic ties: state visits to the United States and Canada**

As discussed in the previous sections of this thesis, in the mid-1950s, Italy emerged as a dynamic player on the international stage, navigating the complexities of Cold War geopolitics and seeking to solidify its position within the Western bloc. Under the seven-year mandate of President Giovanni Gronchi, the country aimed at leveraging its strategic importance as a bridge between Europe and the Mediterranean, while also fostering stronger transatlantic relations in line with a typical neo-Atlanticist approach. In this sense, Gronchi emerged as a key figure in this endeavor, by advocating for a balanced yet assertive position in the Western alliance which sought to harmonize Italy's commitments to NATO with its ambitions to engage more constructively with both Eastern and developing nations. In this regard, he carried out a fully-fledged presidential diplomacy made up of a series of considerable state visits that he paid abroad.

Within this framework, among the official missions undertaken by Gronchi, were his state visits to the United States (February 26–March 2, 1956) and Canada (March 3–15, 1956), which became emblematic of his broader diplomatic vision. Accompanied by Foreign Minister Gaetano Martino and Ambassador of Italy to the United States Manlio Brosio, such missions aimed at reinforcing Italy's partnership with its transatlantic allies. Upon the invitation of U.S. President Eisenhower, Gronchi during his stay in Washington, worked to dispel widespread apprehensions among the American public about his leadership, which had been fueled by channels of misinformation conveyed by his political adversaries to Mrs Clare Boothe Luce, one of the most trusted allies of U.S. President Eisenhower serving as the Ambassador of United States to Italy from 1953 to 1956.

Mrs Luce, a former Congresswoman and a well-known public figure, skilled communicator, and strong supporter of what is called "psychological war", had a reputation for being a fierce anti-communist and a proponent of a strong U.S. role in global affairs. Her appointment as Ambassador to Italy in 1953 was a reflection of Eisenhower's confidence in her abilities, particularly in developing ties with Italy; in addition to providing political support to Eisenhower, she also maintained a personal friendship with him, further cementing her influence on U.S. foreign policy. As Ambassador, her influence was, indeed, instrumental in shaping American perceptions of Italy. Her diplomatic reports and writings often delved into the political character of Italians, perpetuating views that reflected widespread American stereotypes about Italians.

In other words, she highlighted a lack of public responsibility, attributing it to behaviors like tax evasion, and described Italians as “anarchic streak with a contradictory blend of national pride and a tendency to follow the powerful”. Such judgements aligned with Eisenhower’s own views and played a significant role in framing the negotiation of American and diplomatic concessions to Italy. Mrs Luce’s observations were particularly revealing in their portrayal of Italy’s political pragmatism, which she linked to the country’s historical and Machiavellian political culture. In August 1953, she identified “self-interest” and “opportunism” as the driving forces behind European governments, particularly Italy, further consolidating the American perception of the Italian nation as an opportunistic player on the international stage.<sup>33</sup>

Mrs Luce’s diplomatic analysis reflected her concerns about the shifting political dynamics in Europe during the Cold War. She observed that the political power of Christian Democratic parties in Europe – staunch proponents of pro-Americanism and Atlanticism – was giving way to moderate leftist movements. She identified neutralism as the dominant political trend in Europe, a position that, while not explicitly abandoning the Atlantic Alliance, subtly manipulated its structure to secure leadership positions. According to Luce, this neutralism could turn into pro-communist stances, especially in countries like France and Italy. Her public commentary on Italy’s political scene was disseminated within the U.S. government and, often, constrained Italy’s autonomous initiative. Yet paradoxically, Rome leveraged this dynamic to exert pressure on U.S. policymakers, by carving out a strategic position in Cold War diplomacy.

However, in a memorandum from Ambassador Luce dating back to May 26, 1955, doubts were raised about President Gronchi’s claim that his “militant Catholicism” inherently safeguarded him against alignment with Communism. She basically argued that Catholicism, while a significant aspect of identity, does not prevent collaboration with opposing ideologies. Mrs Luce called attention to the fact that “the individual Catholic can live, and is taught to live under any state, or under any form of government” that does not restrict religious practice, thus including Communist regimes, provided other concerns, such as economic or political issues, are addressed. This adaptability had already led millions of Catholics in Italy to support Communism, attracted by promises of economic stability, peace, and political participation.

Furthermore, Mrs Luce remarked that “on the record of past performance and present utterances, Mr Gronchi plainly seeks the political opening to the left, via Nenni,

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<sup>33</sup> Alessandro Brogi, *L'Italia e l'egemonia americana nel Mediterraneo*, pp. 67-104.

and has no intellectual or religious prejudices towards Socialism.” She also pointed to President Gronchi’s political history, including his excommunication for joining the Popular Party, as evidence that his political ambitions often outweighed his religious commitments. Ultimately, she concluded that his openness to leftist alliances, particularly with Nenni’s Socialist Party, demonstrated either a lack of understanding of Marxism’s inherent conflicts with Catholicism or a deliberate prioritization of political objectives over religious principles.<sup>34</sup> In a conversation that Ambassador Luce had with Italian Foreign Minister Martino on July 29, 1955, it is important to note several key issues which were discussed regarding Italy’s political and foreign policy.

Martino revealed that President Gronchi “felt misunderstood by the American Embassy”, for his vision for Italy’s future, including a potential shift toward left-wing alliances. Gronchi believed that the ongoing quadripartite government – involving the DC, the PSI, the PLI, and the Italian Republican Party (PRI) – was unsustainable, then he advocated for a “monocolore” one backed by Nenni’s support. Despite disagreements within Italy’s coalition, Martino acknowledged Gronchi’s concerns, especially with regard to Italy’s limited influence in international matters. He mentioned the Italian President’s intention to write to President Eisenhower, voicing dissatisfaction with Italy’s exclusion from major diplomatic discussions by the “Big Three” powers – like the July 1955 Geneva Summit. He also touched on Gronchi’s desire for a visit to the U.S., noting potential sensitivities around timing, in the context of the American presidential elections.<sup>35</sup>

Building on the themes reported by Mrs Luce and discussed by Minister Martino, President Gronchi sought to redefine Italy’s role within the transatlantic framework. One year before, he had already expressed his commitment to engaging actively in foreign affairs, acknowledging the challenges he faced in his role while emphasizing that these could be mitigated only through mutual trust. In a conversation that he had with Mrs Luce in Rome on May 21, 1955, he stated that U.S. confidence in him would equate to confidence in his policies, asserting that he was “deserving of confidence as a Catholic and as a democrat”.<sup>36</sup> He voiced a clear intention of himself to be deeply involved in

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<sup>34</sup> Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957, Western Europe and Canada, Volume XXVII*, 79. *Memorandum from the Ambassador in Italy (Luce) to the Counselor of Embassy (Durbrow) and the Army Attaché (Miller)*, Rome, May 26, 1955.

<sup>35</sup> Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957, Western Europe and Canada, Volume XXVII*, 83. *Memorandum of a Conversation Between Foreign Minister Martino and the Ambassador in Italy (Luce)*, Rome, July 29, 1955.

<sup>36</sup> Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957, Western Europe and Canada, Volume XXVII*, 77. *Memorandum of a Conversation Between President Gronchi and the Ambassador in Italy (Luce)*, Rome, May 21, 1955.

international matters by frequently and informally exchanging views with foreign Chiefs of Missions. Nevertheless, he specified that such interactions would remain strictly within the boundaries of his presidential authority, demonstrating a commitment to both diplomacy and institutional property.

His joint meeting addressed at the United States Congress on February 29, 1956, further accentuated his desire to assert Italy's position in the broader global context. Gronchi's speech sought to draw American attention "to Italy's current position, its major problems and its assessment of current developments in international relations".<sup>37</sup> Within the context of the Cold War – a peaceful yet adversarial clash between two opposing ideological systems, Western democracy and Marxist-Leninist "people's democracy" – this rivalry progressively extended its reach. Gronchi observed that Soviet influence was increasingly pervasive across continents, particularly in North Africa and the Middle East. In his remarks, he argued that the USSR's strength lay in its appeal to the oppressed and marginalized classes, threatening the stability of the West.

According to the President, this expansion was not purely ideological. It was underpinned by a comprehensive political and economic system, fully harnessed by state power. The Soviets employed a wide range of tools to extend their influence, including propaganda, radio, literature, and also an arsenal – nuclear weapons included – to consolidate their global position. This multifaceted strategy of expansion, blending ideology with tangible power, posed a challenge to the Western bloc. In response, the West was called to safeguard its civilization, by fostering democratic systems increasingly attentive to achieving a vital balance between state authority and individual freedom. It was imperative to strengthen solidarity among countries sharing these ideals and were committed to realizing common goals. This spirit of unit was first established with the formation of the Atlantic Pact and continued to bind Western nations.

Nevertheless, President Gronchi emphasized that the existing framework of the Atlantic Pact was no longer fully adequate for the evolving realities of the time. While military solidarity, originally designed to address the fear of armed aggression, remained important, he argued that new forms of collaboration were needed to reduce the risk of war. This was particularly crucial in light of recent developments concerning the usage of nuclear weapons. In Gronchi's view, a collective defense force, however robust, was not a definitive solution; rather, it could only serve as a means to move beyond the precarious

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<sup>37</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Discorso del Presidente Gronchi ai membri del Congresso americano*, in busta 8, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Visita di Stato negli Stati Uniti (USA) e in Canada del Presidente e signora*, 26 febbraio-15 marzo 1956, 1956.

balance of power and establish a more enduring foundation for peace. To achieve this, Gronchi proposed better coordination among existing organizations such as the OEEC, the ECSC, the WEU, and the Council of Europe, alongside more frequent use of NATO's Atlantic Council in order to facilitate timely and fruitful exchanges among member states.

He placed significant emphasis on the implementation of Article 2 of the NATO Treaty, which aimed at giving the military pact a deeper character as a community of peoples. Gronchi also called for greater contributions from European nations and advocated for stronger recognition of Italy's international role. He stressed that such recognition should be pursued within the limits of Italy's capabilities and in adherence to its commitments. In other words, Italy called for its contributions to be acknowledged beyond its membership in the Atlantic Pact and the financial efforts it undertook, with U.S. support, to meet its obligations. Presidente Gronchi underlined that Italy's most significant post-war achievement lay in rebuilding its democratic institutions – an effort far more impactful than its role in strengthening NATO's military cooperation.

President Gronchi, while recognizing the valuable American assistance in Italy's reconstruction, pointed out that Italy had made significant progress. When looking back, it was not to indulge in satisfaction or pride over the achievements but to assess how much further there was to go, especially in addressing unemployment in the South. Italy, he explained, was not asking for sacrifices, but rather sought to present itself as a nation with strong moral integrity. He made it clear that the conventional image of Italy needed to be reconsidered, as it was mistakenly viewed through the lens of inherent poverty due to limited national resources and the inability of the government to enforce tax collection. The Italian President countered this perception, reiterating that Italy's natural resources were increasing, notably with the discovery of large methane reserves.

Additionally, oil was poised to become a considerable part of Italy's productive resources. He argued that Italy possessed the essential qualities for fostering organic economic development, aligning with the economic model proposed by Minister Vanoni. This vision included encouraging economic collaboration for mutual benefit. He expressed confidence in Italy's future not only owing to the capacity and determination of its entrepreneurs, technicians, and workers but also because of the country's steadfast commitment to democratic ideals. By highlighting Italy's growing resources, industrious spirit, and democratic values, Gronchi tried to reframe the nation's image and solidify its place as a reliable and morally sound partner in the international community.

The *Final Communiqué* of the Washington meeting issued on March 15, 1956, underscored the consensus between the two sides on the “necessity to strengthen the

Atlantic community by deepening and expanding solidarity among member countries, with the aim of fostering greater cooperation in both political and economic spheres”.<sup>38</sup> This enhanced collaboration was seen as a means to elevate the economy of the Western world while simultaneously supporting the development of less advanced nations. For Italy, the focus shifted from receiving aid to securing long-term loans and favorable terms for public investments. Such support was intended to encourage the Italian nation to create the necessary conditions for industrial growth, above all in the Southern part of the country, and stimulate both domestic and foreign private investment.

Following his visit to the United States, President Gronchi continued his North American tour with a trip to Canada. According to documentation produced by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on February 18, 1956, Ottawa’s inclination was to reconsider its overall defense strategy. On matters of political, economic, and social collaboration under Article 2 of the North Atlantic Treaty – previously examined in this study – the Canadian government appeared to share Italy’s desire to strengthen and enhance the efficiency of consultations among NATO member states. Yet, Canada’s approach to détente, exemplified by its Secretary of State for External Affairs, Lester B. Pearson, raised concerns in Washington. Pearson, criticized by the U.S. for his alleged “tendency to favor détente at the expense of security”, especially for his position on recognizing Communist China, embodied a divergence within the alliance that somehow paralleled Italy’s own struggles for greater autonomy in international relations.<sup>39</sup>

Despite his efforts to mend Italy’s relations with the United States, Gronchi’s reputation in U.S. circles remained overshadowed by his clear support for a shift toward the left. While he repeatedly reassured the American government of Italy’s loyalty to the Western alliance, his public statements on key international issues created tension. These included his endorsement of Communist China’s entry into the United Nations, his stance on the German question, which at times echoed Soviet calls for neutralization and his visible frustration with the Cold War restrictions imposed on European trade with nations belonging to the Communist bloc. A victim of both his outspoken nature and the American press’s tendency to sensationalize his comments due to either journalistic sensationalism

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<sup>38</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Comunicato finale di Washington – 15 Marzo 1956*, in busta 8, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Visita di Stato negli Stati Uniti (USA) e in Canada del Presidente e signora, 26 febbraio-15 marzo 1956*, 1956.

<sup>39</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Ministero degli Affari Esteri Politica Estera – 18 Febbraio 1956*, in busta 8, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Visita di Stato negli Stati Uniti (USA) e in Canada del Presidente e signora, 26 febbraio-15 marzo 1956*, 1956.

or political motives tied to Mrs Luce's influence, Gronchi struggled to eradicate Washington's concerns about his supposed neutralist leanings.

## **2.2 Navigating post-war Europe: diplomatic engagements in France and Germany**

As part of his foreign policy agenda to strengthen Italy's role within the Western alliance and promote European unity, President Giovanni Gronchi embarked on two main diplomatic missions in 1956, to France (April 25-28) and the Federal Republic of Germany (6-9 December). The visit to France addressed key issues, including the situation in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, the Atlantic cooperation – the implementation of Article 2 of the NATO Treaty and the need for greater political cohesion within the Alliance – disarmament challenges, progress on European integration, and the pressing questions of German reunification and Western relations with the Soviet bloc. These themes were detailed in a comprehensive report prepared by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, outlining the topics to be discussed during the institutional visit to Paris.<sup>40</sup>

On the eve of this institutional visit by President Gronchi and Foreign Minister Martino, the same Ministry documented that, following the Second World War, at a meeting held in Santa Margherita (in Liguria region) from February 12 to 14, 1951, France and Italy's shared intention to deepen their collaboration and periodically coordinate their policies within the European and global frameworks was reinforced. The agreements reached during this meeting laid the groundwork for the normalization of their bilateral relations, marked by mutual understanding and solidarity. Notable French support was evident in fields such as Italy's pursuit of a revision of the 1947 Peace Treaty – which had imposed significant territorial and political limitations on Italy –, and the Trieste question – where the French position aligned with Italy's one and was supported by Prime Minister René Plevén – and, last but not least, Italy's bid for admission to the United Nations.

By 1956, the bilateral relationship between Italy and France remained strong, characterized by an overall climate of shared priorities and reciprocal regard. This was reflected also in President Giovanni Gronchi's declarations upon his arrival at the Élysée Palace on April 25, 1956, where he addressed French President René Coty. Gronchi reiterated the enduring partnership between the two nations and framed it within the broader context of European and transatlantic solidarity. He highlighted the historical crossroads faced by the two countries in the post-war European order and articulated the

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<sup>40</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Ministero degli Affari Esteri – Argomenti da trattare a Parigi nel corso della visita di S.E. il Presidente della Repubblica*, in busta 9, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Visita in Francia, 25-28 aprile 1956. Visita nella Repubblica Federale di Germania del Presidente e signora, 6-9 dicembre 1956*, 1956.

shared belief in the need for deeper European integration as a prerequisite for a stronger Atlantic Alliance. It was “not possible to build a robust Atlantic community without first achieving some degree of European solidarity”. What’s more, “greater and more effective solidarity among the peoples of Western Europe would have helped to resolve the divisions that had grown perilous within the Atlantic Alliance itself”.<sup>41</sup>

The following day, at the Quai d’Orsay luncheon, President Gronchi opened his speech by emphasizing that Italy and France shared a common destiny – “the destiny of their civilization” – rooted in their shared Western heritage.<sup>42</sup> In his remarks, he stated the community of interests between the two nations in NATO, the United Nations as well as various European organizations. Gronchi called attention to their joint commitment to maintaining peace in the Mediterranean area, from Morocco to the Middle East, especially in light of the Algerian War of Independence which had started in 1954 as a consequence of decolonization. He also acknowledged the common understanding between Italy and France on resolving the pressing issues surrounding Germany’s future, reaffirming their solidarity in addressing key challenges of the time. Through this discourse, the Italian President reinforced the importance of Franco-Italian cooperation as a cornerstone of European stability and, more broadly, of international diplomacy.

The French mission undoubtedly showcased Italy’s ambitions to assume a leading role in shaping European and Mediterranean affairs, a goal that remained central to Gronchi’s subsequent visit to the Federal Republic of Germany eight months later. Regarding the latter, the issue of German reunification warrants particular attention as it represented a crucial area for pursuing Italy’s broader “revisionist aspirations” within the Western alliance.<sup>43</sup> President Gronchi understood that Italy’s standing in the European power hierarchy hinged significantly on how the German question was addressed. His perspective was shaped by the Italian government’s traditional approach, which, until the *Degasperian* period (roughly 1953), had adhered to two key principles. First and foremost, Italy consistently aligned with and supported the Bonn government while adopting the Western bloc’s stance on German reunification.

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<sup>41</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Risposta del Presidente Gronchi all’indirizzo del Presidente della Repubblica Francese Palazzo dell’Eliseo – 25 Aprile 1956*, in busta 9, *Viaggi all’estero del Presidente. Visita in Francia, 25-28 aprile 1956. Visita nella Repubblica Federale di Germania del Presidente e signora, 6-9 dicembre 1956*, 1956.

<sup>42</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Discorso che sarà pronunciato in occasione del pranzo del Quai d’Orsay il 26 Aprile 1956*, in busta 9, *Viaggi all’estero del Presidente. Visita in Francia, 25-28 aprile 1956. Visita nella Repubblica Federale di Germania del Presidente e signora, 6-9 dicembre 1956*, 1956.

<sup>43</sup> Antonio Varsori and Federico Mazzei, *Giovanni Gronchi e la politica estera italiana (1955-1962)*, pp. 107-19.

Second, Italy advocated for co-participation in major decisions, insisting that, despite the German question being primarily managed by the United States, France, and Great Britain, it should have been treated as a collective concern of the Atlantic Alliance. It opposed the formation of smaller, exclusive working groups on the matter, emphasizing that decisions had to be made collaboratively at the alliance level. However, the landscape shifted in late 1954 following the end of the Allied occupation in West Germany, the restoration of its sovereignty, and its inclusion in NATO's integrated defense structure. Such developments elevated the Federal Republic of Germany from a passive partner to an active participant in shaping Western policies on reunification. This change, consequently, conflicted with Italy's position, as Bonn now preferred to limit discussions on the German question to a four-party group comprising the United States, France, Great Britain, and West Germany itself.

As a result, this development excluded Italy and risked undermining its influence within the alliance. Italy viewed it as a threat to its standing and feared that the establishment of such a core group could solidify a hierarchical decision-making structure within NATO, relegating it to a secondary role. As soon as Western powers decided to reopen discussions with the Soviet Union during the July 1955 Geneva Summit, the formation of a quadripartite group turned into a more concrete reality. In response, Italian officials launched an intense diplomatic campaign to emphasize that decisions on the German question should have remained collegial and inclusive within the Atlantic Council only. While Italy resisted the centralization of decision-making on German reunification, it also sought ways to assert its relevance in the alliance.

The Geneva Summit was seen as an opportunity for Italy to contribute to East-West détente while breaking away from the rigid orthodoxy of Atlantic policy. This intent was reflected in President Gronchi's decision, on November 14, 1955, to convene a meeting with ambassadors in Italy of the major centers of power for the purpose of outlining the Italian nation's strategy on critical issues such as German reunification, European security, disarmament, and East-West relations. During Gronchi's state visit to Bonn in December 1956, however, he avoided directly addressing the German question. Instead, he proposed the creation of a consortium of Western nations to promote development in the Middle East, with an invitation for Soviet bloc countries to join. This initiative well illustrated Gronchi's efforts to broaden Italy's diplomatic influence and place the nation as a bridge between competing blocs, even as the German question remained a central but still unresolved challenge in Italy's foreign policy.

The four-day official visit of the Italian president to the Federal Republic of Germany, accompanied by his spouse Carla and Foreign Minister Gaetano Martino, underlined Italy's strategic interest in aligning with West Germany on key international issues, reinforcing Rome's ambition to play a more proactive role in shaping European and global affairs. Such a visit followed the events of the Suez Crisis and the Hungarian Uprising, two geopolitical critical situations that had shaken Western unity and raised concerns over the broader implications of Soviet influence and Western decision-making. Against this backdrop, President Gronchi sought to reinforce Italy's standing as a key interlocutor in European security matters and advocate for a recalibration of transatlantic relations that better reflected European interests.

