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The Implications of the Mattei Plan for Italy: a research

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Introduzione

La presente tesi intende affrontare in maniera analitica, puntuale e, laddove necessario, critica il tanto discusso tema del Piano Mattei, l'iniziativa di politica estera con riguardo al Continente Africano presentata dal Governo presieduto da Giorgia Meloni.

Il Piano rappresenta un progetto particolarmente ambizioso che coniuga vari binari operativi e li fa confluire in un framework uniforme e programmatico, con l'obiettivo dichiarato di portare avanti in simultanea iniziative su più fronti, fra i quali quello energetico e quello commerciale. Un terzo fronte su cui il Piano intende operare è quello della lotta al traffico illegale di esseri umani e della gestione dei flussi migratori.

Il Capitolo Uno parte da una premessa importante: negli ultimi anni l'Italia ha manifestato un ritrovato interesse per il Continente, prevalentemente alimentato da drivers geopoliticamente strategici e accordi con partner energetici. A fronte di questo assunto il capitolo prosegue spiegando il contesto politico nazionale all'interno del quale il Piano ha preso forma. Si tratta di un quadro fortemente dicotomico che schiera da un lato forze di centrodestra storicamente avverse al diktat europeo, e dall'altro forze di centrosinistra tradizionalmente più inclini al multilateralismo. In questo scenario il Piano Mattei funge da strumento a beneficio del governo per alimentare la narrazione di un esecutivo in contrasto con i governi che lo hanno preceduto e, per estensione, più libero da pressioni politiche e normative esterne. Il capitolo si conclude con una panoramica delle posizioni in merito prese da alcuni stakeholder, fra i quali Matteo Renzi (contro) e Maurizio Lupi (pro), spiegandone i rispettivi punti di vista.

Il Capitolo Due individua tre aspetti, oggetto delle politiche implementate dal Piano, particolarmente rilevanti per l'assetto geopolitico ed economico dell'Italia vale a dire, nell'ordine, approvvigionamento energetico, commercio e investimenti e migrazione e sicurezza. Si tratta di temi particolarmente urgenti per la Nazione che ha, tramite il Piano, l'opportunità di sviluppare politiche ad hoc. In seguito ai recenti disordini geopolitici (come la Guerra in Ucraina) l'Italia si è trovata costretta a individuare nuovi partner energetici capaci di subentrare ai vecchi supplier estereuropei. A ciò si aggiunge la necessità di individuare e regolamentare nuove opportunità commerciali a beneficio sia delle PMI italiane che dei partner africani. L'Italia, dati alla mano, importa dal Continente molto più di quanto esporta, alimentando la retorica del paese occidentale predatore. Il Piano Mattei

rappresenta l'opportunità per la Nazione di cambiare questo assetto, raggiungendo un equilibrio virtuoso fra import ed export. Per concludere, il capitolo affronta il delicato tema dell'immigrazione. Dopo una panoramica dettagliata circa l'andamento dei flussi migratori dal 2013 ad oggi, verrà analizzato come il governo italiano intende affrontare la questione.

Il Capitolo Tre consiste in un overlook finale che mira a porre in evidenza limiti strutturali e rischi potenziali di un Piano tanto ambizioso quanto complesso da impostare concretamente. Verranno poi affrontate le implicazioni strategiche di una politica sotto l'egida del blocco occidentale e, in seguito, la sostenibilità (istituzionale, economica e ambientale) del Piano nel lungo periodo.

In conclusione, verranno ripercorse le tappe salienti della storia coloniale e post-coloniale della Francia sul territorio africano. Questo, per quanto all'apparenza scollegato dal tema principale, è da intendersi come un "Bignami" all'attenzione dell'Italia circa le opportunità, ma soprattutto circa i rischi, che la presenza di una potenza occidentale sul Continente implica.

1.1. Research question, scope and methodology

Research question

This thesis analyses Italy's Mattei Plan for Africa as a foreign-policy framework positioned at the intersection of development cooperation, energy security, trade and investment promotion, and migration/security management. The central aim is to assess whether the Plan constitutes a meaningful strategic shift in Italy's Africa policy and to examine the implications of its design choices for implementation and credibility.

Main research question

To what extent does the Mattei Plan represent a substantive shift in Italy's Africa policy, and what are its strategic, economic, and governance implications for Italy and for partner countries?

Sub-questions

1. Drivers and political framing: What domestic and international drivers (migration salience, energy vulnerability, commercial opportunities, and geopolitical competition) explain Italy's renewed attention to Africa, and how has the Plan been framed and debated within Italy?
2. Instruments and coherence: What are the Plan's main instruments and sectoral priorities (energy partnerships, trade/investment tools for SMEs, and migration/security cooperation), and how coherent are its objectives, governance architecture, and resource base?
3. Feasibility, risks and sustainability: Which structural constraints and unintended consequences may undermine the Plan, and what does a comparison with France's Africa posture suggest regarding legitimacy, credibility, and long-term sustainability?

Scope

Substantive scope. The thesis focuses on the Mattei Plan as a policy framework rather than a full ex post evaluation of project-level outcomes. Given that implementation is still evolving and uneven, the analysis prioritizes policy design, internal coherence, and feasibility. The discussion centers on four interlinked domains:

- development-cooperation governance and institutional coordination;
- energy diplomacy and supply security;
- trade, investment and SME internationalization;
- migration management, security engagement and broader geopolitical positioning.

Geographical scope. The primary focus is Italy's policy toward Africa, with particular attention to the Mediterranean neighborhood (North Africa) and the Sahel as a security and migration corridor. A secondary focus concerns EU frameworks referenced by the Plan (e.g., coordination and complementarity with EU instruments) and France as a comparative case used to illuminate risks linked to perception, legitimacy, and short-term securitized approaches.

Temporal scope. The thesis adopts a medium-term lens (approximately the mid-2010s to early 2026) to capture: (i) the emergence of key drivers shaping Italy's Africa engagement; (ii) the political genesis of the Plan; and (iii) the first phase of implementation and positioning.

The analysis does not rely on fieldwork or interviews and does not attempt a quantitative causal test of outcomes (e.g., "the Plan reduces migration flows"). Instead, it offers a structured qualitative assessment of a strategy whose implementation is still underway.

Methodology

The thesis is a qualitative, desk-based policy analysis built around a case-study design and complemented by targeted descriptive indicators. The approach is organized to mirror the progression of the three chapters: context and framing → instruments and coherence → feasibility and strategic implications.

1) Research design

- Single case study: Italy's Mattei Plan as the unit of analysis.
- Structured policy assessment: the Plan is examined through recurrent analytical dimensions: policy problem definition; stated objectives; instruments and implementation channels; governance and coordination mechanisms; resource envelope and "additionality"; accountability, transparency and monitoring provisions.

2) Data and sources

- Primary documentary sources: official institutional material and public communications concerning the Plan's governance architecture, stated priorities, and implementation mechanisms.
- Secondary analytical sources: policy papers, research institute outputs and specialist analyses (used to triangulate claims, situate debates, and interpret policy choices), alongside carefully selected reporting for event context.

3) Analytical techniques

- Document analysis: systematic reading of official texts and relevant policy analyses to identify recurring themes, assumptions, and operational gaps. This includes attention to how the Plan frames “partnership,” how it links priorities across sectors, and how it narrates discontinuity/continuity with past approaches.
- Stakeholder mapping: qualitative mapping of positions and critiques expressed by political actors and policy observers to identify fault lines (e.g., multilateralism vs bilateralism; partnership rhetoric vs asymmetry; ambition vs resources; political communication vs operational design).
- Coherence checks: consistency testing between objectives, instruments, resources, and timelines; and external coherence with EU frameworks where the Plan explicitly invokes them.
- Heuristic comparison: the discussion of France’s Africa posture is used as a comparative lens—not to claim equivalence, but to highlight risks of over-securitization, legitimacy erosion, and reputational costs associated with short-term approaches.

4) Use of indicators

To avoid an exclusively narrative argument, the thesis incorporates a limited number of descriptive indicators from reputable sources (e.g., energy import dependency, ODA/GNI trends, sea-arrival dynamics). These indicators are used to:

- contextualize policy priorities (energy vulnerability; salience of migration);
- illustrate constraints (resource availability; ambition–means gap);
- support plausibility checks (e.g., why development policy and migration outcomes often follow non-linear patterns).

Thesis structure

Chapter 1 situates the Mattei Plan within Italy’s broader refocus on Africa, reconstructing the political and strategic drivers behind the Plan and analyzing the main lines of domestic debate and stakeholder reactions. It establishes the interpretive framework used throughout the thesis by clarifying the Plan’s political narrative, its intended positioning vis-à-vis EU approaches, and the central tension between partnership rhetoric and strategic interest.

Chapter 2 examines the Plan's key areas of intervention and policy instruments. It focuses on energy partnerships and Italy's energy-security agenda, trade and investment opportunities and constraints for Italian SMEs, and the migration/security dimension linked to the wider Mediterranean and Sahelian dynamics. The chapter assesses the internal coherence between stated objectives and the tools and resources mobilized, highlighting operational ambiguities and the conditions under which leverage and "multiplier effects" are plausible.

