


BOOK REVIEW

## Berlusconi ‘The Diplomat’ Populism and Foreign Policy in Italy

By Emidio Diodato and Federico Niglia, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. 226p, \$48.00.

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It is by no means a rhetorical statement to claim that Italy has been at the cutting edge of political innovations whereas its foreign policy remains twisted. For instance, the Italian ambassador and writer Pietro Quaroni once said, answering the question as to ‘who’ makes foreign policy in Italy that the right answer should be ‘nobody’. Quaroni’s answer denoted that Italy simply focused on the developments of the international system without changing the fundamental patterns of the national foreign policy. With such anomalies pervaded in Italian politics, the book published by Emidio Diodato and Federico Niglia titled ‘*Berlusconi “The Diplomat”-Populism and Foreign Policy in Italy*’ appears to be a timely contribution to the political science scholarship in filling the abyss of the literature regarding the Italian foreign policy and populism. It is relevant to understand that the book is not just an endeavour done by two Italian scholars to examine the political ups and downs of Italy’s legendary former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. The palpable objectives of this work are rooted in critically discussing the Italian foreign policy under Berlusconi along with the issue of populism in Italy. In doing so, authors have provided astute analysis on the Italian foreign policy in the post-war era to post-cold war period which gives a profound knowledge on Italian approach to international relations to the readers those who are strange to Italian politics. Authors have given due attention to describing how a country’s geopolitical significance was lost after the cold war where the Italian party system faced severe transformations. In the drawback of such a crucial moment in Italian politics in the early 90s, Berlusconi’s foreign policy and political mechanism marked the beginning of a new era in Italian politics. Authors have stated in the prologue ‘This is the first attempt to assess his contributions to the transformation of the Italian role within Europe, and the world, after the Cold War’ (xiii).

The book consists of nine chapters and the first chapter is an apt illustration narrating the complex nature of Italian foreign policy in the post-cold war context. While tracing Italy’s ambidextrous position in hobnobbing with both Soviets and the Atlantic movement led by the USA in the peak of the Cold War, authors have discussed the significant changes occurred in Italian foreign policy in the 70s. Especially the Italian government chaired by Francesco Cossiga’s decision in 1979 to install the Cruise missiles in Italy to counter Soviet missiles was a decisive moment in Italian foreign policy history during the cold war era. The critical analysis given by the authors in examining the significance of Benedetto Craxi in his foreign policy changes presents a vivid picture of the transformation of Italian foreign policy before the end of the First Republic. Craxi renewed the spirit of the Italian–American relationship by looking for a third way between the traditional Atlanticism of the DC. Craxi’s hostility towards Communism while keeping his socialist spirit and centre-left vision of Italian foreign policy had aspired Berlusconi in carving his foreign policy grounded on his anti-Communist obsession. Authors state ‘An interesting point of

contact between Craxi and Berlusconi is precisely in the field of foreign policy. One can even argue that Craxi's influence on Berlusconi was more radical and relevant in the field of foreign policy than in others because of the innovations introduced' (p. 7).

The third chapter critically discusses the steeping increase of his approach to Italian foreign policy from his starting point in 1994 as a business tycoon who was still strange to the Machiavellian world of politics to the level of a statesman who tended to ground the foreign policy as a 'personal initiative' (p. 57). Personal diplomacy adopted by Berlusconi was propelled by his most peculiar ways of keeping some good relations with the world leaders and I do agree with the analysis pictured by Diodato and Niglia on how Berlusconi placed his personal relations as a pivotal factor in cementing in the foreign policy. In particular, his affinity with Russian president Vladimir Putin and his visits to Russia was a notable as the EU held a sceptical view towards Russian Federation, but Berlusconi was a firm believer in personal relations as a great way to avoid crises in international affairs. Authors have acknowledged 'He and the country he represents were the most suitable candidates to promote dialogue' (p. 59). In evaluating the ups and downs of Berlusconi's foreign policy based on his relations, authors have shown how this 'personal relations' factor failed in locating Italy's position in international affairs as his close links with Kremlin sometimes gave wrong messages to the EU by weakening Italy's credibility within the region.

The chapter discussing the Berlusconi's role as a reformer in changing the perception of Italy in international arena provides a vivid analysis of how his robust approach in cementing the image of Italy made a rapid transformation in the international arena. There was a sense of mixed feelings pervaded among the Atlantics on Italy as a 'problematic country' with the magnitude of the Communist Party and the stagnant economic growth in the post-world war context (p. 76). Especially this feeling was legitimized by the media depiction of Italy as an exotic holiday destination from one side and also an unstable place in the continent from the other side. However, Berlusconi took the strong initiative in changing the depiction of Italy as a backward country. The analysis drawn by the authors on the whole trajectory is a solid attempt that elucidates Berlusconi's faith Italian people to change the image of Italy before the international community.

All in all, the whole work has been able to illustrate a rather descriptive and a critical account on the foreign policy approach of Silvio Berlusconi covering many of the interesting aspects. In my point of view, the author's analysis on Berlusconi's engagement with EU and how he has committed to the cause EU can be considered much significant with its contemporary relevance of understanding Italy's position in the European Union.

But Diodato and Niglia have ended their outstanding work by providing a brief epilogue that does not constitute a substantive analysis as their conclusion. This is a major lacuna that can disappoint a serious reader at the end of the book. Also, the significant part of the epilogue has been confined to this particular sentence. 'We hoped to have contributed to the debate by leading our audience a little further from partisan stereotypes' (p. 193). Nevertheless, the book is indeed a tantalizing work that helps to understand the role played by Silvio Berlusconi in shaping Italian foreign policy in the post-cold war world.