

THE TURTLE AND THE PILOT FISH: HOW THE EU AND ITALY CAN HELP EACH OTHER IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Kelly Petillo, Arturo Varvelli

October 2025

SUMMARY

- Since taking office, Giorgia Meloni has focused on expanding Italy's energy, economic and security footprint across the "Wider Mediterranean", through initiatives such as the Rome Process and the Mattei Plan.
- Meloni aims to redefine Italy's relationship with countries to its south by creating equal partnerships with partner states. This also involves enhancing the role of the private sector.
- Italy's policy efforts run in parallel with the EU's own attempts to improve its relationship with Mediterranean countries on the basis that their futures are interconnected.
- Like the symbiotic relationship between a turtle and a pilot fish, the EU and Italy should combine their policy efforts. They have much to learn from each other about developing more constructive partnerships with countries to the south.
- But to develop a truly holistic approach to the Wider Mediterranean, Italy needs to Europeanise its policy (rather than the EU to "Italianise" its policy) to secure its strategic interests.

Mediterraneo allargato

Italy's "head is a piece of central Europe, while [its] feet are immersed in the Mediterranean". These are the words of Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni, describing the way in which her country's location on Europe's southern flank—surrounded by sea on three sides and just a short distance from the Middle East and North Africa—has shaped its political and geographical outlook. Since Meloni took office in 2022, the Italian government has renewed its economic and diplomatic emphasis on the surrounding region through the concept of *Mediterraneo allargato*—the "Wider Mediterranean".

Under Meloni, Italy's foreign policy approach in the Wider Mediterranean is underpinned by three core goals: managing irregular migration flows; identifying opportunities for robust energy partnerships; and securing Europe's southern flank against encroaching Russian influence. This approach is primarily embodied in the Rome Process, a cross-border initiative which relies on bilateral collaboration to deter what Meloni deems "irregular migration" into Europe's southern flank. But it is the Mattei Plan—Italy's flagship strategy which emphasises energy security and economic relationships—that is putting Meloni's approach into action. Italy's view is that the imperative to secure sustainable development in the Wider Mediterranean is directly related to its own interests, for instance by enabling it to counter Russia's gradual encroachment to Europe's south. Now Italy is looking to offer a development model characterised by equal partnerships and nearshoring.

The Mattei Plan is based on a pragmatism which departs from the traditional "incentive based" European model and emphasises positive cooperation by establishing co-created and mutually beneficial partnerships. To be sure, Italy has already demonstrated that leveraging existing energy partnerships and creating new economic offers can be an efficient way to boost its influence in the Middle East and North Africa. Several Gulf states have already provided substantial funding for the Mattei Plan, and the UAE in particular has contributed \$25m to support a Rome Process/Mattei Plan Financial Facility (RPFF).

But regional instability is preventing Italy from comprehensively advancing its energy, connectivity and security interests. In Libya, for example, the domestic situation is so complex that cooperation remains limited. As needs grow and states' aid budgets shrink, the Mattei Plan represents Italy's solution: an alternative to aid-led development models in favour of a partnership model focused on reciprocal economic opportunity.

This paper argues Italy needs to work symbiotically with the EU if it is to achieve geopolitical stability and economic success in the Wider Mediterranean. Meloni might have successfully promoted her rhetoric of pragmatism to EU decision-makers—but in terms of concrete policy

decisions, such as her migration agreements, the policies she has promoted within the bloc have yielded mixed results. To fully succeed in its renewed foreign policy push, Italy needs to depart from securitised migration models and “Europeanise” the more positive aspects of its approach to the Wider Mediterranean. The EU’s current diplomatic outreach to Mediterranean countries—in the form of its New Pact for the Mediterranean—means that now is a propitious moment for Italy. It should work with the EU to increase the private sector’s role in countries that are part of the Mattei Plan and counter the effects of cooperation with authoritarian governments.

To do so, the EU and Italy need to develop a relationship akin to the sea turtle and the pilot fish: each creature supports the other on their journey through the ocean. While Italy has much to gain from Brussels, the EU too can learn from Italy’s approach: the latter is focused on fostering regional economic opportunities to establish a credible dialogue with Wider Mediterranean countries. Italy can similarly benefit from EU resources like Global Gateway to realise the scale of its Wider Mediterranean ambitions. If successful, this symbiosis will create an enterprising EU political investment which also addresses the root causes of migration and growing Russian pressure along Europe’s southern flank.

Learning the ropes

The “Wider Mediterranean”

The Italian concept of the Wider Mediterranean has traditionally been a “geographical vision” which depicts its namesake sea as a “geostrategic and geoeconomic continuum” between Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Since becoming prime minister, Meloni has emphasised the Wider Mediterranean as a focus of Italian geopolitics: in this iteration, Italy’s future is directly influenced by regional stability, energy security and migration management across the Middle East, North Africa, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. As such, the contemporary application of the Wider Mediterranean idea signals a re-energised, more assertive foreign policy vis-à-vis Italy’s southern neighbours. It is based on realising a geopolitical ambition that departs from previous, more reactive European engagement across the region.

To reflect the place of global geopolitics in its Mediterranean-centred foreign policy, the Italian government is toying with new definitions that communicate its far-reaching ambitions. This is clear, for instance, in its use of concepts like “elongated Mediterranean” (signifying even greater strategic depth towards Africa), “global Mediterranean” (to portray the region as central to global security in an increasingly interconnected world) and “Indo-Mediterranean” (to

highlight Italy's vision for strengthening its geopolitical clout by using economic partnerships such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor—IMEC).

However, regardless of such nuance—or, indeed, what Italy does to expand on these foreign policy concepts in the future—the overarching Wider Mediterranean vision contains three main strands that interweave with the EU's own strategic interests. These are migration, energy and tackling the Russian threat to the south.

Migration

In July 2023, Meloni officially outlined her vision for migration policy at the International Conference on Development and Migration in Rome. Known as the “Rome Process”, the new initiative garnered support from 15 countries across the Middle East and North Africa (including Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and the UAE). The Rome Process aims to address the fundamental causes of migration by engaging with countries of origin, countries of transit and countries of departure—all at the same time, and in order to promote a more holistic strategy. By homing in on development and creating economic opportunities in “source countries”, Meloni hopes to provide incentives for migrants to refrain from moving to Europe for economic reasons.

The conference was attended by European Council president Charles Michel, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, and representatives of various European bodies; their presence was a strong sign of convergence between Meloni and the EU on migration. Days before the Rome conference, the EU's memorandum of understanding with Tunisia, facilitated by Meloni, became the “blueprint” for future EU partnerships in the Wider Mediterranean. German chancellor Angela Merkel espoused the benefits of such bilateral deals back in 2016, when the EU and Turkey signed a similar pact. But Meloni is credited as the architect of those struck by the EU between 2023 and 2025 (as well as with Tunisia, the EU has also concluded agreements with Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon).