A crucial objective of this diplomatic mission to West Germany was to coordinate Italian and German efforts to secure greater U.S. engagement in the Middle East, a region which both nations viewed as vital for European security. During his discussions with Chancellor Konrad Adenauer on December 6, Gronchi uncharacteristically adopted a Cold War rhetoric, by emphasizing the renewed Soviet threat to Europe through the Mediterranean. This shift in tone was likely a deliberate effort to establish greater rapport with Adenauer, a staunch anti-Soviet leader, and to highlight Italy's southern geopolitical concerns as equally pressing as those of Central Europe. Both leaders swiftly reached a consensus on several primary goals, among which:

1. The consolidation of NATO and the necessity of convincing the United States that its influence in Asia was contingent upon first strengthening Europe;
2. The intensification and improvement of allied consultations, taking into account the lack of coordination during the Suez Crisis;
3. The demonstration of a more united Europe in order to gain greater U.S. support, potentially by transforming the *Western European Union (WEU) Assembly* – the intergovernmental military alliance formed in 1948 under the Brussels Treaty – into the first nucleus of a genuine European Parliament;
4. The promotion of a Euro-American consortium for economic assistance to Arab countries, with a special role for non-colonial powers such as Italy and Germany. This initiative included the idea of renewing the Aswan Dam financing offer in a joint WEU-U.S. effort, implicitly aiming at increasing American economic support for Europe through triangular development strategies.

The emphasis on European unity and coordination with Germany reflected Gronchi's broader vision for Italy's foreign policy – one that attempted to assert Italy's role as a mediator between East and West while simultaneously bolstering European influence in

transatlantic affairs. The luncheon hosted by German Federal President Theodor Heuss on December 6, 1956, further reinforced these themes. Heuss, referencing the Hungarian Uprising of October-November 1956, likened Hungary's fight for freedom to Italy's Risorgimento, drawing parallels between the Hungarian Lajos Kossuth and the Italian Giuseppe Garibaldi. His speech condemned the use of force to suppress the self-determination of nations and expressed hope for the possibility of "restoring confidence that the legal forms of international agreements should be the basis of a supra-state order of peace and prosperity" in those countries menaced by Soviet influence.<sup>44</sup>

President Gronchi, in his response, echoed Heuss's concerns and emphasized the ideological confrontation between democratic and totalitarian systems. He recalled that during his recent visit to the United States, he had already warned the American Congress of the stark and intensifying clash between two opposing worldviews – not merely political or economic systems, but fundamentally different moral and philosophical approaches to governance. He followed up the words pronounced by the German President, by linking the Hungarian events with the broader Middle Eastern crisis, portraying them as symptoms of the same geopolitical struggle. He argued that Italy and Germany, having experienced the consequences of past political miscalculations, "had no doubts about the superiority of the conception and of the democratic system" and, for this reason, bore a special responsibility to work together for the cause of freedom, progress, and peace.<sup>45</sup>

In other words, Gronchi's vision extended beyond immediate crises, encompassing a long-term aspiration for European unity and democratic stability. He underscored that Italy and Germany, by virtue of their shared historical experiences and commitment to democracy, were in a unique position to lead Europe toward economic prosperity and political integration. In this context, he suggested that Germany's path to reunification and peaceful international engagement could only be secured through a united Europe, bound together by mutual interests and values. Through this official visit, Gronchi not only tried to improve bilateral relations with West Germany but also advanced Italy's position as an active participant in contributing to the development of European and Atlantic policy.

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<sup>44</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Bonn 6 Dicembre 1956 – Discorso del Presidente Theodor Heuss al pranzo d'onore al "Ridotto" di Bad Godesberg*, in busta 9, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Visita in Francia, 25-28 aprile 1956. Visita nella Repubblica Federale di Germania del Presidente e signora, 6-9 dicembre 1956*, 1956.

<sup>45</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Testo della risposta del Presidente Gronchi al Presidente Heuss*, in busta 9, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Visita in Francia, 25-28 aprile 1956. Visita nella Repubblica Federale di Germania del Presidente e signora, 6-9 dicembre 1956*, 1956.

### 2.3 A bold step toward détente: the intricacies of Gronchi's trip to the Soviet Union

It was becoming increasingly evident how Giovanni Gronchi, during his term as President of the Italian Republic, became not only the determinate proponent of the *opening to the Left* but also an undeniable advocate of a foreign policy of increased attention and sympathy toward the East. His historic visit to the Soviet Union stands as the *par excellence* example of this approach, reflecting a broader trend of détente between the Western and Eastern blocs that had begun to take shape in 1954-1955. This process, already introduced in the initial sections of this thesis as *distensione*, had profound implications not only for international relations as well as for Italy's internal political dynamics. The changing geopolitical landscape influenced the balance of power in Rome, shaped governmental majorities, and introduced new diplomatic possibilities. Within this evolving framework, Italy sought to redefine its engagement with Moscow while steering through the interplay between Cold War blocs and domestic ideological divides.

The Italian approach to this gradual shift in international relations was conditioned by several critical considerations. The government in Rome needed to primarily assess the broader objectives of the Kremlin and determine whether a relaxation of tensions would ultimately serve Italy's strategic interests. A key concern was the impact of improved relations with Moscow on the Italian Communist Party (PCI), specifically in terms of its political legitimacy and influence within national politics. The true challenge lay in striking a balance between fostering dialogue with the Soviet Union and maintaining firm adherence to Italy's Western commitments – both in its European integration hitherto efforts and its Atlanticist orientations. Such priorities set clear boundaries within which Gronchi and his administration had to operate, ensuring that any overtures toward Moscow remained steadily within the parameters of Italy's established alliances.

As has been already discussed, the political climate between East and West began to relax significantly after 1955, a year that marked a crucial shift for Italy and, more generally, in the Cold War dynamics. With the inclusion of the Federal Republic of Germany into NATO and the Western European Union (WEU), and the simultaneous formation of the Warsaw Pact, both at the beginning of May 1955, the nature of the bilateral confrontation between the two blocs was altered. This development opened the door for renewed discussions on the Germany question and the broader continental balances, with the issue of German reunification remaining the centerpiece of debates. As it has been observed in the previous paragraph, President Gronchi himself, during his visit to Germany in late 1956, had actively engaged in this discourse, furthering the Italian position in the context of the shifting geopolitical landscape.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union, undergoing its process of de-Stalinization, began advocating for a policy of “peaceful coexistence” with the West. On May 27, 1958, Moscow presented a draft multilateral non-aggression treaty to all Atlantic powers, proposing an agreement between the Warsaw Pact and NATO. This initiative coincided with the formation of Amintore Fanfani’s second government in July 1958, following the Christian Democrats’ electoral success on May 25, which implied the end of the second Italian legislature. In that election, the DC gained nearly 1.7 million more votes in the Chamber of Deputies, increasing its share from 40.1% to 42.3%.<sup>46</sup> In this context, the Soviet proposal was placed on the diplomatic agenda amidst ongoing discussions between Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and the ambassadors of the United States, Britain, and France. Further reinforcing this strategy, on July 15, the Soviets introduced also a “Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation among European Countries”, a ten-year pact designed to strengthen ties between Eastern and Western Europe.<sup>47</sup>

In response, the Italian Foreign Ministry made it clear that any inquiries from the Soviet ambassador in Rome, Semion Pavlovic Kozyrev, would be carefully reviewed in consultation with Italy’s Atlantic partners before any official response was given, signaling Italy’s commitment to its Western alliances in the face of Soviet overtures. Yet, Fanfani, upon assuming leadership of both the Foreign Ministry and the Presidency of the Council of Ministers – while also retaining his role as political secretary of the Christian Democracy Party (DC), a position he had held since 1954 – embarked on a profound renewal of Italy’s diplomatic apparatus. This restructuring included replacing key diplomatic personnel, most notably the Italian ambassador in Moscow, in what appeared to be a strategic effort to recalibrate Italy’s bilateral relations with the Soviet Union. Historians have referred to this extensive diplomatic shake-up as the “Mau-Mau revolt”, a term used sarcastically to put emphasis on the scale of the turnover, drawing a parallel with the Kenyan guerrilla movement led by Jomo Kenyatta against British colonial rule from 1952 to 1960.<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, at the Italian Foreign Ministry, Fanfani assembled a tightly knit task force composed of trusted individuals, thus reinforcing his control over Italy’s foreign policy direction. This maneuver well underscored his determination to assert a more dynamic and

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<sup>46</sup> Evelina Martelli, *L'altro atlantismo. Fanfani e la politica estera italiana 1958-1963*, p. 26

<sup>47</sup> Bruna Bagnato, *Prove di Ostpolitik: politica ed economia nella strategia italiana verso l'Unione Sovietica (1958-1963)* (Firenze: Olschki, 2003), pp. 9-25.

<sup>48</sup> Bruna Bagnato, ed., *I diari di Luca Pietromarchi, ambasciatore italiano a Mosca (1958-1961)* (Firenze: Olschki, 2002), p. VIII.

potentially independent Italian approach to international affairs while ensuring that any shifts remained within the broader framework of Italy's Atlantic commitments. In a move that may have signaled a shift in Italy's approach toward the Soviet Union, the government replaced Mario Di Stefano, who had served as Italy's ambassador to Moscow since 1951, with Luca Pietromarchi, the former ambassador to Ankara since 1950. While this appointment could be interpreted as part of a broader reassessment of bilateral relations, it was also influenced by Pietromarchi's persistent efforts to secure the post.

He had actively lobbied both Giuseppe Pella, Fanfani's predecessor at the Foreign Ministry, and President Giovanni Gronchi, advocating for his transfer to Moscow. In late September 1958, he finally arrived in the Soviet capital, marking the final chapter of a distinguished diplomatic career which, however, had also been affected by the post-war purges that targeted officials within the ministry, Pietromarchi included. Born into a Roman family with close ties to Vatican circles, he had entered the diplomatic service in the aftermath of the March on Rome, and his rise through the ministry's ranks had taken place during the Fascist era. Now, as Italy's new ambassador to Moscow, he sought to revitalize stagnant bilateral relations and establish a more constructive dialogue with the Soviet Union. His ultimate goal was to improve diplomatic ties as a prerequisite for elevating Italy's status within both the European and Atlantic spheres.

Yet, despite his ambitions, the path ahead was long and fraught with challenges that would make any substantial progress difficult to achieve. As a matter of fact, by the summer of 1958, when the Fanfani government took office and decided to appoint a new ambassador to Moscow, Italian-Soviet relations remained heavily influenced by the lingering effects of World War II. In particular, two unresolved issues continued to strain diplomatic ties: war reparations and the fate of Italian prisoners of war still held in the Soviet Union. The outgoing ambassador, Mario Di Stefano, had been unable to persuade the Moscow government to adopt a more accommodating stance on these matters, which, given the prevailing political conditions, seemed destined to remain unresolved for the foreseeable future. In addition to that, bilateral relations were still burdened by the events that had abruptly halted the early phase of *distensione*, or *détente*.

The 1956 Hungarian Uprising was a major turning point, dealing with what Italian Foreign Minister Giuseppe Pella, in a note dated July 23, 1952, had described as a "serious setback" to the gradual improvement of bilateral relations.<sup>49</sup> In the wake of alike events,

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<sup>49</sup> Pietro Nenni, *I diari di Pietro Nenni, 1943-1971*, a cura di Giuliana Nenni e Domenico Zucaro, 3 voll. (Milano: SugarCo Edizioni, 1982), p. 538.

things started to deteriorate in August 1957, when the Moscow government announced the success of its first intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests. On October 4, 1957, the launch of the first artificial satellite, Sputnik, sent shockwaves through the Western world: the Soviet Union's scientific and politico-military superiority seemed undeniable, and the strategic balance between the two superpowers appeared dangerously unsettled. In an effort to restore a sense of security and trust within the Atlantic Alliance, the U.S. government officially proposed, at the Atlantic Council meeting in Paris (December 16-19, 1957), the deployment of Jupiter and Thor missiles in European territories. The proposal was positively evaluated by Italy, the United Kingdom, and Turkey.

Consequently, the Italian government decided to reaffirm its loyalty to the Atlantic alliance and its special relationship with the United States by agreeing to station IRBMs (*Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles*) in the Apulia region. Such a move not only enhanced Italy's contribution to collective defense but also granted the country a near-nuclear "status" within the alliance.<sup>50</sup> The installation of American missiles on Italian soil became a central issue in Italian-Soviet relations. At this point, the Soviets reiterated their proposals for a non-aggression pact in a bilateral format, issuing a public statement just before the Italian general elections in 1958. Nevertheless, this initiative was perceived as an electoral maneuver, aimed at interfering in Italy's internal affairs. Fanfani maintained that the USSR had to choose between engaging with the Italian government or the Italian Communist Party. Only by prioritizing official relations and ceasing interference in Italy's internal affairs could cordial state-to-state relations be established.

In addition to this, the Middle Eastern crisis further complicated the situation. Following the coup led by General Abd al-Karim Qasim in Iraq in July 1958, which brought a group of officers with suspected Soviet sympathies to power, the United States, in line with the containment of the *Eisenhower Doctrine*, decided to militarily intervene in the region. They were joined by the United Kingdom to support the governments of Jordan and Lebanon, which, according to them, were vulnerable to the communist tide sweeping across the area. At this juncture, to aid in this intervention, Italy made a significant contribution, granting the American and British forces to access to its military bases for the deployment of troops to the crisis zones in those countries.

Last but not least, the issue of war reparations, as outlined in the Italian Peace Treaty of February, still remained unresolved. According to the treaty, Italy was obligated

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<sup>50</sup> Leopoldo Nuti, *La sfida nucleare: La politica estera italiana e le armi atomiche 1945-1991* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2007), p. 171.

to pay the USSR 100 million dollars, but Fanfani argued that, despite the USSR losing approximately 10 million men during the war with no trace of them remaining, the Soviets were still required to provide evidence that their search for the missing individuals had yielded no results. Ambassador Pietromarchi clearly understood these complexities characterizing Italy-USSR relations; he believed that if Italy wanted to participate in high-level discussions – such as the Soviet initiative for a Middle Eastern summit – it needed to take conciliatory steps toward Moscow. Therefore, on the eve of his departure, he met with President Gronchi, with whom he shared both a personal friendship and a nearly identical perspective on international affairs and Italy's role within them.

Giovanni Gronchi thought that the Soviet Union had a vested interest in clarifying its real objectives to the Italian government. In his view, only through full transparency from Moscow could Italy contribute meaningfully to global stability. This perspective mirrored Ambassador Pietromarchi's diplomatic approach as well; the latter saw the need for easing tensions with the USSR to prevent Italy's exclusion from critical global discussions, such as the above-mentioned Middle East summit. President Gronchi's broader strategic aim was to integrate Italy into high-level diplomatic negotiations and establish it as a bridge between opposing blocs. He envisioned a united Europe, free from colonial ambitions and hegemonic aspirations, as a stabilizing force in global politics. This European "third force", in his opinion, could gradually gain autonomy from American influence. To further this neo-Atlanticist vision of himself, he instructed Pietromarchi to subtly introduce these ideas in his conversations with Soviet officials, promoting dialogue rather than outright opposition to Moscow.<sup>51</sup>

However, Gronchi's approach contrasted sharply with that of Minister Amintore Fanfani, who urged extreme caution in dealings with the USSR. Despite their differing views, both agreed on one common thing: reinvigorating economic ties with the Soviet Union. This economic avenue, particularly through increased bilateral trade, represented a shared ground between Rome's diverging diplomatic strategies. In this sense, economic cooperation became a practical means of engagement between Italy and the Soviet Union, especially through the involvement of the figure of Enrico Mattei, the influential head of the Italian State Oil Corporation, ENI. Mattei shared with Ambassador Pietromarchi insights from a delegation of Italian technical experts who had visited Soviet industrial sites. The experts concluded that in some areas, Soviet technology had even surpassed its

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<sup>51</sup> Bruna Bagnato, *Prove di Ostpolitik: politica ed economia nella strategia italiana verso l'Unione Sovietica (1958-1963)*, p. 84.

American counterparts, challenging Western perceptions of Soviet industrial capabilities. This fundamental aspect is going to be addressed in the third chapter of this thesis.

As of September 28, 1958, the day of his arrival as Italian Ambassador to Moscow, Luca Pietromarchi worked closely also with USSR Ambassador Kozyrev, in order to explore opportunities for diplomatic breakthroughs. Both diplomats acknowledged that resolving lingering tensions, such as the issue of war reparations, could mark the beginning of a new phase in bilateral relations. In this way, a potential turning point emerged with the idea of an official visit by President Gronchi to the Soviet Union. Kozyrev revealed that Gronchi had personally expressed his willingness to visit Moscow, provided he received an official invitation. Pietromarchi warned Gronchi that such a visit could trigger internal disputes between Palazzo Chigi and Quirinale as well as provoke strong reactions with NATO. Apart from that, Gronchi was well-determined to proceed, seeing the trip as a historic diplomatic move; he insisted that his visit to Moscow take place before Khrushchev's scheduled trip to Paris, ensuring that Italy played a pioneering role in the renewed dialogue between East and West occurring at that time.

This trip would have been the first-ever state visit of an Italian president to the USSR, thus marking a groundbreaking event in the history of Italian foreign policy. It would have not been just a diplomatic gesture, but a reflection of Gronchi's broader vision for Italy's intermediary role in the international arena, a chance to distance itself from a purely pro-Western alignment and open avenues for dialogue with the Soviets. In this context, the invitation from Moscow turned out to be a noticeable step forward. On November 12, 1959, the President of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, Kliment Voroshilov, formally invited President Giovanni Gronchi and his spouse to Moscow, emphasizing the need for the "strengthening of the good relations between the Soviet Union and the Italian Republic".<sup>52</sup> Initially scheduled for January 1960, the visit was eventually postponed owing to Gronchi allegedly falling ill with the flu.

A telegram from the Quirinale to the Italian Embassy in Moscow stated that, given his commitment to making the trip as soon as possible, Gronchi proposed rescheduling it between February 1-7 or February 2-8.<sup>53</sup> Following discussions with Soviet authorities, the visit was, finally, confirmed for February 6-11, fitting between Voroshilov's return

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<sup>52</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Invito a compiere il viaggio in URSS da parte del Pres. Del Presidium del Soviet Supremo dell'URSS – 12 novembre 1959*, in busta 15, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Visita in URSS (Unione Sovietica) del Presidente e signora, 5-11 febbraio 1960*, 1958-1960.

<sup>53</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Telegramma in partenza n. 244 – Roma, il 6.01.60*, in busta 15, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Visita in URSS (Unione Sovietica) del Presidente e signora, 5-11 febbraio 1960*, 1958-1960.

from India and Khrushchev's departure for Paris. As the visit approached, logistical and technical arrangements were finalized, including the installation of a teleprinter linking the Quirinale and the Italian Embassy in Moscow. Meanwhile, journalists, who had initially arrived in January but left after the postponement, had to return to the Soviet capital. Amid growing enthusiasm, bilateral sports relations also flourished, with Italy inviting Soviet participation in various competitions, such as tennis, athletics, and gymnastics.

Notwithstanding an outbreak of smallpox in Moscow in late January, preparations continued unabated. Alongside diplomatic arrangements, Italian Ambassador Luca Pietromarchi engaged in negotiations with Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandrovich Zorin regarding Italy's war reparations. The Soviets proposed settling this pending issue by constructing a new embassy in Rome, allowing them to sell their existing property on Via Gaeta and use the proceeds as compensation. However, Rome firmly rejected the proposal, maintaining that "the issue of Italian reparations was settled through the liquidation of assets belonging to Italian nationals in socialist countries".<sup>54</sup> At this point, Zorin, dissatisfied, indicated he would report the matter to his government, and there was concern that the Soviet leadership might raise such an issue during Gronchi's visit.

Upon his arrival at the airport of Moscow on Saturday, February 6, 1960, at 2:00 PM, President Gronchi delivered a speech in which he expressed his "disappointment" for having had to postpone his mission a month earlier due to his illness. Then, he emphasized that his visit was the first in the past 50 years that an Italian head of state had made to the country and did not hesitate to express his enthusiasm for the opportunity to visit not only Moscow but also Leningrad, along with his "regret" for the "limited time available to him due to other incoming commitments", which forced him to limit his stay there.<sup>55</sup> Over lunch, the Soviet premier invited the Italian president to spend the following day, Sunday, February 7 – the eve of the official talks – at his dacha near Moscow, accompanied by their Foreign Ministers Andrei Gromyko and Giuseppe Pella.

The latter had recently succeeded Amintore Fanfani, who had served as head of government from July 1958 to January 1959, before his administration collapsed due to a lack of parliamentary confidence and was replaced by Antonio Segni. In any case, at the end of the meal, the Soviet leader raised a toast to his guests, affirming that while the

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<sup>54</sup> Bruna Bagnato, *Prove di Ostpolitik: politica ed economia nella strategia italiana verso l'Unione Sovietica (1958-1963)*, pp. 221-234.

<sup>55</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Discorso pronunciato sabato 6 febbraio alle ore 14 all'arrivo all'aeroporto di Mosca*, in busta 15, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Visita in URSS (Unione Sovietica) del Presidente e signora, 5-11 febbraio 1960, 1958-1960*.

USSR sought friendship with all nations, it placed particular importance on its relationship with Italy. After concluding the luncheon in the late afternoon, the Italian delegation retired to prepare for the evening. The next day, February 8, the official talks formally commenced. The schedule included a morning session, followed by a transfer to the Italian Embassy for an official luncheon in honor of Voroshilov. Later that evening, a grand reception was held, attended by approximately 1.000 guests.

During the morning session, the discussion centered on the German question and Berlin. Khrushchev argued that German reunification was unrealistic and proposed recognizing the status quo, with a possible confederal agreement between the two German states. He also stated that West Berlin belonged to East Germany and that maintaining the Western occupation status was equivalent to prolonging a state of war. The USSR was willing to accept a compromise based on four main points: a reduction of occupation troops, a ban on nuclear weapons, an end to radio propaganda, and the transformation of West Berlin into a free city. But Gronchi strongly opposed this, emphasizing the need for Berlin's population to decide their own fate. Khrushchev warned that if the Soviet proposal was rejected, the USSR would proceed with signing a peace treaty with East Germany; Gronchi, on his side, responded by reiterating his stance and asserting that the German question could only be resolved in the broader context of détente.