Chapter 3 provides a final assessment of feasibility, risks, and strategic implications. It discusses structural limitations (coordination, transparency, and monitoring), potential unintended consequences, and the sustainability of short-term approaches in fragile contexts. The chapter then uses the French paradigm as a cautionary reference to reflect on legitimacy, credibility, and long-term strategic costs, before drawing overall conclusions on the Mattei Plan's prospects and the criteria by which its effectiveness should be assessed.

1. Chapter: The Mattei Plan in the framework of recent Italian policy

1.1. Italian foreign policy turns its attention back to Africa

After years of relative disengagement, over the past 15 years Italy has turned its attention back to the African Continent with a certain degree of attention within the framework of its foreign policies. This growing interest, which for reasons that will be examined further on is not at all surprising, reaches its peak with the development of the “Mattei Plan” under the Government led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni¹.

This renewed interest is not surprising given two factors: firstly, the African continent represents for Italy a geographically close scenario where to address important geopolitical challenges. Secondly, Italy has been described in more than one occasion as the ideal country to act as a “bridge” between Europe and Africa, a role that Meloni accepted willingly².

A closer analysis reveals that what has prompted this renewed and willful interest toward the African continent is not limited solely to the aforementioned reasons: more specifically, factors such as migration, energy supply, commercial interests, and additional geopolitical balances play a fundamental role in this regard.

The issue of immigration, regardless of the percentages actually detected by the statistics, is an integral part of the Italian public debate, which explains why it represents an undeniable priority when it comes to both domestic and foreign politic action³.

¹ Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, “Piano Mattei per l’Africa”, <https://www.governo.it/it/piano-mattei> ; and “Piano Mattei per l’Africa: la Cabina di Regia”, <https://www.governo.it/it/articolo/piano-mattei-lafrica-la-cabina-di-regia/28742> ; see also “Relazione sullo stato di attuazione del ‘Piano Mattei per l’Africa’ (2024)”, https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/documenti/documenti/Notizie-allegati/Piano%20Mattei/Relazione_Atтуazione_PianoMattei_2024.pdf (all accessed 14 February 2026).

² Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), “The Italy-Africa Summit 2024 and the Mattei Plan: Towards Cooperation between Equals” (11 March 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/publications/c05/italy-africa-summit-2024-and-mattei-plan-towards-cooperation-between-equals> (accessed 14 February 2026).

³ UNHCR Operational Data Portal, “Situation Europe: Sea Arrivals (Italy)”, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/europe-sea-arrivals/location/24521> (accessed 14 February 2026).

Italy's high degree of dependence on energy suppliers is also a particularly sensitive issue. Even more so in light of the delicate and still uncertain geopolitical balances in Eastern Europe, the government led by Giorgia Meloni is seeking further energy agreements with potential new African partners⁴.

Another determining area of interest which cannot be overlooked regards the investment opportunities that the African Continent offers to various Italian SMEs. Those commercial opportunities are clearly very appealing to the government who seeks a balance between cooperation and national interest.

Finally, a series of geostrategic opportunities can be identified that make Italy more inclined than ever to reaffirm its historical status as a middle power, foremost among them that of the Sahel: a particularly fragile region the Sahel is part of the geographical area known as the "Wider Mediterranean"⁵.

The Sahel is perceived by the Italian Cabinet as an extremely unstable zone, closely intertwined to North African and Mediterranean dynamics, and therefore directly connected to Italy's security. The presence of armed groups, including jihadist movements, together with the role of the area as a corridor facilitating illicit trafficking and irregular migration toward Europe, explains why Italy devotes such close attention to this external region. This attention on the part of the Italian Cabinet has translated into international missions, the opening of new diplomatic offices, and above all into direct cooperation with certain Sahelian states such as Niger⁶.

⁴ European Commission, "REPowerEU" (timeline and policy overview), https://commission.europa.eu/topics/energy/repowereu_en ; Eurostat, "Energy statistics – an overview" (energy import dependency and gas consumption), https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Energy_statistics_-_an_overview (both accessed 14 February 2026).

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), "Sahel and West Africa", https://www.esteri.it/en/politica-estera-e-cooperazione-allo-sviluppo/aree_geografiche/africa/sahel-e-africa-occidentale/ ; Italian Ministry of Defence, communiqué n.119 (17 October 2023) referencing the "Mediterraneo allargato", <https://www.difesa.it/il-ministro/comunicati/difesa-il-ministro-crosetto-in-arabia-saudita-n-119/29827.html> (both accessed 14 February 2026).

⁶ Start Insight, "Italy's Strategic Role in the Sahel: Challenges and Opportunities after the French Withdrawal" (3 February 2025), <https://www.startinsight.eu/en/italys-strategic-role-in-the-sahel-challenges-and-opportunities-after-the-french-withdrawal/> (accessed 14 February 2026).

1.2. Political context and genesis of the Mattei Plan

The Mattei Plan developed as a part of a broader process of restructuring Italy's foreign policy in the framework of international cooperation. The genesis of the Plan must be interpreted through the lens of the increasing international competition among states, which in recent years has seen numerous global and European actors intensify their economic, political, and diplomatic presence in Africa⁷.

In this sense, even the name of the Plan itself is evocative: the decision to dedicate it to Enrico Mattei, Eni founder, recalls a phase of Italian foreign policy characterized by greater decision-making autonomy and more direct relations with African producing countries. At the domestic level, the Mattei Plan, as many journalists and political scientists observe, also serves, at least partly, a strategic function. Giorgia Meloni, even prior to becoming Prime Minister, was widely accused of parochialism, superficiality, limited competence, and a lack of long-term vision, particularly with regard to issues of international relevance. Presenting a plan such as the Mattei Plan – particularly during the confidence vote speech before the Chamber of Deputies - certainly represents a strong political gesture. It stands as an unequivocal declaration of intent aiming at disavowing the demonizing narrative that has overshadowed Fratelli d'Italia, the Prime Minister's party, since as far back as 2012, the year of its founding⁸.

From broader analytical perspective, the Mattei Plan also represents Meloni's attempt to construct a strong international leadership profile. Politically differentiating herself from the governments that preceded her is undoubtedly advantageous from her standpoint and establishing a new, strong and recognizable foreign policy line is a useful move in this regard. As evidence of this strategy the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs openly states, in one of its reports titled "Rilanciare

⁷ Davide Fattibene, "The Mattei Plan for Africa: A Turning Point for Italy's Africa Policy?" IAI Commentaries 24|10 (March 2024), <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2410.pdf>; ISPI, "Rebooting Italy's Africa Policy" (Policy Paper, 2024), <https://www.ispionline.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/POLICY-PAPER-ISPI-2024-MATTEI-PLAN-1.pdf> (both accessed 14 February 2026).

⁸ Eni, "Our history", <https://www.eni.com/en-IT/company/our-history.html> (accessed 14 February 2026); Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, "Giorgia Meloni's parliamentary address: Government programme" (26 October 2022), <https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/president-council-ministers-giorgia-meloni-s-parliamentary-address-government-programme> (accessed 14 February 2026).

l'Africa Policy dell'Italia", that this new governmental foreign policy line pursues a dual objective: on the one hand, it marks a break with past policies, while on the other it emphasizes continuity with certain already consolidated geopolitical ties. Similarly, in the section entitled "Capitalizing on existing foundations and expertise" of the same report, the Ministry once again underscores its intention to demonstrate discontinuity with previous political approaches. This time, however, it invokes a metaphor repeatedly employed by the Prime Minister herself, that of the "hand that is both charitable and predatory at the same time"⁹.

The metaphor refers to what, according to the government coalition, has been an excessively widespread tendency in the past years: previous governments have on the one hand shown momentum and initiative toward the African continent, yet on the other hand they have used this momentum to conceal far less noble intentions aimed at exploiting the resources that the continent has to offer.

Remaining within the domestic political context into which the Plan is inserted it is evident that, given the determination with which it has been advanced, it also represents an attempt by Meloni's executive to demonstrate capacity for autonomous initiative at the European level. Through the Mattei Plan, Italy seeks to portray itself as the creator and promoter of its own strategy toward the continent, one that diverges from that of other Member States and aligns only partially with that of the European Union.

At the strategic level, this posture contributes to constructing the image of an executive that prioritizes Italian interests and which, wisely, overcomes the perception of Italy as traditionally subordinate to Franco-German balances.

This stance also proves beneficial in consolidating electoral consensus, as it allows for the translation in government action of issues particularly dear to the active right-wing active electorate such as national primacy, sovereignty, and rejection of a policy stance that has always been perceived as both technocratic and imposed by foreign countries.

From this perspective, the Mattei Plan is not merely an instrument of Italy's foreign policy, but also a political and subtly communicative device through which the governing coalition hopes to legitimize its vision of Europe as a space for competition among sovereign states, rather than as a set-up for passive integration.

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation / ISPI, "Il Piano Mattei: Rilanciare l'Africa policy dell'Italia" (publication hosted by MAECI), https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ISPI_FPC-Piano-Mattei.pdf (accessed 14 February 2026).

