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Original Article

Alley Cat or Ally Cat? What the "Italian Tutorial" Tells Us About the Prospects of NATO in an Age of (Apparent) Populism

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Abstract

Since President Trump's second administration began in January 2025, many analysts have expressed understandable concern over the United States' increasingly illiberal turn and its potential implications for NATO's future. Contrary to these widespread fears, this article argues that the alliance's survival is not necessarily in jeopardy. Drawing on the Italian experience—from Berlusconi to Meloni, spanning 1994 to the present—the authors identify an "Italian model" of foreign policy typical of populist radical-right parties (PRRPs). Unlike Viktor Orban's confrontational stance, this model promotes a pragmatic and flexible approach to international relations. They contend that such a model enables a reconfiguration of NATO's vitality, grounded not so much in contemporary liberal norms but rather in what they call "populist Atlanticism." The article advances a second theoretical claim—that once in power, most European PRRPs tend to "become Italian." Their foreign policies evolve toward pragmatic compromise, shaped more by structural realities than by individual personalities. This recurring pattern suggests that, under similar conditions, right-wing populist leaders converge toward a form of Atlanticism that balances national sovereignty with strategic alliance commitments. While this model is particularly intuitive for Europe's medium powers, it is also applicable to the United States, which will find it necessary to adopt a moderate and pragmatic populism to preserve its global partnerships. By reframing populist Atlanticism as a potential stabilizing force, this article offers a nuanced understanding of NATO's adaptability in an era of ideological transformation.

Keywords: NATO; populist radical right parties (PRRPs); populist Atlanticism; Italian foreign policy; Trump administration

One of the few memorably coherent charges hurled by President Joe Biden in an otherwise catastrophic debate on 27 June 2024 against his Republican challenger, the once and future President Donald Trump, was that he had the "morals of an alley cat."[1] We cite that insult in a spirit neither of dissent nor agreement, but simply to support the punning headline chosen for this article's inquiry into the future of transAtlantic relations under a second Trump administration. For we think that the future is likely to evoke an important Italian connection, one relating not to felines but to allies.

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[1] "CNN Presidential Debate: President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump," 27 June 2024, accessed 18 November 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-v-8wJkmwBY.

Notwithstanding widespread concerns expressed for NATO's future during a second Trump administration so easily styled as a new "imperial presidency,"[2] we suggest that the alliance's prospects are not necessarily bleak. In what follows, we draw from the Italian experience (first under Silvio Berlusconi, then under Giorgia Meloni) to outline an "Italian model" of foreign policy that we propose as being typical of many populist radical-right parties (PRRPs). This model, based on a flexible and pragmatic foreign policy, may serve as a "tutorial" of sorts for the United States and other European countries, thus opening up the possibility of the lasting viability of an alliance no longer as centered on liberal foundations as it had once been. In these pages, we call this evolving ideological base "populist Atlanticism." Our central claim is that most PRRPs in Europe, once in power, tend to "become Italian." Due to structural constraints, populist leaders (regardless of their personal beliefs and intentions) often converge toward a recognizably "Italian" model of Atlanticism, which puts a higher than might otherwise be expected premium upon transAtlantic solidarity in security and defense matters.

In what follows, we suggest that the current apparent existence of "democratic backsliding"[3] among several member-states of the liberal-democratic alliance—trends that many observers would detect as evincing a populist shift in a rightward, perhaps even an irreversibly "illiberal" direction[4]—need not be fatal to alliance cohesion, and that an examination of Italian political developments will help us understand why.

In these pages, we introduce a "Berlusconi analogy" to support our claim that despite the naturally fissiparous forces unleashed by strongly nationalist variants of populism, there is an often-overlooked element of what might even be considered internationalism, linked to the strain of politics associated with long-serving former prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi. His time in office was characterized by populist Atlanticism. To be sure, this is not an Atlanticism based upon the collective identity established through a shared liberalism; rather, it is predicated upon an identity redolent of Samuel Huntington's civilizational bonding[5]—the kind of "Euro-Atlantic" sense of "we-ness" signaled in the Trump administration's most recent national security strategy, with its assertion that Europe (though not liberalism) "remains strategically and culturally vital to the United States."[6] This Huntingtonian collective identity is captured in the notion of populist Atlanticism. It reflects the views of the government of Giorgia Meloni, which has of late been attracting a surprising amount of attention for its aspiration to serve as a transatlantic "bridge"[7] (or,

[2] The locus classicus for this suggestive metaphor is Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973). Also see Andrew Rudalevige, *The New Imperial Presidency: Renewing Presidential Power after Watergate* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005). But for claims that the problem of executive overreach can be overstated, cf. Eric A. Posner and Adrian Vermeule, *The Executive Unbound: After the Madisonian Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Dino P. Christenson and Douglas L. Kriner, *The Myth of the Imperial Presidency: How Public Opinion Checks the Unilateral Executive* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

[3] A term first given popularity in Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (January 2016): 5–19, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012. Also see on this concept, Thomas Carothers and Brendan Hartnett, "Misunderstanding Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 3 (July 2024): 24–37, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2024.a930425; Attila Ágh, "The Triple Crisis in Hungary: The 'Backsliding' of Hungarian Democracy after Twenty Years," *Romanian Journal of Political Sciences* 13, no. 1 (Summer 2013): 25–51; and Licia Cianetti, James Dawson, and Seán Hanley, eds., *Rethinking "Democratic Backsliding" in Central and Eastern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

[4] For an excellent discussion of what its contributors term the "Global Right," see Rita Abrahamsen et al., *World of the Right: Radical Conservatism and Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

[5] Expounded initially in his article, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22–49, greatly expanded in book form as *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

[6] *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: The White House, November 2025), 26.

[7] For instance, Emma Bubola, "In a Rudderless Europe, Italy Has Its Moment," *New York Times*, 12 December 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/12/world/Europe/Europe-italy-meloni-stability.html?campaign_id=301&emc=edit_ypgu_20241212&instance_id=142084&nl=your-places:-global-update&regi_id=62171838&segment_id=185575&user_id=23a0e0df85dc5b50fc649eea833dabd0.

linchpin) in an era said, perhaps wrongly, to be one of unstoppable populism.[8] This variant stands in sharp contrast to that other NATO-related brand of populism associated primarily with the anti-Atlanticism championed by the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orban, with some support from his Slovak counterpart, Robert Fico.

To make our case, we structure the analysis by first injecting a bit of theorizing regarding what is sometimes referred to as the "democratic alliance," whose adherents understand *liberal* democracy to be a necessary—and to some among them, even a sufficient—condition of alliance formation and preservation. We ourselves do not think that liberal democracy *is* a sine qua non for the alliance's continuation—however comforting it might otherwise be for us to imagine liberal ideology assisting as a transaatlantictlantic bonding agent far into the future just as it assuredly had done in the past. But scholars and others who *have* seen it as just such a buttress of future solidarity have injected a powerful voice into transatlantic debates for some time, one that justifiably commands our attention in these pages.

That voice conveyed an especially potent message following the Cold War's ending about why alliances such as NATO took shape and endured, and in light of that message, it is easy to understand the malaise felt by so many today about the transatlantic alliance's current state and future prospects. They will tell us that in the absence of vibrant *liberal* democracy among the membership, it is highly unlikely that the allies can remain allied. Hence, if right-wing populism's spread within the West is not checked, the consequences for NATO are dire, according to proponents of this theory. In the next section, we query whether the link between liberalism, democracy, and alliance really *is* this causally significant.