After these morning talks, the official program continued at the Italian Embassy. During lunch, Gronchi delivered a speech in which he expressed admiration for the Soviet people's "confidence in the future", by giving a brief overview of what he had observed so far, highlighting progress in scientific and technological achievements, as well as social and civil advancements aimed at improving the quality of life for all Soviet citizens.<sup>56</sup> However, during the reception in honor of President Voroshilov which followed, Khrushchev gave a speech that turned into a glorification of the communist regime. He asserted that "communists were achieving what had once been only a dream", claiming that in just forty-two years, the USSR had become "the world's leading country in science and culture". He also pointed out the Soviet flag on the Moon as proof of this progress.<sup>57</sup> His unexpected outburst not only embarrassed the Italian delegation visiting the USSR but also left the entire audience surprised and questioning his motives. According to what

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<sup>56</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Discorso pronunciato lunedì 8 febbraio alle ore 13:30 alla colazione nell'Ambasciata d'Italia*, in busta 15, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Visita in URSS (Unione Sovietica) del Presidente e signora, 5-11 febbraio 1960*, 1958-1960.

<sup>57</sup> Bruna Bagnato, *Prove di Ostpolitik: politica ed economia nella strategia italiana verso l'Unione Sovietica (1958-1963)*, p. 243.

Gronchi said to the journalists in a press conference which took place in a room at the embassy, Khrushchev's sharp speech was a direct reaction to the firm stance he had taken earlier that morning during their discussions about the future of Germany and Berlin.

On February 9, the second and final day of talks unfolded. The discussions covered topics such as disarmament, the meaning of peaceful coexistence – particularly in relation to the balance between détente and ideological confrontation – aid policies for developing countries, and the development of bilateral relations. During an exchange of views on disarmament, which had been briefly touched upon the previous day but not fully explored, Gronchi underscored in his speech at a Kremlin reception that disarmament was the “problem of all problems” He stressed that Italy was willing to provide “all necessary guarantees and requirements” to support the process.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, this also implied that the Soviet Union should take concrete steps in the matter.

Khrushchev, in turn, pointed out that any decision on disarmament would be meaningless and unworkable without the agreement of Communist China. He insisted that China's significance could not be ignored and that it deserved a place in the United Nations, given that it had the world's largest population. When the discussions shifted to a shared policy towards developing countries – an issue particularly important to Gronchi – Khrushchev elaborated on the Soviet approach. He explained that the USSR provided real assistance through long-term, low-interest loans, which enabled these nations to develop their economies and achieve independence. During this discussion, Khrushchev criticized Western exploitation of natural resources, using the oil industry as an example. In response, Gronchi highlighted Italy's distinct petroleum policy, which through a *25% royalty system* – under the aegis of Enrico Mattei, something that will be discussed more in detail later –, differed significantly from that of other European states.

He argued that Italy's approach, led by Enrico Mattei, set an example that other nations would eventually follow. This allowed Gronchi to present Italy's oil policy as a clear indication of its commitment to fostering a cooperative and equitable approach to resource management, rather than adhering to the colonialist mindset which had already characterized the past. In any case, the day concluded with the signing of a cultural agreement by Zhukov, Chairman of the State Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries at the USSR Council of Ministers, and Pella, which was made up of 16 articles outlining the “principles of cooperation between Italy and the Soviet Union in

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<sup>58</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Discorso pronunciato martedì 9 febbraio alle ore 18:30 al ricevimento offerto al Cremlino dal Presidium del Soviet Supremo*, in busta 15, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Visita in URSS (Unione Sovietica) del Presidente e signora, 5-11 febbraio 1960*, 1958-1960.

culture, arts, science, technology, and sports”. It included provisions for exchanges of professors, teachers, students, writers, actors, and journalists, as well as collaborations between cultural and research institutions. The agreement also promoted tourism, the exchange of books and periodicals, various cultural events, and film exchanges.<sup>59</sup>

On the evening of February 9, the Italian delegation departed Moscow for Leningrad, arriving there on the morning of February 10. Their visit to the historic city of Saint Petersburg was brief, and by 10:30 PM, Gronchi was already en route back to Moscow. The following afternoon, he boarded a flight to Italy, with his final stop in the Soviet capital serving as little more than a technical layover. Notably, Khrushchev did not attend the departure of the Italian presidential delegation from Moscow. Finally, on the evening of February 11, Gronchi and his entourage arrived in Rome, marking the conclusion of the visit to the USSR. Upon landing at Ciampino Airport, the President of the Republic made a brief statement in which he defended the usefulness of his visit and took a decisive stance regarding the media controversy that had erupted in Italy concerning the diplomatic incident at the Italian embassy reception on February 8.

He affirmed that the trip had been worthwhile, as it had achieved the primary objective of the “cautious and prudent expectations” set beforehand – namely, to assess the real possibility of fostering the climate of détente that all the world’s nations hoped for.<sup>60</sup> According to a draft of the Italian-Soviet *Final Communiqué* at the conclusion of the visit, overall, the trip had taken place in a general atmosphere of cordiality and mutual understanding. It led to a broad exchange of views on the international situation and the shared intent to “safeguard peace through security and the economic and social progress of individual nations”, with positive effects on improving the status of bilateral relations. There was also the prospect of increasing opportunities for improvement in other areas, such as culture, trade, and tourism.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Ministero degli Affari Esteri – Accordo culturale tra la Repubblica Italiana e l'Unione delle Repubbliche Socialiste Sovietiche.*, in busta 15, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Visita in URSS (Unione Sovietica) del Presidente e signora, 5-11 febbraio 1960, 1958-1960.*

<sup>60</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Dichiarazioni del Signor Presidente all'Aeroporto di Ciampino fatte l'11 febbraio 1960 al rientro dal viaggio in U.R.S.S.*, in busta 15, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Visita in URSS (Unione Sovietica) del Presidente e signora, 5-11 febbraio 1960, 1958-1960.*

<sup>61</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Progetto di comunicato congiunto italo-sovietico a conclusione della visita del Presidente Gronchi in U.R.S.S.*, in busta 15, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Visita in URSS (Unione Sovietica) del Presidente e signora, 5-11 febbraio 1960, 1958-1960.*

## 2.4 Italy's positioning in the Middle East: Gronchi's strategic trip to Iran

It was, actually the trip organized in Iran between September 7-12, 1957, that had set the stage for the visit to the Soviet Union, symbolizing the evolving foreign policy direction attributed to President Giovanni Gronchi through the presidential diplomacy that he carried out during his seven-year mandate at the Quirinale. His journey to Tehran, though often overshadowed by his later trip to Moscow, was a crucial step in his broader neo-Atlanticist strategy of asserting Italy's role as a proactive international actor. By engaging in Iran – a key regional player balancing between Western alliances and national sovereignty aspirations – Gronchi sought to reinforce Italy's presence in the Middle East, leveraging economic diplomacy as a tool to secure a more strategic partnership. This visit served, as a matter of fact, as a sort of platform for advancing bilateral cooperation in multiple sectors, from energy to trade, and cultural exchanges.

In relations with Italy, Iran had always maintained friendly ties; it did not declare war during WWII, and diplomatic relations were restored as soon as possible. A commercial treaty was signed in 1955 and a major development was the recent agreement with ENI for oil concessions, signaling Italy's growing role in Iran's energy sector – topics which be better explored in the next paragraphs. According to a documentation prepared by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Iran's foreign policy was shaped by its determination to “preserve its national identity and safeguard its independence”.<sup>62</sup> Yet, the country was tackling both external and internal challenges from Soviet influence in the region. Unlike Turkey and Pakistan, it had a significant communist presence, and its political landscape was affected by the lack of a strong middle class, which played a role in the nationalist crisis during Prime Minister Mossadeq's tenure.

After the 1953 coup led by General Zahedi with the Shah's approval which caused the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq, Iran reoriented itself toward the Western bloc. It joined the Baghdad Pact – also known as the *Central Treaty Organization* (CENTO) and *Middle East Treaty Organization* (METO) –, which was established in 1955 as a military alliance with Iraq, Turkey, the UK, and Pakistan to contain the Soviet Union's expansion in the Middle East. Moreover, due to its long border with the USSR, it remained highly exposed and, given the constant instability in the Middle East, it had urged the U.S. to join such a pact in order to strengthen its effectiveness. During the Suez Canal Crisis, it

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<sup>62</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Eventuali argomenti di conversazione in Iran*, in busta 11, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Progetto di viaggio in Medio Oriente (Libano, Turchia, Iran) 27 marzo-9 aprile 1957 (non effettuato). Visita di Stato in Iran del Presidente e signora, 7-12 settembre 1957, 1957.*

tried to maintain ties with Arab neighbors and, at the same time, also supported the *Eisenhower Doctrine*, receiving substantial American aid.

Iran's economic landscape in the 1950s was marked by its oil wealth and industrial aspirations, thus providing fertile ground for enhanced cooperation with Italy. According to another document prepared by Office V of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs dated August 26, 1957, Iran presented itself "at first glance as the most attractive country in the Middle East for exporters and investors". The country's economy was still developing, with a considerable portion of the population employed in agriculture and traditional industries. Italy emerged as an important trade partner during this period; the growing interests in this country aligned well with the Italian strategy of engaging with non-aligned and emerging economies to secure energy resources while reducing dependence on Western cartels, an approach that fit within President Gronchi's vision of neo-Atlanticism, which sought to establish a more autonomous Italian foreign policy.<sup>63</sup>

One of the key areas of cooperation between the two countries was the expansion of industrial and commercial exchanges. Iranian exports to Italy primarily included, in the first place, oil, agricultural products and commodities, primarily oilseeds and fruits, raw cotton, and raw hides and skins. In turn, Italy exported machinery, industrial equipment, and consumer goods to Iran, such as the supply of pharmaceutical products by the once Milano-based company *Carlo Erba*, and railway carriages by the mechanical construction company *A. Cecchetti*, and tank cars by *Gio. Ansaldo & C.* – nowadays absorbed by Leonardo S.p.A. –, or the construction of the machine dedicated for the spinning and weaving of the jute by the company *Gardella srl*. This trade balance reflected a mutual interest in strengthening economic ties beyond traditional European markets. This context, then, paved the way for Gronchi's strategic visit of state to Tehran.

A telegram received from Tehran on August 3, 1957, announced President Gronchi's planned visit to Iran, which was arranged by the Iranian government for the period from Saturday, September 7, to Thursday, September 12.<sup>64</sup> Another telegram sent from Rome to Tehran the following day confirmed this mission to Iran, noting that Gronchi would be accompanied by Foreign Minister Pella and his spouse Carla. The visit was scheduled at the invitation of His Majesty Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Imperial

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<sup>63</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Appunto sulla situazione economica iraniana e sugli scambi con l'Italia*, in busta 11, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Progetto di viaggio in Medio Oriente (Libano, Turchia, Iran) 27 marzo-9 aprile 1957 (non effettuato). Visita di Stato in Iran del Presidente e signora, 7-12 settembre 1957*, 1957.

<sup>64</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Telegramma n. 19036 in arrivo da Teheran – 3 agosto 1957*, in busta 11, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Progetto di viaggio in Medio Oriente (Libano, Turchia, Iran) 27 marzo-9 aprile 1957 (non effettuato). Visita di Stato in Iran del Presidente e signora, 7-12 settembre 1957*, 1957.

*Shahinshah*,<sup>65</sup> with the dual purpose of affirming the longstanding relationship between Italy and Iran and exploring “more concrete and effective opportunities for cooperation between the two friendly nations”.<sup>66</sup> It was, indeed, intended to reaffirm the cordiality of the relationship as well as showcase the mutual desire to strengthen bilateral ties.

Upon his arrival in Tehran, Gronchi issued a statement pointing out the unwavering friendship between Italy and Iran, which, he remarked had “never been clouded by any dispute”. He expressed that Italy regarded Iran “not only as a land with an ancient civilization whose remarkable heritage endures to this day”, but also as a nation whose people, “inspired by enlightened traditions and a profound sense of their unique identity”, are navigating the challenges of modern life while advancing in economic and social progress. Then, he concluded his brief speech by sharing his hope that his visit would further reinforce the bonds of friendship and foster deeper mutual understanding between the two nations at a time when both superpowers were vying for influence amid increasing tensions in the Middle East and broader international context of the Cold War.<sup>67</sup>

In his welcome address, the Shah spoke warmly about the long history of Italian-Iranian relations, emphasizing the mutual sympathy between the two nations. He traced their shared history, highlighting the “mutual sources of science” that have connected them over the centuries. He referenced the figures of ancient Rome, the distinguished men of the Renaissance, and all the Italian scholars and intellectuals of the modern era, whose works were appreciated not only by Iranians but also by many other peoples. The Shah, throughout his speech, emphasized that the relations between the two countries at that time were, in fact, just as strong as those of the past, pointing out that the peoples of Italy and Iran remained united in their common goal to “maintain and consolidate peace under the leadership of their great ones” and to “repair past events with a peaceful spirit”.<sup>68</sup>

This was, he stated, the foundation upon which both nations could build their future development, taking advantage of the science and work of the Italian people. In this way, he expressed hope for welcoming scientists, scholars, merchants, and people from other

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<sup>65</sup> A Persian title given to the King of Persia.

<sup>66</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Telegramma n. 9761 in partenza da Roma – 4 agosto 1957*, in busta 11, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Progetto di viaggio in Medio Oriente (Libano, Turchia, Iran) 27 marzo-9 aprile 1957 (non effettuato). Visita di Stato in Iran del Presidente e signora, 7-12 settembre 1957*, 1957.

<sup>67</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Dichiarazione alla stampa al momento dell'arrivo del Signor Presidente a Teheran*, in busta 11, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Progetto di viaggio in Medio Oriente (Libano, Turchia, Iran) 27 marzo-9 aprile 1957 (non effettuato). Visita di Stato in Iran del Presidente e signora, 7-12 settembre 1957*, 1957.

<sup>68</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Traduzione del brindisi di S.M. lo Shahinshah*, in busta 11, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Progetto di viaggio in Medio Oriente (Libano, Turchia, Iran) 27 marzo-9 aprile 1957 (non effettuato). Visita di Stato in Iran del Presidente e signora, 7-12 settembre 1957*, 1957.

social classes to Iran, inviting them to “witness their activities” and, thus, enable both countries to derive countless social and material benefits from one another. In his reply, Gronchi reciprocated the Shah’s words of esteem and, in a celebratory tone, highlighted the deep-rooted friendship between Italy and Iran. He described this relationship as “the manifestation of an affinity existing between the two countries that was never denied in their millennial history”. He referenced the continuous exchange of ideas and people between Persia and the Italian states over the centuries, facilitated by travelers who helped maintain these cultural and intellectual connections.<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, he acknowledged the more recent contributions of Italian labor to Iran’s modernization efforts under Shah Reza Pahlavi. To better illustrate this point, Gronchi specifically mentioned two prominent instances: the thousands of Italian workers who participated in the construction of the Trans-Iranian Railway, a major infrastructure project initiated in 1927 and completed in 1938, and the role of the Italian Naval Academy in assisting with the development of the Iranian Navy. These historical collaborations, he argued, provided a foundation for greater economic and trade cooperation between the two countries. Such cooperation was not only mutually beneficial but also served the broader goal of promoting global peace, especially in the Middle East and the Mediterranean – regions that both Italy and Iran considered central to their civilizations.

The 1957 official *Final Communiqué* reflects the whole common vision shared by both countries regarding the international situation and the appropriate means to safeguard peace, freedom, and economic progress. Both governments reaffirmed their commitment to the principles of the United Nations Charter – Iran had become a member of the international forum, on October 24, 1945, thus ten years before Italy’s membership – considering solidarity and cooperation as the two essential elements for maintaining global stability. Central to their relationship was their faithfulness to the defensive alliances they had joined: Italy as a member of NATO since 1949 and Iran as a founding member of the Baghdad Pact. Such alliances were seen as essential for securing national independence, fostering economic prosperity, and improving the living standards of their citizens.

Additionally, the *Communiqué* highlights Italy and Iran’s geostrategic roles in Middle Eastern stability, a crucial factor given the Cold War dynamics. Both nations recognized their ability to contribute effectively to a lasting regional balance due to their geographic positions. Consequently, they agreed on the necessity of regular consultations

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<sup>69</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Testo del brindisi del Signor Presidente*, in busta 11, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Progetto di viaggio in Medio Oriente (Libano, Turchia, Iran) 27 marzo-9 aprile 1957 (non effettuato). Visita di Stato in Iran del Presidente e signora, 7-12 settembre 1957, 1957.*

regarding Middle Eastern affairs and underlined the importance of a cohesive Western policy toward the region in all sectors, which was to be based on “an effective and sincere cooperation as well as on mutual respect”, in other words through a unified strategy to enhance stability in the whole region, which was going through an intense political transformation, marked by the decline of European colonial rule, a wave of nationalist attempts, and Cold War-related rivalries addressed in the previous sections of this thesis.<sup>70</sup>

The *Communiqué* also reports the belief that economic cooperation serves as the true foundation for peace, reinforcing the idea that Italy and Iran sought to strengthen their bilateral economic ties. A key element of their discussions, as it has been hinted at in the words issued by Shah Pahlavi, was the utilization of Italian technical expertise and labor in Iran’s economic development projects. Besides being an undeniable and arguable success of the Italian foreign policy and a noteworthy accomplishment of ENI, the “revolutionary agreement” dating back to August 3, 1957, on Italy’s participation in the exploitation of Iranian oil resources, along with the expansion of industrial activities entrusted to Italian companies, was presented as a significant milestone in their evolving relationship across the years. In any case, the characteristics and implications of this historic agreement will be analyzed in a later section of this thesis.<sup>71</sup>

In line with this, the *Communiqué* highlighted a new spirit of collaboration in the energy sector, positioning Italy as a key economic partner for Iran at a time when the latter was seeking to diversify its foreign partnerships beyond the traditional Anglo-American sphere. Following the events of the early 1950s, more exactly the passage of the law for nationalization of the oil industry by the Iranian Parliament on March 15, 1951, and under the guide of Iranian Premier Mohammad Mossadeq, Iran was eager to diversify its foreign relationships and tap into alternative sources of technical expertise and investment. Both nations agreed on the importance of exploring additional initiatives in various fields, including industry, agriculture, technology, and commerce. To facilitate this process, they committed to exchanging economic and technical delegations for conducting further feasibility studies and enhancing bilateral trade between the countries.

Last but not least, beyond political and economic relations, the *Communiqué* revealed also a strong emphasis on cultural and educational cooperation, stressing soft

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<sup>70</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Testo del brindisi del Signor Presidente*, in busta 11, *Viaggi all'estero del Presidente. Progetto di viaggio in Medio Oriente (Libano, Turchia, Iran) 27 marzo-9 aprile 1957 (non effettuato). Visita di Stato in Iran del Presidente e signora, 7-12 settembre 1957*, 1957.

<sup>71</sup> Ilaria Tremolada, *La via italiana al petrolio. L'ENI di Enrico Mattei in Iran (1951-1958)* (Milano: l'Ornitorinco Edizioni, 2011), pp. 19-40.

power diplomacy as a means to consolidate bilateral ties. In this regard, Italy and Iran expressed their mutual desire to deepen their cultural relations as well, leading to the decision to negotiate a formal cultural agreement. As an initial step, the Italian government offered thirty scholarships to Iranian students wishing to study at Italian universities and polytechnic institutes; such an initiative was designed to foster academic and intellectual exchanges, reinforcing Italy's influence among Iran's future elite. The final remarks of the *Communiqué* well reflected a sense of satisfaction with the continuous progress of political, economic, cultural as well as commercial relations.

The latter had, in fact, been initiated earlier with the signing of a *Treaty on Trade, Establishment, and Navigation* between Italy and Iran, concluded in Tehran on January 26, 1955. The treaty, presented by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was subsequently approved by the Chamber of Deputies on January 31, 1957. Its primary objective was to facilitate and strengthen economic cooperation between the two countries, which, among other commitments, agreed to grant each other tariff concessions on imported goods. In addition to being founded on the "principle of equal treatment for nationals", the treaty also upheld the "principle of freedom of transit" through each other's territories for persons, goods, automobiles, aircraft, and ships. According to the agreement, these would benefit from most-favored-nation treatment, both in terms of entry and exit at ports and in the use of port facilities and navigation rights.<sup>72</sup>

Overall, the *Communiqué* positions Italy and Iran as partners committed to strengthening their historical positive friendship, while also demonstrating Italy's broader neo-Atlanticist ambition to have a bearing in the Middle East through economic engagement and cultural diplomacy. Gronchi's official visit symbolized the consolidation of pre-existing economic efforts tying both countries and the discussions held during his stay in Tehran covered not only trade and economic partnerships but also broader geopolitical concerns, including energy security and regional stability. The emphasis on economic collaboration between the two nations reflected a shared vision of development, fostering a win-win partnership that resonated with Italy's broader diplomatic objectives.

## **2.5 Dialogues at home: meetings and interactions with foreign dignitaries in Rome**

The series of diplomatic engagements abroad analyzed in the previous subchapters well illustrate the broader shifts in Italy's foreign policy under President Giovanni

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<sup>72</sup> Senato della Repubblica Italiana, *Atti Parlamentari – Senato della Repubblica, Legislatura II (1953-1957), Disegni di Legge e Relazioni – Documenti (N. 1868-A), Relazione della 3a Commissione Permanente (Affari Esteri e Colonie)*, presentato dal Ministro degli Affari Esteri il 7 febbraio 1957.

Gronchi, particularly his use of economic diplomacy as a tool to reinvigorate Italy's global standing. These official missions paved the way for continued interactions, where the most salient points of his neo-Atlanticist approach emerged clearly. These principles can be traced also in his conversations with foreign ambassadors, diplomatic representatives, envoys, and heads of state, with whom he interacted in Rome during his tenure. This paragraph, therefore, aims at going into the details of the core tenets of neo-Atlanticism, including a less subordinate role within the Atlantic Alliance, rapprochement with non-aligned and Eastern bloc countries, support for European integration with a Mediterranean focus and, crucially, the use of energy diplomacy as a foreign policy tool – an approach reflected in high-level meetings held at the Quirinale during his presidency.

