

A BRIDGE TO NOWHERE?

Giorgia Meloni and her balancing act between the United States and Europe

Following the G7 meeting in France in June, US President Donald Trump claimed that Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni “begged” to take a picture with him during the summit.¹ Such a public rebuke is only one of a string of episodes evidencing a serious rift between the two leaders. The outcome is surprising given that the political and personal relationship between Meloni and Trump has, until recently, appeared to be rather idyllic.² Placing the issue within the broader context of Italy’s balancing act between the United States and Europe, this PRIF Spotlight aims to uncover how this rift emerged and explore its potential implications for Meloni, Trump, and the future of European foreign and defence policy cooperation.



Outrage in Italy after U.S. President Donald Trump says Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni ‘begged’ for photo Italy, Rome, June 19, 2026. Photo: © picture alliance/ ROPI | Marco Lanni.

BY GIUSY CAVASSO AND FABIO FIGIACONI

During both his first Presidency and the 2024 electoral campaign, Trump’s “America First” rhetoric has often been antagonistic and at times outright hostile towards Europe.³ In the lead-up to his second term, the US President’s adversarial attitude became a serious concern among many European governments.⁴ However, this did not extend to Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni who, since the outset of the Trump 2.0 era, has tried to position herself as a mediator between Washington and the European capitals. Her credentials for the role were rooted both in Italy’s long-standing transatlantic foreign

policy alignment and, above all, in her solid positioning within the global constellation of the political far-right. When Donald Trump was sworn in as the 47th US President, Meloni was the only European leader present.⁵ Later on, when the Trump Administration’s frictional attitude towards the European Union became increasingly apparent, as evidenced for instance by US Vice President JD Vance’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, Meloni doubled down on casting herself as the bridgebuilder Europe needed to deal with the US President.⁶ Even international observers acknowledged the Italian PM as the only political leader capable of assuming an intermediary role between Europe and the United States.⁷ Consequently, Giorgia Meloni earned the moniker of “Trump whisperer”⁸ and seemed indeed to have managed to forge a special relationship with the US President.

Numerous episodes are testimony to this. In April 2025, following Trump’s announcement of increased tariffs for the EU, the Italian PM was the first European leader to be received at the White House.⁹ Then, following the outbreak of the Israel-Iran twelve-day war in June 2025, Trump and Meloni both attended the G7 meeting in Canada. There they isolated themselves from the rest of the leaders to have an informal meeting on a bench, clearly projecting the image of a privileged US friendship with the Italian ally. In short, the relationship between the two leaders seemed to extend beyond mere ideological alignment, as there was a palpable sense of mutual personal admiration. Trump frequently lauded Meloni, and the Italian PM always tried to signal closeness to her powerful international ally. This occurred for instance at the

Meloni-Trump meeting at the White House in April 2025

At their first official bilateral meeting at the White House, Meloni agreed to most of Trump's requests regarding Italy, such as buying more US gas and, above all, reaching NATO's defence spending target of 2% of GDP, a significant step forward for a country that has long lagged behind in military expenditures. Yet, less clear were the concessions obtained in return, except for a handful of compliments, as the Italian online newspaper *Il Post* pointed out.*

beginning of 2026, when Trump's initiative to establish the Board of Peace for Gaza was set in motion. Meloni, who had been invited to join by the US President, initially claimed that Italy would take part, only to backtrack shortly after. Indeed, formally joining the Board would have likely created serious legal problematics for the Italian executive, since Article 11 of the Italian Constitution permits joining international institutions only on a basis of *de jure* equality with other Member States. This was clearly not the case for Trump's Board of Peace.¹⁰ Thus, Giorgia Meloni, to circumvent the problem, announced that Italy would only join as an "observer".¹¹ Importantly, Meloni's efforts to participate in the Board contrasted with the behaviour of other major European states like Germany, France, and Great Britain, whose leaders explicitly ruled out any kind of involvement in the newly created institution. The peak of the privileged relationship with the current US President was arguably reached when Meloni, unlike other European leaders, publicly expressed her support for Trump receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, should he manage to put an end to the Ukraine war.¹²