1.3. Stakeholder's reactions and Political domestic debate

At the domestic level, the Mattei Plan has raised, within the political debate, a considerable number of concerns regarding several critical points.

As might be expected in the case of such an ambitious project, the Plan has generated a wide range of reactions. In principle, the distinction between detractors and supporters largely reflects the composition of the parliamentary spectrum: governing parties emphasize its potential, while critics highlight its shortcomings. Prominent figures in the Italian political landscape, such as Matteo Renzi, have denounced its inconsistency and lack of strategic vision. More specifically, Renzi criticizes Meloni's decision to rely on technicians and bureaucrats in addressing such a challenge, arguing instead for the involvement of entrepreneurs with concrete experience in Africa and development. Renzi cites the example of Mauro Ferrari, an entrepreneur and biomedical engineer who, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, launched a development initiative across West Africa.

Renzi, however, is not the only leading opposition figure openly challenging the direction of the Plan. Angelo Bonelli and Nicola Fratoianni, of Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra, also point to its critical aspects, albeit in a more ideological and less technical manner. For them, the Plan represents a condensation of neocolonialism and domination disguised as cooperation.

More encouraging reactions, as noted above, come from parties that openly support the governing majority. Maurizio Lupi, leader of Noi Moderati, considers the issue of immigration to be highly critical, and therefore relaunches the idea of managing flows as part of a structured and articulated project, rather than through an approach that adjusts year by year to overall landing trends. Lupi is not alone; among the various supporters, Patrizia Marrocco, a Forza Italia deputy, energized the chamber during a debate on cooperation by stating that the Plan "reflects Berlusconi's vision."

Despite a very solid base of consensus among majority parties, skeptics of the Plan remain numerous; it is now worth examining which points, among others, prove particularly divisive.

One of the first divisive issues concerns the feasibility of a partnership between Africa and Italy that does not result in the well-known "master/servant" dynamic. Recent analyses highlight how, in the face of growing geopolitical and economic competition, a transnational approach to international cooperation is increasingly emerging. This approach prioritizes relationships based on immediate exchanges of interests, leaving little room for a foreign policy grounded in support for democratic processes and the promotion of human rights. Within this framework, international relations are increasingly interpreted as instruments serving national strategic objectives, rather than as vehicles for equitable cooperation.

In support of these concerns, many analysts have emphasized the existence of a strong structural contradiction between the declared objective of mutual cooperation and the inevitable persistence of certain asymmetric national interests. Many, among opposition parties and various political analysts, underline how the commitment to overcoming paternalistic, or even harmful, approaches clashes with an international political environment characterized by intense competition for political influence, resources, and market access. It is within this context that Member States continue to act according to strategic-interest logics.

In light of all this, the Mattei Plan provides an opportunity to raise a fundamental question regarding the very nature of partnerships between Europe and Africa: can these relationships truly evolve and transform into equitable models? Or are they destined to remain bound to dynamics of dependency, albeit reformulated in modern terms? From this perspective, the concrete risk is that the rhetoric of a new “non-charitable” approach may ultimately serve to conceal yet another form of commercial and geopolitical instrumentalization.

A further concern that emerges, according to certain stakeholders, relates to the nature of the foreign policy line adopted by the government led by Giorgia Meloni.

As highlighted in the CESPI report entitled “The Mattei Plan, opportunities, ambitions and elements of debate,” the Mattei Plan is situated at the center of Italy’s attempt to balance multilateralism and bilateralism. In other words, according to the report, it is as though the Italian government were simultaneously attempting to pursue two mutually exclusive foreign policy approaches. This should not come as a surprise when considering the historical trajectory of the governing majority: all coalition parties have consistently expressed skepticism toward multilateralism, preferring bilateral approaches to issues of supranational relevance. The ambiguity therefore concerns the effective integration of the Plan within an already consolidated multilateral framework and, above all, its alignment with the objectives of the European Commission. Although the Plan explicitly references EU policies, what is missing is an operational definition of “how” it is meant to integrate with European and global multilateralism. In other words, the Plan explicitly mentions partnerships within which it intends to position itself, such as Global Gateway and Agenda 2030, yet it is less detailed when it comes to clarifying concrete internal coordination mechanisms. By way of example, the following points remain unspecified¹⁰:

¹⁰ CeSPI, “Il Piano Mattei, opportunità, ambizioni e elementi di dibattito” (forum page), <https://www.cespi.it/it/eventi-attualita/dibattiti/il-piano-mattei-opportunita-ambizioni-elementi-di-dibattito> ; European Commission (DG INTPA), “The Mattei Plan for Africa and Global Gateway” (20 June 2025), <https://international->

- which common parameters (EU/UN) will be adopted to monitor and evaluate the progress of initiatives
- which shared criteria will guide the selection and choice of projects with European or non-European partners
- which EU instruments will be regularly employed in pursuing the objectives of the Plan.

Another crucial issue highlighted by the CESPI report concerns the availability of public resources and, in particular, the gap between the ambition of the objectives declared by the government and the consistency of the financial means mobilized. The Plan does not benefit from specifically earmarked funds, but rather relies on existing development cooperation spending and the Italian Climate Fund: the indicated allocation (equal to €5.5 billion) is presented as the result of reallocating already planned resources, rather than as a commitment of new ad hoc funding¹¹.

This approach generates an accounting problem far more serious than it might initially appear. In large international partnership initiatives, a *conditio sine qua non* for attracting external resources (EU, international funds...) is the presence of a solid share of national investment serving as a guarantee—consisting, among other elements, of co-financing and guarantees. In essence, if the national contribution is limited and lacks prospects for expansion, it becomes considerably less likely that the Plan will produce a multiplier effect through European and multilateral instruments.

The issue of resources also fits into the much broader framework of budgetary priorities. In Italian public debate, there is frequent and intense discussion regarding the opportunity to increase defense spending toward NATO's 2% of GDP target, an ambitious benchmark that is nevertheless widely shared internationally. By contrast, far less attention is devoted to another equally important common objective: allocating 0.7% of Gross National Income to Official Development Assistance (ODA). This disparity in ambition reflects not only public finance constraints, but above all differing perceptions of the “strategic value” assigned to various components of foreign policy.

partnerships.ec.europa.eu/publications-library/mattei-plan-africa-and-global-gateway_en (all accessed 14 February 2026).

¹¹ Davide Fattibene, “The Mattei Plan for Africa: A Turning Point for Italy's Africa Policy?” IAI Commentaries 24|10 (March 2024), <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2410.pdf> ; African Development Bank, “Mattei Plan Partnership: Advancing Africa's Development through Strategic Collaboration” (news item, February 2026), <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/mattei-plan-partnership-advancing-africas-development-through-strategic-collaboration-90869> (both accessed 14 February 2026).

The criticality is high because, with regard to this latter point, urgency has declined significantly in recent years: in 2023, ODA fell to 0.27% of Gross National Income. In this sense, a Mattei Plan that, despite setting such ambitious foreign policy objectives, fails to increase public funds for cooperation risks being taken less seriously¹².

This phase of “budgetary stagnation” becomes even clearer when viewed against Italy’s historical record; it is not merely a matter of recent negligence. Italy has long exhibited a troubling tendency to underestimate cooperation as a strategic asset and to treat it as a “residual” budgetary chapter compared to priorities perceived as more pressing. This trend has remained largely constant, with the exception of a brief period during the Craxi–De Michelis years, when the ODA index reached a promising 0.4. This was made possible by a broader political context in which cooperation was seen as a tool serving both international projection and the country’s economic interests.

In sum, the issue of resources and their allocation is not merely an accounting matter but a litmus test for the entire Mattei Plan framework: if resources are not genuinely additional but rather “recycled,” the strategy risks remaining unbalanced, widening the gap between political ambition and implementation capacity. And precisely because the Plan aims to deliver standardized and regular interventions rather than episodic ones, the availability of proportionate funding becomes an essential criterion for assessing its validity and long-term sustainability.

¹² Eurostat, SDG indicator 17.10 “Official development assistance as share of gross national income”, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_17_10/default/table ; CONCORD, AidWatch 2024 Report (Italy country profile, 2023 early figures), <https://aidwatch.concordeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2024/10/Aidwatch-2024-online.pdf> (both accessed 14 February 2026).

2. Chapter: Key areas of intervention and policy instruments

2.1. Energy partnerships, energy security and Italy's role

The energy dimension constitutes one of the principal drivers explaining why, in recent years, Rome has brought the African continent back to the center of its foreign policy priorities and why the Mattei Plan has been presented as a strategy that is both innovative and necessary. Energy security is indeed among the primary motivations prompting Italy to strengthen cooperation with Africa. This impetus is in fact linked to a structural condition of vulnerability, namely the country's historical dependence on energy imports. Looking at the numbers, Italy records an energy import dependency rate of 79.2% (2022), a notably high figure in absolute terms, and especially striking when compared to the EU average (63%)¹³.