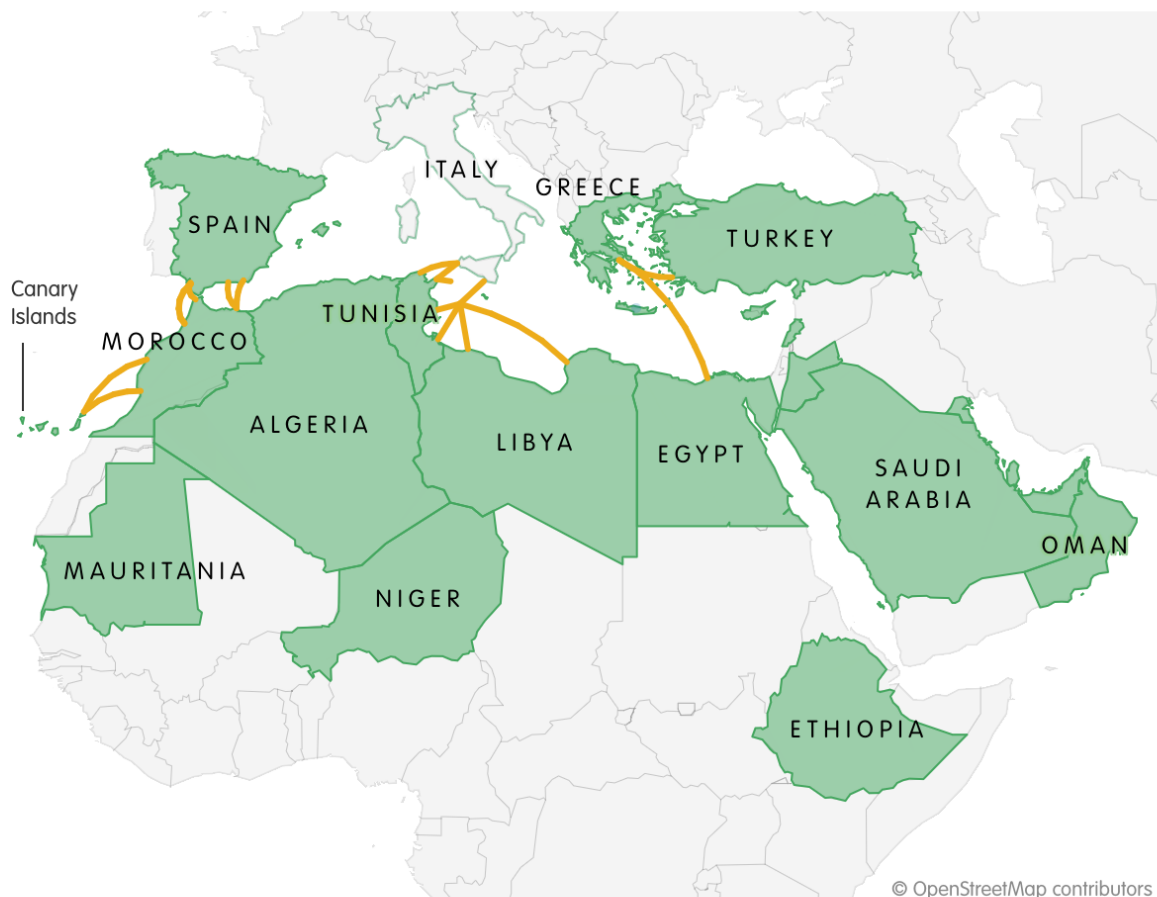
However, Meloni's deal-making does not match her rhetoric on addressing the drivers of migration. Nor is it making a dent in the figures. Irregular crossings from North Africa to Europe are increasing, including via new routes such as from Libya to Crete. Meloni also maintained controversial migration deals struck by past governments, despite their human toll. And following reported human rights abuses by the EU-funded Tunisian national guard, the EU has overhauled its own bilateral agreement with Tunis. The deals have exacerbated intra-EU tensions, with EU officials and member states expressing concern at the apparent lack of consultation by von der Leyen before she endorsed their content.

Meloni has shown she is willing to adapt her migration policies when cracks emerge. Despite renewing the controversial Italy-Libya memorandum of understanding on migration, Italy developed the Rome Process after it ran into difficulties implementing a €653.5m plan for migrant detention hubs in Albania. At the same time, Meloni recognises Italy needs a younger workforce to sustain the economy. To this end, she issued a “migration flows decree” to assign 500,000 work permits to non-EU nationals between 2026 and 2029. The decree’s aim was to improve the mechanism through which migrants can legally work in Italy. But it will also help build trust with Italy’s southern neighbours, which can “sell” this policy to their own publics.

With countries such as Germany endorsing Italy’s migration model, Meloni’s ideas are gaining traction among other European states. The migration deals demonstrate her success in forging influential coalitions capable of reshaping the European consensus.

The Wider Mediterranean. States in the Mediterranean region, the Middle East and Africa participating in the “Rome Process”

— Main Mediterranean migration routes



Source: governo.it; UNHCR; IOM; Global Initiative.
ECFR · ecf.eu

Energy and connectivity

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 prompted Europeans to reconsider their energy dependencies—and nowhere more so than Italy. Meloni's ambition to transform her country into an energy hub and green-energy corridor for Europe is driven by an imperative to reduce reliance on Russia and other traditional suppliers. The war is impelling the nearshoring of energy, manufacturing and connectivity across the Mediterranean, and Italy has led new projects in gas extraction and green hydrogen. For example, Italy's state-owned energy company Eni has signed deals with Algeria, Egypt, Israel and Libya, aiming to capitalise on their abundant natural gas reserves.

However, the European race to replace Russian energy supplies also faces a tension between prioritising natural gas purchases and finding further investments for other sources of green energy. The southern Mediterranean region has enormous green energy potential. Countries like Morocco, Egypt and Saudi Arabia could become leading producers of offshore wind energy. Egypt, Jordan and Morocco receive among the highest solar radiance globally, making them important partners for the EU's transition to renewable energy.

But under Italy's presidency in 2024, the G7 made little progress on its green agenda. Despite significant potential for the relationship between Italy and Wider Mediterranean countries in this field, development has stalled. Domestically, Meloni has often criticised the “ideological undercurrent” of the European Green Deal. And Italian policy remains vague about how to develop the clean hydrogen infrastructure necessary to export from the Middle East to Europe, or construct interconnected electricity grids. The country still mainly focuses on hydrocarbon deals with states such as Algeria and Libya. This could compromise Meloni's insistence that Italy wants to develop other regional partnerships based on green energy; it could also attract comparisons between Italy and China that favour the latter. After all, China is pursuing green energy projects and leading on sector-specific manufacturing. In its active regional engagement, China portrays itself as a non-colonial actor, which could prove a more attractive diplomatic proposition than that offered by Italy and Europe.