At the same time, however, Meloni's close political proximity to Trump has not been perceived by most European leaders as useful asset in the European diplomatic toolkit. Rather, it has meant that Meloni has often found herself at odds with European partners on some important issues. For instance, in January 2026, following Trump's threats to annex Greenland, Meloni signed a Joint Statement supporting Denmark together with other European leaders.¹³ Yet she later downplayed the US President's hostile rhetoric and refused to join eight other European partners in sending troops for a highly symbolic military exercise taking place on the island.¹⁴ Additionally, Meloni has always stressed the central role

of NATO¹⁵ and the United States in brokering and guaranteeing any future ceasefire and peace deal in Ukraine.¹⁶ This position has caused a certain reticence on her part to get fully on board with European-managed initiatives on Ukraine. This was shown clearly in her lukewarm and hesitant participation¹⁷ in the talks launched by France and Great Britain to establish a "coalition of the willing"¹⁸ to provide support and future security guardrails to Kyiv.

INCREASING TENSIONS

Yet, despite Meloni's track record during the early period of Trump's second Presidency, the first months of 2026 have ushered in a deterioration of the relationship between the Italian PM and the US President.

First, Trump's decision to attack Iran without consulting European allies led to significant intra-NATO frictions and a multitude of negative spillovers. In the case of Italy specifically, US actions in the Middle East took the government by surprise, so much that the Italian Minister of Defence, Guido Crosetto, who happened to be in Dubai at the time, remained stranded there for several days.¹⁹ Second, the outbreak of the war raised significant concerns among the Italian population. The potential economic consequences of the conflict, and especially its impact on energy prices,²⁰ became a significant source of anxiety for a country so dependent on external energy supplies.²¹ To appease such worries, Meloni addressed the issue, claiming that "Italy is not at war, and does not want to be".²²

Finally, the conflict broke out at a particularly critical juncture for Meloni's cabinet. Indeed, at the end of March, the Italians voted on a Constitutional reform advanced by Meloni's government. The reform concerned some technical aspects of the Italian judicial system. However, given the timing of the vote, such referendum took on the connotations of a "mid-term judgement" on Meloni's government on the part of the Italian public. For this reason, the reform's rejection came to represent a significant defeat for the Italian PM, who began to appear weaker in the eyes of international observers as well.²³ Against this backdrop, commentators have speculated on a link between the referendum results, Trump's low popularity in Italy,²⁴ and Meloni's closeness to him, citing the possible existence of "T Factor",²⁵ or a "Trump Trap".²⁶ The referendum, however, remains a matter of domestic policy. Meloni's connection to Trump may have influenced the result, but it was not the main driver. Nonetheless, the reform's rejection has challenged the Prime Minister, who has since then tried to find a new balance, both on internal matters and, especially, on foreign policy.

THE CLASH

When it comes to external affairs, such a step-change can be seen in certain critical turning points. First, since the end of March the Italian government has become increasingly vocal about the conflict in Iran. In this context, Italy refused to allow US bombers to use the Sigonella airbase in Sicily, a military installation routinely visited by US aircrafts.²⁷ While the issue was more procedural than political, it could be interpreted as a tangible stance taken by Rome against the war on Iran.²⁸ Second, it was the Meloni-Trump personal relationship that took a direct hit. The trigger was Pope Leo XIV's strong criticism of the war against Iran, which pushed President Trump to harshly attack the pontiff.²⁹

Giorgia Meloni, a conservative who has made her Catholic faith a key element of her political identity, could not help but voice her opposition to Trump's statements, defining them as "unacceptable" and expressing her solidarity with Pope Leo.³⁰ The US President responded soon after, stating that "She is the one who is unacceptable",³¹ lamenting Meloni's lack of support for the conflict in Iran. Last, during June's G7 meeting in Evian, Meloni and Trump reportedly had several bilateral conversations, in what initially appeared to be a *rapprochement*.³² Yet in an interview given shortly after the summit Trump lashed out once again at Meloni, claiming that in France Meloni had "begged me to take a photo with her" and that he "felt sorry for her",³³ an accusation against which the Italian PM strongly pushed back.³⁴