According to the transcript of a meeting held in Rome between President Giovanni Gronchi and the USSR Ambassador in Italy, Semion Pavlovic Kozyrev, on September 16, 1961, the Soviet ambassador had conveyed greetings from Soviet leaders and acknowledged the importance of dialogue with Italy. He also referenced Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani's visit to Moscow occurred on August 2-5, 1961, along with Foreign Minister Antonio Segni, emphasizing its continuity with President Gronchi's foreign policy itself. Interestingly, before his trip, the Italian Prime Minister had carefully studied the reports of the February 1960 talks between Khrushchev and Gronchi; his visit was, then, driven by the ambitious neo-Atlanticist strategy, aimed at reducing Italy's marginality within the Atlantic Alliance and actively contributing to détente.

An intriguing topic emerged toward the end of the conversation between President Gronchi and Ambassador Kozyrev, namely Italy's potential supply of six oil tankers to the USSR, following the delivery of one tanker that the Soviets had decided to name as "Garibaldi". This discussion reflects the broader economic relations between the two countries during the Cold War. Despite being a major oil producer, the Soviet Union allegedly lacked a robust naval infrastructure for large-scale transportation and wanted to "increase the commercial fleet", leading it to seek Italy's expertise in shipbuilding.<sup>73</sup> Though a NATO member, Italy pursued a policy of economic openness toward the USSR, aligning with Gronchi's neo-Atlanticism and Enrico Mattei's ENI-driven strategy. During the conversation, Kozyrev emphasized the importance of economic cooperation between Italy and the USSR, reaffirming Moscow's interest in purchasing these Italian ships.

As a result, this underscored the Soviet Union's view of Italy as a reliable supplier of naval technology, despite the ideological divide between the two blocs to which they

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<sup>73</sup> Evelina Martelli, *L'altro atlantismo. Fanfani e la politica estera italiana 1958-1963*, p. 294.

were pertaining. President Gronchi then welcomed the Soviet request and appeared open to strengthening trade relations. However, there was an implicit awareness that such supplies could provoke reactions from Western allies, particularly the United States, which feared an excessive economic rapprochement between NATO countries and the USSR. Apart from that, other themes were addressed, among which the need for a general disarmament agreement reiterated by Kozyrev, who stressed that negotiations remained stalled. He justified the USSR's resumption of nuclear tests as a response to the failure to conclude a peace treaty with Germany and find a solution for its reunification.

President Gronchi expressed concern over rising tensions, highlighting the lack of mutual trust as the primary obstacle and noted that the Soviet concerns over the resurgence of German militarism were a major impediment to negotiations. Instead, Kozyrev insisted on the necessity of involving East Germany in discussions regarding access to West Berlin. But Gronchi suggested that guarantees on Berlin's access routes should have been an integral part of a broader peace treaty to prevent future disputes. He also stated that, while German reunification seemed unlikely in the short term, the possibility should not have been ruled out entirely. In short, the Italian president sought areas of convergence with the USSR, which maintained that the Germans should have determined their future but firmly opposed any idea of reunification potentially imposed by force over the German people "with the overpowering of one Germany over the other".<sup>74</sup>

Another key conversation took place on May 3, 1962, in Rome, involving President Gronchi, the newly appointed British Foreign Secretary Lord Home, Italian Foreign Minister Amintore Fanfani, and Ambassadors Clarke and Grazi. In this discussion, Gronchi, in line with his far-reaching vision of a more independent foreign policy and intention to position Italy strategically amidst the superpowers and mitigate the polarization between the United States and the developing world, specifically criticized the negative influence exerted by U.S. administrations in Latin America. This was a region of personal and political importance to him. A month earlier, from April 6 to April 20, 1961, he had travelled to Peru, Argentina, and Uruguay, further solidifying his interest in Latin America. During the meeting, Gronchi expressed criticism of the activities of American multinational corporations such as the *United Fruit* and the *Seven Sisters*.

He argued that these major oil companies were responsible for the exploitation of the region's natural resources, extracting wealth without adequately reinvesting in the

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<sup>74</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Colloquio Signor Presidente con Ambasciatore sovietico Signor Kozyrev – Roma, 16 settembre 1961*, in busta 32, *Verballi di colloqui avuti dal PdR Gronchi con personalità straniere, 1956-1962, 1955-1962*.

economic and social development of Latin American countries. He emphasized that, rather than contributing to the prosperity of the local populations, these multinationals were accused of plundering Latin America's reserves for their own benefit, while disregarding the people's welfare and the broader region's long-term development. Gronchi's criticism, which stemmed from his impressions during his visit to the aforementioned countries, echoed a widespread sentiment in many Latin American countries, which perceived American economic influence as detrimental. On this matter, he offered his interpretation, stating that "North American aid tended to undermine the independence and restrict the freedom of those states", as economic penetration was driven by private interests.

As a matter of fact, the involvement of U.S. corporations was seen as "reinforcing undemocratic structures in these nations", where local elite – often wealthy landowners or industrialists – collaborated with American interests, effectively hindering wealth redistribution and preventing improvements in the living conditions of the locals. While Gronchi realized that such criticisms might sometimes be exaggerated, he pointed out that they were rooted in deeply ingrained psychological attitudes shaped by the fear that American intervention could erode the political and economic sovereignty of Latin American nations. His analysis underscored that the image of the United States in the regions had, and in many ways still had, significant challenges owing to the exploitative nature of the economic ties, which were increasingly perceived as benefiting only the powerful elites and foreign corporations, rather than the broader populace.

President Gronchi's remarks resonated with British Foreign Secretary Lord Home, who responded by drawing a parallel with India and Pakistan. He noted that both these countries had initially prioritized industrialization at the expense of agriculture, which led to inflation and, ultimately, forced them to reassess their approach. Home then posed a crucial question: how could they assist, then, the U.S. in overcoming the hostility it faced in emerging economies? In response, Gronchi underlined the need for a stronger U.S. partnership with Europe, arguing that a multilateral approach to aid would have reduced suspicion and fostered greater trust. His recommendation aligned perfectly with his neo-Atlanticist strategy, which sought to balance transatlantic cooperation with a more independent and diversified engagement in international relations.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Colloquio Signor Presidente con Ministro Affari Esteri britannico Lord Home, presenti l'On. Ministro Segni, gli Ambasciatori Clarke e Grazi, e il Segretario di Home Signor Samuel – Roma, 3 maggio 1961*, in busta 32, *Verballi di colloqui avuti dal PdR Gronchi con personalità straniere, 1956-1962*, 1955-1962.

A further relevant discussion centered on this topic took place during his meeting in Rome with the newly appointed American Ambassador G. Frederick Reinhardt – U.S. Ambassador to Italy from May 1961 to March 1968 – on the occasion of the presentation of his letters of credentials on May 17, 1961. During the long conversation they had, Gronchi openly declared that the United States had a quite negative image in Latin America, largely due to the interventionist policies of previous administrations. He argued that American aid was often seen as imposed rather than cooperative, stressing the need for a new approach based on a “real cooperation between giver and receiver”, similar to the model Italy had adopted in the Middle East. He advocated for a more active European role in supporting Latin America’s development, noting that industrialization was the primary concern of those countries but cautioned that, without parallel agricultural development, they risked becoming too dependent on food imports.

With the purpose of addressing these challenges, Gronchi, then, suggested that aid should be more diversified and strategically targeted to prevent inefficient centralization. He proposed that the OECD (referred to as “OCED” in the document) could serve as a more suitable platform than NATO for fostering economic cooperation with Latin America, as this would help mitigate suspicions of political interference. Moreover, he emphasized that the primary concern for Latin American countries was industrialization, but warned that without simultaneous and substantial progress in agriculture, these nations could face growing dependency on food imports. Therefore, he advocated for deeper economic integration within the region, proposing the formation of consortia to tackle shared challenges, such as agricultural development.<sup>76</sup>

Apart from Latin America, President Gronchi demonstrated the same consistent focus on fostering economic development also in his dealings with countries of the African continent such as Morocco. He had an interesting exchange of opinions with the Moroccan Ambassador in Rome, Mohamed Aouad on October 4, 1961, during which he highlighted the importance of strengthening Italy’s role as a reliable partner in Africa, by emphasizing the country’s historical ties to the region and its potential to mediate between Africa and the West. The Moroccan King Hasan II had sent a personal invitation for an official state visit of the Italian President to Morocco, which Gronchi acknowledged with gratitude, although he was cautious in committing to a specific date due to the uncertain political situation, given by the grown influence of the Communist Party, that Italy was facing.

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<sup>76</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Conversazione Signor Presidente con nuovo Ambasciatore statunitense Signor Reinhardt in occasione presentazione credenziali – Roma, 17 maggio 1961*, in busta 32, *Verbali di colloqui avuti dal PdR Gronchi con personalità straniere, 1956-1962, 1955-1962*.

The Moroccan Ambassador conveyed that King Hasan II retained “vivid and grateful memories of his recent visits to Italy”. He added that His Majesty would have warmly welcomed Italy’s active cooperation with Morocco in Africa, where it enjoyed high esteem. The ambassador also recalled that Morocco’s historical role was as a natural mediator between Africa and the West – a function that could become truly effective with Italy’s decisive engagement as well. Given that Italy was free from colonial disputes in Africa, it was very well-positioned to play a significant role in that sense. Indeed, according to him, Italy and Morocco could work toward solutions for nations that lacked opportunities for progress. Overall, the dialogue reflected Gronchi’s diplomatic approach, which was both proactive and cautious at the same time.<sup>77</sup>

While expressing a willingness to pursue greater cooperation with the Moroccan counterpart, he was careful not to rush decisions, particularly in light of the changing political landscape in Africa, as a consequence of the wave of decolonization and the rise of nationalism. Gronchi recognized the delicate nature of relations with newly independent African countries, which were sensitive to Western influence; his response to the Moroccan ambassador indicated that Italy was keen on supporting African development but without the baggage of colonial ties. The King’s message itself conveyed Morocco’s desire for Italy to play a more active role in African affairs, leveraging its solid position among Western allies and its positive reputation in Africa. The Italian president seemed receptive to this idea, realizing that Italy’s involvement in Africa could yield mutual benefits, both in terms of economic collaboration and political influence.

Besides Morocco, President Gronchi showed the same interest in fostering economic development in North Africa, significantly in Tunisia. During his meeting with President Habib Bourguiba on July 21, 1960, he expressed a cordial welcome, emphasizing the importance of the Italian-Tunisian relationship. Bourguiba, in turn, acknowledged the support Italy had extended to Tunisia, in helping to clarify and stabilize the political situation amidst unrest in neighboring Algeria and Congo. He highlighted the pivotal role Tunisia could play in Africa as a stabilizing force, citing its efforts to maintain a balance between moderating influences, avoiding demagoguery, and engaging with former colonial powers like France. Both presidents discussed the situation in Congo, where Belgian mismanagement had led to unrest, and how Tunisia could serve as an example of a peaceful transition for other African nations facing similar challenges.

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<sup>77</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Colloquio Signor Presidente con Ambasciatore del Marocco Signor Mohamed Aouad – Roma, 4 ottobre 1961*, in busta 32, *Verballi di colloqui avuti dal PdR Gronchi con personalità straniere, 1956-1962, 1955-1962*.

Gronchi expressed Italy's support for the United Nations' peacekeeping efforts in Congo, emphasizing Italy's commitment to boosting stability through diplomatic means. Coming to their bilateral discussions, the two leaders also touched on economic issues, above all fishing rights and agricultural land ownership. Bourguiba stressed the importance of respecting Tunisia's territorial waters, including the extension of its fishing zones. He conveyed the need for cooperation between their nations, advocating for a mutually respectful agreement to prevent any kind of illegal fishing activities by Sicilian fishermen. At this point, Gronchi reassured Bourguiba of Italy's commitment to respecting Tunisia's sovereignty and willingness to engage in negotiations to resolve these matters.

President Bourguiba expressed a positive view of the agreement between Tunisia and ENI nonetheless; he saw the partnership as beneficial for Tunisia's economic development and appreciated Italy's role in providing Tunisia with technical expertise and manpower, which were crucial for developing the country's oil and gas resources. In his view, there were the premises to stipulate an agreement to receive Italian ships and technicians, provided that "the certainty of territorial waters would have been respected". This conditional approach meant that Tunisia was open to collaborating with Italy, which was reaffirmed as an ideal European partner. Gronchi's words underlined the "great role" and "action of moderation and balance" that the Tunisians had in Africa.<sup>78</sup> In this way, he suggested that Tunisia could serve as a valuable guiding force in the region, reflecting Italy's recognition of its potential influence in fostering stability in North Africa.

Actually, this meeting followed a previous one between Gronchi and Bourguiba on July 18, 1959, where discussions had already begun revolving around strengthening bilateral ties and exploring areas of mutual interest. That time President Bourguiba had expressed his strong confidence in the support of Italian institutions for the economic reconversion of Tunisia, comparing the country's problems to those of Southern Italy. He had drawn attention to the substantial lack of capital for land reclamation and the industrialization of the country as a whole, pointing out the favorable conditions for attracting Italian investment and stimulating development. The Tunisian president had reiterated the need for technical knowledge, particularly necessary in sectors such as agriculture, industry, and infrastructure, and foreign experts to exploit the country's oil reserves, a matter that he had already discussed with Enrico Mattei himself.

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<sup>78</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Colloquio Signor Presidente con Pres. Burghiba – Roma, 21 luglio 1960*, in busta 32, *Verbali di colloqui avuti dal PdR Gronchi con personalità straniera, 1956-1962, 1955-1962*.

President Gronchi's crystal-clear support for "contacts with Mattei regarding oil" illustrated his intention to leverage the potential of ENI and Italian energy policy to promote national interests, serving as a concrete example of neo-Atlanticism, always from the perspective to balance Italy's membership in the Western bloc with more room for maneuver in the international scenario.<sup>79</sup> The Italian delegation participating in this meeting, led by Minister Pella, had proposed a more structured collaboration involving private sectors in both countries through *Italconsult* – a global engineering and project management consultant headquartered in Rome since 1957 which had been engaged in the general development plan of Iran as well – in order to formulate a multi-year development plan in Tunisia's key sectors. Also in that case, Bourguiba had restated that Tunisia's independence was paramount, and while open to cooperation, they needed guarantees for their territorial integrity, particularly in relation to their maritime boundaries.

Italy wanted to put the same effort into Egypt as well, and this is well evidenced by the conversation Egyptian Ambassador Okacha had with Gronchi on October 29, 1958. As they engaged in dialogue, major themes were touched upon, among which the Aswan High Dam, the management of the river Nile's waters as well as the economic implications of the Kosseir mines. Gronchi stressed the importance of approaching "Egypt's central problem represented by the utilization of the waters of the Nile" holistically, advocating for an integrated financial plan rather than isolated infrastructure projects. He suggested that the entire river basin be considered, taking into account the potential obstacles to such a project coming from Sudan and other stakeholders. To achieve this, he proposed a staggered financial strategy that could involve Western partners, including the United States, in a whole effort to counterbalance Soviet influence in the region.<sup>80</sup>

Another key element of the discussion was the economic challenge posed by the Kosseir mines. Following Nasser's rise to power in 1954, the mines were eventually nationalized in 1964 and integrated into the Egyptian General Mining Corporation (EGMC) as part of Egypt's five-year industrial development plan. Gronchi acknowledged the financial strain that a direct repurchase of the mines from Italy – estimated at 2 billion *lira* – would have placed on the Egyptian government. Instead, he proposed a more pragmatic solution: reinvesting these funds into Egyptian agricultural and irrigation

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<sup>79</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Colloquio Signor Presidente con il Presidente della Repubblica tunisina Signor Bourghiba, presenti l'On. Ministro Pella e gli Ambasciatori Bouziri e Mazio – Roma, 18 luglio 1959*, in busta 32, *Verballi di colloqui avuti dal PdR Gronchi con personalità straniere, 1956-1962, 1955-1962*.

<sup>80</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Colloquio con Ambasciatore Egitto Okacha – Roma, 29 ottobre 1958*, in busta 32, *Verballi di colloqui avuti dal PdR Gronchi con personalità straniere, 1956-1962, 1955-1962*.

projects. The Egyptian ambassador responded favorably to Gronchi's proposals, explicitly emphasizing how they aligned with the economic vision of Enrico Mattei, who had already established close ties with Egypt through ENI's energy diplomacy.

The Egyptian ambassador's remarks underscored a sort of synergy between Gronchi's political vision and Mattei's entrepreneurial initiatives, thus reinforcing Italy's growing role as a mediator in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern affairs. Gronchi, in turn, recognized that boosting economic collaboration with Egypt could also serve a broader diplomatic purpose, namely reducing ideological prejudices between Italy and Arab nations and ensuring a stable framework for future cooperation. By the end of the meeting, Ambassador Okacha reaffirmed his personal dedication to fostering strong bilateral relations between Italy and Egypt. Gronchi's engagement with Nasser's Egypt, therefore, reflected a pragmatic blend of economic and diplomatic initiatives, reinforcing Italy's neo-Atlanticist approach while simultaneously fostering South-South cooperation.

Concerning the Aswan High Dam, this signified not only an infrastructure project but also a crucial element in the larger Cold War dynamics. During a meeting with German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, President Giovanni Gronchi proposed the idea of an international consortium, which could also include the Soviet Union, to coordinate aid efforts for developing countries, to avoid direct competition with the USSR's aggressive economic diplomacy. The latter was, indeed, offering Egypt favorable financial terms for the dam project and the additional risk was represented by the modernization of the Alexandria port. Gronchi, then, warned Adenauer about the exposure to unchecked Soviet engagement in Egypt. Italy, aware of its limited capacity in this "competitive coexistence", was hoping for a coordinated Western response, involving both the United States and European countries, to prevent Egypt from falling entirely under Soviet control.<sup>81</sup>

All these principles that were driving the neo-Atlanticist strategy pursued by Italy under Giovanni Gronchi's presidency and clearly traceable in his numerous interactions with many foreign dignitaries at the Quirinale, were not without criticism and negative reactions, both domestically and internationally. Within Italy, certain political and diplomatic feared that excessive autonomy in relations with the Middle East – particularly with countries like Iran – could jeopardize ties with traditional allies, especially the United

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<sup>81</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Ufficio Relazioni con l'Estero – Udienza del Cancelliere Adenauer. Presenti, da parte italiana: il Pres. Del Consiglio on. Segni, il Vice-Pres. Del Consiglio on. Saragat, il Min. degli Affari Esteri on. Martino, l'Amb. Rossi Longhi, l'Amb. Grazi, il Min. Lucioli e, da parte tedesca: il Min. degli Affari Esteri e l'Amb von Brentano*, in busta 32, *Verballi di colloqui avuti dal PdR Gronchi con personalità straniera, 1956-1962*, 1955-1962.

States and NATO. On the international stage, Italy's more independent foreign policy and its strengthened relations with non-aligned nations raised suspicions among Western powers, who viewed this approach as a potential weakening of Atlantic cohesion. What's more, cooperation with figures like Enrico Mattei and his vision of Italy as a key player in the energy sector fueled tensions with major Anglo-American oil companies, which saw Italy's activism as a threat to their strategic interests.

In fact, during a conversation between Gronchi and NATO Secretary General Dirk U. Stikker, held in Rome on October 10, 1961, in the presence of Premier Amintore Fanfani, Foreign Minister Antonio Segni, Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs Carlo Russo, and the Ambassadors Alessandrini and Fornari, concerns were raised regarding Italy's economic policies toward the Soviet Union. Secretary Stikker dwelled upon the fact that certain NATO members, particularly the United States, viewed with apprehension Italy's trade relations with the Soviet Union, especially in the energy sector, including the purchase of Soviet oil. He literally said that "Italy's position differs from that of other Alliance members" in this regard.<sup>82</sup> This perception, as it appears, was widely shared within NATO, and Stikker on that occasion acted as its spokesperson in conveying such concerns to the Italian leadership with whom he was interacting.

On the other hand, the Italian government – most markedly through the responses of Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani and Hon. Russo and Amb. Alessandrini – firmly rejected these criticisms. They basically argued that Italy's economic exchanges with the Soviet Union did not violate NATO commitments and pointed out that other member states, such as West Germany, were engaging in a similar way with Moscow. Italy, therefore, defended its position by emphasizing that these transactions were aimed at rebalancing its trade deficit and did not signify any strategic dependence on the USSR. On top of that, the Italian leadership stressed that national economic policy had to account for domestic priorities, namely the diversification of energy sources and securing favorable conditions for raw material supplies. Finally, they reiterated that any trade restrictions with the USSR should have been the result of a collective NATO decision, rather than unilateral measures imposed only by a few member states over one.

While on the American side, there was growing concern about Italy's commercial relations with the Soviet Union during this period, on the Italian side – particularly from

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<sup>82</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Colloquio Signor Presidente con Segretario Generale della NATO Signor Stikker, presenti gli On.li Presidente Fanfani, Ministro Segni e S.Segretario Carlo Russo, gli Ambasciatori Alessandrini e Fornari – Roma, 10 ottobre 1961*, in busta 32, *Verbal di colloqui avuti dal PdR Gronchi con personalità straniere, 1956-1962, 1955-1962*.

President Gronchi – there was no hesitation in openly alluding to the hegemonic stance of American oil companies towards developing countries. In two meetings with the American Ambassador James David Zellerbach – U.S. Ambassador to Italy from February 1957 to December 1960 –, President Gronchi emphasized Italy's independent stance in foreign policy, asserting that the Italian nation would have not simply followed the lead of the United States. The Italian President, increasingly convinced, reaffirmed Italy's desire for greater control over its own natural resources, like oil, and voiced concerns about the actions of U.S. oil companies which were allegedly driven by an imperialistic mindset that was undermining Italy's economic autonomy. He believed that these companies' influence went against Italian interests and independence endeavors.