Meanwhile, deepening geopolitical instability in the Middle East is disrupting key connectivity routes. This includes IMEC, a project with goals comparable to those of China's Belt and Road Initiative. For example, IMEC entails a central role for Israel, but others involved in the project, such as Saudi Arabia, remain lukewarm due to recent Israeli actions. Without an end to the war in Gaza (and Israel's other escalating regional attacks), the project will fail to draw investment into the Italian port of Trieste and other locations across the Mediterranean.

India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)



Source: MERICS; Worldbank; Lowy Institute
ECFR · ecf.eu

The Russian threat

Meloni is also vocal about the threat posed by Russian entrenchment in countries across the Wider Mediterranean. She has assigned an importance to Russia's threat in the east equal to that of its activities along Europe's southern border.

Following the toppling of Bashar al-Assad, Moscow is exploring a naval base in Tobruk, eastern Libya (with whose leader, General Khalifa Haftar, it has deep security ties) and is reportedly

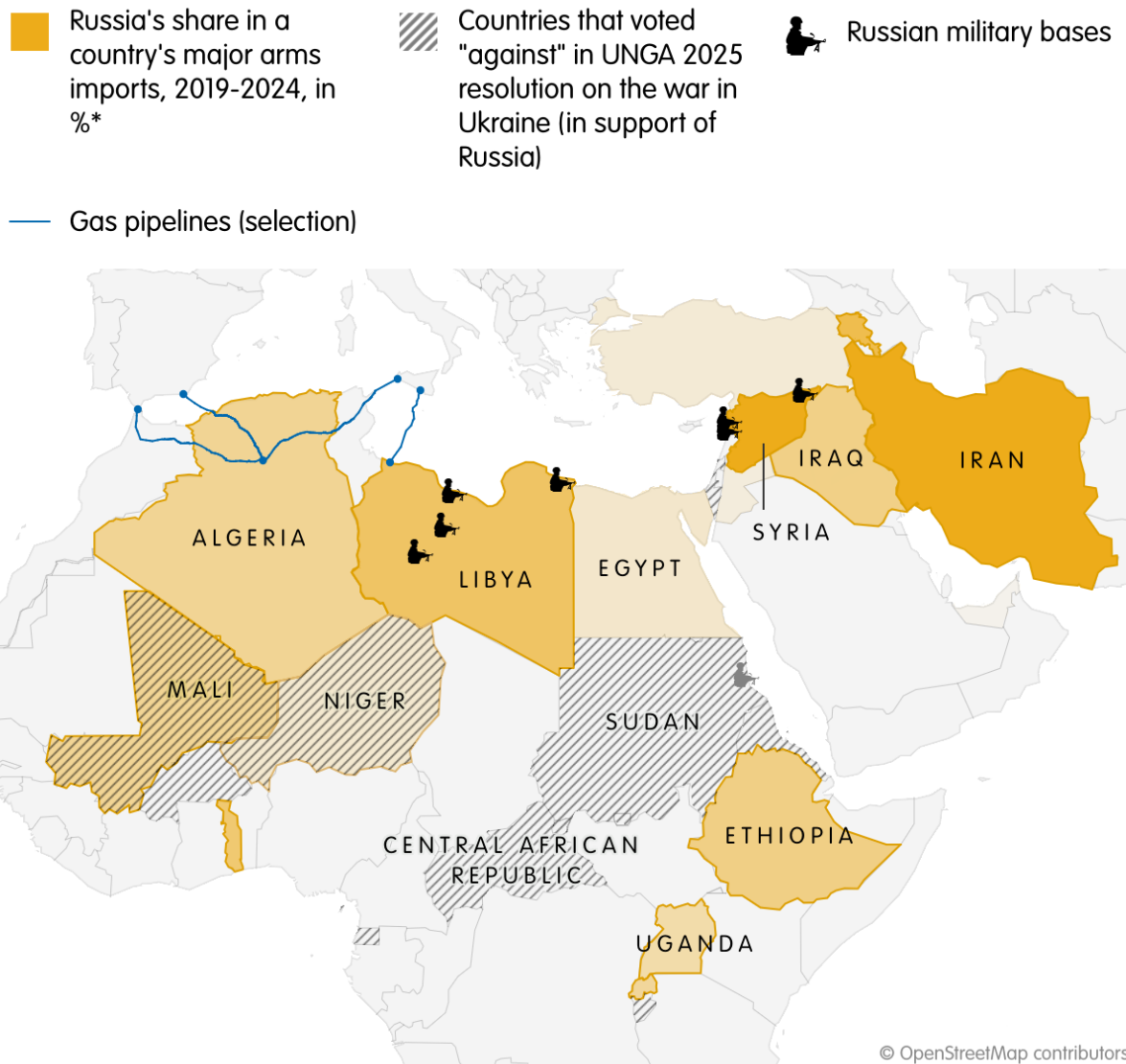
looking to install missiles “facing Europe” in Sabha. Russia’s military presence in North Africa also means it is well placed to exploit alleged smuggling networks which take migrants to Europe and provide resources for Moscow to carry out hybrid attacks—for example, carrying out disinformation campaigns alongside support for military actors. Elsewhere, Russia is building a new power station in Turkey and financing the expansion of Egypt’s Dabaa power plant. Moscow has deepened ties with Tehran, signing a comprehensive strategic partnership treaty covering politics, trade and energy. Finally, it has promulgated anti-Western disinformation campaigns.

Italy’s geographical position exposes it to the potential consequences of Russian activities in Africa, which Meloni believes may trigger new waves of migration. (Italy is already the top destination of sea arrivals to the EU.) To counter this, Italy has played a central role in attempting to end energy dependence on Russian gas by concluding deals with Algeria, Egypt and Libya, which Meloni envisages as part of diversifying away from Russian dependence. These partnerships have allowed Italy to deepen relations with traditionally Russia-friendly countries like Algeria, which is looking to distance itself from Russia in order to become more diplomatically balanced and independent of foreign powers. Italy has expanded its military presence in Africa, for instance in Niger, when the 2023 coup led to the withdrawal of other European forces. Italy also maintains a presence in western Libya.

Meloni has pressed for Russia’s southern encroachment to be addressed in the EU’s forthcoming New Pact for the Mediterranean and through the EU’s newly established directorate-general for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf. The bloc is considering economic-led interventions, arguing that greater EU-Mediterranean trade integration would help align partners with single-market rules.

However, the Italian government believes these plans fail to allay concerns about Russia’s presence in the Wider Mediterranean. Together with other southern European countries, it has sounded the alarm over the EU’s and other member states’ lack of focus on the challenge.

Russian presence in the Wider Mediterranean



*Based on volume of transfers of major arms 2019-2024 measured in SIPRI trend-indicator values (TIVs). Libya's data includes arms transfers to eastern and western Libya.