Following that examination comes another theoretical section, in which we examine critically the current debate swirling around the very notion of "populism." As we will show, the term is nothing if not ambiguous, falling squarely into the category British philosopher W. B. Gallie so memorably labeled "essentially contested concepts"[9]—concepts whose employment generates an endless and necessary series of definitional disputes on the part of their users. In this third section, we argue that there are noteworthy distinctions to be made between the genus, "populism," and a species thereof, "sovereignism." There is, today, a tendency for observers to subsume all of the transatlantic community's right-wing governments under the latter category.[10] Doing so augments the current mood of pessimism among NATO-watchers, dismayed by trends in American politics but also by concerns that many European allies are themselves so evidently experimenting with right-wing populism.[11] For if all transatlantic populists dance to the same sovereignist beat, it would follow that cooperation among alliance member-states run by populists must be the ultimate absurdity—an absurdity best demonstrated by revising Marx and Engel's famous invocation of proletarian solidarity so as to make it read, "Nationalists of the world, unite!"[12]

And this brings us to the next two sections, four and five, in which we present our argument about the relevance of an Italian tutorial that we maintain demonstrates the unique features of populist Atlanticism, first under Berlusconi, and most recently under Meloni.

[8] "Europe's Populist Right: Can They Be Stopped?," *Economist*, 13–19 December 2025, 15–18.

[9] W. B. Gallie "Essentially Contested Concepts," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series 56 (1955–1956): 167–98.

[10] A recent case in point being Matthias Matthijs and Nathalie Tocci, "How Europe Lost: Can the Continent Escape Its Trump Trap?," *Foreign Affairs* 105, no. 1 (January/February 2026): 154–65.

[11] Anton Jäger and Dries Daniels, "Things Are Terrible in Europe, and They're Only Going to Get Worse," *New York Times*, 22 December 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/22/opinion/Europe-germany-france-trump.html. Also see Steven Erlanger, "Some Europeans Fear Trump's Allies Crave Far-Right Regime Change," *New York Times*, 21 September 2025, 13; and David Broder, "Centrists Are Failing to Save Europe from a Far-Right Sweep," *New York Times,* 7 December 2025, SR 12.

[12] What the pair actually wrote in *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848 was "proletarians of all countries, unite," a call to action generally recollected as "workers of the world, unite."

Our concluding section offers reasons to believe, *pace* many of today's commentators, that the transatlantic alliance might be able to ride out the current populist vogue; it might not be as liberal a democratic alliance as it once was, but by the same token it would not be rendered defunct by the alteration in its value structure. For it simply does not follow that the only security alliances that can aspire to longevity are those between liberal democracies; after all, the Delian League was in business for three-quarters of a century, nearly as long as NATO, and no one would argue that liberal democracy came remotely close to constituting its binding agent.[13] That said, much of the current populist-generated angst about NATO does rest on the conviction that this particular alliance *must* be a liberal one or it cannot be an alliance at all. In the following section, we look at the basis of this conviction.

Problematizing the "Democratic Alliance"

Anniversaries are always occasions for reflection. If what is being recollected is a successful marriage, then the reflections are suffused with happiness. But if marking the passage of years becomes just a dolorous opportunity to reflect upon colossal mismatches, then anniversaries become much more somber affairs. This seemed to many to be the case when NATO leaders gathered in Washington a half-dozen years ago to commemorate the alliance's seventh decade in existence, with a rather subdued ceremony that one European attendee quipped resembled more a wake than a birthday party, such had been the funk enveloping the transatlantic community at that time—a funk that had several causes, the most important of which was the worry that new allies who not too many years before had been Soviet client states were busily "turning authoritarian."[14]

Expressive of this worry had been a remarkable presentation made a couple of months earlier to the annual Munich Security Conference, at which two former American ambassadors to NATO, Douglas Lute and Nicholas Burns, detected and denounced "a potentially cancerous threat from within" the alliance. This threat, they said, emanated from three particular allies, two of them members of the first enlargement class of the post-Cold War NATO, and the third a member of the first enlargement class of the *Cold War* NATO. "Three allied governments—Poland, Hungary, and Turkey—have undermined their own democracies in varying degrees by suppressing free speech and a free press and limiting the independence of the courts. As NATO is, first and foremost, an alliance of democracies, the actions of these governments threaten the core values—democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law—to which each ally is committed in the North Atlantic Treaty."[15]

By July 2024, when NATO leaders next met in Washington to mark a milestone anniversary (the alliance's seventy-fifth), a different security challenge was capturing their attention—the challenge of Russian aggression in Ukraine. The war launched by Vladimir Putin in late February 2022 had the effect of concentrating minds once more

[13] See Hunter R. Rawlings III, "Thucydides on the Purpose of the Delian League," *Phoenix* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 1–8.

[14] David E. Sanger, "As NATO Envoys Celebrate, Signs of Fracturing From Within," *New York Times*, 4 April 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/04/us/politics/nato-anniversary.html?emc=edit_th_190405&nl=todaysheadlines&nlid=621718380405. Also see Walter A. McDougall, "NATO at Three Score and Ten: An Anticipatory Elegy," *Law & Liberty Forum*, 1 April 2019; https://lawliberty.org/forum/nato-at-three-score-and-ten-an-anticipatory-elegy/. On that general funk, see Mark Webber, James Sperling, and Martin A. Smith, *What's Wrong with NATO and How to Fix It* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021); Henrik B.L. Larsen, *NATO's Democratic Retrenchment: Hegemony After the Return of History* (London: Routledge, 2019); Stanley R. Sloan, *TransAtlantic Traumas: Has Illiberalism Brought the West to the Brink of Collapse?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018); and Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning* (London: Penguin, 2020).

[15] Douglas Lute and Nicholas Burns, *NATO at Seventy: An Alliance in Crisis*, a Report of the Project on Europe and the TransAtlantic Relationship (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, February 2019), 4. Sharing this downcast view was Trine Flockhart, "A Fractured Alliance in Good Shape? NATO at 70," *Atlantisch perspectief* 43, no. 2 (2019): 10–14.

upon the reason the alliance had come into existence in the first place, which was to provide for the collective defense of its members.[16] An ally such as Poland, which just a few years previously was being castigated for its derogations from liberal democracy, was now being touted for standing up for Ukraine against Putin. Still, while it is undeniable that the Russian dictator had been responsible for a rallying effect on the part of the Western allies, the earlier anxiety about backsliding has not gone away; to the contrary, the November 2024 U.S. election rekindled fears about the alliance harboring potentially cancerous "enemies within." Some appear to see America's current president as far and away the principal threat to the alliance's continued health.[17] Others, much more catholic in their censorial attributions, include many other member-states within the circle of miscreants, because these observers insist that the alliance *must* be a liberal-democratic one if it is to survive.

These theorists' attitude is rooted in some potent causal assumptions they entertain about why NATO took shape in the first place and how it has managed to defy the normal lifespan of alliances by lasting as long as it has. Such collective defense groupings tend not to be very long-lived historically, in light of the existential challenges they confront either when they lose a war or win one; in the former case, they are rendered extinct, and in the latter they wrestle with having suddenly become redundant. Theorists of the democratic alliance sought to dispel the redundancy challenge facing NATO beginning in 1990, by stressing *values*-based justifications for alliance continuation during a period of time (the "post-Cold War" era) when it seemed to many that since the allies no longer had an enemy, it followed logically that they no longer had a reason to remain allied. Prominent among the skeptics were the "structural realists," whose champion Kenneth Waltz pithily remarked, early in the first post-Soviet decade, that "NATO's days are not numbered, but its years are."[18]

We now know that this prediction was, at best, exaggerated. The reason why NATO managed to transcend the existential challenge of redundancy, in an era when most observers believed great-power conflict to have become yesterday's problem, had everything to do with the alliance's "re-inventing" itself, changing from the collective defense entity of the Cold War years to an organization whose "reform" mandate during the 1990s saw it edging into two new areas, which together led many observers (including its own secretary general during the second half of that decade, Javier Solana) to speak of it as a "cooperative security" organization.[19] Those two new areas were peacekeeping and "dialoguing" with former European adversaries from the Soviet Cold War alliance.[20]

And while some might take comfort from Putin's having eliminated the redundancy crisis that had earlier faced the alliance and bringing it back to its original mandate of collective defense, it would be wrong to understate the importance of arguments in support of NATO's continuation that were being advanced by liberal and constructivist theorists in

[16] Timothy Sayle, "Patterns of Continuity in NATO's Long History," in *Evaluating NATO Enlargement: From Cold War Victory to the Russia-Ukraine War*, ed. James Goldgeier and Joshua R. Shifrinson (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), 47–72.