A significant aspect that surfaced in the course of the first meeting with Ambassador Zellerbach occurred on June 7, 1960, is President Gronchi's firm opposition to the idea of a "three-power directorate" within NATO, led by France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This position was not merely a "matter of national prestige", as Gronchi's words emphasized, but was rather rooted in Italy's sense of responsibility within the alliance. According to the President, Gronchi had accepted all NATO obligations and had, thus, earned the right to participate fully in any discussions on critical issues. He argued that any decision-making process that excluded Italy could expose the country to serious risks. His reference to the U-2 incident – the 1960 shooting down of an American U-2 spy plane by the USSR while it was conducting reconnaissance over Soviet territory – highlighted the potential for the decisions of NATO to lead to severe complications, as the flight had not been coordinated within the alliance.<sup>83</sup>

For Gronchi, Italy had to play a leading role, but not at the same level as the United States, which, in his opinion, was seen as promoting the interests and "imperialism" of North American oil companies in many Arab countries such as Iraq and Libya, the latter bound to Italy and, at that time, "withdrawing from legally binding commitments due to pressure from American companies". This is another noticeable aspect that emerged during a previous conversation that the Italian President had with Ambassador Zellerbach on October 10, 1957, when both addressed the sensitive issue of oil policy.<sup>84</sup> Gronchi was, basically, referring to how the American companies were taking actions to push Italy out

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<sup>83</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Colloquio Signor Presidente con Ambasciatore statunitense Signor Zellerbach – Roma, 7 giugno 1960*, in busta 32, *Verbali di colloqui avuti dal PdR Gronchi con personalità straniera, 1956-1962, 1955-1962*.

<sup>84</sup> ASPR, Affari Diplomatici, *Colloquio Signor Presidente con Ambasciatore Stati Uniti d'America Signor Zellerbach – Roma, 10 ottobre 1957*, in busta 32, *Verbali di colloqui avuti dal PdR Gronchi con personalità straniera, 1956-1962, 1955-1962*.

and replace it in these agreements or business dealings in the Middle East. He suggested that a frank discussion with the U.S. government was necessary to clarify Italy's position and ensure that Italian interests were fully respected.

From his side, Zellerbach responded that the U.S. government had no objection to Italy entering the international oil market, but the U.S. could not control the actions of its private oil companies abroad. Then, both sides agreed on the importance of regular consultations between Italy and the United States, particularly in relation to Middle Eastern policies, since this was the primary area of the world where their interests converged. Gronchi, more specifically, suggested that a U.S. representative be sent to discuss these issues more thoroughly, while Zellerbach promised to report back to Washington. Gronchi concluded by reiterating the need for ongoing dialogue and mutual understanding between the two countries. This commitment to open dialogue and diplomatic transparency underscored the Italian President's neo-Atlantic strategy: to navigate the complexities of the Cold War while asserting its autonomy and bolstering economic ties with both the Western bloc and the emerging nations of the Middle East and beyond.

## CHAPTER III – The Making of Italy’s Energy Diplomacy with Mattei’s ENI

### 3.1 Enrico Mattei’s vision for energy independence and the rise of ENI

In the second half of the 1950s, Italian foreign policy underwent, as we have seen so far, a significant transformation which was characterized by a growing spirit of independence and the assertion of its role as a Mediterranean power. This shift was, in part, a response to the structural limitations imposed by Italy’s post-war alignment with NATO, which it had formally joined on April 4, 1949. While integration into the Atlantic Alliance provided security guarantees and anchored Italy firmly with the Western bloc, it also constrained its ability to maneuver freely in international affairs. The early years of the Italian Republic had been dominated by efforts to secure international rehabilitation and European integration, leading Rome to prioritize its engagement in the European Economic Community (EEC) project. Yet, as the country’s political and economic situation stabilized, Italian leaders – most notably President Giovanni Gronchi – sought to recalibrate Italy’s international strategy beyond its Atlantic commitments.

The loss of the Italian colonial possessions in Africa further spurred this redefinition, compelling Italy to explore alternative avenues of influence, particularly in the Mediterranean Africa and the Middle East. Rome placed great value on its image as a non-colonialist nation and engaged in a critical reflection on the root causes of instability in the Middle East, attributing primary responsibility to outdated colonial practices. By 1951, the belief that Anglo-French policies were no longer adequate was further reinforced by two events, namely the outbreak of Iran’s Abadan crisis and Egypt’s decision to denounce the 1936 treaty with Britain concerning the defense of the Suez Canal. Motivated by this conviction and by Britain’s growing difficulties in the region, Italy sought to establish a “policy of active friendship with the Arab world”, using the Iranian crisis as a starting point and leveraging the Egyptian situation to position itself as the natural bridge between Western European civilization and the various Mediterranean cultures – an idea first articulated by Alcide De Gasperi, as it was already argued in this thesis.<sup>85</sup>

One of the most representative figures in this pursuit of an independent foreign policy was Enrico Mattei, the driving force behind Italy’s national hydrocarbons holding company, *Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi* – commonly known as ENI –, of which he became his emblematic president. He envisioned a more autonomous Italian energy strategy that would break free from the constraints imposed by the dominant Anglo-American oil companies’ consortium often referred to as the *Seven Sisters* – already introduced in the

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<sup>85</sup> Ilaria Tremolada, *La via italiana al petrolio. L’ENI di Enrico Mattei in Iran (1951-1958)*, p. 31.

initial part of this thesis – and also fit very well with the presidential diplomacy carried out by President Gronchi. They basically consisted of a group of seven major Western oil companies dominating the global petroleum industry from the mid 20-century until the 1970s; they controlled the vast majority of oil production, refining, and distribution, particularly in the Middle East area. The term was popularized by Enrico Mattei himself, who used it critically to describe their oligopolistic control over oil sources and, consequently, challenged their dominance in monopolizing prices, supply, and access.

Unlike their *modus operandi*, Mattei advocated for a new model of cooperation between industrialized nations and oil-producing countries; his vision rejected the neo-colonial practices and proposed a system in which producer nations would not only profit from their natural resources but could also participate actively in the industrial and technical development necessary to sustain long-term economic growth. A concrete manifestation of this approach was Mattei's initiative to train local technicians from oil-producing nations, providing them with the necessary expertise to manage their own energy industries. This initiative was symbolic and strategic, as it demonstrated Italy's commitment to fostering true partnerships rather than merely extracting resources. Unlike Western companies that established enclaves within oil-producing states, isolating themselves from the local population, Mattei's ENI promoted integration.

At this point, it is crucial to discuss the rise of ENI and its significance in reshaping the Italian energy policy and international positioning by tracing its roots back to Italy's earlier state-controlled industrial policies. Before its official establishment, the Italian energy sector was primarily managed by two key institutions: the *Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale (IRI)* – the institute for Italy's industrial reconstruction – and *Azienda Generale Italiana Petroli (AGIP)* – the general Italian oil company. The former, created in 1933 during the Fascist regime, played a crucial role in Italy's economic recovery as a response to the financial crisis stemming from the Great Depression (1929-1939) by restructuring key industrial and financial sectors. The latter was established in 1926 as a state-owned company responsible for oil exploration and distribution within Italy, as part of the fascist regime's efforts to ensure national self-sufficiency.

Nevertheless, despite AGIP's efforts, Italy's reliance on foreign oil imports, particularly from British and American companies, remained substantial, primarily due to its limited domestic oil reserves rather than a lack of extraction initiatives. While AGIP, under Mattei's leadership, played an important role in shaping Italy's energy strategy, its capacity to alter the structural dependence on foreign oil was inherently constrained. However, the case of natural gas presented a different scenario; unlike oil, Italy possessed

significant gas reserves, particularly in the Po Valley, yet these had long been underutilized. Here, Mattei – who was originally tasked by the Italian government with liquidating AGIP – took a pioneering approach, recognizing the untapped potential of this resource and promoting its exploitation by spearheading the development of a national gas network, ensuring that Italy could harness its own energy resources more effectively. While other countries often flared off natural gas as a byproduct of oil extraction, Mattei saw it as an asset that could reduce reliance on foreign energy sources, provide a cost-effective alternative to imported oil, and support the country's industrial growth.

After World War II, the Italian rapid industrialization and growing energy needs prompted the search for a more centralized and ambitious energy policy. Recognizing the importance of hydrocarbons for Italy's economic sovereignty, the government decided to restructure the sector. Thus, on February 10, 1953, the Italian State Oil Corporation, ENI, was officially founded by law, with Enrico Mattei appointed as its first chairman. Conceived as a state-owned energy conglomerate, ENI was tasked with exploring, extracting, and distributing hydrocarbons to mitigate Italy's dependence on foreign oil and securing more favorable agreements with producer countries. Although Law n. 136 did not explicitly authorize the company to operate internationally, the broad formulation of its mission – defined in the legislation as “ENI is tasked with promoting and implementing initiatives of natural interest in the hydrocarbon and gas sector” – provided sufficient flexibility to allow for operations beyond Italy's borders.<sup>86</sup>

It was the result of a lengthy parliamentary debate involving both Italian and American political and business circles. Throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, various proposals were made to reform mining laws and create a national energy institution. Initial plans aimed at dividing Italian oil and gas resources among private companies, but the discovery of natural gas in the fields in Caviaga and Cortemaggiore in the Po Valley in the ending years of World War II had shifted public opinion in favor of a state-owned entity. While left-wing parties advocated for full nationalization, the final law – explained above – created ENI as a “public holding company incorporating the main state-owned hydrocarbon firms while legally recognizing them as private companies”.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana*, no. 72 (March 27, 1953), Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica n. 136/1953, “Istituzione dell’Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (E.N.I.),” <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1953/03/27/053U0136/sg>.

<sup>87</sup> Elisabetta Bini, *La potente benzina italiana: guerra fredda e consumi di massa tra Italia, Stati Uniti e terzo mondo (1945-1973)* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2013), pp. 48-51.

This structure allowed government oversight through presidential appointments and budget approval while granting operational autonomy to its subsidiaries.

Although private oil companies were permitted to become shareholders in ENI-affiliated firms, the law consolidated all stages of the oil industry – exploration, extraction, transportation, refining, and distribution – within a single entity, strengthening its market position. This meant that the Italian government controlled ENI only partially, appointing its president and approving its annual budget in Parliament, while all other decisions were left to the individual companies. In other words, the law did not grant ENI a full public monopoly over hydrocarbon exploration and extraction in the Po Valley, as private oil companies, including *STANIC* – an Italian company formed in 1950 by a 50/50 partnership between *Esso* and *ANIC* – and *IROM*, were permitted, as it was said before, to hold shares in ENI's affiliated firms, have financial interests and, possibly, also some influence in the operations carried out by those companies.

ENI was, therefore, created under the political leadership of the President of the Council of Ministers, Alcide De Gasperi, and the second President of the Italian Republic, Luigi Einaudi, to ensure Italy's energy independence. Its activities could not be confined solely to the domestic market or to natural gas alone. Although ENI had achieved remarkable success in this field, particularly through the discovery of large gas reserves in the Po Valley, the rapid expansion of demand for petroleum products – such as gasoline, diesel, and fuel oil – made it necessary for the new state-owned entity to look beyond national boundaries. Italy found itself in a critical position, caught between two possible energy strategies: it could either secure its oil supply through traditional channels, accepting the monopoly of the major multinational oil companies, or pursue an independent course of action, challenging the oil cartel of the *Seven Sisters*.

As became evident in the following years, Mattei opted for the second path. Many analysts believe, however, that his choice was not entirely voluntary but rather a “necessary response to an international landscape where no agreement with the Anglo-American companies would have left ENI and Italy in anything more than a marginal position”.<sup>88</sup> To develop an energy policy suited to Italy's rising economic needs, ENI had to secure petroleum at the lowest possible price, either by leveraging its position as a major purchaser or by turning to independent producers offering better terms than those dictated by the Anglo-American corporations controlling the global oil trade, especially in the

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<sup>88</sup> Alberto Tonini, *Il sogno proibito: Mattei, il petrolio arabo e le sette sorelle* (Firenze: Polistampa, 2003), pp. 45-9.

Middle East, where by 1950, the annual production had reached 88 million tons, a notable increase from the 16 million extracted in 1938, driven by the strong demand for petroleum products during and after WWII from European and North American states.

Thus, ENI's strategy unfolded within a rapidly shifting global context, where, for the first time, a major oil-producing country – Iran, under Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq – directly challenged the dominance of the multinational oil companies. With the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry in 1951, the legitimacy of foreign oil intermediaries was called into question; Iran did not merely demand a larger share of profits but also sought greater control over its own natural resources and the wealth it generated. On the producers' side, the escalation of the Iranian crisis, the rise of nationalist demands, and dissatisfaction with the existing profit distribution system created the conditions for a significant shift in oil production and trade. Meanwhile, on the European front, several factors – including the desire to reduce dependence on the United States and the opening towards the socialist bloc, exemplified by the Italian case of study at issue here – gave new opportunities to players traditionally excluded from the global oil market.

As a matter of fact, ENI's first major opportunity to enter international oil politics emerged with the resolution of the Iranian crisis. During Mossadeq's tenure, Mattei had deliberately refrained from purchasing Iranian oil extracted by the *National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC)*, despite the highly advantageous prices at which it was offered. By respecting the boycott imposed by the major oil corporations, ENI's chairman hoped to position the Italian energy conglomerate favorably in future negotiations. In 1954, following the return of the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's reinstatement to power in the aftermath of the 1953 coup d'état which had overthrown Premier Mohammad Mossadeq, an international consortium was created to manage Iranian oil extraction and commercialization. It included the *Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC)* – which had been expelled following Mossadeq's nationalization –, all major cartel companies like the *Compagnie Française des Pétroles (CFP)*, and several independent U.S. producers.

Italy was not included in this consortium, but it had actually attempted to secure its own independent access to Iranian oil by bypassing the Anglo-American oil monopoly. Discussions about the possibility of two Italian companies signing agreements with Iran, indeed, had begun earlier in January 1952. These companies were the *Società chimico farmaceutica a responsabilità limitata (SUPOR)* – a company founded in 1951 by Andrea Porlezza and the Russian exile Nicolai Soubotian for “the import and export of pharmaceutical raw materials, products, and specialty chemicals” – and *Ente Petrolifero Italia Medio Oriente (EPIM)* – a newly established company aimed at purchasing oil from

Iran in exchange for farm equipment and tractors.<sup>89</sup> Two contracts were signed between SUPOR and EPIM along with the Iranian governments; such agreements became part of Mossadeq's broader effort to break the stranglehold of the APOC.

However, owing to the international embargo imposed by the oil cartel in retaliation for Iran's nationalization of its oil industry, these contracts were never effectively implemented. The EPIM group faced repercussions, the most notable being the seizure of the oil tanker "Rose Marie" by the British authorities. This action aimed at preventing the purchase of Iranian nationalized crude oil, which had been expropriated by Mossadeq's government and was still claimed by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). In contrast, the agreement with SUPOR involved annual Italian purchases of 5 million tons of crude oil in exchange for Italian goods. Such deals were estimated to include compensations worth approximately 60 million dollars but failed to take into account two factors: the limited capacity of Italian oil treatment facilities to process large quantities of oil and the political obstacles imposed by the British and Americans, who sought to undermine Mossadeq and prevent countries from engaging with Iran's nationalized oil.

This failure highlighted Italy's vulnerability in the global oil market and its reliance on major oil companies, which dictated the conditions under which oil could be bought and sold; all of this underscored the need for the Italian state to have a stronger state-backed entity capable of negotiating more favorable deals with producer nations and attaining a stable oil supply outside the traditional cartel system. By April 1954, Italy revised its approach to a more pragmatic policy, reducing the compensation level with Iran to approximately 19 million dollars; at the same time, it limited its Iranian crude oil imports to 1.5 million tons for the 1954-55 period, thus aligning itself more closely with Western strategic considerations. This shift in policy aligned with Italy's request to Britain and U.S. governments to recognize its right to negotiate reduced compensations with Iran. But, following Mossadeq's fall, it struggled to secure a foothold in the Iranian oil market.

This situation stressed the challenges Italy faced in asserting itself in global energy affairs, as it had to navigate between Western strategic interests and its own economic imperatives. Thus, securing a more stable position in Iran's oil sector required a more assertive and independent approach. Italy now had to redefine its strategy, recognizing that it could no longer rely solely on the goodwill of major oil powers. Instead, it needed to take a more active role in shaping its own energy policy to ensure its access to Iranian oil. This struggle reinforced the idea that it could not remain passive in the face of global oil

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<sup>89</sup> Ilaria Tremolada, *La via italiana al petrolio. L'ENI di Enrico Mattei in Iran (1951-1958)*, p. 80.

politics and needed a more definite entity to safeguard its interests. The rise of ENI was, therefore, a direct response to this necessity – providing Italy with a more autonomous instrument in the hands of Enrico Mattei to negotiate better deals and challenge the constraints imposed by the prevailing oil cartel system.

Taking this into account, the subsequent subchapters will delve deeper into how the intersection of Mattei's economic objectives with President Giovanni Gronchi's neo-Atlantic vision was evident in their shared efforts to bypass traditional power structures dominated by Anglo-American interests. As discussed in the previous chapter focused on a series of encounters between Gronchi and foreign dignitaries in Rome, the Italian President actively endorsed Enrico Mattei in advancing his vision for energy diplomacy. As Gronchi pursued real diplomatic initiatives to expand Italy's reach beyond the rigid constraints of NATO alignments and establish it as a proactive mediator, also Mattei took an unconventional approach and engaged in journeys during which he sought to secure new energy partnerships, by travelling to the Middle East, North Africa, and the Soviet Union, often clashing with dominant Western interests. This convergence of diplomatic and economic strategies underscored a uniquely Italian approach to international relations, in which energy policy and foreign policy became deeply intertwined in those years.

### **3.2 Negotiations in Iran leading to the signature of the ENI-NIOC agreement**

With the objective of securing energy resources essential for Italy's industrial and economic development, Enrico Mattei embarked on an ambitious international strategy that took shape between 1955 and 1956. Well-determined to reduce Italy's dependence on the prominent Anglo-American oil companies, which had traditionally supplied the country's crude oil, Mattei directed ENI towards a bold expansion abroad. This effort actually began in Egypt and soon extended to Iran, where, as this thesis aims to demonstrate, ENI was able to establish a solid presence. The groundwork for this success had been laid years earlier, during the Anglo-Persian crisis, when Italian entrepreneurs cultivated valuable business relationships that would later facilitate Mattei's negotiations. Against the backdrop of increasing tensions among oil-producing nations, ENI's engagement in Iran marked a turning point in Italy's energy diplomacy, by preparing the ground for a new model of economic cooperation in the world.

The already introduced *Treaty on Trade, Establishment, and Navigation* between Italy and Iran signed in Tehran on January 26, 1955, laid the foundation for future economic exchanges between the two countries. While this treaty facilitated economic cooperation and mutual tariff concessions, it was ultimately Enrico Mattei who effectively

opened the Iranian market to Italian industries. Following a series of private negotiations, he successfully managed to secure the first major economic agreement between Italy and Iran. Signed on August 3, 1957, in Tehran, the oil agreement between ENI and the *National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC)* was made possible due to the personal trust of Shah Reza Pahlavi. After several meetings and discussions with Mattei, the Shah personally endorsed the agreement, marking what could be definitely considered the first real success of Italy's new neo-Atlanticist strategy. This agreement was the first in a series of groundbreaking deals that ENI would later establish with other oil-producing nations.

More specifically, Enrico Mattei's initial engagement with the Iranian government began in mid-1955, likely during the Fourth World Petroleum Congress organized in Rome in June 6-17, 1955. Yet, negotiations between company executives only took shape in 1956 when Emanuele Floridia, the managing director of the company "STIO", submitted to the attention of Enrico Mattei a cooperation proposal coming from Iranian authorities. They suggested the establishment of joint ventures between Italian and Iranian partners for oil exploration in areas not yet controlled by major Western consortia. The terms of the draft agreement with the Iranians included a 50/50 partnership between ENI and an Iranian entity, joint exploration rights, equal division of royalties, the right of Italy to export its share of oil, and tax exemptions for Italian operations in Iran.<sup>90</sup>

Floridia accordingly informed Mattei that this offer was exclusive to ENI for a period of 15 days, after which it would be extended to other Italian firms if ENI did not respond. At that point, Mattei immediately confirmed his interest and ensured that no other Italian company would be involved. On August 8, 1956, a delegation of ENI experts, represented by Floridia, departed for Tehran to further evaluate the proposal. The team included also specialists from *Agip Mineraria* – which had been established as a specialized division of AGIP focusing on the exploration and exploitation of non-oil mineral resources (i.e. coal, minerals) – and *SNAM* – an Italian energy infrastructure company –, each assigned to assess different aspects of the potential agreement with Iran, including geological surveys, legal frameworks, and political risks. Upon their arrival in Tehran, the Iranian government introduced new precise conditions to the agreement. Notably, Iran proposed expanding the exploration area from 1.000 to 20.000 square miles, significantly increasing ENI's potential access to oil reserves.

However, Iran also demanded a lump sum payment of 20 million dollars, an annual fee of 1 million dollars for ten years as well as a mandatory investment of 500.000 per year

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<sup>90</sup> Ilaria Tremolada, *La via italiana al petrolio. L'ENI di Enrico Mattei in Iran (1951-1958)*, p. 192.

for eight years. Such unexpected financial demands concerned the Italian delegation visiting Tehran, which initially considered them excessive. After lengthy negotiations, two official documents were signed nonetheless: firstly, a concession agreement defining the exploration zones, which now covered over 35.000 square kilometers in the Northern Persian Gulf, Abadeh region, and over the coastal areas along the Indian Ocean; secondly, a confidential agreement, outlining payments by the ENI subsidiary *Società Azionaria Italiana Perforazioni E Montaggi (SAIPEM)* – lit. *the Drilling and Assembly Italian Public Limited Company* – to Iranian intermediary Ahmed Maybud as a commission. The latter was the Iranian government official responsible for managing the country's oil affairs.