Source: SIPRI; ISPI; United Nations; Global Energy Monitor
ECFR · ecf.eu

Making waves in policy

Enter the Mattei Plan

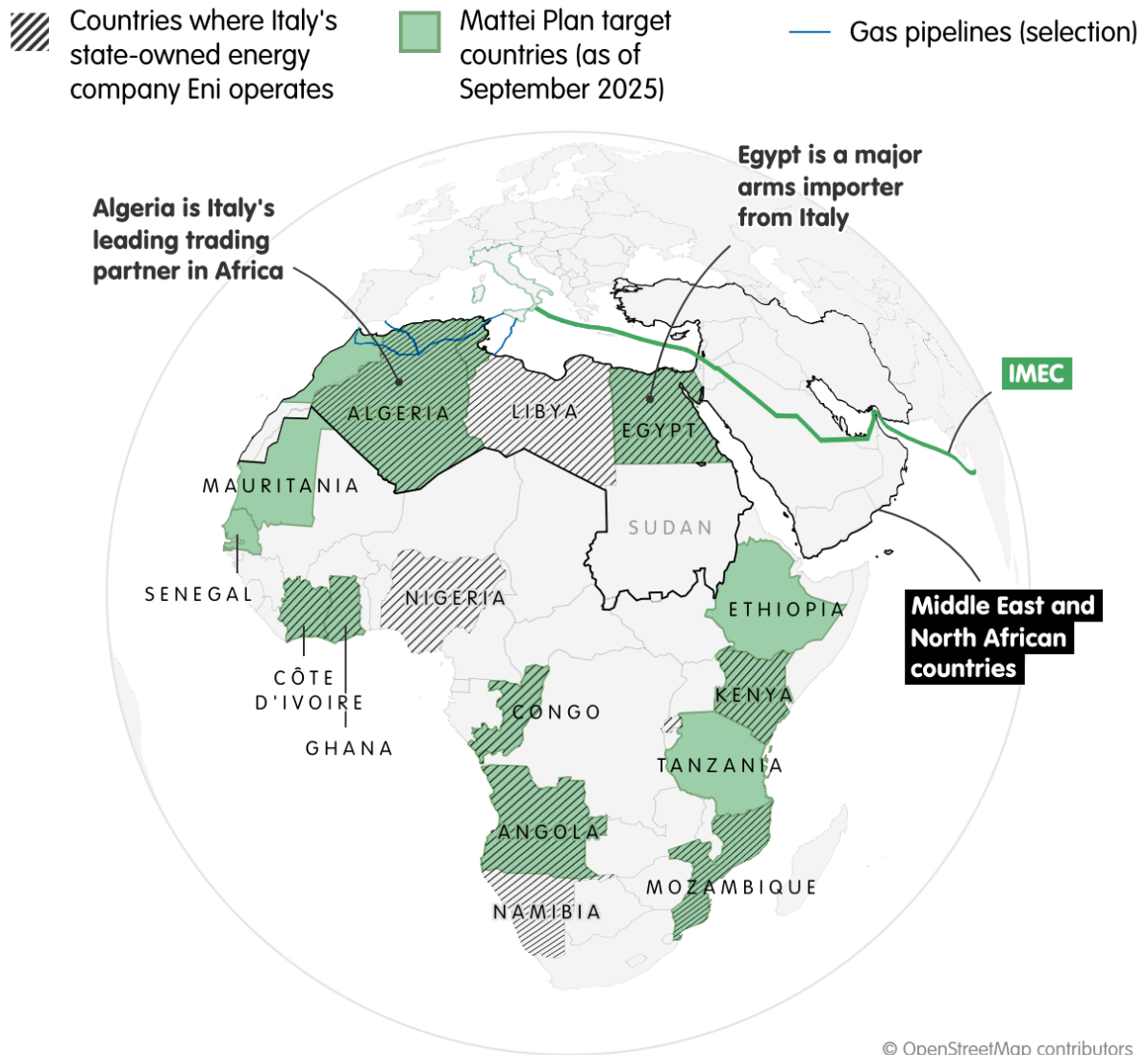
The Rome Process underscores Italy's commitment to addressing complex migration challenges through a collaborative framework. But it is the Mattei Plan—the Italian government's flagship initiative to implement its strategic approach towards the Wider

Mediterranean—that Meloni hopes will cement Italy’s geopolitical influence and economic leverage across the region. Named after the influential 20th century figure Enrico Mattei, the plan is based on deploying public-private partnerships in the Wider Mediterranean. It covers six themes where Italy has an interest in growing its footprint: education, agriculture, health, energy, water and infrastructure, including digital.

Meloni defined the €5.5bn plan (€3bn of which comes from the Draghi government’s Climate Fund, the rest from Italy’s aid budget) as a way of promoting “mutual, sustainable and lasting development” between Italy and recipient countries in favour of establishing regional stability and security. She argued the initiative was “not just projects” but rather “a new paradigm” able to redefine relations with countries involved based on “cooperation between equals”.

The plan is presented as primarily aimed at Africa. However, tellingly the initial choice of countries reflects Italy’s focus on the Middle East and North Africa: four of the plan’s nine pilot countries are in the African continent’s north (Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia), and several projects are already under way here. Arab Gulf states’ contribution (including from the UAE) to some of the plan’s initiatives further signals the importance of the Middle East dimension. The Mattei Plan is not formally linked to migration issues, nor explicitly to developments in the Middle East—in fact, the bulk of its projects and funding focus on energy and sustainable climate cooperation. But it is designed to foster sustainable development and mutual growth across the region, in the hope that these help address drivers of instability and, ultimately, migration.

Main target countries of the Mattei Plan



Source: Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca; ENI; Global Energy Monitor
ECFR · ecf.eu

How the plan works

The Mattei Plan seeks to develop a new model of equal partnerships. Under these partnerships, target countries would no longer be passive recipients of aid, but rather co-creators of future joint ventures. The Mattei Plan represents a departure from Brussels's rigid provider-to-recipient logic, which is based on conditionality, and from a “top down” model defined by a lack of “respect for partner countries' policy space and leadership”.

Crucially, the Mattei Plan embodies Italy's commitment to becoming a European energy hub by investing in and collaborating with countries in North Africa. It aims to increase European and

local access to energy resources by promoting renewable energy, new technologies and infrastructure. It marries Italy's state policy objectives with the commercial expertise and operational capabilities of its national corporate entities—above all, Eni. The oil giant had previously signed a production-sharing contract with Algeria's national state-owned oil company, Sonatrach, worth \$1.3bn for hydrocarbon exploration and development. This built on a 2022 agreement that significantly increased Algerian gas exports to Italy. The Italy-Algeria Business Forum held in July 2025 further consolidated trade and investment ties across various sectors. As a result, Algeria is now a key player in the future energy market, including in the production of green hydrogen, and it is Italy's leading gas supplier and foremost economic partner in Africa. This has boosted cooperation between Italy and Algeria, including on security issues such as counterterrorism and migration, where the two countries have institutionalised and strengthened their joint work.