Such a level of vulnerability, in operational but most of all strategic terms, translates into the need to increase and diversify supplies and to consolidate a north–south supply axis. This essential need has been present at least since the 2014 Crimea Crisis, therefore well before the catalytic event in terms of the interruption of “energy taps,” namely the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022. In other words, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict was not the triggering event, but it rather accelerated geopolitical dynamics that had already long been underway.

Within the energy framework, a crucial actor is ENI, which, in addition to being a well-established presence in Africa, represents an Italian excellence operating well beyond the energy sector alone. According to data from the ISPI institute (Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale), over 50% of ENI's hydrocarbon production and approximately half of its reserves originate precisely from the African continent. These statistics clearly illustrate the relevance of Africa not only as a space for cooperation, but also as a fundamental cornerstone of Italy's energy positioning. Remaining within the ENI framework, Italy's energy interests in Africa is closely related to the geopolitical uncertainties of recent years, which have required diversification away from the traditional east–west axis, implying an even closer alignment between the government and ENI,

¹³ Eurostat, “Energy imports dependency (NRG_IND_ID),” European Commission, accessed 17 February 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/product/view/nrg_ind_id.

whose agendas have increasingly converged. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine provided a significant boost to this cooperation¹⁴.

The energy dimension of the Mattei Plan should not be interpreted solely as a search for new sources of supply, but also as an attempt to position Italy in a role of supranational relevance: agreements between the Meloni government and African partners, together with related investments, may enable Italy to become an energy hub benefiting both Europe and the African continent. As already anticipated in Chapter 1, Italy has traditionally been inclined toward the idea of serving as a “bridge” between the two shores. The operational term “hub” refers to a strategic node where energy flows originating from diverse sources and destined for different markets are concentrated, redistributed, and transformed.

Having outlined the general framework, it is now necessary to examine the instruments through which the Mattei Plan intends to give concrete and solid form to its ambitious energy objectives.

The practical dimension of the energy sphere within the Mattei Plan does not correspond to a single specific initiative, but rather to an articulated infrastructural and geopolitical design structured across multiple levels.

The first level concerns the immediate consolidation and diversification of supply in the short term. From this perspective, several operational levers are identified. First and foremost, strengthening relations with Algeria is crucial in order to increase natural gas imports through the well-known Transmed¹⁵ pipeline. Secondly, it is essential to further develop the Coral South field in Mozambique¹⁶, currently led by ENI, in order to stabilize supply. Even these two references alone demonstrate how the practical dimension of the Plan is articulated, at least partially, through partnerships with producing countries and through the enhancement of Italian companies already operating in strategic areas.

The second level entails the construction of interconnections and infrastructures aimed, as previously noted, at transforming Italy into an energy hub. The underlying logic is rather

¹⁴ ISPI (Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale), Policy Paper on the Mattei Plan (trade and investment data), accessed 17 February 2026; ENI, Annual Report / Form 20-F and operational data for Africa, accessed 17 February 2026.

¹⁵ Snam, “TransMed / Enrico Mattei gas pipeline” (infrastructure overview and capacity), accessed 17 February 2026, https://www.snam.it/en/transportation/our_network/transmed.html

¹⁶ ENI, “Coral South FLNG (Mozambique)” (project overview), accessed 17 February 2026, <https://www.eni.com/en-IT/operations/mozambique-coral-south.html>.

straightforward: at present, there are no direct electricity connections between Italy and Africa. This gap would be addressed through the *Italy–Tunisia interconnection project*. The initiative would be implemented by the respective transmission system operators, namely Terna (Italy) and STEG (Tunisia), and would represent a turning point in the process of concretizing Italy’s role as a European hub. This point is significant because it demonstrates that the interconnection in question is not merely aspirational, but grounded in a tangible operational rationale¹⁷.

The third operational level clarifies a fundamental point: Italy does not intend merely to “extract” from Africa, but it rather aims at “giving back” in equal measure. The Plan does not present itself as a traditional scheme of resource appropriation or importation, but rather as a model of development-oriented cooperation. From this perspective, the Plan includes several initiatives, among which:

- the establishment of a Center of Excellence and Training on renewable energy in Morocco. This initiative specifically responds to the need to complement infrastructure with the necessary competencies to operate it, investing significantly in human capital in addition to technological assets
- the production of sustainable biofuels in Kenya and Côte d’Ivoire, contributing to the diversification of energy sources

This third level of the Plan therefore seeks to delineate an operational and technical model integrating energy transition, supply security, and local development.

Remaining on the practical level, it is appropriate to mention the report entitled “The Mattei Plan and Italy’s Role as an Energy Hub,” drafted by the OSSISNa observatory (Osservatorio per la Sicurezza del Sistema Industriale Strategico Italiano) in collaboration with the CISINT center (Centro Italiano di Strategia e Intelligence). The report highlights a frequently overlooked issue: the security of strategic infrastructure. If neglected, this dimension risks rendering the three aforementioned levels ineffective or, at the very least, less productive¹⁸.

Giuseppe Lucci, the author of the report, describes the Mediterranean seabed as a network of informational and energy arteries simultaneously supporting flows of energy and communications. This network, as Lucci observes, has two principal convergence points on Italian territory: Puglia and

¹⁷ Terna, “Elmed: MASE authorises the Italy-Tunisia interconnection,” press release (15 May 2024), accessed 17 February 2026, <https://www.terna.it/en/media/press-releases/detail/elmed-mase-authorises-italy-tunisia-interconnection>.

¹⁸ OSSISNa & CISINT, “The Mattei Plan and Italy’s Role as an Energy Hub” (report cited in text), accessed 17 February 2026.

Sicily. Although these two regions represent only 13% of the national surface area, a considerable concentration of infrastructure is located there:

- approximately 60% of submarine telecommunications cables connecting Italy to foreign countries land there
- roughly 50% of submarine gas pipelines either pass through or reach these regions
- transnational electricity interconnections that are already operational or still under development (see Tunisia).

Lucci's argument is therefore precise: if Italy truly intends to become an energy hub serving as a bridge between Europe and Africa, it must acknowledge the strategic centrality of these regions. These areas are as strategic as they are vulnerable and therefore require "ad hoc" protection and maintenance protocols. Signing energy agreements with African countries is not sufficient to secure new energy flows. If those flows arrive in Puglia or Sicily, then the efficiency and security of those regions become a fundamental component of European energy security.

In conclusion, the energy dimension of the Mattei Plan is addressed not only through agreements or diplomatic lines, but through an integrated framework combining short-term supply, medium-term infrastructure, and long-term transition. All of this presupposes the protection and security of infrastructure as a prerequisite.

2.2. Trade and Investment: opportunities and constraints for Italian SMEs

The commercial dimension of the Mattei Plan must be framed in light of an extremely important structural fact: despite the growing interest toward Africa, the continent continues to occupy a marginal role within Italy's foreign commercial priorities. Italy's presence in African markets remains limited to a small number of countries. While this represents a challenge on the one hand, on the other it constitutes an opportunity for potential expansion for Italian SMEs which, despite forming a fundamental pillar of the national productive fabric, often encounter difficulties throughout the internationalization processes.

According to the statistics reported in the ISPI Policy Paper on the Mattei Plan, the North African and the sub-Saharan regions account for 2.2% and 1% of Italian exports, respectively. Similarly, imports from those regions into Italy correspond to 5% (North Africa) and 1.6% (sub-Saharan Africa) of total imports. In more concrete terms, Italy exports goods to the African continent

totaling approximately €20.5 billion, while importing roughly €39 billion. It appears evident that Italy's trade balance is negative¹⁹.

From these data, two important considerations can be drawn. Firstly, as already noted, Africa occupies a marginal position at least within Italy's commercial priorities. Secondly, it becomes evident that the trade structure is highly unbalanced: Italy primarily imports raw materials and energy, while exporting mainly medium-value manufactured products. These numbers thus help delineate a markedly asymmetrical framework: the continent acts as a supplier of essential resources, whereas Italy largely maintains the role of exporter of industrial goods.

According to ISPI, this asymmetric configuration should be interpreted as the legacy of a “center–periphery” paradigm that limits trade diversification and hinders the integration of SMEs into additional commercial sectors.

Despite the aforementioned data, in recent years interest in the African continent has grown considerably, also due to the perception of a steadily expanding market. In this regard, one of the factors stimulating domestic markets while simultaneously attracting foreign investors is demographic growth. Africa is the region with the highest population growth rate in the world, a trend that carries implications on multiple levels: not only an increase in consumers, but more broadly a rising in demand for manufactured goods, infrastructure, services, and industrial products over the long term.

An additional commercial layer amplified by demographic growth concerns the young population. In many African countries, the median age is significantly lower than in almost all European states. This implies a potentially larger workforce and therefore new investment opportunities. Moreover, as many rural areas are gradually transforming into more urbanized contexts, new cities are slowly emerging, highlighting how the existing infrastructure is insufficient—a gap that Italian SMEs may help to address.