[17] Philip H. Gordon and Mara Karlin, "The Allies After America: In Search of Plan B," *Foreign Affairs* 105, no. 1 (January/February 2026): 142–53. Also see Steven Everts, "Europe in Danger: Navigating a Future without Trump's America," European Union Institute for Security Studies, 12 March 2025, https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/commentary/europe-danger-navigating-future-without-trumps-america.

[18] Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 18, no. 2 (Fall 1993):44–79, quote at 75, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539097. Also see, for the claim that NATO after the Cold War was condemned to purposelessness, Richard H. Ullman, *Securing Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

[19] Javier Solana, "Letter from the Secretary General," *NATO Review* 45 (November–December 1997): 3.

[20] A concise and valuable summary of the transformation is John S. Duffield, "NATO's Functions after the Cold War," *Political Science Quarterly* 109 (Winter 1994–1995): 763–87. Also see Josef Joffe, "NATO After Victory: New Products, New Markets, and the Microeconomics of Alliance," in *Will NATO Go East? The Debate Over Enlarging the Atlantic Alliance*, ed. David G. Haglund (Kingston, ON: Queen's University Centre for International Relations, 1996), 57–68.

those early post-Cold War years of the "threatless" 1990s: at the very least, the advocacies supplied compelling rationales for keeping NATO in existence rather than calling it a day and closing up shop. This is why we need to take seriously, and not simply dismiss as straw men, that decade's theorists of the democratic alliance and to comprehend the claims that they made during the years following the demise of the Soviet Union, when all but a few analysts found it very difficult to imagine that Russia would re-emerge any time soon (if ever) as a serious threat to European and transAtlantic security.[21] And among the ideas most in need of being recollected today are the pair of assumptions that lay at the core of the Burns-Lute claim about NATO's being "first and foremost, an alliance of democracies." For the ambassadors' words expressed exactly how earlier theorists of the "democratic alliance" had conceptualized the transAtlantic states' subscription to collective defense at the end of the 1940s.

The term *democratic alliance* does not simply mean an alliance of democratic countries; that would be an uninteresting as well as an annoyingly tautological theoretical construct. As understood by those who employ the term, a democratic alliance invariably produces "democratic international institutions," within which are embedded such liberal political principles as equal representation, the right to dissent, absence of coercion, and commitment to conflict settlement procedures. A democratic alliance, in this usage, can be either (1) an alliance that takes shape independently of the existence of objective threat, or (2) an alliance of liberal democracies that, by dint of the political cultural makeup of its members, is said to be "stronger" than the normal garden-variety (i.e., "realist") alliance, even if in its inception might have been due to the normal, garden-variety reasons—namely because members sensed a common threat to their security. The first variant is consistent with what we might call the strong version, and the second with the weak version, of democratic-alliance theory.

One of the leading theoreticians of the democratic alliance, in either version, is Thomas Risse (formerly Risse-Kappen). In its strong version, the theory of the democratic alliance turns on its head the traditional realist conception of alliance formation, which holds that states feeling imperiled by a powerful foe will band together in self-protection, perhaps even discovering in the process that they have, outside of the defense and security realm, some interests and even values in common with their new allies.[22] For Risse, this is to put the cart before the horse: states first feel a sense of kinship with others of their ilk, and then they develop a collective identity that undergirds the sense of community, and, in turn, that "sense of community by delimiting the boundaries of who belonged to 'us,' also defined 'them.' . . . In other words, the collective identity led to the threat perception, not the other way around."[23] In this view, ontological security ranks alongside physical security in accounting for a democratic alliance's formation; put otherwise, identity is at least as important as are interests when it comes to the creation and safeguarding of alliances and may even be more important. Apropos of NATO, the archetypal democratic alliance, Risse goes on to state:

> One could . . . argue that the North Atlantic Alliance represents an institutionalization of the security community among democracies. While the perceived Soviet threat certainly strengthened the sense of common purpose among the allies, *it did not create the community in the first place*. NATO was preceded by the

[21] On the initially optimistic but ultimately confused debate about how Russia was to be related to the transforming NATO of the 1990s, see Mary Elise Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021); Coral Bell, "Why an Expanded NATO Must Include Russia," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 17 (December 1994): 27–41; and James E. Goodby, *Europe Undivided: The New Logic of Peace in U.S.-Russian Relations* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998).

[22] See Stephen M. Walt, "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse," *Survival* 39, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 156–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396339708442901.

[23] Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Cooperation Among Democracies: The European Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 32.

wartime alliance of the United States, Great Britain, and France, which also closely collaborated to create various postwar regimes in the economic and security areas.[24]

This claim about origins to the contrary notwithstanding, Risse's major preoccupation has been with a rather different argument, about alliance *continuation.* This was, to recall, the principal concern of liberal and constructivist theorists who were supporters of NATO in the 1990s. They held that because the Western allies were cognate liberal democracies, they had been able to forge a distinct and more cohesive kind of alliance than would have been the case had they represented a congeries of political cultures, bound together only by fear of a common foe.[25] And this is why there is today such concern among many NATO-watchers about the rise of populism, in particular in its right-wing form. Simply put, for theorists of the democratic alliance, democracy must necessarily mean *liberal* democracy, with the latter said to be ipso facto antithetical to populism.

Now it might seem that populism must imply that fundamentally it is the "people" who are calling the shots. If this is so, some might query why populism's apparent rise in the transAtlantic world should seem so dangerous for alliance solidarity, especially when the alliance in question is specifically branded as *the* democratic alliance. Doesn't democracy rest on the claim that it is not just the "people" who call those shots but also who *should* be calling them? The response to the question, of course, turns upon how one understands the democratic alliance. For the latter has often been construed as being not merely a democratic alliance but also a *liberal* one. And populism, whatever else it is supposed to represent (a topic we address in the following section), assuredly does not equate to liberalism.

Hence, we see the current state of worry on the part of many who see populism as necessarily corrosive of transAtlantic collective identity. The fear is linked not only to a concern that the allies might be unable to stand together against external threats, as bad as that failing might be. Even worse, the fear is that the allies, no longer fortified and sustained by shared liberal values, might someday turn against each other, just as they had so routinely and distressingly done in the past, before they became allies. This latter fear is nourished by a set of assumptions that link *liberal* democracy with peace. Most typically such assumptions have been captured by the rubric "democratic peace theory," but this is really a misnomer, for what those who adhere to the theory most value is not democracy so much as it is liberalism. This is why the more descriptive label should be "liberal-democratic peace theory," or even just the theory of the "liberal peace."[26]

So what is meant by "liberal democracy"? Can we say that there exists a hard core of norms and values essential to a liberal-democratic system, applicable to all members of the set of such countries? The answer to this question must begin with a definition of democracy, which in our case we take from Philippe Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl: "Modern political democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives."[27] This definition, however necessary to the argument we make in this article, is not sufficient.