Another aspect of the Mattei Plan's potential lies in its ability to scale up existing projects using multiple actors. The plan's success depends on enabling collaboration among different levels of governance, the speed and efficiency at which projects are implemented, and the extent to which these projects address international development goals like sustainability. Domestically, the Mattei Plan seeks to leverage the entire "Sistema Italia" by harmonising multiple players—from state-owned and fully private companies, to development agencies and insurance companies—while the government acts as an intermediary coordinator. For example, by linking national development agencies and embassies with the private sector, under the Mattei Plan a system of credit and insurance for Italian companies is in development to help de-risk the environments in which a company can operate.

Italy might have developed the "Wider Mediterranean" concept in isolation from the EU, but from the outset, Meloni's ambition was for the Mattei Plan to be a European initiative. Meloni has made strides in aligning the plan with the EU's Global Gateway: in March 2025, Italy and the EU hosted an initial meeting to "reinforce collaboration with Africa". This was followed three months later by a summit at which von der Leyen announced €150bn in Global Gateway funding for Africa explicitly in line with the Mattei Plan.

Since its launch, the plan has expanded to take in more countries and projects and shifted towards a "Team Europe" approach. This entails leveraging the full range of European resources from member states, local agencies and development banks such as the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, as well as financing by global institutions like the World Bank. In this respect, Italy is the pilot fish while the EU turtle uses existing instruments such as Global Gateway to develop fresh collaboration. Greater symbiotic working in this way can bring about a more competitive, more sustainable political offer in the region—and put Europe in a stronger position to address Russia's presence there.

Merits of Italy's method

A pragmatic approach

The Mattei Plan makes an explicit claim to be “not paternalistic, not charitable, not predatory” and rely instead on new forms of engagement. This strategic rebranding of Italy's foreign policy, with Meloni front and centre, aims to secure the trust of African partners. The plan's positive offers, such as increased economic cooperation, provide a way to secure reforms that also benefit Europeans as a whole. For example, as part of its effort to expand business relations with Algeria, in 2022 Italy advocated for Algeria to adopt a new investment law, which paved the way for the Mattei Plan projects that followed.

The plan serves Meloni herself in two distinct ways. First, domestically: while migration is not a focus of the Mattei Plan, the policy nonetheless demonstrates the prime minister is attempting to deliver on her electoral pledge to tackle irregular migration and grant young people across the Wider Mediterranean countries “the right not to emigrate”. Second, internationally: the plan's focus on areas other than migration allows Italy to maintain good relationships with partner countries. Partners appreciate that “Italy doesn't ask hard questions” but rather concentrates on building mutually beneficial partnerships among equals, according to one Italian official.^[1] For example, while Algeria is Italy's top supplier of natural gas, Italy has also expanded Algeria's domestic energy capacity through an Italian-led project. This invested €420m to cultivate 36,000 hectares of arid land and positively impact up to 600,000 Algerians. A tripartite deal involving Albania, Italy and the UAE focuses on sharing renewable energy and infrastructure through the Adriatic Sea, which should help embed the role of the Mediterranean Sea in IMEC.

Italy's involvement in IMEC is especially crucial for the prospective Italy-EU symbiotic relationship, since Global Gateway also contains a pledge to support the corridor's development. In the future, the Mattei Plan could create similar types of economic cooperation in which Italy channels investment through government funding. By integrating local institutional actors, Italian companies face fewer operational risks because of the intervention of their government. The Mattei Plan has the potential to create new avenues for partnerships with the EU and its member states: in the meantime, the EU can leverage the plan's most positive aspects to develop its own, more constructive, bilateral partnerships.

Overseas appeal

Meloni is using the Mattei Plan to reframe the economic relationship between Italy and the Wider Mediterranean. In doing so, Italy is drawing a distinction between itself and Russia and China, both of which deploy anti-colonial messaging to rally countries in the Middle East and North Africa against the West while extending military and infrastructure support. Italy instead plays on its geographic position as a European power with proximity to Wider Mediterranean countries; it advocates a shared future bound up in the diplomatic resolution of regional crises.

So far, this is paying off. Egypt, for example, increasingly recognises Italy as a key European interlocutor, praising its incorporation of aspects like increased employment prospects into conversations on migration. Given Egypt's essential role in mediating in the Gaza conflict and in post-war reconstruction talks, this is a boon for the EU—the latter is facing a reputational crisis due to perceptions of double standards between Ukraine and Gaza. In light of this, as well as the risk of further migration from the war in Sudan and potentially Gaza, Italy spearheaded an EU-Egypt deal to support Egypt's economy and business investments. Rome also amplified its own bilateral partnership with Cairo, which included a potential Egyptian role in tackling smuggler networks in eastern Libya as well as a joint employment centre.

The Mattei Plan has also benefitted Algeria. The two countries' increased energy ties upgraded Algeria's status as Italy's “most stable, strategic and long-standing” partner in North Africa. Crucially for Algeria, Italy has refrained from supporting Morocco's claim to sovereignty over Western Sahara (in contrast with other major European countries), despite not taking a defined position, and it has approved support for Sahrawi refugees.

Throughout 2025, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have provided direct financial support for the Mattei Plan. Italy and Saudi Arabia also signed a memorandum of understanding on water desalination and renewable energy projects in Africa. All this comes as Meloni boosts bilateral economic ties with Arab Gulf states to historically high levels while acknowledging their important strategic role in addressing regional crises. Saudi analysts have praised Italy's push for new partnerships (for instance, on renewables and green hydrogen, connectivity and security) and described the country as a “central European actor” able to forge EU consensus on collective efforts for peace in the region.

America's “from aid to trade” strategy also strongly aligns with Italy's goal of decoupling from Russian energy (including by increasing exports of American liquefied natural gas to Italy), and with Meloni's commitment to facilitating connectivity initiatives through IMEC. Indeed, her policy turn towards migration, trade, energy and infrastructure in the Wider Mediterranean comes as the US renews its regional focus in light of increased Russian and Chinese influence. The US special envoy for Africa, Massad Boulos, echoed Meloni in a trip to North Africa when

he emphasised Washington's desire to build mutually beneficial partnerships with the region's countries. He and the Italian foreign minister further highlighted their shared goals at a recent meeting. Italy's Eni and America's Hill International have also signed a multibillion-dollar oil and gas exploration deal with Italian-Libyan consortium Mellitah.

Mending fences with France

Meloni's government is also working towards improving Italy's relationship with France. Meloni and French president Emmanuel Macron had a rocky relationship from the start: Macron excluded and isolated Meloni from French-led diplomatic initiatives. Italian deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini has also made disparaging comments about Macron's approach to Ukraine, and former French prime minister François Bayrou accused Italy of engaging in "fiscal dumping".