As the agreement evolved, ENI negotiated more favorable terms with Iran. In October 1956, Mattei personally participated in a second round of negotiations in Rome, alongside Maybud and Iranian Minister Manouchehr Eghbal. During this meeting, Iran agreed to reduce its financial demands, including lower minimum spending requirements for exploration, equal cost-sharing for production operations (50/50 split), and halving of the commission owed to Maybud. Italian calculations estimated that these revisions saved ENI approximately 28 million dollars compared to the original Iranian demands. Mattei justified the investment by arguing that acquiring oil reserves in Iran was still more cost-effective than purchasing equivalent supplies in Europe. With the revised terms in place, ENI required then a final authorization from the Italian government to conclude the deal.

At this stage, Mattei took personal charge of securing political approval, meeting with representatives of Antonio Segni's government and emphasizing the economic and geopolitical benefits of Italy's involvement in Iran; his persistent lobbying efforts ensured that the agreement moved forward, solidifying Italy's presence in the Persian Gulf. Therefore, the Italian government recognized the strategic value of the Iranian deal to the extent that a high-level meeting attended by Prime Minister Antonio Segni, Finance Minister Giulio Andreotti, Treasury Minister Giuseppe Medici, and Industry Minister Guido Cortese resulted in the approval of ENI's investment plan, allocating over 280 million dollars, with 2 million specifically earmarked for the Iranian agreement.

Despite strong opposition from American interest groups, the deal was successfully concluded, paving the way for promising economic developments for Italy in Iran. It is important to consider that this issue coincided with the arrival in Rome of the new American ambassador, Mrs. Clare Boothe Luce – whose figure has been already introduced in the second chapter of this thesis – who officially took office in Italy in April 1953. Her persuasive daily reports convinced the U.S. Department of State that Mattei's rise and ENI's expansion posed a serious threat to the prevailing balance of power, which,

in their view, was safeguarded only by the continued dominance of the Christian Democrats in government – a political stability they deemed necessary to maintain in Italy. A lengthy secret memorandum prepared by the U.S. Embassy in Rome in December 1954, titled “Enrico Mattei and the ENI” further shed light on these concerns.<sup>91</sup>

Furthermore, Mattei-led ENI’s proposal, which was met with resistance from the international oil consortium, introduced a new profit-sharing model that was more favorable to producing countries. This marked a break from the dominance of the so-called *Seven Sisters* – the seven major oil companies that controlled the global petroleum market under the rule of a 50/50 profit-sharing model. Established by the international consortium in 1954 following Mossadeq’s fall, this model allocated half of the petroleum sale proceeds to these companies while leaving only the remaining half to the producing nations, including Iran, thus representing a major setback for the Iranian long-standing aspirations to nationalize its oil resources. In contrast, ENI’s proposal went beyond the conventional arrangement by adding an additional 25% to the producing country’s share.

This was a key feature that became known as the “Mattei Formula”, marking an innovative approach which not only granted Iran a greater share of its oil revenues but also challenged the whole established dominance of the Western oil giants, signaling a shift in power dynamics within the global petroleum industry.<sup>92</sup> In essence, Mattei fundamentally altered the traditional fifty-fifty profit-sharing agreements in the oil industry, increasing the share allocated to the producing countries to 75%, while ENI retained only 25%. By doing so, he granted producing nations significantly greater control over their own energy resources. This groundbreaking approach recognized oil-producing countries not merely as suppliers of raw materials but as equal partners in the exploration, extraction, and refining of hydrocarbons. The core innovation of such a formula basically lies in the emphasis put on partnership rather than on subordination.

Unlike the dominant model imposed by Western oil giants, which limited the role of producing nations to passive recipients of royalties, Mattei’s framework enabled them to actively participate in the entire oil production process. Once an oil or natural gas deposit was discovered by ENI, the host country engaged in its development through joint ventures, where national entities collaborated directly with the Italian company in both extraction and refining operations. This formula can be seen as a direct response to the increasing demands of producing countries for greater sovereignty over their natural

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<sup>91</sup> Ilaria Tremolada, *La via italiana al petrolio. L’ENI di Enrico Mattei in Iran (1951-1958)*, pp. 176-77.

<sup>92</sup> Elisabetta Bini, *La potente benzina italiana: guerra fredda e consumi di massa tra Italia, Stati Uniti e terzo mondo (1945-1973)*, pp. 174-80.

resources. By fostering a model of cooperation rather than exploitation, Mattei not only challenged the dominance of the *Seven Sisters* but, above all, built the basis for a more balanced relationship between oil-producing nations and foreign energy companies.

As president of ENI, Mattei, after failing to secure a position for Italy within the international consortium, turned to other oil-producing nations, offering them an alternative to the traditional oil royalties system. Such a system, which allowed companies to control the quantity and price of crude oil extracted in the Middle East, granted them significant influence over the economic and political stability of producer countries. Iran was a prime example of this influence; while the Shah had been advocating for increased oil extraction since early 1956, the Suez Canal crisis contributed to a further decline in sales, exacerbating Iran's economic difficulties, which were closely tied to oil revenues. The ENI-NIOC agreement was not only a valuable economic opportunity for Italy, which aimed at developing its industry through direct access to energy resources and allowed it to build strong political ties but also held great significance for Iran as well.

The first agreement to introduce the Mattei formula in the Middle East was precisely this one; for the first time, a foreign oil company established a true partnership with a producing country. Under the contract, a joint venture was created and named the *Société Irano-Italienne des Pétroles (SIRIP)*, which would only share in the expenses in the event of a successful oil discovery. The Iranian state was guaranteed 50% of the oil revenues, while the remaining 50% was split equally between the Italian and Iranian companies. The agreement also entailed the transfer of *Agip Mineraria's* technical personnel to Iran, along with the necessary equipment and expertise for oil exploration and extraction. This not only facilitated technology transfer and capacity building within Iran's energy sector but also strengthened diplomatic and economic ties between the two nations.

Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who had returned to power following the 1953 coup d'état orchestrated by the CIA and MI6 to overthrow the nationalist government led by Premier Mohammad Mossadeq, showed strong personal support for such an agreement with Mattei. It may be argued that it provided him with an opportunity to act in a way that could somehow restore Iran's political independence as well. The Shah saw the deal as a symbolic step towards strengthening Iran's sovereignty; in fact, the country's heavy reliance on oil revenues, controlled by foreign royalties, had long influenced Iran's political landscape, ensuring that economic and strategic interests remained aligned with those of major Western powers. For this reason, he unequivocally supported the agreement

with Mattei and reassured Giardini, the Italian ambassador to Tehran, that “no opposition, from whatever source it may come, would change his mind on this issue”.<sup>93</sup>

For Mattei, this initiative fit into the broader framework of Italy’s Middle Eastern policy. Having emerged from the colonial experience of the fascist era as a defeated Axis power, Italy sought to restore its credibility in the Mediterranean and the Middle East by positioning itself as the previously analyzed bridging nation – the “bridge role” it aspired to – and as a privileged interlocutor in the region. Beyond geopolitical ambitions, economic imperatives further reinforced this approach, as maintaining good relations with raw material suppliers was crucial for sustaining Italian industry and making energy diplomacy a key component of national strategy. He himself openly defended this vision during a visit to Paris in November 1957. Speaking at a conference at the *Centre d’Études de Politique Étrangère*, he vigorously justified both the financial and political rationale behind the innovative oil partnership model introduced by his formula.

He emphasized that “in a capital market that is almost everywhere subjected to strong pressure, obtaining funds constitutes a problem and a burden that becomes more serious the more the distribution of profits moves away, in favor of governments, from the classic 50/50”. In simpler terms, as producing countries secured a greater share of revenues, foreign companies faced increasing challenges in securing investment. Mattei explained that under this new model, a partnership between a foreign oil company and a local national company not only ensured a more balanced distribution of profits but also enabled the producing country to actively participate in industry financing. This was achieved through capital contributions and the reinvestment of profits, ensuring that oil-rich nations were no longer passive recipients of royalties but rather stakeholders with a vested interest in the success of the enterprise.

He further underscored that oil “is a political resource *par excellence*”, stressing the necessity of leveraging it for the common good rather than for the benefit of a selected few. To this end, he advocated for policies “as free as possible from imperialistic and colonialist reminiscences” and, instead, aimed at fostering “peace, the well-being of those who possess that resource as a gift from nature, and of those who use it by force of their industry”.<sup>94</sup> Although, as previously noted, the U.S. Department of State and the American embassy in Rome interpreted Mattei’s actions through the lens of the Cold War – viewing them not only as a direct challenge to U.S. policies in the Middle East but also as a potential

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<sup>93</sup> Massimo Bucarelli, “All’origine della politica energetica dell’ENI in Iran: Enrico Mattei e i negoziati per gli accordi petroliferi in Iran del 1957,” *Nuova Rivista Storica* 94, no. 2 (2010): p. 31.

<sup>94</sup> Bruna Bagnato, *L’Italia e la guerra d’Algeria (1954-1962)* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2012), pp. 321-22.

manifestation of neutralist politics – ENI pursued a nuanced strategy, regardless. It positioned itself as a staunch anti-Communist force in the eyes of the United States, as an autonomous player in oil-producing nations, and as a symbol of anti-Americanism to the Soviet Union. This carefully calibrated approach allowed the Italian State Oil Corporation to establish a significant presence in both Communist and non-aligned countries.

It perfectly matched the broader strategy championed by President Giovanni Gronchi in his diplomatic engagements abroad and at home. Mattei's efforts through ENI provided the economic foundation for a more independent Italian presence in the Middle East. This landmark agreement between ENI and NIOC, signed just a month before the official visit that Gronchi had paid to Tehran on September 7-12, 1957, further accentuated Italy's diplomatic ambitions in the region. This well exemplifies the synergy between the Italian President and ENI's chairman in Iran, where economic and political interests intertwined under the umbrella of neo-Atlanticism reflecting a shared vision of Italy as an assertive actor on the international stage, capable of negotiating partnerships that prioritized mutual benefits over traditional spheres of influence. The following sections will explore how Enrico Mattei continued to reinforce this pragmatic approach through policies consistently designed to boost strong and lasting ties with oil-producing actors as well as will continue to show how it complemented Gronchi's geopolitical aspirations.

### **3.3 The “Mattei Formula” in North Africa: ENI's challenge to Western oil hegemony**

From the second half of the 1950s, ENI extended the “Mattei Formula” to countries such as Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, integrating its policies into a more comprehensive geopolitical framework which involved post-colonial North Africa, France, and the United States. These efforts aimed at shaping the region's international positioning within the Cold War and Mediterranean affairs. After gaining independence in 1956, Tunisia and Morocco sought international economic support to boost productivity and reduce France's lingering influence; both countries embraced the rhetoric of economic development to secure foreign aid, taking advantage of their strategic location as gateways between Europe and Africa. Their independence was encouraged by the United States, which supported their nationalist aspirations since the 1943 Casablanca Conference and, by 1957, provided both military and economic assistance to integrate them into the Western bloc.

Throughout the 1960s, American initiatives, such as USAID-backed agricultural programs – the *United States Agency for International Development* – strengthened U.S. involvement. Meanwhile, France responded by promoting its own development policies in North Africa to counterbalance American influence. In 1957, it established the

*Organisation de Coopération et des Recherches Sahariennes (O CRS)*, encompassing parts of Algeria, Chad, French Sudan, Niger, and Mauritania. Such an initiative tried to safeguard French economic interests in the event of Algeria gaining independence; to strengthen this position, France ensured that the 1962 Évian Accords granted it strategic control over Algeria's hydrocarbons, including preferential access for six years. Amid this French and also American involvement, Morocco and Tunisia, along with Algeria, sought alternative partners for economic development under more favorable terms.

By the late 1950s, in particular, Morocco and Tunisia turned to Italy and, more exactly, to ENI. During an official visit to Rome in 1957, King Mohammed V of Morocco officially requested Italian support and met Mattei in Florence during a series of Mediterranean talks which were organized by the Mayor Giorgio La Pira. Here it is worth briefly examining this intriguing figure, as La Pira was a key proponent of neo-Atlanticism alongside President Gronchi, Minister Fanfani, and Enrico Mattei. His perspective was rooted in two fundamental beliefs; first, that Italy had its "own historical vocation and mission as a leader of young nations", and second, that the only true interlocutors for a foreign policy aligned with this vision were Gronchi and Fanfani themselves.<sup>95</sup> This idea materialized precisely through the diplomatic initiative of the Mediterranean talks.

These meetings aimed at defining a foreign policy path that would enhance Italy's international standing without jeopardizing its alliances with Atlantic and European partners; at the same time, it sought to resist the demands for European solidarity imposed by powers such as Great Britain and, in this case, France mainly in their Mediterranean strategy. This round of talks eventually resulted in Mattei's visit to Morocco, leading to an economic mission that included representatives from ENI, *Ilva* and *Finsider* – two Italian companies working in the steel sector –, and *Ansaldo* – one of Italy's oldest engineering companies – alongside some agricultural experts. Beyond hydrocarbon exploration, Italy saw an opportunity to support Morocco's economic growth through natural resource extraction and agricultural modernization as well. Morocco considered the Italian nation as a model for development, drawing parallels between its own economic struggles and the Italian industrialization efforts on the issue of *Mezzogiorno*.

The latter was, moreover, particularly relevant for ENI, given its contribution to the "struggle" against the economic depression of Southern Italy, which materialized through the construction of large industrial complexes – whose activities are still considerable

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<sup>95</sup> Antonio Varsori and Federico Mazzei, *Giovanni Gronchi e la politica estera italiana*, pp. 70-1.

nowadays – such as the Site of National Interest in Gela, Sicily.<sup>96</sup> In 1956, a Moroccan delegation visited Italian industrial sites and the Milan Trade Fair, expressing interest in Italy's economic policies, particularly the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno*. This growing cooperation reflected Italy's broader vision of the Mediterranean as a shared space for European-African collaboration. Within this context, in 1958, ENI established the *Société Anonyme Marocaine et Italienne des Pétroles (SAMIP)* for hydrocarbon exploration in southern Morocco. The following year, it launched two additional joint ventures.

The first one was the *Société anonyme marocaine-italienne de raffinage (SAMIR)*, tasked with building a refinery in the port city of Mohammedia on the west coast, and the second one was *Agip Casablanca*, which developed a network of service stations and motels. The refinery aimed at supplying Morocco with petroleum products, thus reducing its reliance on French imports, while also exporting crude oil to Italy and Western Europe. It became ENI's first refining facility in North Africa and processed oil sourced from Egypt, Iran, and, to some extent, the Soviet Union. Consequently, France reacted against ENI's thriving influence in Morocco to the degree that the French embassy in Rome warned Mattei against challenging French interests in the region, while the French ambassador in Rome, Gaston Palewski, personally intervened with both Italian Prime Minister Adone Zoli and Mattei himself. French media also voiced concern; *Le Figaro* notably described Mattei's ventures as an attempt to “win the battle for oil in Morocco”.<sup>97</sup>

France feared that ENI could replicate its Iranian partnership model in North Africa. In response, it offered ENI a role within the OCRS, hoping to integrate the company into its sphere of influence. Yet, Mattei refused, maintaining ENI's independent course. Italy's collaboration with Morocco continued, or rather, extended even beyond the oil sector; in fact, a series of economic agreements led to the establishment of a FIAT mechanical workshop in Casablanca, support for the steel industry, agricultural mechanization, and the expansion of arms manufacturing. Italy also contributed to Morocco's educational development, funding a vocational school in Tangier, while increasing imports of Moroccan phosphates. Additionally, Italy played a role in developing even Moroccan television and co-producing films, therefore fostering cultural and economic ties.

What's more, the economic and technical aid provided by Italy, along with ENI's joint ventures, became integral to Morocco's five-year development plan. This partnership undoubtedly contributed to Morocco's industrialization, particularly after the late 1960s,

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<sup>96</sup> Enrico Mattei, *Scritti e discorsi 1945-1962*, pp. 975-77.

<sup>97</sup> Elisabetta Bini, *La potente benzina italiana: guerra fredda e consumi di massa tra Italia, Stati Uniti e terzo mondo (1945-1973)*, pp. 183.

when the Moroccan government assumed full control of *SAMIR*. In this broader context, Enrico Mattei's unexpected absence from the inauguration ceremony of the Mohammedia refinery in January 1962 became a striking episode. Contrary to all predictions, Mattei did not attend the event, a decision that led to multiple interpretations. Almost all explanations, however, pointed to the "strange discovery" made on the eve of his planned departure for Morocco – a screwdriver found in the engine of his personal aircraft, which was supposed to take him to Casablanca. Much debate surrounds this suspected sabotage, seen as a "dangerous warning" of rising opposition to ENI's North African strategy, an alarm intensified by Mattei's fatal plane crash just months later in October 1962.<sup>98</sup>

Following the steps undertaken by Morocco, also Tunisia aligned with ENI, not only because the Italian company treated oil-producing countries as partners but also because it recognized the state's role in economic development. This was evident in Tunisia's decision in 1959 to build a refinery at the end of a pipeline from Algeria's oil fields. The projects were to be led by the *Société Tunisienne de Raffinage* (with *Esso*, *Shell*, *Mobil*, and *Purfin*). Enrico Mattei's ENI offered Tunisia better conditions, by proposing a joint company to extract hydrocarbons, build a refinery, and also establish a network of service stations and motels. On this matter, the Tunisian newspaper *Le Petit Matin* described this deal as a key to Tunisia's fight against underdevelopment and a symbol of sovereignty, by saying that "ENI will take the lead in collaborating on the establishment of the crude oil refinery, a strategic asset for Tunisia".<sup>99</sup>

Recognizing that ENI's terms were more advantageous, *Esso* urged the U.S. government to pressure Tunisia toward free enterprise, while other oil companies emphasized the importance of private enterprise in economic development. Tunisia's Secretary of State for the Economy and Commerce, Ahmed Mestiri, highlighted the treaty's significance, emphasizing the Tunisian active role in managing its oil resources and technical participation. This agreement not only marked a turning point in Tunisia's economic strategy but also underscored its commitment to reducing reliance on former colonial powers. In this way, ENI completed the construction of the Biserta refinery in 1963 on the site of a former French military base, transforming a symbol of colonial occupation and foreign interference into an engine of national development. The refinery, capable of processing crude oil from Algeria and other sources, was a critical step in Tunisia's industrialization as well as energy independence.

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<sup>98</sup> Bruna Bagnato, *Petrolio e politica. Mattei in Marocco*, p. 319.

<sup>99</sup> Elisabetta Bini, *La potente benzina italiana: guerra fredda e consumi di massa tra Italia, Stati Uniti e terzo mondo (1945-1973)*, p. 184.

On this occasion, Tunisia integrated the refinery's inauguration into its independence celebrations, inviting leaders such as Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, Algeria's Ahmed Ben Bella, and Morocco's Hasan II, reinforcing solidarity among oil-producing nations. The presence of these leaders reflected the broader wave of pan-Arab cooperation and anti-imperialist sentiment that defined that era. The event was not just a technical milestone but also, above all, a political statement, demonstrating that North African states could control their natural resources and shape their own economic destinies. Like the Iranian and Moroccan cases, the collaboration with ENI, rather than Western oil majors, signaled a shift toward economic partnerships which prioritized national sovereignty over external corporate interests.

At the same time, Algeria's struggle for independence (1954-1962) heightened tensions in the region, complicating France's position and creating new opportunities for actors like Italy. Yet, ENI's presence in Algeria was more complex. After the discovery of significant oil and gas reserves in 1956, American, British, Italian, and German companies sought concessions. Certain Anglo-American companies engaged in clandestine dealings, by conducting "their shady business with the revolutionaries, bartering support for their movement in exchange for the promise of contracts", maneuvering behind the scenes to secure a foothold in the region's emerging oil industry even before Algeria gained independence.<sup>100</sup> However, France still retained control over exploration and extraction, linking energy resources to the Algerian War. Mattei himself secretly supported the National Liberation Front (FLN) with funds in exchange for potential future concessions, which led to threats from the French *Organisation de l'armée secrète (OAS)*.

Following the Évian Accords through which Algeria gained independence from France in July 1962, the newly established Algerian state sought to nationalize its resources with the creation of *Sonatrach* in 1963 in order to safeguard its national oil interests. By doing so, the first Algerian President Ben Bella pushed for the nationalization of the industrial enterprises which were still owned by France. Moreover, in 1964, as part of its wider efforts to assert autonomy over its energy sector, Algeria established a petrochemical training center, largely funded by the Soviet Union, to develop local expertise. That same year, the country inaugurated its first refinery, constructed by the *Société de la Raffinerie d'Alger*, a consortium which included the *Compagnie Française*

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<sup>100</sup> Alessandro Brogi, *A Question of Self-Esteem: The United States and the Cold War Choices of France and Italy, 1944-1958* (Londra: Praeger Publishers, 2002), p. 179.

*des Pétroles (CFP)*, *Esso*, *Mobil*, *BP*, the *Société Nationale de Recherche et d'Exploitation de Pétrole en Algérie (SN REPAL)*, and *Shell*.

But after Houari Boumédiène 1956 coup, Algeria renegotiated oil agreements, securing greater control and revenue. ENI, wary of Algeria's growing ties with the Soviet Union, sent a delegation to Algeria and chose not to propose a joint venture, fearing that such an arrangement might lead to demands for a 51% majority stake. Instead, the company sought to secure a concession, with the possibility – if successful – of allowing the North African state to become a co-owner alongside AGIP, holding equal control over the concessions. In addition to that, ENI aimed at constructing a refinery, purchasing natural gas, and conducting oil exploration, further solidifying its presence in the region.