We must bring into the analysis the critical role that liberal values play, both in liberal-democratic peace theory and in theorizing the "democratic alliance." Although scholars

[24] Ibid. By the notion of "security community" is meant a grouping of states about which it can be said that they neither make war nor threaten to make it among themselves; they resolve their disputes peacefully. On this notion, see Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, eds., *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[25] For a slight gloss on this argument, which emphasizes the greater frequency of democratic states to ally, see Randolph M. Siverson and Juliann Emmons, "Birds of a Feather: Democratic Political Systems and Alliance Choices in the Twentieth Century," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35, no. 2 (June 1991): 285–306, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002791035002007.

[26] See Michael W. Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," in *Debating the Democratic Peace*, ed. Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 3–57.

[27] Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, "What Democracy Is ... and Is Not," *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 75–88, quote at 76, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.1991.0033.

can and do differ as to which of these values are necessary to have, as opposed simply to being nice to have, most would agree that liberal values include some combination of the following: (1) the equality of individuals with respect to each other and before the law, meaning that each may participate in political life, all are subject to the same laws, and none have to submit to arbitrariness; (2) freedom of speech, of association, and of the press—freedoms judged essential to the exercise of civic and political rights; (3) other individual rights, including the right to private property and to free enterprise, considered the basis of the economic order and the chief mechanism for collective wealth-building; (4) tolerance, resulting from respect for the individual; (5) cosmopolitan law in the Kantian sense, which guarantees the free circulation of people, goods, and ideas between states; and (6) the sovereignty of the state, which enables it to act as the depository and agent for the realization of actions undertaken in the collective interest, as well as the guarantor of individual rights against both internal and external threats.[28] Again, not everyone agrees on how these values should be transitively ordered, or even upon whether all are considered necessary as opposed to optional.

The point is that the values, norms, and political processes typically associated with liberal democracy *at home* are said to have determinative impact upon the management of conflict within the alliance, because they speak directly to the issue of whether to resort to force in dispute settlement *abroad*.[29] The convergence of these liberal-democratic values fosters a "sense of community," or collective identity, that leads members of the community to regard fellow members in a way fundamentally different from the manner in which they assess states lying outside the liberal-democratic group: they simply do not take seriously that the former could represent potential aggressors.

Do current political trends among growing numbers of transAtlantic states—many veering toward populism, a few heading in an antipopulist direction—presage the weakening if not demise of NATO, threatening in the process to transport the transAtlantic allies "back to the future"?[30] Does populism represent the kiss of death for the Western security community, and along with it, the alliance? To begin to answer this question, we turn in the section immediately following to a critical assessment of contemporary populism in the transAtlantic political arena; in this section, we take pains to distinguish between populism and a cognate term, "sovereignism," and to show why the latter should not be taken merely to be a synonym for the former. Following that conceptual and theoretical foray come two more sections, in which we invoke our Italian tutorial to make the case that Atlanticism might be expected to endure, even in an age when the "people" are calling more of the strategic shots than heretofore.

Deciphering the Populism-Sovereignism Muddle

Populism and sovereignism[31] are tricky concepts, held by some to be as analytically separable as Tweedledum is from Tweedledee—which is to say, not very much. We think, however, there are distinctions worth drawing between the concepts, even though we recognize how much sovereignism has in common with the populism within which it is nested, at least

[28] For an elaboration, see David G. Haglund and Stéphane Roussel, "Is the Democratic Alliance a Ticket to (Free) Ride? Canada's 'Imperial Commitments', from the Interwar Period to the Present," *Journal of TransAtlantic Studies* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/14794010708656852.

[29] See Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 43–71; and John M. Owen IV, *Liberal Peace, Liberal War: American Politics and International Security* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 15–16.

[30] To employ the play on words expressive of the pessimism about NATO's prospects subsequent to the ending of the Cold War, as those prospects were discussed in John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (Summer 1990): 5–56, https://doi.org/10.2307/2538981.

[31] Alternatively called, in North America, "sovereigntism."

in the radical-right, or "national" version of the latter.[32] As two Italian scholars have argued, one of the important points of differentiation between sovereignism and populism is ideational and centers on the sovereignists' zeal to restore their country's presumably lost sovereignty, with the latter being understood "not in a precise and consistent manner, rather as a more or less concrete, and more or less idealized, place and time, in which the people and the nation were allegedly deemed to hold the political power, disposing of full control over a given territory, its borders, policy-making, etc."[33]

Despite sharing an emphasis upon the nation-state, with its related insistence upon the control of territory and policing of borders, sovereignism parts company from populism on two matters. First is an emotional commitment to an idealized vision of a past shrouded in romanticism and mythologizing, which has much less pull on the heartstrings of the (national) populists than it does on the sovereignists. The populists understand that past as having been unambiguously superior to the present, while the sovereignists are less sure about this, which is why they expend so much energy romanticizing what may, or may not, have actually existed: a superior past. In other words, the populists are more committed to a "good old days" perspective as representing what actually *did* exist, while the sovereignists traffic in a version of a noble past that they are not certain really existed—and if it did not, they certainly regret it—but still they idealize that (likely) fictional past, because their interest lies mainly in using it as a template for a very real future. They dream bigger dreams than their populist fellow travelers.

A second distinction concerns the choice of polemical targets, which in the case of the populists tend to be other nation-states, while the sovereignists' dudgeon is raised by supranational institutions and bodies, aided and abetted by "multicultural elites" bent on promoting a globalization that has stripped the nation of its sovereignty. These differences can be obscured due to the allure, for both populists and sovereignists, of that postulated superior past, objectively so in the case of the former, inspirationally so in that of the latter. In Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) mantra, we see a conviction that the past *had* to have been better than the present—a conviction some scholars have referred to as "pessimistic nostalgia," or "retrotopia."[34] Nevertheless, the differences matter, for as we will see later the sovereignists are simply more allergic to *institutional* cooperation than are the populists, marking the latter as being, in principle, more open to supporting NATO than the former.

Sovereignism and populism each see corrupt elites as being in league with supranational institutions and bureaucracies and each deems financial markets to be guilty of plundering sovereignty. And though both may frame their political discourse in terms of recovery of a lost sovereignty from globalized and allegedly unresponsive elites, populism elevates the figure of the leader to that of the "spokesperson" for defending the people. By contrast, sovereignism places the emphasis less upon a single (and singular) leader than upon the "nation."[35]

[32] For our purposes here, we refer to this right-wing variant as simply "populism," although we are aware that left-wing variants of populism surely exist. On sovereignism, see Sean Mueller and Anja Heidelberger, "Should We Stay or Should We Join? 30 Years of Sovereignism and Direct Democracy in Switzerland," *European Politics and Society* 21, no. 2 (2020): 182–201, https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1632582.

[33] Alessio Scopelliti and Valerio A. Bruno, "Restoration of Sovereignty? Interpretative Lectures of Sovereignism beyond Nationalism and Populism," *Soft Power: Revista Euro-Americana de Teoría e Historia de la Política y del Derecho* 9, no. 2 (July-December 2022): 191–211, 194, http://dx.doi.org/10.14718/SoftPower.2022.9.2.10.

[34] Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017); Colin Crouch, "The 'Left Behind' and Pessimistic Nostalgia," *Medium*, 3 September 2019, https://medium.com/whose-society-whose-cohesion/the-left-behind-and-pessimistic-nostalgia-d5828833c280.

[35] Especially at the level of far-right populism, there is so much overlap that it becomes almost impossible to separate clearly their respective discourses. See Luca Verzichelli, "Conclusions. The Populism-Sovereignism Linkage: Findings, Theoretical Implications and a New Research Agenda," in *Sovereignism and Populism: Citizens, Voters and Parties in Western European Democracies*, ed. Linda Basile and Oscar Mazzoleni (London: Routledge, 2022), 108–20.