Historically, Rome's diffidence towards Paris is driven by a suspicion that France's colonial past harms Italian interests. For its part, France has suggested that Italy is ready to take advantage any time Paris faces a diplomatic crisis. The countries' jostle for influence across the Mediterranean is most evident in Libya. This is a delicate location for Italy, due to its fraught history with the country and frustrations that derive from the Arab uprisings, when it felt forced to support the French-driven NATO intervention.

France also refuses to rally behind EU initiatives driven by Italy, such as the migration deals struck in 2023. It is especially reluctant to back a plan bearing the name of Mattei, who was vehemently opposed to French colonialism. Nevertheless, the French ambassador to Italy has described a strong overlap in Franco-Italian interests, including competitiveness, migration policy and economic policy. Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* described the meeting between Meloni and Macron in June 2025 as a "turning point"; Italian foreign minister Antonio Tajani's subsequent participation in the Connected Mediterranean summit hosted by Macron highlights the potential for cooperation, even on sticky topics like IMEC and Libya.

Despite France and Italy preferring to take a bilateral approach to their interests in North Africa, closer alignment between them on the Wider Mediterranean could breathe new life into EU policy. In Libya, France walked back its support for Haftar, while Italy develops stronger diplomatic relationships in the country. If Meloni and Macron can find more common ground, they could drive momentum towards peace in Libya. French support for Italy's Wider Mediterranean narrative would also strengthen EU common migration, energy and development policies. For its part, Italy could help France benefit from its own improved relations with countries such as Algeria, with which France is undergoing a deep crisis.

Shortcomings of Italy's approach

Practical missteps

It is not all smooth sailing, however. Italian opposition parties have criticised the Mattei Plan's centralised decision-making structure, in which local Italian development agencies and civil society enjoy only limited input. A dedicated committee, which sits within the prime minister's office, takes all decisions; implementation is overseen by a coordinating body which involves state-controlled and private companies. The government responded to these concerns by establishing a technical committee and coordinating further with embassies and development actors. Meloni has also made efforts to integrate the Mattei Plan within Global Gateway. This is set to elevate the Mattei Plan from a national initiative to a multilateral system able to advance the sustainable development of African countries at scale.

Fault-lines with the EU

While Italy is making progress in sub-Saharan Africa, worsening instability and entrenched national interests across the Middle East and North Africa are compromising the positive and collaborative framing of its engagement in the Wider Mediterranean. Migration from North Africa is rising—a trend exacerbated by partner countries where crackdowns against migrants are creating an additional push factor. Israel's war in Gaza has already effectively stalled parts of IMEC (to China's benefit), and distracted and divided Europe (to Russia's). The €5.5bn allocated by Meloni to the Mattei Plan is significant, but a region beset with such specific geopolitical demands requires the political will to allocate a greater budget. Italy needs to collaborate with the EU and member states to tackle ongoing conflicts and add credible weight to its initiative. Only a collective effort can meet the region's challenges and adequately address the core drivers of migration.

But Rome is showing a disinclination to do this, and in some cases Meloni has even obstructed EU action. For example, Italy opposed the revising of the EU-Israel association agreement, despite leading Israeli lawyers, Israeli scholars and the UN defining Israel's actions as genocide, and the war itself triggering a famine, a major displacement crisis and spillover that could lead to global conflict. Italy also refuses to suspend its memorandum of understanding with Israel. At the EU level, Italy—whose buy-in is crucial to secure the necessary qualified majority to end Israel's preferential trade clause—voted against suspending the association agreement, despite the European External Action Service reporting breaches of its human rights clauses. Meloni also rejected a symbolic suspension of the Horizon Europe cooperation.

Finally, Italy refused to join other G7 countries like Britain, Canada and France in recognising the Palestinian state during the 2025 UN General Assembly. Meloni pledged to do so only if all Israeli hostages are released and Hamas is excluded from a future Palestinian government. But Meloni's reluctance to roll back Italy's (and Europe's) relationship with Israel will only entrench Middle Eastern perceptions of European complicity in regional conflicts and perpetrate regional instability. She should not be surprised if forced mass displacement of Palestinians into Egypt results in more migration to Europe and jeopardises Egypt's security to the detriment of its ties with Italy.

Bilateral breakdowns

Rome's partnership model is based on state-to-state dynamics, centred on how cooperation between governments can support shared climate, energy and economic interests. But if migration trends alone drive engagement with North African countries, it will harm any efforts to set a positive dynamic through the Mattei Plan.

And despite progress in bilateral dynamics with North African countries, some target governments remain content to hedge among what they perceive as stronger global powers. For example, even as Italy-Egypt relations improve, Egypt and China held their first-ever joint air force drills. Egypt is also acting as a strategic interlocutor for Italy and the EU at the same time as its partnership with Russia grows. Elsewhere, Algeria maintains an "in-depth strategic partnership" with Russia on Algerian defence needs. The country is also expanding its relations with China.

Furthermore, Italy's pragmatism prompts it to largely sidestep regional problems, from Tunisia's authoritarian drift, to corruption in Egypt, to instability fuelled by Israel, or the entrenched rivalry between Algeria and Morocco. Instead of pursuing solutions to these problems, Italy tries to cement its narrow interests. A case in point is Libya, which initially was absent from the Mattei Plan despite its strategic importance for Italy. The existing cooperation between the two countries remains focused on migration, fossil fuels and business relations. There is no overarching vision for the country's future or any diplomatic proposal on the table to address the current territorial and political fragmentation. Italy is now looking to gradually include Libya in the Mattei Plan while Eni has pledged to transition to renewables in the long term.

But Libya urgently requires more profound political intervention. Currently, huge gaps remain when it comes to formulating an ambitious Italian—and European—offer which sufficiently addresses the country's political situation. The arrival of a new UN special representative and resumption of the Berlin Process mean the time is ripe for a diplomatic investment by Italy. For

the governments taking part in the Mattei Plan to take Meloni seriously as a reliable geopolitical actor, she needs to more boldly address the unfolding regional crises across the Wider Mediterranean.

The EU's new approach

Six months after the Mattei Plan's launch, the EU announced its New Pact for the Mediterranean would forge a “people-centred agenda” in light of new realities in the region (and perhaps also because EU politics themselves are changing). The pact seeks to capitalise on the position of the EU and its member states as key economic partners for Mediterranean countries. It aims to draw these actors closer to the bloc and away from geopolitical rivals.

The pact echoes Italy's pragmatism by focusing on developing win-win partnerships that involve important economic players. The European Commission's new directorate-general plans to “combine the EU's financial offer with its policy instruments ... to maximise the positive and mutually beneficial impact [of] our cooperation”. For instance, it seeks to increase European energy security and industrial capacity in the Mediterranean by establishing a Trans-Mediterranean Energy and Clean Tech Cooperation Initiative to increase renewable energy trade with Mediterranean countries while boosting job creation. But on migration the pact is set to retain the EU's existing externalisation logic which puts into practice “the external aspects of our migration policy” through border controls and other measures. More deals—framed as “comprehensive agreements”, replicating the Tunisia model—appear to be in the pipeline for Morocco and Lebanon. Finally, the pact also seeks to integrate security considerations, including counterterrorism and Russian and Chinese influence across the Mediterranean.