However, Houari Boumédiène pursued a policy of nationalizing the oil industry, aiming at driving the country's economic development through extensive state intervention. In August 1965, *Sonatrach* sent a letter to ENI, stating that Algeria could not accept the Italian company's offer, as it “deprived Algeria of the legitimate share of profit that it should obtain from a natural wealth that belongs to it”.<sup>101</sup> The situation was further exacerbated by ENI's recent agreement with *Esso* to import natural gas from Libya, which triggered a strong reaction from the Algerian government, leading to the suspension of all cooperation between the two countries. From 1967 onwards, in the context of the Six-Day War, Algeria even adopted a way more aggressive approach.

Following the Tehran-Tripoli agreement negotiated in 1971 by the *Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)* members – which secured a 14% increase in oil prices and up to 55% in rent shares for Libya, Algeria, and Iraq – all nationalized assets were transferred to *Sonatrach*, a move that Boumédiène allegedly hailed as the decolonization of oil. Despite these shifts, ENI managed to maintain its position in North Africa, largely thanks to the policies it had implemented in oil-producing countries throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Later on, *Sonatrach* and ENI would have reached an agreement to construct a pipeline across the Mediterranean, linking Algeria to Sicily, to transport natural gas to Italy, though it was not officially inaugurated until 1983.

Also in this case, in light of decolonization and the geopolitical competition between France and the United States in North Africa, Enrico Mattei's initiatives were significantly supported – and, in many ways, facilitated – by President Giovanni Gronchi, whose diplomatic interactions with North African officials paved the way to the realization

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<sup>101</sup> Elisabetta Bini, *La potente benzina italiana: guerra fredda e consumi di massa tra Italia, Stati Uniti e terzo mondo (1945-1973)*, pp. 188-89.

of Mattei's objectives in the region, particularly Tunisia. In this regard, a notable example is his conversation with Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba in July 1960 – as previously reported in the second chapter of this thesis –, which served as a prelude to deepening bilateral cooperation between the two countries and clearly underscored Italy's emerging role as a cooperative partner. During their exchange, as analyzed, Bourguiba had emphasized the crucial importance of Italian technical expertise.

He had recognized that Italy, through ENI, could offer not only investment but also the skilled workforce essential to enhance the country's primary resources, such as oil and gas. In turn, Gronchi had acknowledged Tunisia's stabilizing role in Africa and its potential as a key regional leader. This diplomatic groundwork helped consolidate the basis for deeper cooperation between Tunisia and ENI, aligning seamlessly with Enrico Mattei's intentions of challenging the dominance of the traditional Western oil giants in the area. Mattei not only started partnerships with these emerging post-colonial states but even engaged with rival powers like the Soviet Union. As this thesis has already noted, Gronchi made history as the first Western head of state to officially visit the USSR, a trip that also anticipated agreements for *Fincantieri's* construction of oil tankers and discussions between Mattei and the Soviet government, culminating in the historic deal to purchase Soviet oil in exchange for Italian-made rubber and other materials.

### **3.4 Negotiations with the USSR: energy as a tool of East-West détente**

At the beginning of the 1960s, ENI explicitly challenged U.S. oil policies by signing an agreement with the Soviet Union to import crude oil in exchange for technical assistance. Under the terms of the deal, ENI would send rubber and steel beyond the Iron Curtain and contribute to the construction of a pipeline linking the Urals to East Germany, while Italy would receive oil supplies for five years. Enrico Mattei's decision was driven by the fact that Soviet crude oil was priced 40% lower than any other country or company, making it an economically attractive alternative. Mattei also leveraged the agreement as a strategic tool to challenge Anglo-American oil companies, pressuring them to offer more competitive pricing on the global market. To fully understand the context of this agreement, it is essential to consider the events leading up to it, most notably, the visit of an Italian delegation of technicians from *Châtillon* – or *Società Anonima Italiana per le Fibre Tessili Artificiali*, a subsidiary of the *Edison* group – to the Soviet Union.

First and foremost, on a commercial level, the Soviet Union and Italy had been working since 1957 – the year of their first four-year trade agreement – to establish the foundations for a gradual yet promising expansion of bilateral trade. Italian entrepreneurs

were highly interested in the vast potential of the Soviet market, seeing it as an almost limitless opportunity for exporting their products. At the same time, they faced intense competition from other Western nations, particularly West Germany, Great Britain, and France, which were also highly receptive to Khrushchev's calls for economic collaboration. An equally important issue had naturally emerged: the interplay between political and economic decisions. In other words, if trade relations with the Soviet Union had begun to follow a thaw with the endorsement of key political and administrative institutions in Italy, this could be seen as a significant indication of the Italian government's interest in fostering a broader détente with Moscow.

Both central authorities, such as the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, as well as peripheral entities, including the Italian Embassy in Moscow and its commercial consultancy office, played an active role in facilitating this economic rapprochement. Supporting this interpretation is the simple observation that economic relations would have been for easier to develop if political tensions had already been eased, creating the conditions for greater cooperation. It was precisely in this context that, at the end of March 1958, the Italian embassy in Moscow confidentially reported that "for obvious reasons of national and foreign competition", at the end of February, a group of Italian technicians had arrived in Moscow at the invitation of the Soviet organization *Teknoproimport*.<sup>102</sup> The Soviet managers had shown great interest in a specially prepared project for the construction of a complete plant in the USSR for the production of special artificial fiber fabrics, with a total value exceeding 10 billion *lira*.

While the prospects for this business seemed highly favorable for *Châtillon*, it was fundamental to consider the functioning of the existing trade agreement and, above all, the lack of interest shown by Italian importers in Soviet products, which risked stalling bilateral trade exchanges. Furthermore, it was noted that industries from other European countries, especially British firms, had shown great interest in this sector. In response, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs consulted the relevant ministries and agencies to assess whether they supported taking effective measures to facilitate the realization of this supply agreement. Both the Italian Ministry of Foreign Trade and the Ministry of Industry expressed their approval. As a result, on June 18, 1958, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs authorized the issuance of entry visas for a Soviet delegation composed of technological engineers and chemists from the Soviet chemical industry. Their visit to

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<sup>102</sup> Bruna Bagnato, *Prove di Ostpolitik: politica ed economia nella strategia italiana verso l'Unione Sovietica (1958-1963)*, p. 69.

Châtillon in Milan aimed at initiating negotiations on the purchase of technical documentation and equipment for the production of artificial fabrics for tires.

However, by the summer of 1958 – coinciding with the formation of the Fanfani government and the impending change of leadership at the Italian embassy in Moscow – the negotiations between the relevant Soviet bodies and *Châtillon* were not the only ones underway. In fact, on August 21, 1958, an eight-member ENI delegation invited by *Glavgaz* to tour Soviet hydrocarbon facilities and led by Professor Marcello Boldrini, who has been described as the “creator of Mattei as a man of ideas and as a politician”,<sup>103</sup> arrived in the USSR for a fifteen-day visit. During their stay, the delegation had the opportunity to inspect scientific research facilities in Moscow, gas fields in the Stavropol region, as well as oil extraction and refining plants in Baku and Leningrad. Boldrini expressed great satisfaction with the visit, noting the warm reception they received at every stop and highlighting the wealth of valuable technical insights gained from their thorough.

The Italian technicians informed the Italian embassy that they were struck by the vast scale of the gas and oil fields they had visited. Regarding the industrial facilities, they observed a stark contrast between cutting-edge equipment and outdated machinery, resulting in a non-homogeneous and somewhat irregular infrastructure. Nevertheless, they noted that the Soviet gas and oil industry was undergoing significant development and modernization, and within a few years, it could, in their view, become very efficient and even capable of competing with the United States. At the conclusion of the visit, Boldrini also engaged in discussions on commercial matters with representatives of Soviet organizations, by initiating negotiations for ENI’s import of a number of turbo-drilling rigs. In addition to that, a contract for the purchase of a substantial quantity of fuel oil was in the final stages of negotiation between the two parties.

ENI was particularly keen on securing a market in the Soviet Union for 50.000 tons of synthetic rubber produced at the *ANIC – Azienda Nazionale Idrogenazione Combustibili* – plant in Ravenna, Italy, and had already put forward proposals in this regard. That is the reason why it closely monitored the competition for access to the Russian market with a degree of apprehension. Mattei’s decision to sell such a substantial quantity of rubber to the Soviet Union was directly tied to the development program approved by the plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU, the USSR Communist Party; through this program, the Soviet government had set ambitious targets for expanding the chemical, plastics, artificial and synthetic fiber industries. In September 1958, when Mattei’s offices informed

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<sup>103</sup> Marcello Colitti, *ENI. Cronache dall’interno di un’azienda*, p. 123.

Palazzo Chigi of the presence of U.S. and Canadian delegations in the Soviet Union, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs promptly instructed the Italian embassy in Moscow to discreetly assess the prospects for the success of the Italo-Soviet negotiations.

Thus, the agreement between ENI and the Soviet Union was reached in November 1959, albeit the Italian government only disclosed the news about it in January 1960. Both the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the U.S. Department of State reacted immediately. In one of its weekly reports, the CIA highlighted the negative consequences that ENI's policies could have on American interests in Western Europe and the Middle East. The agency warned that the agreement "could pave the way for future relations with the bloc regarding the construction of pipelines and Italian bids for drilling facilities and technical assistance in exchange for oil".<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, according to the CIA, ENI could encourage the Italian government to establish a monopoly on crude oil imports, effectively excluding all international oil companies. This agreement triggered a strong reaction from the U.S. government, as also evidenced by a memorandum of conversation.

According to such memorandum dated November 3, 1960, the deal secured AGIP 11 million tons of crude at a cost of 80 million dollars, along with 1.5 million tons of low-sulfur fuel oil for an additional 21 million dollars. In return, AGIP committed to supplying the Soviet Union with synthetic rubber, pumps and pipeline materials, along with some other industrial equipment and diesel engines worth a total of 100 million dollars of bilateral trade. What's more, the memorandum warned that the undeniable ambition of Enrico Mattei to capitalize on the lower cost of Soviet crude to increase Italy's commercial presence in the Soviet market by selling industrial goods, technology, and services and to make ENI more competitive in the Western European energy market could "threaten to bring Italy into a dangerous position of subservience to the Iron Curtain block".<sup>105</sup>

The ENI-Soviet contract was even renewed in 1961 for an additional four years, providing the Soviet Union with the equipment needed for its chemical industry, as well as steel, rubber, and tanker trucks, in exchange for crude oil that would cover 14% of Italy's annual oil imports. The CIA expressed concern over ENI's contribution to the Soviet Seven-Year Plan and its role in enabling the USSR to "consolidate a tanker fleet [and] build pipelines to transport its oil to its European satellites".<sup>106</sup> The American

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<sup>104</sup> Elisabetta Bini, *La potente benzina italiana: guerra fredda e consumi di massa tra Italia, Stati Uniti e terzo mondo (1945-1973)*, p. 177.

<sup>105</sup> Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960, Western Europe, Volume VII, Part 2*. 281. *Memorandum of Conversation*, November 3, 1960.

<sup>106</sup> Elisabetta Bini, *La potente benzina italiana: guerra fredda e consumi di massa tra Italia, Stati Uniti e terzo mondo (1945-1973)*, p. 178.

concerns extended even beyond the Western bloc, as there was also the fear that the Soviet Union would use its relationship with ENI to refine its crude oil in countries where the Italian company was building refineries, namely Ghana, Morocco, and Tunisia.

One of the main fears of the United States was that by strengthening its position in oil-producing countries, the Soviet Union could become part of *OPEC*. Such a scenario would give the Soviets an extremely profitable position in influencing Middle Eastern governments that might lead to a deterioration in relations between those governments and Western oil companies. Moreover, according to the State Department, Soviet crude oil imports could harm North African oil-producing countries, making it more difficult for them to sell their own oil to Western Europe. Oil-producing countries themselves strongly opposed the agreements between ENI and the Soviet Union, fearing a general decline in crude oil prices. On the occasion of the Third Arab Petroleum Congress organized by the Secretariat General of the League of Arab States and held in 1961 in Alexandria, Egypt, Lebanese businessman Emile Bustani openly criticized ENI's policies.

He stated: "I am an Arab in the Arab world; I want my oil to have the highest price. For heaven's sake, you Italians, as our friends, as friends of the Arabs, do not damage your interests and at the same time ours".<sup>107</sup> Such a statement well reflected the anxiety among Arab nations that ENI's import of Soviet crude oil could undermine their economic interests. By purchasing oil from the USSR at more affordable prices, ENI was increasing competition in the global oil market and this was particularly alarming for Middle Eastern producing countries, as their economies heavily depended on oil revenues. Bustani's appeal clearly suggests a plea for Italy to align itself more closely with Arab producers rather than engaging in trade with Soviet suppliers. Arabs feared that Italy was inadvertently undermining their negotiation leverage with Western oil companies.

ENI's policies ultimately led the United States to seek an agreement with Mattei. In 1961, William Averell Harriman, President Kennedy's foreign policy advisor, met with Mattei to urge him to stop purchasing Soviet oil. During the meeting, ENI's president not only denounced the discriminatory practices of American oil companies against smaller firms like ENI but also argued that the United States failed to grasp the foresight of his policies. Mattei also maintained that ENI's objective was to keep oil-producing countries within the Western bloc. In 1962, the U.S. Department of State, still concerned about Italy's booming oil trade with the Soviet Union, intervened by urging representatives of

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<sup>107</sup> Robert E. Ebel, *Communist Trade in Oil and Gas: An Evaluation of the Future Export Capability of the Soviet Bloc* (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 75.

*Esso* – a major U.S. oil company which was originally the trading name for *Standard Oil of New Jersey (SONJ)* – to arrange a meeting with Enrico Mattei. As a result, in 1963, ENI and *Esso* reached a compromise aimed at reducing Italy's reliance on Soviet oil.

Such a compromise also secured a stable supply for ENI. Indeed, *Esso* agreed to supply ENI with 80 million barrels of crude oil from Libya over five years, which represented about 25% of ENI's total crude oil needs. In exchange, ENI provided *Esso* with key services and infrastructure, including pipelines, transportation, and oil refining at the *Ingolstadt* refinery, in Austria. Therefore, the agreement was seen as a win-win situation, as, on one side, it ensured that a significant portion of Italy's supply came from a Western-aligned producer rather than the Soviet Union, and, on the other side, it created a new commercial outlet for Libyan crude, helping *Esso* sell the hydrocarbons it extracted in North Africa. In this regard, Libya, which had formerly been an Italian colony, served as a strategic foothold for Italy, allowing it to reassert its presence in the Mediterranean region at a time when Rome was enjoying renewed international legitimacy.

Libya, which had been Italy's colony since 1911, had fallen under Allied control; in 1943, following the Italian defeat in WWII, British forces had occupied Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, while the French had taken control of Fezzan. By 1951 the UN General Assembly had decided that Libya would become an independent state, making it the first African country to gain independence through the United Nations. The new Libyan state unified Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan into the Kingdom of Libya, an independent constitutional monarchy led by King Idris I. Even though Italy had lost its historical colony, it still maintained strong economic and political ties with Libya. The Italian presence on Libyan soil was reinforced by *ASSEIL*, a network of distributors which was established in 1957 as one of the first oil companies in North Africa.

It was formed through the incorporation of the assets belonging to *Società Anonima Petroli Libia*, commonly known as *Petrolibia*, which had been created in 1939 by AGIP in collaboration with FIAT. This deep-rooted connection between Italy and the Libyan energy sector laid the groundwork for future strategic arrangements, including the above-mentioned 1963 compromise between ENI and *Esso*. Interestingly, *ASSEIL* was a joint venture between the Italian AGIP and private Libyan stakeholders, including approximately one hundred individuals, many of whom were members of the Libyan government. It established a series of service stations in Tripoli, later expanding its presence to the city of Benghazi as well, throughout the 1960s. To further develop local expertise, the company also sponsored training programs, by sending Libyan employees to Italy to attend courses on service station management.

Lastly, *ASSEIL* avoided emphasizing the Italian origins of its products or associating its operations with ENI's activities in Africa. Nevertheless, the presence of a substantial Italian community in Libya – comprising both those who had remained after the end of colonial rule and others who had arrived following the discovery of Libyan oil in the late 1950s – played a considerable role in facilitating *ASSEIL*'s establishment in the Libyan market. Many petrol advertisements were published in the “*Giornale di Tripoli*”, a daily newspaper primarily read by the Libyan bourgeoisie educated in Italian schools.<sup>108</sup> Additionally, some *ASSEIL* service stations were managed by Italians, often individuals who had lived in Libya since the colonial era. Overall, such dynamics not only reflected Italy's lingering economic footprint in Libya but also foreshadowed the renewed strategic interest in Africa that would continue to shape Italy's energy policy even decades later.

At any rate, the signing of the agreement between ENI and the Soviet government remains an undeniable achievement of true oil diplomacy – one that Mattei did not pursue alone, but was strongly endorsed by Gronchi. As previously noted in the subsection dedicated to the trip of the latter to the Soviet Union, it was under his leadership that the first Italo-Soviet cultural agreement was initially signed. Such an agreement aimed at regulating cultural exchanges across all sectors at an intergovernmental level, had been very well accepted by Italy in view of the fact that it could be an opportunity to limit the influence of cultural organizations linked to the Italian Communist Party (PCI).

It was precisely in the wake of the understanding that emerged from this agreement – and the general atmosphere created by the Italian president's visit to Moscow and Leningrad (despite being somewhat marred by Khrushchev's outburst during which he had ferociously criticized the capitalist system) – that Mattei strived to conclude the commercial agreement, that was undeniably facilitated by Giovanni Gronchi. It is as his official visit to Soviet soil further legitimized the economic partnership that was taking shape according to Mattei's intentions. In a way, Enrico Mattei acted as the true driving force behind Gronchi's neo-Atlanticist policy, under the safeguard and endorsement of the Italian President himself.

### **3.5 Reviving Mattei's legacy: the plan for Africa under the Meloni government**

The legacy of Enrico Mattei, the visionary entrepreneur behind Italy's national energy strategy, nowadays continues to shape Italy's approach to international economic

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<sup>108</sup> Elisabetta Bini, *La potente benzina italiana: guerra fredda e consumi di massa tra Italia, Stati Uniti e terzo mondo (1945-1973)*, pp. 227-30.

relations and energy diplomacy. His vision, which prioritized partnerships with resource rich-nations through a model of mutual benefit rather than neocolonial exploitation, still remains a point of reference for Italian foreign policy. Under the current government of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, this legacy has been revived in the context of a renewed Italian engagement with Africa, considerably through the “*Piano Mattei per l’Africa*” – *Mattei Plan for Africa* –, a policy initiative aimed at fostering energy cooperation, economic development, and infrastructural investment across the African continent.

The Meloni government, inaugurated in September 2022, has been placing a strong emphasis on recalibrating Italy’s role in Africa, making the most of the historical ties and Mattei’s precedent to assert the Italian nation as a reliable partner. This initiative seeks to position Italy as a key player in the European Union’s broader strategy towards Africa, by counterbalancing the increasing influence from China, Russia, as well as Gulf states. Central to the Mattei Plan is a multi-faceted approach that integrates energy security, investment in critical infrastructures, and diplomatic engagement, mirroring Mattei’s strategy of direct collaboration with African states rather than operating through intermediaries or ex-colonial powers. The plan began to take shape with the Legislative Decree No. 161 of November 2023 and was later converted into Law No. 2/2024, which formally established the “Mattei Plan for Development in the States of the African Continent”, defining its governance structure and implementation bodies.<sup>109</sup>

Diplomatically, Italy has been intensifying its outreach to African leaders, hosting summits and high-level meetings to reinforce bilateral cooperation, for instance the Italian-African summit held in Rome at Palazzo Madama on January 28-29, 2024, where, after the dinner hosted at the Quirinale by the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, Premier Giorgia Meloni presented the new Italian policy initiative towards the countries of the African continent. She addressed to the President of the African Union Azali Assoumani, the President of the African Union Commission Moussa Faki Mahamat, the President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola, former President of the European Council Charles Michel, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, and the Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations Amina Jane Mohammed.

On the occasion of such a summit, the Mattei Plan was presented to the counterparts as “a new philosophy of cooperation” of Italy: that of seeking a renewal of relations with

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<sup>109</sup> *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana*, no. 10 (January 13, 2024), Conversione in legge, con modificazioni, del decreto-legge 15 novembre 2023, n. 161, recante disposizioni urgenti per il «Piano Mattei» per lo sviluppo in Stati del Continente africano,” [https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/stampa/serie\\_generale/originario](https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/stampa/serie_generale/originario)

Africa that were centered not on a “predatory” approach, but rather on a “cooperation among equals” in setting up what was hoped to be a new phase – in both practical and symbolic terms – in the relations between Italy and Africa. The goal is to create the conditions for development in African countries by supporting greater dynamism in the involvement of and between Italian and African actors in the long term.<sup>110</sup> Giorgia Meloni, then, added that the plan is structured around five priority areas and key intervention sectors: education and training, healthcare, water, agriculture, and energy. This summit was the first international event held in Italy since the start of its G7 Presidency last year, highlighting the importance that Italy has placed on its partnership with African nations.

The Italian G7 Presidency has placed a strong focus on Africa in technical discussions, particularly regarding food security, the development of sustainable infrastructure – linking the Mattei Plan to some Group of Seven’s initiatives, such as the collaborative effort known as *Partnership on Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII)* and the European Union’s *Global Gateway*, strategies to counter China’s *Belt and Road Initiative* – as well as supporting entrepreneurship and women’s empowerment in Africa. Numerous African guests were invited to the cycle of ministerial meetings that took place in a series of Italian cities before and after the high-level event which culminated in the three-days summit gathering the heads of state last June in Borgo Egnazia, Puglia.