One of the recurring themes in contemporary European politics is that the region is being swept by a wave of right-wing nationalism, reflected in the success of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in the February 2025 German elections, in which leader Alice Weidel's party came in a strong second behind the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union, winning 152 seats on 24.1 percent of the vote, and more recently in the commanding public-opinion lead of Britain's Reform Party over any other challenger, with pollsters currently finding Nigel Farage's right-wing party attracting 30 percent of the vote and highly likely to form a majority government if an election were held today (one does not need to be held in the United Kingdom until 2029).[36] Something similar seems to be happening in France, where survey data reveal that should President Emmanuel Macron's stumbles in trying to form a workable government in the Assemblée Nationale lead to a new parliamentary election, the likely winner would be the Ralliement National (RN), with Jordan Bardella emerging as prime minister.[37] Yet while the parties of the European far-right do share common values, slogans, and perhaps political platforms, there remain meaningful differences between them—differences that we argue may have major implications for the future of transAtlantic relations should the rightward trend in the Western world not be reversed. These differences are key to understanding variations in foreign policy, once far-right parties get the chance, as some of them have, to implement their own agendas.

Illustratively, two leaders can be said to embody polar models within contemporary European right-wing populism: Italy's Giorgia Meloni and Hungary's Viktor Orban. The "Orban model" openly pursues the path of illiberal democracy and is confrontational vis-à-vis institutions, especially the EU but also NATO; its hard Euroscepticism seeks neither dialogue nor compromise with more traditional parties, whether in Budapest or Brussels—and by Brussels we mean not just the EU but also NATO. We might think of the Orban model as representing sovereignism on steroids. By contrast, the "Meloni model" is rather pragmatic, as her government has pursued both dialogue and compromise and tends to keep a low profile—unlike Hungary's—and to adopt moderate positions both at the international and the EU levels. For example, recently the Meloni government supported a free-trade agreement between the EU and Mercosur, while Orban's government remained firm in its opposition.[38] No doubt, this moderation is in many ways reflective of the external constraints historically facing the country, about which we will have more to say later in this article; here we simply remark that those constraints have played a part in generating in Italy both a desire and an ability to serve as a "bridge" in Brussels between such established mainstream party "families" as the European People's Party and parties much further to the right, such as the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) and Patriots for Europe (PfE). At the domestic level, although Meloni's model exhibits elements of radicalism in several policy areas (foremost among them, immigration) and manifests a strict law-and-order profile, it has not embraced illiberal values to anywhere near the same extent as Orban's, nor—and this is the important point—is its populism congenitally averse to *institutional* cooperation, unlike Orban's sovereignism.

Table 1 summarizes this point, using the EU populist far-right parties as a proxy for the political context of the European members of the alliance, given that of the sixteen parties listed, only one (the Freedom Party of Austria, or FPÖ) operates in an EU state that is not at

[36] "What Elon Musk Gets Wrong about Europe," *Economist*, 20 September 2025, 10–11.

[37] Roger Cohen, "Criticism of Macron's Repeat Pick for Prime Minister: It's a 'Bad Joke'," *New York Times*, 12 October 2025, 4.

[38] Patricia Cohen, "E.U. and South America to Form Free-Trade Zone of 700 Million People," *New York Times*, 11 January 2026, 8. The members of Mercosur are Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

Table 1. List of EU Populist Radical and Far-right Parties

Party	"Meloni model"	"Orbán model"	EP elections 2019–2024 percent	Latest parliamentary elections (House of the Rep.)	Government role	European political group
Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) Germany	X	X	11 (2019) 15.9 (2024)▲	10.3 (2021) 20.8 (2025)▲	Opposition	ESN
ANO 2011 Czech Republic		X?	21.19 (2019) 26.12 (2024)▲	29.64 (2017) 26.14 (2021)▼	Minority government (2017–2021); opposition (since 2021)	Patriots for Europe
Chega Portugal	X	X	1.60 (2019) 9.8 (2024)▲	7.18 (2022) 18.06 (2024)▲	Opposition	Patriots for Europe
Fidesz Hungary			52.56 (2019) 44.82 (2024)▼	49.27 (2018) 53.29 (2022)▲	Government	Patriots for Europe
Finns Party Finland	X		13.83 (2019) 7.61 (2024)▼	17.48 (2019) 20.06 (2023)▲	Government coalition (since 2023)	ECR
Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) Italy			6.46 (2019) 28.76 (2024)▲	4.35 (2018) 26 (2022)▲	Government coalition	ECR
Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) Austria		X	17.20 (2019) 25.4 (2024)▲	16.17 (2019) 28.85 (2024)▲	Opposition	Patriots for Europe
Forum for Democracy (FvD) Netherlands	X		10.96 (2019) 2.49 (2024)▼	5.2 (2021) 2.23 (2023)▼	Opposition	ESN
Law and Justice Party (PiS) Poland		X	45.38 (2019) 36.16 (2024)▼	43.6 (2019) 35.4 (2023)▼	Opposition	ECR
Lega Italy	X	X	34.26 (2019) 8.97 (2024)▼	17.37 (2018) 8.77 (2022)▼	Government coalition	Patriots for Europe
New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) Belgium	X		14.17 (2019) 13.96 (2024)=	16 (2019) 16.7 (2024)=	Government coalition	ECR
People's Party of Slovakia (ĽSNS) Slovakia		X	12.07 (2019) 0.48 (2024)▼	7.97 (2020) 0.84 (2023)▼	Extra-parliamentary	—
Party for Freedom (PVV) Netherlands		X	3.53 (2019) 16.97 (2024)▲	10.81 (2021) 23.49 (2023)▲	Coalition	Patriots for Europe
Rassemblement National (RN) France	X		23.34 (2019) 31.7 (2024)▼	18.61 (2022) 28.05 (2024)▲	Opposition	Patriots for Europe
Sweden Democrats (SD) Sweden	X		15.34 (2019) 13.17 (2024)▼	17.5 (2018) 20.5 (2022)▲	Confidence and supply	ECR
Vox Spain	X		6.20 (2019) 9.6 (2024)▲	5.03 (2019) 2.70 (2023)▼	Opposition	ECR

Green triangles (▲) indicate an increase in vote share compared to the previous parliamentary election; red triangles (▼) indicate a decrease.

the same time a NATO member. The parties extend along a continuum bounded on either end by the Meloni and Orban models. Sometimes the parties do not perfectly match up when it comes to their affiliations within European political groups; for instance, France's Ralliement National and Italy's Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) have a great deal in common, and yet they adhere to different groups in Brussels (respectively PfE and European Conservatives and Reformists [ECR]). Also, it is important to notice that some parties do not have a marked preference for either of the two models, for instance Germany's AfD and Portugal's Chega.[39]

Should it transpire that the Trump administration ends up acting more like a geopolitical "ally cat" than a solitary and mangy alley cat, much will depend on whether American decisionmakers find themselves attracted to an Italian model that assumes the collective identity we have been calling populist Atlanticism can serve as a binding agent between countries that might otherwise slip back to a future of nationalist competition so characteristic of the interwar decades of the 1920s and 1930s. This, at least, seems to be the hope of the Meloni government, which is counting on the power of the Italian tutorial to help keep such a future at bay.

In the following section, we address the logical and empirical basis of this hope that Italy might play a role in arresting centrifugal forces that otherwise might tear the alliance apart. In it, we examine the often-overlooked Atlanticism that characterized Italy's grand strategy during the years when Silvio Berlusconi was prime minister. Those were the years in which there appeared the first iteration of the Italian tutorial.