In perhaps the EU's biggest departure from its democracy-driven “southern neighbourhood” approach, the pact explicitly pivots towards offering mutually lucrative partnerships around energy, infrastructure and connectivity. If Russia's offer to the Wider Mediterranean is militarisation and China's offer is economic, the EU seems to suggest abandoning the logic of conditionality of aid for reform in favour of bilateral partnerships. However, what this new logic entails remains undefined. Against this vacuum, Italy's model could provide the EU with some answers, showing the bloc how to advance its interests in this region through a new narrative and concrete initiatives.

How Italy can help the EU

Italy is paying meaningful attention to an increasingly unstable Wider Mediterranean just as the EU reassesses its own engagement in the region. Meloni's primary focus remains on migration

and mobilising intra-EU alliances with political bedfellows. But Italy is also arguably the only European country taking Russian influence in the Wider Mediterranean seriously, while others focus on Europe's east.

Continued instability in the eastern Mediterranean is preventing the fulfilment of key European strategic interests such as IMEC and green energy projects. Through the Mattei Plan, Meloni has deepened relationships with actors such as Algeria at a time where other EU countries like France are facing the opposite experience. This positions Italy as an interlocutor potentially able to facilitate dialogue between Wider Mediterranean countries and Europe. Even domestically, under Meloni, Italy is also enjoying a rare period of political stability, swapping places with countries like France, which are undergoing one political crisis after another.

At the European level, Meloni has shown the capacity to secure support simultaneously from centre-left politicians like British prime minister Keir Starmer (who appreciates Meloni's emphasis on tackling the root causes of migration) and far-right individuals like Hungary's Viktor Orban. And Meloni's close relationship with US president Donald Trump and ability to project a moderate tone despite her right-wing domestic policies also, in the face of Europe's current geopolitical realities, positions her to both play a leading role on the European and global stage. Now Meloni's model of foreign policy pragmatism could help the EU foster internal unity.

Achieving buy-in from the full spectrum of EU actors, including its related institutions and a core group of powerful member states including France, would allow for a fuller symbiosis with Brussels. If channelled through a common EU approach, the Mattei Plan can better emphasise constructive dimensions like education, training, job opportunities and legal pathways to migration. This would signal to Wider Mediterranean leaders that Italy and Europe are truly committed to more sustainable relations.

The Wider Mediterranean, revisited

Choppy waters and calmer seas

Tensions remain between Italy and the EU and its member states, which may well compromise the harmony of their two approaches. Meloni does not see eye to eye with certain EU institutions, such as the European External Action Service. This disconnect has not been salved by appointments such as the EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Kaja Kallas, whose candidature Meloni did not support. Furthermore, some member states would struggle to embrace Italy's narrative on the Wider Mediterranean because of their own

misgivings about Italy's role in the region. These countries see Meloni capitalising on existing tensions, for instance between Algeria and France (due to its historic colonial role) as well as Spain (over its presence in the Western Sahara).

It is true that Meloni is no natural Europeanist. Her security-centred agenda advances a nationalist vision, and she used Italy's G7 presidency in 2024 to emphasise global challenges. But Meloni is a pragmatist. As the Mattei Plan enters a new phase of expansion through Global Gateway, the Italian prime minister should balance her country's need for European resources by more proactively participating in collective European responses to present-day crises and seizing opportunities across the Wider Mediterranean. Here, her challenge lies in integrating relevant EU mechanisms, institutions and other member states into the Mattei Plan.

Italy is in a particularly good position to play a leading role in the Mediterranean. As foreign investment declines in Europe and G7 countries cut their aid budgets, Italy's overseas aid spending is growing and the Mattei Plan is consolidating Italy's image as an attractive destination for economic partnerships. The plan has the potential to develop Europe's capacity for public-private partnerships across the Wider Mediterranean; the EU could then build up the local private sector and workforce capacity in partner countries while supporting its own economic resilience. Here other European instruments, like Global Gateway, are complementary: only these initiatives can match the scale of Italy's ambitions in the Wider Mediterranean. Given that the Mattei Plan does not present a comprehensive offer to the region, Italy needs to leverage the full spectrum of European development instruments. If it fails to do this, its Wider Mediterranean policy will remain fundamentally ill-equipped to address the core drivers of migration and take on rival global competitors.

Harmonising the Mattei Plan with Global Gateway

The Mattei Plan's focus on increasing Italian private-sector access across the Wider Mediterranean fully aligns with the EU's Global Gateway goals. Now Italy and the EU should build on this to fully align EU resources with Italy's increasingly successful developmental narrative in the region. The EU could achieve this by channelling additional mechanisms, for instance on education and research, through Mattei Plan initiatives and by creating opportunities for other European entities to get involved. If Italy fully Europeanises the public-private partnership model of the Mattei Plan, companies from other member states could expand their footprint in the Wider Mediterranean and help the European Commission become a competitive trade and energy actor.

Two cases in point in North Africa are the success of the Italian-brokered major hydrogen pipeline project (the SouthH2 Corridor, which involves Algeria, Austria, Germany and Tunisia), and the consolidation of ELMED, an electrical interconnection project between Tunisia and

Italy. Both projects show the Mattei Plan and Global Gateway working in harmony: made possible by funding from EU institutions and the World Bank, their success is inspiring European nations like Spain to manage similar complex challenges with its southern neighbours. By becoming a strategic energy hub, Italy is demonstrating to other European nations the value in a partnership-led economic model while strengthening the position of regional actors like Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia. Merging Italy's model with Global Gateway resources would bolster Italy's ambition to finance green-energy projects, while boosting the EU's own capacity. Both the Mattei Plan and Global Gateway aim to address the existing trust gap between the EU and the Wider Mediterranean, as well as the shortcomings in Europe's response to geopolitical challenges such as Russian and Chinese influence, climate change, migration and regional development.

Meanwhile, Global Gateway can substantiate Italy's narrative by securing additional project funding and resources. The EU should help Italy increase its capacity to integrate private-sector actors (as opposed to fully public or hybrid actors) into local projects. While Mattei Plan projects have made progress, they still only involve Italian companies owned or partially owned by the government. From Italy's side, imbuing Global Gateway resources with the ethos of the Mattei Plan could also shift the EU's approach in Africa to one based on mutually beneficial cooperation. This would help sell Global Gateway to external actors who view it as an initiative designed to benefit Europeans, with goals set by Europeans, rather than as a means to achieve mutual prosperity.