Despite an increasingly “cooperative” international logic in light of the aforementioned benefits and opportunities, the potential of these territories remains largely unrealized, at least as far as Italian companies are concerned. The causes of this underutilization can be traced to several structural risks, foremost among them the perception of political and administrative risk. In many African countries, firms confront unstable regulatory frameworks, frequent legislative shifts, and more generally a rigid approach to economic policymaking. While large corporations often manage to establish a presence

¹⁹ ISPI, Policy Paper on the Mattei Plan (Italy's trade shares with North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa), accessed 17 February 2026.

within such uncertain environments, small and medium-sized enterprises experience this instability as a powerful deterrent, discouraging them from exploring new investment opportunities.

Another potential deterrent for foreign firms is the fragmentation of African markets, which do not constitute a homogeneous whole but rather a variety of national contexts differing significantly in terms of size, political development, legal frameworks, administrative profiles, and operational conditions. The logical consequence of this heterogeneity is that entry strategies must be adapted on a case-by-case basis, making market entrances more complex and demanding than elsewhere.

A further obstacle to the entry of Italian firms into Africa concerns the lack of reliable information. ISPI highlights in several studies the difficulty of obtaining data regarding local partners, regulatory frameworks, and investment opportunities. This imbalance is particularly disadvantageous for SMEs, which lack dedicated resources for foreign market analysis. This generates a fairly intuitive vicious circle: the absence of clear information reinforces perceived risk among foreign investors.

Taken together, all the elements discussed in the preceding paragraphs outline a rather concerning picture, in which the opportunities offered by African markets collide with structural constraints that affect small and medium-sized enterprises in particular.

Precisely in response to these criticalities, the Mattei Plan envisages a strengthening and smart development of public instruments supporting internationalization and cooperation, with the primary objective of facilitating Italian SMEs' entry into African markets. In this perspective, the role assigned by the government to actors such as *Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (CDP)*, *SACE* (export credit and insurance services), and *SIMEST* (Italian Society for Foreign Enterprises, providing solutions for the internationalization of Italian firms) is crucial. These entities are tasked with coordinated operations through credit guarantees, concessional financing, and insurance tools designed to mitigate political and commercial risk. Within this framework, public support does not merely provide financial resources passively, but seeks instead to construct a proper and working mechanism of accompaniment and oversight, capable of assisting firms throughout the entire process of market entry, from exploratory phases and preliminary data collection to the realization of productive investments. The declared objective is to overcome initial barriers that primarily discourage SMEs (a part of which has been discussed in the previous passages of the present report), fostering the emergence of industrial partnerships and joint projects with local counterparts.

Another crucial element concerns the attempt of the Italian government to more closely integrate trade, investment, and development cooperation. As highlighted in multiple ISPI reports, the Mattei Plan aims to overcome the traditional and deeply rooted separation between these domains by promoting an approach that combines public intervention with private entrepreneurial initiative.

Within this framework, productive investments are conceived not only as instruments for commercial expansion by Italian firms, but most importantly as strategically designed leverages to support the development of partner countries through local job creation, strengthening of production chains, and the development of new skills. This approach reflects a vision in which economic cooperation seeks to build more stable and conducive environments for entrepreneurial activity, embedding SMEs within structured projects and minimizing the isolation that often characterizes individual initiatives.

Despite these ambitions, several reports by major Italian geopolitical and policy observers such as ISPI, FOCSIV (Federation of Christian-inspired international volunteer organizations), and Federalismi.it highlight multiple limitations of the current framework. First, as previously noted, the financial resources associated with the Plan do not appear genuinely additional compared to existing instruments, but largely derive from the reorganization of pre-existing funds. Although this has already been addressed earlier, it is worth reiterating briefly, as the limitation of non-additional but reallocated funds affects not only specific areas of the Plan but rather all operational domains. Second, the complexity of access mechanisms for financing and guarantees represents a significant obstacle for SMEs, which frequently lack the administrative, technical, and legal expertise required to navigate multiple support channels. Added to this is the strong—and repeatedly criticized—centralization of the Plan’s governance, which may limit the direct involvement of the entrepreneurial fabric and make it more difficult to translate strategic objectives into widely distributed concrete opportunities.

Overall, the Mattei Plan outlines a framework in which trade and investment are viewed as necessary means to relaunch economic relations between Italy and Africa. For Italian SMEs, the continent represents both a potential growth opportunity and an environment characterized by high risks and structural constraints that are difficult to navigate. The success of the Plan, with regard to its strictly commercial dimension, will depend largely on its ability to transform public support instruments into concrete market access opportunities, reducing the informational and financial asymmetries that have so far constrained a potentially broader and more stable presence of Italian small and medium-sized enterprises in Africa.

2.3. Migration, security and geopolitical balance: trade-off and cooperation frameworks

Within the Italian political debate, the issue of immigration has always played a particularly prominent role. It is therefore no coincidence that governing parties have made it one of the central pillars of their electoral platforms. For years, Giorgia Meloni’s party, as well as the Lega – Salvini

Premier, have harshly criticized center/center-left coalitions for what they describe as a superficial and way too permissive management of migratory flows. In this sense, the Mattei Plan represents for the governing right an opportunity to give concrete form to its vision of an intelligent and efficient management of the migratory phenomenon. Before examining the Mattei Plan's take on immigration in detail and how it intends to address such a sensitive issue, it is necessary to outline the relevant contextual coordinates.

From 2014 onward, the phenomenon that has most significantly affected migratory flows has been irregular arrivals by sea coming from the Mediterranean route. These crossings primarily involve vessels departing from Libya and Tunisia and arriving in southern Italy, with Sicily and Calabria being the regions most affected by this phenomenon. These journeys typically involve individuals persecuted in their countries of origin for political reasons, citizens fleeing wars, or simply families seeking irregular reunification with relatives who have long been in Europe.

In 2014, a significant peak in irregular sea arrivals was recorded, although the impact of the operation known as Mare Nostrum²⁰ must be taken into account. This Italian Navy mission, launched in response to the numerous major shipwrecks that occurred in 2013, pursued the dual objective of saving lives at sea and combating the illegal trafficking of migrants.

Also in 2014, following Mare Nostrum, the European Union launched Operation Triton, a joint operation coordinated by FRONTEX²¹, which moved beyond the national scope of the previous mission toward a more communitarian framework. European countries complemented search-and-rescue activities at sea with targeted strategies aimed at surveillance and securing EU borders.

In 2015 and 2016, figures remained substantial, with approximately 153,000 and 181,000 arrivals respectively. During this two-year period, the dominant route continued to be the Libyan one, and landings kept increasing²².

²⁰ Italian Navy (Marina Militare), "Mare Nostrum Operation" (launched 18 October 2013; ended 31 October 2014), accessed 17 February 2026, <https://www.marina.difesa.it/en/operations/pagine/marenostrum.aspx>.

²¹ Frontex, "Frontex launches Joint Operation Triton" (31 October 2014; operational start 1 November 2014), accessed 17 February 2026, <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-launches-joint-operation-triton-JSYpL7>.

²² UNHCR Operational Data Portal, "Europe Sea Arrivals: Italy" (annual arrivals data, including 2015–2016), accessed 17 February 2026, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/europe-sea-arrivals/location/24521>.

The first significant decline was observed in 2017, following the memorandum of understanding signed between Italy and Libya (Italy–Libya Memorandum of Understanding of 2 February 2017)²³, strongly wanted and promoted by the then Minister of the Interior Marco Minniti during the government led by Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni. This protocol provided for tailored training by Italy for Libyan authorities in order to curb migration at its source. The objective was essentially to ensure that the Libyan Coast Guard would be able to intercept and stop individuals before they could leave the continent.

The first genuine “collapse,” however, was observed only in 2018, when the effects of the aforementioned protocol began to materialize.

In 2020, the trend reversed, with arrivals rising once again. In 2020, approximately 34,000 arrivals were recorded; in 2021, around 67,000; and in 2022, just over 105,000. Several factors likely contributed to this renewed increase, including the socio-economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

These sharp and sudden increases demonstrate that migration routes cannot be treated as bridges that can simply be dismantled to contain the problem. What emerges instead is the opposite: migratory flows respond to containment policies (such as the Italy–Libya memorandum), but precisely for this reason, when such measures are relaxed, flows rise again.

In 2023, a new peak was reached, with more than 157,000 arrivals—an increase that appears particularly significant when compared to the 2018 collapse. In response to this surge, the European Union signed the EU–Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding on 16 July 2023. This strategic and comprehensive partnership is based on five core pillars: macroeconomic stability, economy and trade, green transition, people-to-people contacts, and migration and mobility. The aim of the Memorandum is to strengthen international cooperation in addressing irregular flows and safeguarding EU borders²⁴.

Following this EU–Tunisia agreement, migratory flows declined again, reaching 66,617 arrivals²⁵.

²³ ASGI (Association for Legal Studies on Immigration), “Italy–Libya agreement: the Memorandum text” (2 February 2017), accessed 17 February 2026, <https://www.asgi.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ITALY-LIBYA-MEMORANDUM-02.02.2017.pdf>.

²⁴ European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), “EU–Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding,” PE 751.467 (September 2023), accessed 17 February 2026, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/751467/EPRS_ATAG%282023%29751467_EN.pdf.

²⁵ UNHCR Operational Data Portal, “Europe Sea Arrivals: Italy” (annual arrivals data used for the 66,617 figure), accessed 17 February 2026, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/europe-sea-arrivals/location/24521>.