The Italian Tutorial 1.0: Berlusconi and the Alliance

The similarities between Silvio Berlusconi and Donald Trump transcend the merely anecdotal. Despite the indelible "quirks" of their characters and the different American and Italian political contexts, certain common traits profoundly influenced the two leaders' approaches to politics and their electoral successes. Both Berlusconi and Trump were seasoned entrepreneurs prior to entering politics, and both were able to construct images of themselves as charismatic leaders, outsiders to the establishment, and thus individuals able to speak directly to the people, exemplars of national populism (or what we have been calling, for simplicity's sake, unadorned populism). Berlusconi and Trump were both reasonably successful businessmen prior to entering politics, with a primary focus on real estate, though also engaging in other walks of commercial life. Berlusconi amassed a media empire through his ownership of Mediaset and the football club AC Milan, while Trump's name became synonymous with a substantial real estate empire and the television program, "The Apprentice."[40] Like his Italian counterpart, Trump too styled himself a sporting impresario, having been owner of the short-lived New Jersey Generals in the equally short-lived United States Football League of the early 1980s.

Their backgrounds enabled both men to utilize channels of communication and entertainment for the purpose of consensus-building. Both cultivated a distinct and provocative communication style, often characterized by its directness and intensity: Berlusconi could use his control over the media to fashion for himself an image as a "winner," while Trump

[39] António Valentim Domingos, "Os Votos No Chega São Um Grito: E Não é Contra a Democracia," *Expresso* (Lisbon), 26 May 2025, https://expresso.pt/geracao-e/2025-05-26-os-votos-no-chega-sao-um-grito-e-nao-e-contra-a-democracia-052d4377.

[40] Marco Clementi, David G. Haglund, and Andrea Locatelli, "Making America Grate Again: The 'Italianization' of American Politics and the Future of TransAtlantic Relations in the Era of Donald J. Trump," *Political Science Quarterly* 132 (Fall 2017): 495–525, citing from 506–15, https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12655.

successfully exploited and continues to exploit social media to bypass traditional media and speak directly to his supporters. Both demonstrated an unfailing ability to garner attention, often through controversial statements or direct confrontations with opponents. Their shared communication style has been said to reflect a common personality trait, namely strong narcissism, characterized by high self-esteem and the belief that they alone possessed extraordinary leadership qualities.[41]

Each portrayed himself as the consummate "problem-solver," able and only too willing to confront challenges head on and resolve them decisively. Neither perceived himself to be a mere representative of a political party but rather as a charismatic mobilizer of the masses. This personalization of leadership was transposed into the realm of diplomatic relations. While adopting divergent approaches and yielding divergent outcomes, both Berlusconi and Trump demonstrated an inclination to conceptualize relations with other states primarily through the prism of personal relationships with other leaders (one of them, notably, being Vladimir Putin).[42]

A fundamental component of their communication strategy had them positioning themselves as anti-establishment mavericks. Berlusconi presented himself as the only figure capable of challenging the Italian political "caste," primarily attacking professional politicians, who had already been discredited by a major scandal in 1994. "Mani Pulite" (Clean Hands), or "Tangentopoli" (Bribeville), as it was called at that time, was a highly publicized judicial investigation that uncovered widespread corruption in both public and private sectors, primarily involving politicians, business leaders, and public officials. So consequential was it that within a few years, Italy transited into the era of its so-called "second republic," with many historical political parties dissolving (and their leaders fleeing or being sent to jail)—and one new leader stepping out onto center stage: Silvio Berlusconi.

It should be noted, however, that Berlusconi's ire was not solely directed at political leaders; judges, journalists, and other businessmen hostile to him were often publicly accused of unduly interfering with his work.[43] A similar approach has been adopted by Trump, who has based his perpetual campaign on the fight against Washington elites, the "fake news" media, and the "Deep State." In this respect, Trump has turned out to be even more assertive than Berlusconi ever was, given the zeal with which during his first term and, even more early in his second, he endeavored to staff the top echelons of the administrative state with loyalists.[44] Still, when it came to remonstrating against political foes and doing the fundamentally unorthodox as a matter of rule, Berlusconi certainly showed himself to be no slacker, undertaking such radical and delegitimizing moves as continuous assaults on the judiciary, and fostering right-wing coalitions, including with the (former) fascist of Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI)/Alleanza Nazionale (AN). All of this is to say that Trump's second-term approach, aimed as it has been so far at weakening the institutional constraints ("guardrails") on presidential power, can be understood as the logical extension of a populist political vision he has shared with Berlusconi. It is a vision that consistently

[41] See Stanley Renshon, *The Real Psychology of the Trump Presidency* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); and Seth Allcorn and Howard Stein, *Psychoanalytic Insights into Social, Political, and Organizational Dynamics: Understanding the Age of Trump* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 35–62.

[42] Emidio Diodato and Federico Niglia, *Berlusconi the Diplomat: Populism and Foreign Policy in Italy* (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). On Trump, see John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

[43] Sofia Ventura, "The Narcissistic Celebrity Leader: Berlusconi's Communication Style and Its Impact on Italian Leadership," *Contemporary Italian Politics* 16, no. 4 (2024): 434–51, citing at 439, https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2024.2381336.

[44] Allcorn and Stein, *Psychoanalytic Insights*, 103–11.

places the leader at the pinnacle of the political hierarchy, proclaiming himself or herself to be the sole authentic interpreter of the people's will.

As a result particularly of this last attribute, another striking point of congruence between the two leaders has been a penchant for controversy and litigation. Notwithstanding numerous scandals and court cases, both Berlusconi and Trump managed to maintain significant popular support: Berlusconi faced corruption charges and judicial ordeals, while Trump has suffered two impeachments and numerous legal investigations. Despite (or perhaps *because* of) this, both leaders managed effectively to transform accusations against them into evidence that they were facing an ongoing conspiracy on the part of a discredited establishment bent on undermining them through the "weaponization" of the law, or as some have taken to calling it, "lawfare." In this struggle, both proved skillful in transforming their image from that of potential perpetrator to that of vanquisher of corrupt enemies.[45]

Unmistakably, the two leaders steeped themselves in populist messaging, with a necessary hefty dose of antagonism toward the established political elite. Berlusconi styled himself as the only figure capable of challenging the "strong powers" possessed by the administrative cadres, who he charged were constantly harassing him with the "laces and ties" of bureaucracy. A notable instance of this was his lamentation at the time of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe summit in late May 2010, when, citing Mussolini's diaries, he complained, "I have no power, maybe I had it as an entrepreneur, but today I don't have it."[46] Trump has assiduously channeled the stances of his Italian counterpart when championing the interests of the general people as against those of a globalized, exploitative elite fundamentally opposed to American values.

Both leaders dwelt on the abstract notion of the people, albeit with different declinations and by different means. Berlusconi's career was already on the wane when social media first appeared on the global political scene; for him, the people alternatively represented the electorate, or public opinion as it was shaped by the media. He was able to mold the perception of the people according to circumstances, exploiting the power of television to build consensus around his own figure and policies.[47] His rhetoric oscillated between, on the one hand, characterizing the populace as a sovereign body of voters, thereby legitimizing his authority through their casting of ballots, and on the other, conceptualizing it as a passive recipient of influence via his television channels. In this manner, the legitimization of his power was derived not only from the democratic process but also from the control of public discourse. A similar logic has been employed by Trump, with his constructed narrative of representing the "forgotten people" against the elites in Washington. However, the definition of the people employed by Trump has evolved so as to take on an increasingly polarizing coloration, predicated on an exclusivist logic: the people to whom Trump speaks are those who share his political vision, while his opponents are often portrayed as enemies of America or part of a corrupt system, or both. The point is that each leader effectively used the concept of the people to consolidate his own power, in the process transforming politics into a never-ending struggle between "us" and "them."[48]

[45] Tobias Jones, "We're All Living in Berlusconi's World Now," *Foreign Policy*, 21 August 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/21/were-all-living-in-berlusconis-italy-world-now-trump-boris/.