In short, the current Italian government has given Africa a prominent role in its foreign policy. Prime Minister Meloni has repeatedly mentioned the Mattei Plan since her election campaign and, during her mandate, has held numerous bilateral meeting with African leaders. She has also undertaken official visits to Ethiopia, Mozambique, the Republic of the Congo, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. In July 2023, the Italian government organized the International Conference on Development and Migration, conceived as part of an international cooperation process to combat irregular migration, which got to be known as the “Rome Process” and is based on the principles of cooperation, inclusivity, and mutual respect between all participating countries.<sup>111</sup>

A total of 5.5 billion euro has been allocated to the plan, with 3 billion euro coming from the Italian Climate Fund and 2.5 billion euro from development cooperation resources. Specific financial instruments have been developed, including grants,

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<sup>110</sup> Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, “Italia-Africa. Un ponte per una crescita comune”, Governo Italiano, January 29, 2024, <https://www.governo.it/it/articolo/italia-africa-un-ponte-una-crescita-comune/24851>.

<sup>111</sup> Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, “International Conference on Development and Migration Conclusions”, Governo Italiano, July 23, 2023, <https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/international-conference-development-and-migration-be-held-rome-commitments-and-shared>.

guarantees, and credit operations. Some of these instruments are channeled through governments, others through businesses, and some follow a hybrid approach. The plan is being implemented through a series of pilot projects, some identified from the outset and others introduced in the following months, across nine countries: four in North Africa (namely Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia) and five in Sub-Saharan Africa (Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Mozambique, Republic of the Congo).

The initial selection of countries focused on those with already established relations with Italy, primarily in the Mediterranean region. Meanwhile, other areas, particularly West Africa – an important region for the Italian strategic interests – are less represented, with the Ivory Coast currently the only partner in that area. However, in line with the incremental logic that animates the plan, projects, sectors of intervention, and partner countries may expand over time, based on Italian initiatives and the interest expressed by African nations. From this perspective, the plan follows a bottom-up approach which brings together various initiatives, resulting in a diverse composition in terms of proposed actions and the actors involved, both on the Italian side and that of the African countries.

Rome has been paying close attention to the potential impact of African dynamics on Italy, due to its geographical proximity and, especially, concerning migration. At the same time, Italy given this neighboring position amounts to a potential connector between Africa and Europe, a concept that has been historically illustrated with the metaphor of a “bridge” between the two continents. This same metaphor was used by Alcide De Gasperi himself when arguing Italy’s blend of geographic location, political ties, religious heritage, historical legacy, and cultural influences which naturally positions it as a connection between Western European civilization and the diverse traditions of the Mediterranean. This role not only has enhanced Italy’s international standing as a whole, particularly within Europe, but also has had tangible implications, notably in the energy sector.

As a major energy importer, Italy has increasingly invested in developing a more interconnected Mediterranean energy landscape. In this context, its current energy ambitions include two key projects that reinforce its strategic role as a Mediterranean energy hub and can also be viewed through an anti-Russian lens. This is particularly relevant in light of ongoing European efforts to reduce dependence on Russian energy – a priority which became even more urgent following Russia’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In this regard, investments in energy infrastructure, especially for transporting natural gas from North African countries, have taken on a geopolitical dimension, underpinning Italy’s broader strategy for diversification and security.

Infrastructure, in fact, plays a cross-cutting role across the five previously mentioned priority areas of the Mattei Plan described by Premier Meloni.

The first project is given by the Italy-Tunisia power interconnection named *ELMED*, a new trans-Mediterranean energy interconnection currently under development. This submarine electricity cable – co-financed by the European Union – is supposed to extend between the Partanna electrical station in Sicily and the Mlaabi station on the Tunisian peninsula of Cap Bon, covering a total length of approximately 220 kilometers – around 200 km of which will be laid underwater – and with a capacity of 600 MW to reach a minimum depth of about 800 meters along the Sicily Channel. In this way, it would link the Italian and Tunisian power grids, enhancing energy security while enabling the integration of renewable energy from North Africa into the European markets. By doing so, the project reduces dependence on fossil fuels and strengthens Italy’s role as a key transit country for electricity flows between Africa and Europe.

This is an electrical interconnection that has already been authorized by the Italian Ministry of the Environment and Energy Security, as stated in a ministerial decree issued in 2024.<sup>112</sup> It is expected to be completed by mid-2028, with a total investment of nearly 850 million euro. The project has been designated as a “Project of Common Interest” by the European Commission itself and, interestingly, marks the first time that Brussels has financed a project in which one of the participating countries is not part of the EU-27 members.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, out of the total investment for the project, which will be carried out by *Terna* – the Italian company responsible for managing the national electricity transmission grid – and the *Société Tunisienne de l’Électricité et du Gaz (STEG)*, the sum of 307 million euro has been allocated by the European Commission through the EU funding programme *Connecting Europe Facility (CEF-Energy)*.

Meanwhile, the *Hydrogen South Corridor*, also known as the *SouthH2 Corridor*, represents another crucial initiative, aiming at transporting green hydrogen produced in North Africa towards Europe through Italy. A “Joint Declaration of Intent” was recently signed in Rome by representatives from Germany, Algeria, Italy, Austria, and Tunisia to

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<sup>112</sup> Ministero dell’Ambiente e della Sicurezza Energetica, Decreto n. 239/EL-532/404/2024, Dipartimento Energia – Ex Direzione Generale Infrastrutturale e Sicurezza, Dipartimento Sviluppo Sostenibile – Ex Direzione Generale Valutazioni Ambientali, 2024.

<sup>113</sup> “Dal Mase via libera al collegamento elettrico ‘Elmed’ tra Italia e Tunisia”, *QualEnergia*, May 16, 2024, <https://chatgpt.com/c/67b861b6-0dc0-800b-97d1-6aaf47ded73f>.

support this plan which envisions the creation of a 3.500-4.000 km pipeline.<sup>114</sup> As of now, it is a project of common interest of the European Union only up to Sicily, but the Italian Minister of Environment and Energy Security, Gilberto Pichetto Fratin, has expressed the “hope” that it will receive funding from the afore-mentioned *Connecting Europe Facility* to further support its future development.<sup>115</sup> This long-term vision aligns with the overall objectives of the Mattei Plan, by evaluating the possibility of upgrading the existing *Transmed* submarine gas pipeline, which was inaugurated in 1983 following the agreement reached between ENI and *Sonatrach* to transfer the Algerian natural gas to Italy, as it has been already explained in the third section of this chapter.

In other words, the Mattei Plan not only supports the *Hydrogen South Corridor*’s project but also actively promotes its extension to Tunisia, by upgrading existing infrastructure and strengthening the energy cooperation by involving Tunisian companies, research centers, and universities “for the benefit of skills transfer”.<sup>116</sup> Both projects, therefore, reflect the core principles of the Mattei Plan and Italy’s geopolitical and economic initiative aimed at fostering mutually beneficial partnerships with African nations, notably in the energy sector. While the Mattei Plan does not explicitly dictate these projects, its overarching philosophy – focused on supporting development – resonates with Italy’s Mediterranean strategy. Much like Enrico Mattei’s vision of diversifying energy sources while positioning Italy as an intermediary between producers and consumers, such initiatives manifestly reaffirm the Italian nation’s commitment to both energy security and sustainable development in an evolving geopolitical scenario.

The recent agreement signed in Maputo, Mozambique, for the construction and equipping of the Manica agri-food center is one more exemplifying instance of the implementation of the Mattei Plan, demonstrating Italy’s commitment to fostering sustainable development, food security, and economic inclusion in Africa. More specifically, it aims at developing and equipping a center in the Mozambican province of Manica, which is supposed to serve as a regional hub for the processing and distribution of agricultural products. Such a project, valued at 38 million euro, is funded by the Italian

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<sup>114</sup> “Corridoio Sud dell’Idrogeno, Italia Ponte Energetico tra Nord Africa e Cuore dell’Europa”, *AGI*, January 22, 2025, <https://www.agi.it/maeci/it/news/2025-01-22/corridoio-sud-idrogeno-italia-ponte-energetico-nord-africa-cuore-europa-29684102/>.

<sup>115</sup> Alessandro Pulcini, “Idrogeno, l’Italia e i partner accelerano sul SouH2 Corridor: ecco cos’è”, *Fortune Italia*, January 21, 2025, <https://www.fortuneita.com/2025/01/21/idrogeno-litalia-e-i-partner-accelerano-sul-south2-corridor-ecco-cose/>.

<sup>116</sup> “Mission to Tunis for Mattei Plan Project on Green Hydrogen”, *ANSA English*, July 22, 2024, [https://ansabrazil.com.br/english/news/news\\_from\\_embassies/2024/07/22/mission-to-tunis-for-mattei-plan-project-on-green-hydrogen\\_f37cda2f-19ce-4fec-bfe7-e145739aecf6.html?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://ansabrazil.com.br/english/news/news_from_embassies/2024/07/22/mission-to-tunis-for-mattei-plan-project-on-green-hydrogen_f37cda2f-19ce-4fec-bfe7-e145739aecf6.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and is also expected to support the inclusion of women and youngsters in the local business landscape.<sup>117</sup> Another example is given by Italy's contribution to the realization of the Lobito Corridor.

The latter is a major infrastructure system, a 1.300 km railway artery that will connect Angola to Zambia via the Democratic Republic of the Congo, an ambitious project involving multiple sectors and creating opportunities for Italian businesses. Italy confirmed its support to it, approving a maximum allocation of 320 million euro. These funds, announced during the last G7 summit, are part of the Mattei Plan, an integral part of the afore-mentioned *PGII* and the *Global Gateway* program, which aims at mobilizing up to 300 billion euro in public and private investments between 2021 and 2027.

Last but not least, Italy has established a strong synergy with the United States in Eastern Africa as well, particularly in Kenya. Under the Biden administration, the partnership with Nairobi was thought that could help revive the struggling African policy of the White House and enable the U.S. to take on a greater regional and continental role in Africa, particularly in light of recent developments in Niger, where in July 2023 a group of military officers overthrew President Bazoum in a coup, entailing the growth of the Russian influence in the region and with Russian forces taking over bases which were formerly used by the American and French troops. In Kenya two projects under the Mattei Plan are currently taking shape in the renewable energy sector: the first one focuses on developing the biofuels supply chain, aiming at the involvement of around 400.000 farmers, and the second one concerns geothermal energy production.

In this way, the Italian government appears to have set the framework for the Italian public and private sectors to collaborate, even in regions of Africa where Italy has not traditionally been active. What is particularly noteworthy is Italy's emerging leadership role – one that has historically been dominated by France, a country whose reputation in Africa has significantly declined in recent years, mostly due to the resentment over the French past policies in its former colonies. Italy, by contrast, has been positioning itself as a more neutral and pragmatic partner by means of the Mattei Plan which offers an alternative approach that aligns with the evolving priorities of African nations seeking new economic opportunities beyond traditional European powers. Such a strategy not only boosts Italy's diplomatic standing in Africa but also bolsters its role within the geopolitical landscape, in relation to the EU's Africa policy and transatlantic cooperation with the U.S.

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<sup>117</sup> Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, "Piano Mattei per l'Africa, Mozambico: firma dell'Accordo per il CAAM", Governo Italiano, July 8, 2024, <https://www.governo.it/it/articolo/piano-mattei-lafrica-mozambico-firma-dellaccordo-il-caam/26190>.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this thesis have revealed some important aspects related to Italy's post-war international positioning and the intertwined role of Giovanni Gronchi and Enrico Mattei in shaping a distinct and autonomous foreign policy. Their strategic vision and ambitions, rooted in the principles of neo-Atlanticism, redefined Italy's engagement beyond the rigid constraints of Cold War alliances, illustrating how political and energy diplomacy could serve as complementary tools to enhance national sovereignty and global influence. The synergy between Gronchi's diplomatic agenda and Mattei's energy diplomacy exemplifies how foreign policy and economic imperatives can intersect to redefine a nation's role in the global order. Their initiatives, while quite arguable, laid the foundations for Italy's engagements in the Mediterranean, Middle East, and beyond.

Giovanni Gronchi's presidency marked a critical moment in Italy's diplomatic evolution, as he sought to balance the country's loyalty to the Atlantic alliance with a more independent and proactive toward emerging global actors. His foreign policy initiatives aimed at fostering closer ties with non-aligned world, while simultaneously leveraging Italy's position within NATO to advocate for a broader and more inclusive international dialogue. This nuanced stance, though often met with skepticism from Italy's Western allies, underscored Gronchi's commitment to positioning Italy as a bridge between East and West, a role that would later resonate in the broader Mediterranean vocation and strategy which unavoidably reframed the Italian diplomatic identity during the Cold War and laid the groundwork for a more diversified foreign policy in the decades to come.

Giovanni Gronchi undoubtedly emerges as a pivotal figure in the study of Italy's political system in the post-war period. His institutional role accompanied the early years of a Republic that was constantly questioning its international positioning and geopolitical alignment. At the same time, however, Gronchi's figure has also been subject to controversy, particularly concerning the series of certain diplomatic missions he personally undertook and that this thesis has been focused on. His trip to the Soviet Union had a paradoxical effect on his image: it was striking that a pro-Atlantic president visited the USSR, especially given the infamous outburst of Khrushchev during the visit. Nevertheless, the bilateral dialogue between the two governments remained open, sustained by the development of mutually beneficial economic relations.

From a more strictly political perspective, the notable aspiration to strengthen the directive power and intervention capacity of the presidency – which this thesis has framed as presidential diplomacy by examining Gronchi's most meaningful trips abroad – can be seen as a response to the crisis of centrism that had emerged in 1953. Such a crisis was

sparked by the elections which dealt a blow to the Christian Democrats, as they saw their share of the vote declined. Therefore, Gronchi's international project should not be regarded as a mere occasional foray into foreign affairs, but rather as a deliberate strategy shaped by his reading of Italy's internal political crisis. This, eventually, led to his opening towards the left, as a way to stabilize the Italian government in the aftermath of the historical leader of the Christian Democracy Party Alcide De Gasperi's passing in 1954.

It is manifest that President Gronchi was a keen observer and strategic manager of the centrist crisis, as demonstrated by his efforts to navigate Italy out of this political impasse by fostering a rapprochement between the Christian Democrats and the Socialists. However, this convergence was not meant to be limited to domestic politics alone; rather, it had to extend into foreign policy as an essential area of dialogue. The series of diplomatic travels that he undertook well illustrate how, in his view, Italy should take the lead in the détente process, acting as a Western democracy capable of offering greater responses to endeavors for prosperity. This approach allowed Italy to maintain its ties with other European nations and Western allies while forging relationships with non-aligned countries, seizing opportunities to establish new, and possibly profitable, partnerships.

The redefinition of Italy's role in the international arena was a central issue in which Giovanni Gronchi sought to intervene directly and actively. Through his foreign policy efforts, he engaged with one of the earliest attempts to reshape institutional and political balances. The international stage, thus, became a battleground for internal debates within the Christian Democracy Party and the broader Italian political spectrum in the late 1950s. The expectations and hopes that Gronchi had stirred within the Italian Parliament, especially among left-wing factions, had coalesced around his election in 1955. However, they may have placed an excessive burden on him, since his mandate was characterized by bold initiatives but also significant challenges, to the point he even considered resigning in 1961. Such difficulties persisted throughout his tenure until it ultimately concluded in May 1962, after which he became a senator for life.

Over the course of Giovanni Gronchi's seven-year presidency, the presence in successive governments of political figures such as Amintore Fanfani – who, as it has been observed, was very active in foreign policy – along with the political and economic actions of ENI under the aegis of Enrico Mattei, who passed away in the same year Gronchi's mandate ended, contributed to making Italy a more economically credible country. These facts enhanced to a great extent the Italian political influence over the southeastern Mediterranean states, further solidifying the Mediterranean vocation that Italy claimed as its own, which ultimately became a salient feature of its international identity. It was

precisely within this Mediterranean vocation that ENI, founded in 1953, played a substantial role in Italy's industrial development.

This was achieved through the expansion of the petrochemical sector, the construction of refineries, and agreements with various oil-producing states, which were often provided with technical assistance in exchange for concessions to exploit energy resources. The economic conditions of the time, along with ENI's significance in the Italian industrial landscape, also gave impetus to Rome's foreign policy, particularly in relation to its Mediterranean strategy. This approach was driven by a complex set of interests that led Italy to operate through the work carried out by ENI in North African countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya – cases explored in this thesis – as well as in the Middle East, exemplified by the agreement Mattei secured in Iran.

Enrico Mattei's energy diplomacy complemented Gronchi's vision by offering Italy the means to assert its independence on the global stage. As the head of ENI, Mattei disrupted the dominance of the Western oil conglomerates, known as the *Seven Sisters*, by forging equitable agreements with oil-producing countries in the Middle East and North Africa. His innovative approach, which emphasized fairer profit-sharing deals, was not only revolutionary in challenging the traditional structures of global energy market but also instrumental in facilitating long-term partnerships with nations seeking alternatives to Western economic hegemony. Through this strategy, Mattei aligned his energy policies with Gronchi's diplomatic outreach, demonstrating that economic and political autonomy were mutually reinforcing pillars of Italy's broader international aspirations.

From his actions and achievements, Enrico Mattei emerges as a leader and man of action, guiding a rapidly developed yet firmly rooted and structured enterprise in the years that followed the war. His work can be summarized as a combination of entrepreneurial initiative and political struggle, aimed at advancing national interests in oil-producing countries, where multinational corporations, mainly representing American and British interests, dominated with force. The original approach he employed in the negotiation of economically viable agreements reached with North African nations, Iran, and the Soviet Union provides enlightening considerations not only about his character, but, more importantly, into the distinctive direction he sought to imprint on ENI as a whole.

It is as if the end of the war was not a conclusion, but rather a necessary stage, for Mattei, to redouble efforts in achieving national objectives. The Resistance, in which he himself had taken part, along with the armed struggle and the rejection of national humiliation in the face of the great powers' interests, had generated immense energy. Such an energy demanded to be channeled into rebuilding both the country's physical

infrastructure and its social framework as well. According to Mattei, these forces needed to be integrated into a broader vision for national revival – one that not only had to increase national income but, above all, develop new resources. This vision was embodied in the so-called “Mattei Formula”, by means of which he spearheaded efforts to build Italy’s new and targeted joint ventures beyond Italian borders.

Mattei’s model represented a sort of vision of both an Italian citizen and a worker that stood in contrast to what had happened in the past and what he still continued to witness in the country. At the core of such a model was the idea that power could only be exercised if it was legitimate, and legitimacy, in turn, derived from the tangible results it achieved and the ethical and operational commitment driving it. These results were to be measured in terms of improvement – not only in Italy’s own economic conditions but also in those of the countries Mattei sought to engage for the purchase of crude oil. His agreements with Iran and the Soviet Union proved to be noticeable successes, just as ENI’s ventures in Africa demonstrated a strong commitment to building refineries and distribution networks, reinforcing the Italian presence in the energy sector.

In short, Giovanni Gronchi, the third President of the Italian Republic and the first to undertake a state visit to the Soviet Union and the Middle East – specifically to Iran – embodied an Italy that moved beyond the trauma and severe economic difficulties of World War II and its immediate aftermath. He symbolizes a nation with an optimistic outlook, striving for economic prosperity and undergoing significant social transformations. Despite the criticism and suspicions that surrounded him, Giovanni Gronchi played a remarkable role in restoring Italy’s credibility on the international stage. His presidency ought to be remembered and valued for his contribution to integrating the role of the President of the Republic into Italy’s wider foreign policy framework.

Through his international and high-level interactions, meetings and interventions, Gronchi shaped Italy’s external relations to a high degree and positioned the presidency as a relevant actor in diplomatic affairs. Without his efforts, the role of the President of the Republic in foreign policy might not have evolved into what is nowadays – an influential figure in setting the trajectory and conducting Italian diplomacy. His actions paved the way for the active involvement of the head of state in foreign affairs, demonstrating that the presidency could serve not only as a symbol of national unity but also as a strategic diplomatic player. Through his neo-Atlanticist vision and steps, Gronchi helped refine the Italian position in the world, keeping the dialogue with both traditional Western allies as well as emerging global powers and economies, an achievement that would have not been possible without the work of Enrico Mattei in the energy sector, regardless.

This alignment between Gronchi and Mattei, crystallized also in the diplomatic discussions between the Italian President and foreign dignitaries – some of which are documented in this thesis –, was not just a reflection of shared national interests but an orchestrated political strategy. It made visible the way energy policy could serve as a powerful tool of foreign relations, successfully enabling Italy to carve out its bridging role as a mediator between Western and non-Western actors. Gronchi's open endorsement of Enrico Mattei's undertakings helped consolidate ENI's standing into key oil-producing regions as a valid international player while also confirming Italy's importance within the Western alliance. By advocating for an energy policy rooted in fair partnerships rather than neocolonial dependencies, Gronchi ensured that Italy remained a respected player in international relations, even within the constraints imposed by Cold War alliances.

In this sense, the conclusion can be drawn that Giovanni Gronchi's unwavering support of Mattei-led ENI's initiatives well-enhanced Italy's reputation as a bridge between rival geopolitical blocs, highlighting how economic diplomacy functioned as an effective means for managing Cold War complexities. Besides reinforcing the Italian state oil company's position as a reliable entity abroad, his neo-Atlanticist strategy underscored Italy's strategic relevance within the Western alliance. By endorsing the energy policy based on fair cooperation rather than neocolonial exploitation championed by the pioneering voice and figure of Mattei, Gronchi ensured that Italy continue to keep an influential role in international affairs, by diversifying oil partnerships and reducing dependence on pre-existing Western-controlled mechanisms.

Although the managerial and political trajectories of Enrico Mattei and Giovanni Gronchi eventually came to an end – one under tragic and still unresolved circumstances (Mattei's sudden death) and the other marginalized by the shifting international order of the Cold War – the last and conclusive question remains: what is left today of their vision, which sought to secure a primary role for Italy in the Mediterranean energy sector? The most evident legacy is that ENI remains the leading energy company on the African continent, reinforced by the current government's revival of the so-called *Mattei Plan* under Giorgia Meloni's administration. This enduring prominence is a direct result of the quest for new opportunities and Italy's strategic assertion on the global stage, a vision shaped precisely by Mattei and Gronchi themselves. Once again, studying the past proves essential in understanding the layered realities of the present, giving them coherence and historical depth at the same time.

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***Federica Alessandrini***