Two key data points remain essential for properly framing irregular flows from Africa to Italy: first, arrivals are not exclusively of African nationality, as multiple ethnic groups, such as Asian migrants, also travel along the central route. Second, regardless of the absolute number of arrivals in Italy, the Mediterranean remains an extremely lethal passage, with peaks reaching 4,000 deaths per year²⁶.

Now that the immigration issue has been examined in depth, it is time to assess how the Mattei Plan proposes, in practical terms, to manage this phenomenon. In this regard, among the various reports, one of the clearest and most authoritative is the already cited “Mattei Plan: Relaunching Italy’s Africa Policy,” jointly authored by ISPI, Aspen, CESPI, ECFR, and IAI.

This report shows that the Mattei Plan sets ambitious objectives in combating irregular migration, while also revealing a lack of practical initiatives capable of economically and logistically sustaining these ambitions. The paper explains unequivocally that a core assumption underpins the Plan: namely, the idea that reducing irregular migratory flows depends on the implementation of particularly effective economic partnerships. This emerges clearly from Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni’s opening speech at the Italy–Africa Summit in January 2024, during which it was explicitly stated that the Plan aims to create suitable conditions for local populations to decide “not to migrate,” by acting on the presumed structural causes of the phenomenon. The underlying logic may appear intuitive; however, the paper highlights that the relationship between economic growth and reduced migration is far from linear.

Not only does the development of economically disadvantaged countries not necessarily translate into lower mobility, but quite often the opposite occurs. When a country begins to grow economically, this development affects multiple domains, including information, communications, and education. This frequently generates a growing desire among inhabitants to move in search of better opportunities in more developed countries.

Analyses by ISPI further reinforce this interpretation, pointing to an incompatibility between objectives and means: a substantial reduction in migratory flows would require far more extensive resources than those currently envisaged.

Continuing along this line, it appears that the governing coalition seeks, through the Mattei Plan, to reconcile two fundamentally different operational objectives. On the one hand, the

²⁶ IOM (International Organization for Migration), Missing Migrants Project (Mediterranean route) and related updates on annual fatalities; see also IOM news release on 2016 fatalities (Jan 2017), accessed 17 February 2026, <https://www.iom.int/news/mediterranean-migrant-arrivals-top-363348-2016-deaths-sea-5079>.

government promotes cooperation and development; on the other, it also seeks to curb irregular migratory flows. These two objectives, however laudable, are often mutually exclusive, at least in the short and medium term. A strategy combining short-term effects (reduction of irregular flows) with long-term outcomes (local development) would therefore likely prove more effective.

From a practical standpoint, the Mattei Plan addresses immigration, like other sensitive issues, through a multi-level approach based on the six pillars identified by the government as priorities in Africa: education, health, agriculture, energy, and infrastructure. Understanding this “multidisciplinary” dimension is important because, as previously noted, immigration is not tackled directly but rather transversally: the implementation of these sectors is expected to indirectly reduce migratory flows.

Another fundamental element of the Mattei Plan on migration is its alignment with the Rome Process, launched during the International Conference on Development and Migration in July 2023. The Plan explicitly draws on this conference and its pillars: a holistic approach²⁷ encompassing Europe, the Wider Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Africa, aimed at addressing migration not as a temporary emergency but as a structural phenomenon. A crucial role is assigned to IOM, the International Organization for Migration, which is tasked with supporting the objectives of the Rome Process and thus indirectly those of the Mattei Plan. IOM’s approach is based on developing regular migration channels, protection mechanisms for the most vulnerable, and recognition of professional skills aimed at transforming human mobility into sustainable development.

A further practical dimension of the Mattei Plan involves leveraging diasporas in support of effective migration policy. Diaspora refers to migrant communities—in this case African—that already reside in Italy. These groups typically have long-standing work experience in Italy, maintain active ties with families in their countries of origin, and possess knowledge of local languages, needs, and gaps. According to CESPI and IOM, diasporic communities can play a role in the success of the Mattei Plan comparable to that of governments and foreign companies: they can help institutions design action frameworks that genuinely respond to local needs, facilitate contacts with local governments, form cooperatives, or even transfer skills. The Italian state therefore commits to funding initiatives and projects proposed by migrant associations and to incorporating their perspectives. A concrete outcome of this renewed attention to diasporas is the A.MI.CO Program (Migrant Associations for Co-development), which provides funding to migrant associations to implement

²⁷ Italian Government, “International Conference on Development and Migration – Conclusions” (23 July 2023), accessed 17 February 2026, https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Conclusioni_230723.pdf.

projects in their countries of origin. In this context, the Meloni government also commits to cooperating with CIDCI (Italian Coordination of Diasporas for International Cooperation)²⁸, an entity bringing together various diasporic associations operating in Italy with the aim of representing them before institutions and ensuring stable involvement. In other words, diasporic communities can enhance the effectiveness of development interventions and therefore constitute a fundamental component of the strategy outlined in the Mattei Plan.

In parallel, and still within a framework of combating irregular migration, the Mattei Plan also seeks to strengthen pathways for regular and safe migration. The expected benefits of this approach are twofold: on the one hand, enhanced protection of human rights through reducing traffickers' markets and associated risks; on the other, these flows are viewed as development levers for countries of origin that forge increasingly productive relationships with European partners, fostering skills transfer and talent circulation.

On the security front, Italy, through the Mattei Plan, commits to reinforcing its engagement within the "Wider Mediterranean," a geographical area encompassing not only North Africa but also sub-Saharan Africa, particularly the Sahel.

The Sahel region has for years been central to debates on security and geopolitical balances, as it simultaneously constitutes a key corridor for irregular migratory routes and an area marked by profound political instability exacerbated by the presence of armed groups and entrenched criminal networks.

For these reasons, the Sahel is viewed as an instability multiplier across the African continent, with repercussions extending to North Africa and, by extension, Italy's coasts. Italian interest in the region has grown substantially over the past decade, as evidenced by recently opened embassies and participation in European and bilateral missions, including contributions to the United Nations stabilization operation in Mali, MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali), whose mandate ended in 2023²⁹.

²⁸ IOM Italy, A.MI.CO. (Migrant Associations for Co-development) programme documentation (toolkits and overviews), accessed 17 February 2026, <https://publications.iom.int/books/amico-programme-implementation-toolkit>; see also <https://italy.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11096/files/amico-programme-overview-en.pdf>.

²⁹ UN Peacekeeping, "Security Council ends MINUSMA mandate, adopts withdrawal resolution" (30 June 2023), accessed 17 February 2026, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/security-council-ends-minusma-mandate-adopts-withdrawal-resolution>.

Between 2011 and 2013, the Sahel experienced a period of crisis driven by internal imbalances rooted in long-term historical dynamics. The peak of this instability was reached with the Mali crisis, ongoing since 2012, representing a complex and multidimensional emergency marked by successive coups d'état and the expanding influence of jihadist movements. Many analysts describe the situation as a “hybrid” security environment in which the Malian military authorities—led since 2021 by Assimi Goïta—have confronted armed insurgencies, including Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), an Al-Qaida-linked coalition active across Mali and the wider Sahel³⁰.

From 2017 onward, alongside escalating violence, a humanitarian crisis has also intensified: growing numbers of internally displaced persons and cross-border refugees have borne the brunt of persistent instability. As of 31 January 2026, a total of 4,886,711 individuals—including refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons (IDPs)—have been recorded since the onset of the emergency³¹.

Between 2020 and 2023, an additional source of concern for the Sahel was the wave of coups affecting countries such as Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali. This configuration has produced two immediate consequences: it has further weakened institutions in the eyes of local populations and necessitated the renegotiation of previous international partnerships.

This series of coups has led to a significant downsizing of Western presence in the region. Geopolitical arrangements have been substantially reshaped, and many Western actors have been compelled to withdraw, most notably France. In this context, however, certain European countries have managed to strike a balance between total disengagement and outright opposition to military juntas. Particularly emblematic in this regard is Italy's stance: while not recognizing the legitimacy of the various military regimes, Italy has nevertheless maintained channels of dialogue with local governments. This pragmatic posture has yielded tangible results, as Italy has succeeded in preserving MISIN (Bilateral Support Mission in Niger) as the only Western mission still operational in Niger. This approach reflects Italy's effort to keep channels open with strategically relevant actors despite adverse geopolitical conditions.

³⁰ United Nations Security Council, ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions List: “Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM),” accessed 17 February 2026, <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/jamaa-nusrat-ul-islam-wa-al-muslimin-jnim>.

³¹ Reuters, “Mali coup leader Assimi Goita sworn in as transitional president” (7 June 2021), accessed 17 February 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-coup-leader-assimi-goita-sworn-transitional-president-2021-06-07/>.

In conclusion, the government led by Giorgia Meloni is well aware that in a delicate context such as irregular African routes toward Italian shores, maintaining ties with illegitimate governments constitutes a fundamental component of its containment strategy.