[46] Corriere della Sera, "Berlusconi cita i diari di Mussolini. 'Io non ho potere, i gerarchi sì'," 27 May 2010, https://www.corriere.it/politica/10_maggio_27/berlusconi-cita-mussolini_356ec23a-69b0-11df-a901-00144f02aabe.shtml.

[47] On the stylization of the "people" within populist ideology, see Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–63, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x; as well as Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America," *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 2 (2013): 147–74.

[48] Robert C. Rowland, *The Rhetoric of Donald Trump: Nationalist Populism and American Democracy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2021), 1–24.

While both achieved a level of consensus, their promises frequently encountered institutional impediments. Berlusconi, despite being the longest-serving prime minister in the history of the Italian Republic, was repeatedly hindered from implementing laws he favored. Those obstacles included the need to mediate with diverse coalition rulings made by the Constitutional Court, which blocked core agenda items. So too did Trump encounter considerable opposition during his first term, when despite having a Republican majority in Congress (until the 2018 mid-terms), he was often frustrated legislatively. To these were added the constraints imposed by various bureaucratic entities, not excluding many of his own advisors, capable of demonstrating notable levels of resistance to him the first time around.[49] This was especially the case in foreign policy, where Trump (like Berlusconi) proved unable to deliver on the promise to unleash a diplomatic revolution. As numerous commentators have observed, the initially flamboyant rhetoric of the first Trump administration was balanced by a significant degree of continuity in terms of alignments, international commitments, and security policies.[50]

Similarly, those who had long predicted that Silvio Berlusconi's personality would result in a hopelessly erratic Italian foreign policy corrosive of transAtlantic relations were compelled to revisit their initial assumptions.[51] Instead, Silvio Berlusconi's foreign policy rested upon a strong Atlanticist foundation and a close working relationship with the United States.[52] Since taking office for the first time in 1994, Berlusconi consistently underscored the significance of his collaboration with Washington, notwithstanding the anti-NATO preferences of such a significant government ally as the Northern League. During his tenure, Berlusconi cultivated a partnership with three successive U.S. presidents, most notably with George W. Bush. The bond with the United States was consolidated in particular following the 9/11 attacks, with Italy supporting the "war on terror" launched by Bush and participating in military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The 2003 decision to take part in the Iraq mission was a particularly contentious one, encountering strong opposition at both the domestic and European levels. In defense of the intervention, Berlusconi contended that it was imperative to fortify the transAtlantic alliance and guarantee international security.[53]

As Lorenzo Cladi and Mark Webber have observed that Berlusconi altered Italy's decades-long foreign policy course by injecting a pervasive sense of skepticism toward European institutions and their policies—but *not* toward transAtlantic ones.[54] While Italy had once been an enthusiastic and pivotal contributor toward the construction of a more integrated Europe in the post-Second World War decades, under Berlusconi there arose a dual tendency to favor the transAtlantic axis over the European one and to base foreign policy more upon bilateral than upon multilateral cooperation. Berlusconi's

[49] Patrick Porter, "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed," *International Security* 42, no. 4 (2018): 9–46, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00311; Andrea Carati and Andrea Locatelli, *Taming the President: Trump, the Advisory System, and the Mechanisms of US Foreign Policy Decision-Making* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2025).

[50] Paul K. MacDonald, "America First? Explaining Continuity and Change in Trump's Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly* 133, no. 3 (2018): 401–34, https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12804; Andrea Locatelli and Andrea Carati, "Trump's Legacy and the Liberal International Order: Why Trump Failed to Institutionalise an Anti-Global Agenda," *International Spectator* 58, no. 1 (2023): 92–108, https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2022.2156226.

[51] On the role of Berlusconi within Italian right-wing coalitions since 1994, see Daniele Albertazzi, Donatella Bonansinga, and Mattia Zulianello, "The Right-Wing Alliance at the Time of the Covid-19 Pandemic: All Change?" *Contemporary Italian Politics* 13, no. 2 (2021): 181–95, https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2021.1916857; and Albertazzi and Sean Mueller, "Populism and Liberal Democracy: Populists in Government in Austria, Italy, Poland and Switzerland," *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 3 (2013): 343–71, https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2013.12.

[52] Diodato and Niglia, *Berlusconi the Diplomat*.

[53] Jason Davidson, *America's Allies and War: Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq* (New York: Palgrave, 2011).

[54] Lorenzo Cladi and Mark Webber, "Italian Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War Period: A Neoclassical Realist Approach," *European Security* 20, no. 2 (2011): 205–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2011.565052. Also see Philip Giurlando, "Populist Foreign Policy: The Case of Italy," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 27, no. 2 (2021): 251–67.

confrontational approach was not limited to the EU; over time, it also embraced key European partners, such as France and Germany, with whom he seemed to enjoy bickering. Furthermore, he advocated a model of European governance that placed less emphasis on bureaucracy and more on national sovereignty. In this context, he frequently voiced criticism of EU economic policies, expressing opposition to excessive regulation, and the rigidity of the Maastricht parameters.

Looking back at his time in power, it is not difficult to conclude that Berlusconi's personality traits, leadership style, and political agenda all mark him as a Trump forerunner, even to the extent of his conceptualization of Russia's Vladimir Putin as a potential diplomatic asset. His apparent fondness for Putin was something Berlusconi himself sought to amplify in the media, for he believed it would enable Italy to serve as "bridge" between Western countries and Russia, as well as to strengthen economic and trade relations between the two countries, with a focus on the energy sector.

It is no coincidence that the concerns voiced about the potentially disruptive impact of the initial Trump presidency bore striking similarities to assessments articulated by Italian commentators nearly a quarter-century earlier. That said, on the all-important issue of transAtlantic relations, chaos was averted during Berlusconi's years in power. Indisputably, his foreign policy remained strongly oriented toward cooperation with Washington, in what became the first instantiation of populist Atlanticism within the alliance. Moreover, his opposition to the EU had only a negligible impact on the process of European integration itself. Despite the upheaval initiated by Berlusconi and subsequently compounded by the early Trump administration, transAtlantic relations continued undisturbed—or at least as undisturbed as they normally have been throughout the long history of this chronically disputatious, yet fundamentally enduring, alliance.

This, we suggest, gives reason for thinking that despite today's appearance of NATO's standing at death's door,[55] the alliance still has a good deal more life left to it than current alarmists imagine. TransAtlantic solidarity (of a kind) can be expected to persist even should the coming years be characterized by the continued rise of populism and retreat of the liberal order. To put it differently, there is no reason to assume that NATO must collapse pari passu with the retrenchment of liberalism internationally. To show why this is so, we turn to the second iteration of the Italian tutorial, the one that focuses upon the role of Giorgia Meloni.

The Italian Tutorial 2.0: Meloni and the Alliance

Silvio Berlusconi's lengthy leadership of the Italian right-wing coalition ended in late 2011, during the years of the widescale European sovereign debt crisis, when he had to step down in favor of Mario Monti, who led a technocratic government with the strong support of President Giorgio Napolitano between 2011 and 2013. In December 2012, Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) was established with the stated aim, ironically, of distancing itself from Berlusconi. Within a decade, this new party would come to preside over the victorious right-wing coalition emerging from the September 2022 parliamentary elections—a coalition whose shining star turned out to be Meloni herself, who looked like nothing so much as the second coming of Berlusconi.[56] Her government managed to implement

[55] For instance, see Rym Momtaz, "Taking the Pulse: Can Europeans Build Their Independent Extended Nuclear Deterrent?" Strategic Europe, 3 April 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/Europe/strategic-Europe/2025/04/taking-the-pulse-can-Europeans-build-their-independent-extended-nuclear-deterrent?lang=en.