Addressing energy, migration and the Russian threat

On energy, Italy and the EU need to go beyond projects that focus on their own needs and collaborate to help Wider Mediterranean countries transition to green energy. For instance, 90% of Morocco's energy relies on imported fossil fuels—but instead of securing its indigenous green-fuel capacity, the country plans to export most of its green hydrogen to Europe. Similarly, Algeria's gas exports make up 47% of its tax revenue. But as demand for these resources declines, its economy is already vulnerable, with a widening deficit and soaring unemployment rates. Besides tapping Algerian resources for their own energy security demands, Italy and the EU should increase their support for the country to diversify its economy and build resilience against future market fluctuations.

On migration, Italy and the EU need to transcend transactionalism and approach the issue as a shared challenge to manage for their mutual benefit. Rhetorically, Meloni's migration strategy under the Rome Process, rightly underpinned by a focus on drivers, is supported by many local actors. But she needs to back this up with migration deals that concentrate on developing sustainable and legal pathways. In its new Mediterranean pact, the EU should focus on creating

more study and employment opportunities for people from the Wider Mediterranean in light of the fact that, in its own words, Europe “needs more workers” and “migrants can fill these jobs”. So far, despite Italy’s strong emphasis on this dimension in its bilateral exchanges, these have reportedly been hard to come by. The Italian government knows that due to its (and the EU’s) demographic situation, a younger workforce is desperately required. To succeed, Meloni needs to distance herself from harmful migration deals underpinned by border control and human rights abuses.

On Russia, Italy should leverage Europeans’ willingness to align with the Rome Process and the Mattei Plan to help them develop a closer relationship with key states in the Middle East and North Africa. Italy’s economic partnership with Algeria, for example, can facilitate EU member states to reset their relationships with the country: closer Algeria-EU cooperation could bring Algeria closer to the bloc (and further away from Russia) and create a better dynamic in the Western Sahara, the Sahel and other locations important to Algerian security. Italy could lead on setting up a European Political Community for Europe’s southern flank, in which EU member states facilitate discussions on shared security challenges.

Meloni should also strive for closer cooperation with key member states such as France on specific matters of collective strategic importance, such as Libya. Italy currently participates in collective initiatives. However, despite Libya’s strategic importance to Italy, the latter does not play an active role in leading on the political dialogue or acting as a diplomatic host. Instead, Italy tends to act alone when pursuing its own economic and security interests. For instance, a trilateral meeting in Istanbul with Turkey and Libya culminated in yet another bilateral migration deal. This exposes the limits of Italian action, which fails to address the situation in a way that reflects the country’s strategic importance to Rome.

France appears keen to work more closely with Italy on Libya; the Italian government should seize this moment to increase joint cooperation. Tajani’s vision for an EU-Libya policy, which is supported by France, would be a good starting point. It is underpinned by three objectives: the need for a country-wide ceasefire; relaunching an EU-led political process under the UN special representative (and in line with the revamped Berlin Process); and counteracting growing Russian influence. If successful, this could better place Europe to counter irregular migration and Russia’s growing military presence in North Africa.

La tartaruga e il pesce pilota

EU decision-makers need to be more ambitious in how they present their New Pact for the Mediterranean, the Global Gateway initiative and their strategy for the Middle East and North Africa. They need to acknowledge that dividends in the Italian approach mainly come from its strong, pro-local narrative. But they should go beyond this by adopting a comprehensive

proposal for a truly different dynamic with the region. For its part, Italy's Wider Mediterranean strategy presents clear opportunities for economic development, energy partnerships and private sector inclusion. The EU should recognise and leverage Italy's progress on this front. However, the Italian approach fails to account for the region's political troubles, which ultimately contribute to driving migration to Europe.

Italy should complement its bilateralism with a symbiotic relationship with the EU. Meloni alone cannot fully address the entrenched dynamics fuelling instability, effectively address Russia's growing influence in Africa and advance connectivity and the EU's green agenda—all while securing energy resources. Only by turning the Rome Process and the Mattei Plan into true European instruments can Italy facilitate a more positive approach to the Wider Mediterranean, one that matches both the region's potential and investment by rival actors like Russia and China.

Most importantly, Italy needs to leverage its positive diplomatic and trading relationships to help countries in the Wider Mediterranean regain trust in the EU. Their relationship has suffered from perceptions across the region that Europe has an inward-looking agenda centred only on migration imperatives. Neither Italy nor the EU can address these challenges alone—but together, they can succeed.

About the authors

Kelly Petillo is the programme manager for Middle East and North Africa at the European Council on Foreign Relations, focusing on refugee, humanitarian and human rights issues.

Arturo Varvelli is a senior policy fellow and head of ECFR's Rome office. His research interests include geopolitics and international affairs; the Middle East and North Africa; EU and Italian relations with the region; and transnational terrorist movements.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all the officials, experts, colleagues and friends who contributed to this paper through their rich input. Special thanks to Amy Sandys for her outstanding edit and to Nastassia Zenovich for the infographics. Finally, ECFR would also like to thank Compagnia di San Paolo for its support which made this paper possible.

[1] Meeting with Italian official, April 2025.



ABOUT ECFR

The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) is the first pan-European think-tank. Launched in October 2007, its objective is to conduct research and promote informed debate across Europe on the development of coherent, effective and values-based European foreign policy. ECFR has developed a strategy with three distinctive elements that define its activities:

- A pan-European Council. ECFR has brought together a distinguished Council of over two hundred Members – politicians, decision makers, thinkers and business people from the EU’s member states and candidate countries – which meets once a year as a full body. Through geographical and thematic task forces, members provide ECFR staff with advice and feedback on policy ideas and help with ECFR’s activities within their own countries. The Council is chaired by Carl Bildt, Lykke Friis, and Norbert Röttgen.
- A physical presence in the main EU member states. ECFR, uniquely among European think-tanks, has offices in Berlin, London, Madrid, Paris, Rome, Sofia, Warsaw, and Washington. Our offices are platforms for research, debate, advocacy and communications.
- Developing contagious ideas that get people talking. ECFR has brought together a team of distinguished researchers and practitioners from all over Europe to carry out innovative research and policy development projects with a pan-European focus. ECFR produces original research; publishes policy reports; hosts private meetings, public debates, and “friends of ECFR” gatherings in EU capitals; and reaches out to strategic media outlets.

ECFR is a registered charity funded by the Open Society Foundations and other generous foundations, individuals and corporate entities. These donors allow us to publish our ideas and advocate for a values-based EU foreign policy. ECFR works in partnership with other think tanks and organisations but does not make grants to individuals or institutions. ecfr.eu

The European Council on Foreign Relations does not take collective positions. This paper, like all publications of the European Council on Foreign Relations, represents only the views of its authors. Copyright of this publication is held by the European Council on Foreign Relations. You may not copy, reproduce, republish or circulate in any way the content from this publication except for your own personal and non-commercial use. Any other use requires the prior written permission of the European Council on Foreign Relations. © ECFR October 2025. ISBN: 978-1-918078-07-7. Published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 4th Floor, Tennyson House, 159-165 Great Portland Street, London W1W 5PA, United Kingdom.