3. CHAPTER: Final assessment and outlook

3.1. Structural limitations, potential risks and unintended consequences

The Mattei Plan, although the government led by Giorgia Meloni currently enjoys relatively consolidated support, has not been immune to criticism. Several observers have pointed to controversial aspects and to initiatives drafted in a somewhat approximate manner, which could undermine the success of a programme whose necessity—in terms of development cooperation, supply security, and, more broadly, a break with past policies—has nonetheless been acknowledged by many stakeholders.

One of the first adverse and critical assessments comes from Filippo Nicolis di Robilant, associate researcher at CeSPI. While he recognises the importance—and the necessity—of a radical paradigm shift in international relations between Africa and Italy, he argues that the Mattei Plan should be approached without prejudice, yet with a critical eye where necessary. Due to time limitations, he reviews only some of the Plan's areas of intervention in order to illustrate what he considers its main and most worrying shortcomings, describing it as a Plan conceived “without a soul”³².

The first issue he addresses is development cooperation. The CeSPI report entitled “Un piano senz'anima” highlights the risk that the Mattei Plan could be implemented by creating a parallel institutional track, partially bypassing (or duplicating) Italy's existing development cooperation system, as redesigned by Law No. 125/2014³³. In essence, the concern is that—by concentrating strategic direction within the Prime Minister's Office and by centring implementation on state-owned enterprises—the Plan may weaken the role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), the Inter-

³² Filippo Nicolis di Robilant, “Un piano senz'anima” (“A Plan without Soul”), CeSPI (Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale).

³³ Italy's development-cooperation governance was redesigned by Law No. 125 of 11 August 2014 (“Disciplina generale sulla cooperazione internazionale per lo sviluppo”). The law established, inter alia, AICS, CICS and CNCS and clarified the role of MAECI.

ministerial Committee for Development Cooperation (CICS), and the National Council for Development Cooperation (CNCS).

With that in mind, it is now time to delve into the Mattei Plan itself, namely the governance model defined within Law No. 2/2024, which introduced a Steering Committee (*Cabina di regia*) and a dedicated Mission Structure (*Struttura di Missione*) at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers³⁴. Here the question is whether, and to what extent, these new bodies will integrate the existing decision-making and implementation ecosystem—or whether they will instead operate alongside it, potentially generating overlaps and frictions.

The paper makes it clear that the concern does not inherently criticise the Plan's overall approach—namely strengthening relations with African countries and promoting a partnership-based model. Rather, it questions whether the institutional and organisational set-up risks prioritising speed and political visibility over coherence, coordination, and long-term development impact.

Going deeper into the various criticalities inherent to the Plan and its recent implementation, the same report notes that, thus far, concrete initiatives appear to have remained largely at the level of political announcements, meetings, and exploratory missions. In other words, while diplomacy and signalling are indispensable, a clearer translation into operational programmes, selection criteria, and measurable objectives would strengthen credibility—regardless of whether the Plan's primary driver is economic, geopolitical, or both.

Another critical point that should be taken into account is transparency. In the absence of a clear monitoring and accountability mechanism—spelled out in advance and shared with Parliament, civil society, and partner countries—the Plan's discourse may be perceived as a form of "greenwashing" or "friendshoring", rather than as a truly mutual development partnership.

Another point raising significant concern emerges from Elena Ruffato's report for Geopolitica.info. Her analysis emphasises that, despite ambitious rhetoric, the Mattei Plan risks remaining a branding exercise unless it clarifies governance responsibilities, project-selection criteria, and evaluation tools, while also ensuring meaningful African ownership and consultation³⁵.

³⁴The Mattei Plan's governance framework was introduced through Law No. 2/2024 (conversion of Decree-Law No. 161/2023), which created a *Cabina di regia* and a *Struttura di Missione* at the Presidency of the Council.

³⁵ Elena Ruffato, "Mattei Plan for Africa: an analysis of the potential and weaknesses of the Italian strategy to strengthen relations with African countries", Geopolitica.info (Observatory).

3.2. Strategic implications for Italy and partner countries

Within the framework of Italy's strategic implications in light of the Mattei Plan, one of the most sceptical readings comes from Professor Eugenio Capozzi. In a provocative article, he argues that the Plan may de facto function as an instrument aligned with a broader US-led containment posture towards Russia and China, rather than as an autonomous Italian strategy rooted in long-term Euro–African partnership³⁶.

After the military junta seized power through the July 2023 coup in Niger, Niamey asked France and the United States to withdraw their troops, a decision that significantly reshaped the regional security architecture. The episode also fuelled concerns about a widening space for Russian influence, given the visibility of pro-Russian demonstrations and public messages from the Wagner network offering support to the new authorities³⁷.

In a world in which many geopolitical analysts do not hesitate to describe the contemporary international environment as a "new Cold War", the Mattei Plan can therefore be read as part of a broader attempt to secure Italy's economic interests and energy supply while navigating intensifying great-power competition on the African continent.

The link between what has been described from the beginning of the current chapter and the previous one is straightforward: the Mattei Plan sits at the intersection of development policy, energy strategy, and geopolitical positioning, and its success will depend on how coherently these dimensions are balanced.

This risk is compounded by the fact that European sovereigntists—of whom Giorgia Meloni has long been a prominent representative—have often remained a minority within EU politics. In order to compensate for this, and while seeking international support to advance her government's policies, Meloni has strengthened ties with the United States. This, despite the coalition's efforts to avoid an explicitly confrontational stance towards Moscow, places Italy firmly within the Western bloc. According to Capozzi, this positioning can make some African governments even less inclined to cooperate with Italy on the practical implementation of the Mattei Plan.

³⁶ Eugenio Capozzi, "I rischi di un Piano Mattei sotto egida USA" (The risks of a Mattei Plan under U.S. auspices), *La Nuova Bussola Quotidiana*.

³⁷ On the 26 July 2023 coup in Niger, subsequent requests for French troop withdrawal (announced September 2023), and public signaling from the Wagner network offering support to the junta, see major international coverage (e.g., Reuters and Associated Press reporting, 2023–2024).

In concluding his article, the professor draws a parallel between Italy's geopolitical posture during the Cold War and its current positioning in what some call a "new Cold War". At that time, Italy—although aligned with the Atlantic bloc and, by extension, with the United States—maintained a degree of autonomy on certain issues. Bettino Craxi's stance during the 1985 Sigonella crisis and Enrico Mattei's actions through ENI are two emblematic examples in this regard³⁸. Capozzi attributes this now-lost autonomy to particularly effective leadership (such as that of Craxi or Amintore Fanfani, both Prime Ministers in those decades), political mediation carried out by the clergy, and a generally more independent national orientation.

As of today, Italy appears to be attempting to replicate a similar posture, presenting itself as a partner that can speak with African counterparts in a less paternalistic tone than some former colonial powers, while also leveraging its energy and industrial actors as instruments of foreign policy.

3.3. Stability and short-term approaches

After addressing the Plan's general framework as well as some criticisms and potential consequences within the Italian and global context, a clear assessment of whether the Mattei Plan has the potential to remain sustainable in the long term seems necessary.

A single answer to these questions would be overly simplistic. Nonetheless, several criteria can help assess whether the Plan is structurally equipped to endure beyond short political cycles and shifting international conditions.

The first fundamental level to be examined is institutional stability. Italy has historically experienced frequent cabinet turnover, which can make long-term foreign-policy programmes difficult to sustain without cross-party buy-in and robust administrative continuity³⁹.

It should nevertheless be noted that, despite the aforementioned criticalities, the Mattei Plan is not limited to bilateral agreements between Italy and African countries. It also aims to encourage

³⁸ For the 1985 Sigonella episode (in the context of the Achille Lauro hijacking) and its relevance to Italian autonomy debates, see legal-historical overviews such as The Army Lawyer (U.S. Army JAG Corps), "The 1985 Sigonella Episode and the Limits of the U.S.–Italian Relationship" (2021).

³⁹ Italy's post-war political volatility is widely documented; for instance, official government archives list numerous cabinets since 1946, often with short average duration (see Presidenza del Consiglio / Governo italiano, "Governi" listing, and comparative political analyses).

international collaboration with stakeholders such as the European Union, multilateral development banks, and other European states, in order to consolidate partnerships and strengthen sustainability.

Despite this internationalisation promoted by Giorgia Meloni, the absence of a clear, public, and measurable roadmap—together with limited transparency on project pipelines—could still weaken credibility. Several analysts, including the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), have recommended creating a transparent digital platform and clearer monitoring tools to track progress and results over time⁴⁰.

The second level to be examined in assessing the long-term stability of the Mattei Plan is financial sustainability, which depends not only on headline figures but also on allocation rules, leverage mechanisms, and implementation capacity.

The Mattei Plan is explicitly designed as an innovative cooperation model based on partnerships. In terms of resources, the government has indicated an initial envelope of €5.5 billion, combining allocations from Italy's Climate Fund and development-cooperation resources, to support public and private initiatives⁴¹.

Furthermore, the Mattei Plan adopts a gradual approach with regard to the geographical scope of interventions, selecting a limited group of partner countries for pilot projects before scaling up to a broader set of initiatives and partnerships.