INFOBOX

Security relations

Italy hosts around 120 US military installations, which serve both military and logistical purposes. Among these, 7 key US military bases are strategically located across the Italian peninsula.^{**} In terms of personnel, there are 12,783 active-duty US military members stationed in Italy, making it the second-largest troop host in Europe, after Germany (37,009).^{***}

All in all, Donald Trump's attacks against Giorgia Meloni have dealt a significant blow to the foundation of the diplomatic bridge she was trying to build. However, for the Italian PM, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Italian observers suggest that her close relationship with Donald Trump, once an asset, gradually evolved into a liability from which Meloni needed to break free.³⁵

AFTER THE STORM, IN WHICH DIRECTION WILL MELONI GO?

With the relationship between Rome and Washington apparently at its lowest point in years, Meloni and her administration will have to make crucial decisions going forward. Given Italy's longstanding and deeply entrenched security, economic, and dip-



Source of data: https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/public/osservatorio/interscambio-commerciale-mondo/Tab%205A%20Principali%20paesi%20destinatari%20delle%20esportazioni%20italiane_1781590034.pdf

THE AUTHORS

Giusy Cavasso is a former Erasmus+ Trainee at Goethe University Frankfurt and a former member of the LOEWE Research Group World Orders in Conflict. Fabio Figiaconi is an Associate Fellow at PRIF's Research Department International Institutions and also a member of the LOEWE Research Group.

CONTACT giusy-cavasso@hotmail.it
figiaconi@prif.org#

PRIF, Darmstädter Landstr. 112, 60598 Frankfurt/M.
PVst, DPAG 43853, Entgelt bezahlt, ISSN-2512-627X

lomatic ties with Washington, a severing of relations with the current Trump Administration is not in the cards. Thus, structural constraints render it inevitable that Meloni will at least find a resized but nonetheless functional *modus vivendi* with the White House.

At the same time, considering Trump's well-known frequent positional swings on political matters and Meloni's own chameleonic profile, some sort of public reconciliation between the two leaders is not to be ruled out altogether.³⁶ After all, scholarly studies have duly evidenced the opportunistic and "political-marketing" elements that can be embedded in foreign policy actions by populist actors.³⁷ Conversely, Meloni's present fall from Trump's good graces could tempt the Italian PM to perform a foreign policy U-turn, taking some distance from the US President and engaging more with her European counterparts on Europe's main foreign and security policy issues, such as the future of EU defence and Ukraine. In this sense, Giorgia Meloni's partic-

ipation alongside the leaders of Germany, France, Great Britain and Poland in the defence-related E5 summit in June 2026 in Berlin, and her statements on the necessity of Europe taking on more responsibility for its own defence, could be read as a strategic signal in this direction.³⁸

Yet the question remains as to whether and how much European political players can rely on Meloni's political goodwill when it comes to her participation in both ongoing and new EU initiatives. For instance, Rome's recent hesitancy to demand access to the EU-backed SAFE loans scheme, meant to finance joint European defence procurement initiatives, hints at a potential mismatch between deeds and actions by the Italian PM.³⁹

In sum, as Meloni's bridge between the United States and Europe now appears in a poor state, going forward the Italian Prime Minister risks finding herself swimming alone in the strong currents of international and European politics.

PRIF SPOTLIGHT: The Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) is the largest institute for peace research in Germany. PRIF sets out to analyze the causes of violent international and internal conflicts, carrying out research into the conditions necessary for peace and working to spread the concept of peace.

V.i.S.d.P.: Karin Hammer, Press and Public Relations (PRIF), Darmstädter Landstr. 112, Frankfurt am Main, Phone +49 (0) 69 959104-0, info@prif.org, www.prif.org. Design: Anja Feix · Layout: PRIF · Print: Druckerei Spiegel

Text License: Creative Commons (Attribution/No Derivatives/4.0 International). The images used are subject to their own licenses.



References and further reading:
prif.org/spotlight1026-fn
DOI 10.48809/prifspot2610



Peace Research Institute Frankfurt
Leibniz-Institut für
Friedens- und Konfliktforschung