Another encouraging element, still within the framework of financial sustainability, is the effort to crowd in additional resources through partnerships. A notable example is the co-financing agreement signed in December 2024 between Italy's Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (CDP) and the African Development Bank (AfDB)⁴².

Despite what has been outlined so far, it remains evident—as several authors have noted—that the total amount committed, while politically significant, is modest compared to the scale of Africa's

⁴⁰ IAI (Istituto Affari Internazionali) policy commentary has stressed the need for a transparent, trackable implementation roadmap and monitoring tools (including a digital dashboard/platform) to reduce information asymmetries and improve accountability.

⁴¹ The government's initial €5.5bn envelope has been described as combining resources from Italy's Climate Fund and development-cooperation allocations; see official communications on the Piano Mattei and related policy analysis discussing the composition and constraints of these resources.

⁴² CDP–AfDB co-financing framework (announced December 2024) to leverage additional resources for African projects.

infrastructure and development needs. The Plan's impact will therefore depend heavily on leverage, governance quality, and the selection of bankable, high-impact projects.

A further level that proves particularly useful to examine, in terms of long-term sustainability, is the coherence of the Plan with climate and environmental objectives and with the evolution of European standards in this area.

In light of this awareness, the IAI and the Policy Center for the New South, among others, have highlighted that a substantial share of the Plan's resources is drawn from Italy's Climate Fund and is therefore subject to environmental eligibility criteria that can constrain the financing of hydrocarbon-extraction projects⁴³.

In conclusion, to ensure the success of what the Italian government presents as a strategic initiative, the Mattei Plan should combine political ambition with credible governance, transparency, and an evidence-based approach to project selection and evaluation. Otherwise, the risk is that it will remain a short-lived political brand rather than a durable partnership framework.

3.4. The French paradigm as a memorandum for Italian policymakers

Before concluding the present chapter, it is necessary to further examine France and its long-standing approach to Africa as a relevant comparative case. France's experience illustrates both the possibilities and the risks of blending development discourse with security policy and strategic competition.

It is well known that France's military presence has increasingly been contested by segments of local public opinion, particularly in the Sahel. Operation Barkhane—launched in 2014 and formally ended in 2022—deployed thousands of French troops, headquartered in N'Djamena, and

⁴³ Several analyses note that Climate Fund resources typically require environmental eligibility and thus constrain fossil-fuel extraction financing; see, for example, Policy Center for the New South policy briefs and IAI commentary discussing the Plan's resource composition and climate-compatibility implications.

operated across several G5 Sahel countries to support local forces against jihadist groups; yet it ultimately became a focal point of anti-French sentiment and political backlash⁴⁴.

As explained by Alain Antil, researcher at the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), French interventions have often oscillated between acting as a regional security guarantor and being perceived as a "gendarme" or "cicerone" of Africa—roles that are increasingly contested in today's political climate⁴⁵.

More recently, however, France—partly due to factors such as the rise of Russia and China, the shrinking influence of Western powers, and the growing assertiveness of local political actors—has been forced to reconsider the scope, visibility, and political framing of its African engagement.

Around the 2010s and especially after 2017, President Emmanuel Macron acknowledged that the traditional France–Africa relationship was politically costly and required rethinking. Beyond security adjustments, he sought to reframe relations through a stronger engagement with African youth and civil society, including the Montpellier Africa–France Summit in October 2021 and advisory initiatives such as the Presidential Council for Africa (CPA)⁴⁶.

France's policy shift towards Africa also extended to culture. Following Macron's 2017 Ouagadougou speech, France announced a greater openness to the restitution of certain cultural artefacts and pursued a series of initiatives aimed at reshaping narratives around colonial history and memory⁴⁷.

Despite the best intentions of the French establishment—and despite a rhetorical shift away from paternalism—France has continued to face significant pushback. In several contexts, the perception of inconsistency between discourse and practice, particularly on security and governance issues, has undermined trust.

⁴⁴ Operation Barkhane was launched in 2014 and formally ended in 2022; it operated across the Sahel with a headquarters in N'Djamena and variable troop levels in the thousands. See France's Ministry of the Armed Forces ("Opération Barkhane") and independent analyses for details on scope and force posture.

⁴⁵ Alain Antil (IFRI), "France's Africa policy under President Macron: good intentions, bad results", policy analysis discussing the evolution of France's role and perception in Africa.

⁴⁶ On Macron's attempt to reframe France–Africa relations through youth/civil society engagement, see the Montpellier Africa–France Summit (8 Oct 2021) and Élysée communications; for the Presidential Council for Africa (CPA) see Élysée statements and speeches (2017–2022).

⁴⁷ In the Ouagadougou speech (2017) Macron announced a shift on African cultural heritage and opened the way to restitution initiatives; see France Diplomatie / Élysée materials on cultural restitution and subsequent policy measures.

To this assertive military posture must also be added a degree of incoherence within French foreign policy, which has at times eroded its credibility. Diverging signals between domestic politics, security priorities, and declared partnership principles can make it easier for alternative actors to portray France as self-interested or unreliable.

In conclusion, despite the fact that France has acknowledged some past mistakes and attempted to adjust its approach, its experience in Africa highlights the reputational and strategic costs of policies perceived as interventionist. For Italy, this suggests that credibility, transparency, and genuine co-ownership with African partners are not ancillary issues but central conditions for success.

At first glance, France's African experience might appear to have little in common with Italy's current posture. Yet it provides a useful memorandum: initiatives framed as "partnerships" can quickly lose legitimacy if they are not matched by consistent practice, accountable governance, and an ability to adapt to local political realities.

4. CONCLUSION

The Mattei Plan represents one of the most ambitious attempts in recent decades to redefine Italy's role in Africa and, more broadly, in the Wider Mediterranean. Presented as a new paradigm of “non-predatory” cooperation, the Plan embodies the convergence of foreign policy, economic diplomacy, energy security, and national strategic interests. It positions itself as a structural instrument aimed at strengthening Italy's geopolitical posture through strategically targeted investments, energy partnerships, and a reconfiguration of development cooperation within a broader strategic framework.

From a political standpoint, the Plan emerges within a polarized domestic context, in which the Meloni Government seeks to reconcile a sovereigntist narrative with the need to consolidate Italy's credibility within both the European Union and NATO frameworks. In this sense, the Mattei Plan also performs a symbolic function: it seeks to reinforce Italy's identity as a middle power capable of autonomous initiative while remaining embedded within Euro-Atlantic structures. The initiative therefore operates simultaneously as an instrument of external positioning and domestic consensus-building.

Operationally, the Plan's core pillars are energy security and industrial-commercial projection. Energy constitutes the strategic backbone of the initiative, particularly in light of Europe's diversification needs following the 2022 geopolitical rupture. Italy's ambition to act as a Mediterranean energy hub—linking African producers to European markets—represents both an economic and geopolitical objective. Trade and investment policies, supported by public financial instruments such as Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (CDP), aim to facilitate the internationalization of Italian firms, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Within this architecture, development cooperation is no longer treated as a standalone policy area but is integrated into a broader framework of strategic partnership and economic engagement.

Migration, although formally included among the Plan's areas of intervention, does not constitute a structural pillar. Rather, it remains functionally connected to energy and security priorities and is often addressed through parallel diplomatic and bilateral mechanisms. By contrast, the security dimension—especially in the Sahel—remains highly salient. Coups d'état, institutional fragility, Western retrenchment, and expanding influence from actors such as Russia and China generate a complex strategic environment in which development, stabilization, and geopolitical competition

intersect. The case of Niger exemplifies the structural difficulty of simultaneously pursuing political dialogue, security cooperation, and long-term development objectives.

Despite its strategic ambition, the Mattei Plan displays structural limitations. Governance remains highly centralized through a steering committee, multi-year programming lacks full clarity, and the issue of genuinely additional financial resources remains contested. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are still insufficiently articulated. These elements raise legitimate concerns regarding implementation capacity, institutional continuity, and long-term accountability. Furthermore, there are potential risks of imbalance between economic interests and local development priorities, limited inclusion of African stakeholders in decision-making processes, and excessive reliance on short-term geopolitical calculations.

The sustainability of the Mattei Plan will therefore depend on its institutional consolidation, financial predictability, and normative coherence. Transforming the initiative from a government-led project into a durable state policy will be crucial for ensuring continuity beyond electoral cycles. Equally important will be the integration of the Plan within European and multilateral cooperation frameworks, avoiding duplication and enhancing strategic complementarity. Environmental sustainability, climate compatibility, and social safeguards will further determine the Plan's credibility in both African and European contexts.

Ultimately, the Mattei Plan signals a significant recalibration of Italy's Africa policy, yet it remains a strategic project in evolution. Its long-term relevance will not be measured solely by the scale of announced commitments, but by its capacity to operationalize coherent governance mechanisms, foster genuinely reciprocal partnerships, and embed Italian strategic interests within a framework of sustainable development and regional stability. Only by aligning geopolitical ambition with institutional responsibility and inclusive cooperation can the Mattei Plan transcend the contingencies of the present moment and establish itself as a lasting pillar of Italy's international strategy in Africa and the Wider Mediterranean.

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