[56] Valerio Alfonso Bruno and Mara Morini, *The Rise of the Brothers of Italy: Organisation, Leadership and Ideology* (Cham: Springer, 2026).

policies that resonated with broader contemporary trends in Europe, especially in such politicized issue-areas as stricter control over migration and closer attention to economic and cultural protectionism. In so doing, the Italian government became a model to be emulated in the broader radical-right galaxy.

A large part of this success stems from its approach to tackle head-on such contentious policy areas as migration, through an approach that managed nevertheless to differentiate itself from the offerings of leaders such as Orban. Meloni has been able to attract a wider base of supporters abroad than anything Orban could achieve—a base embracing moderate right-wing leaders of EU institutions along with some conservative European governments. Her leadership style balances a nationalist rhetoric and engagement with EU institutions, enhancing the model's appeal to both government and opposition parties elsewhere.[57] Parties such as Vox in Spain, RN in France, and even the AfD in Germany, have all sought to replicate Meloni's strategy so as to gain mainstream credibility, while maintaining their ideologically tough (and historically rooted) stance on such culture-war fronts as migration and national identity. Among the differences between the Meloni and Orban models one stands out the most: Meloni's strategy is suffused with pragmatism. It is based on two metaphorical and mediatory pillars: bridging and the "dual-track." Each represents the direct and ongoing impress of Berlusconi upon Italy's transAtlantic policies.[58]

Bridging refers both to Italy's approach within the EU and to the role between the latter and the United States. While Meloni, as a right-wing populist, obviously shares certain nationalist traits with Orban, she has adopted a far more cooperative approach than her Hungarian counterpart when it comes to engagement with EU institutions, and even more so when it comes to NATO. Rather than positioning herself in direct opposition to the EU, as Orban and some other far-right figures elsewhere have done, Meloni balances nationalist rhetoric with institutional cooperation, effectively positioning herself as a bridge between radical right-wing forces and the mainstream center-right at the European level. This is particularly evident in her engagement with the European People's Party, a dominant force in EU parliamentary politics; her strategic alignment with certain factions enhances her party's legitimacy and expands its influence within European governance structures.

Likewise, since the return of Donald Trump to the White House, Italy's prime minister has sought to exploit her personal and ideological affinity with the MAGA leader to position Italy as a bridge between the United States and the EU. This strategy is not always an easy one to operationalize, given the well-known idiosyncrasies of the mercurial American president, yet Meloni has been showing herself to be as good as anyone, and probably better than most, at the task of dealing with Trump, particularly on potentially divisive transAtlantic files such as the Ukraine War and the complexities involved in boosting European contributions to collective defense, to say nothing of the bizarre squabble within the alliance that erupted in early January 2026 over Greenland, a Danish possession that many in Europe appeared to think might be the site of the Trump administration's next military intervention following the one in Venezuela shortly after New Year's day.[59] In this pursuit of bridge-building, Meloni is carrying on in the tradition Berlusconi established, rather than blazing any new diplomatic trails.

[57] Riccardo Alcaro and Nathalie Tocci, "The Janus Face of Italy's Far Right," *Survival* 66, no. 5 (2024): 7–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2024.2403208.

[58] Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, *Populists in Power* (London: Routledge, 2015); Albertazzi, Bonansinga, and Zulianello, "The Right-Wing Alliance at the Time of the Covid-19 Pandemic."

[59] Michael D. Shear, Eric Schmidt, Steven Erlanger, and Jenna Smialek, "Tremulous NATO Allies Grope for a Response on Greenland," *New York Times,* 11 January 2026, 4.

A similar pattern has been emerging on the domestic political landscape, for while Berlusconi may be dead and buried, "Berlusconism" lives on.[60] As mentioned earlier, the FdI, under Meloni's leadership, serves as the central pillar of Italy's right-wing governing coalition. This coalition unites ideologically diverse actors, ranging from Berlusconi's center-right Forza Italia, now led by Antonio Tajani, to the far-right Lega, headed by Matteo Salvini. Meloni's ability to mediate between the two factions has been instrumental in ensuring the coalition's stability, despite its underlying ideological divergences and policy disagreements. Here, too, she follows in Berlusconi's footsteps, for back in 1994, the first Berlusconi right-wing coalition was able to keep together such odd bedfellows as Umberto Bossi's Lega Nord party and Gianfranco Fini's Alleanza Nazionale/MSI (basically a postfascist/neofascist party). By maintaining a leadership style accommodative of both moderate conservative and radical right-wing elements, Meloni has not only consolidated her domestic power but she has also strengthened her position as a central actor on the broader European conservative stage. Within contemporary right-wing European politics, it is Meloni's political model rather than Orban's that clearly has the wind in its sails. Radical right-wing leaders increasingly seek institutional legitimacy by trying to engage with centrist and center-right forces rather than to position themselves as defiant challengers to the political mainstream.[61]

The "dual-track" refers to a somewhat different tack. After coming to power in September 2022, Meloni's government made it a point to combine moderation in foreign policy with symbolic and highly controversial and politicized culture wars domestically, guaranteed to appeal to the core ideals of red-meat populists everywhere—nativism and authoritarianism.[62] This had the dual aim of seeking normalization at the EU level, through moderation, while retaining the support of radical constituencies domestically.

An example of how this works is furnished by the "Albania agreements." Through a protocol signed in 2023, Albania allowed Italy to develop a way to process asylum seekers outside the EU. Centers on Albanian soil have been designed to handle applications from up to three thousand asylum seekers a month, primarily men intercepted in international waters en route to Europe. The implementation of the agreement has faced significant legal challenges, with Italian courts repeatedly blocking the transfer of migrants to Albania, citing concerns over the legality and human-rights implications of the arrangement, even though at the EU level it has received, somewhat surprisingly, positive reactions—and not only from far-right leaders. For instance, the Meloni initiative has been deemed worthy of close study by top EU officials, including EC President Ursula von der Leyen and several fellow commissioners. German leaders had also recently considered it as a potential model for Europe writ large.[63]

If on the migration front Meloni has demonstrated her populist bona fides, foreign policy has allowed her to showcase other credentials. The war in Ukraine serves as an example. Despite initial concerns and skepticism regarding Meloni's foreign policy inclinations,

[60] Valerio A. Bruno, "Centre Right? What Centre Right? Italy's Right-Wing Coalition: Forza Italia's Political 'Heritage' and the Mainstreaming of the Far Right," in *Populism and Far-Right*, ed. Bruno (Milan: EduCatt, 2022), 163–95.

[61] The term "far-right" might best be considered as an umbrella concept, suitable for understanding a variety of different right-wing political parties and movements; see Andrea L. Pirro, "Far-Right: The Significance of an Umbrella Concept," *Nations and Nationalism 29*, no. 1 (2023): 101–12, https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12860.

[62] Cas Mudde, "The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy," *West European Politics* 33, no. 6 (2010): 1167–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2010.508901.

[63] Reuters, "*Germany's Scholz Looking 'Closely' at Italy's Migrant Deal with Albania,*" 11 November 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/Europe/germanys-scholz-looking-closely-italys-migrant-deal-with-albania-2023-11-11/. Much further to the right, the AfD's Alice Weidel has stated that she looks to the Italian government and Giorgia Meloni's leadership for inspiration, especially regarding immigration policies; LaPresse, "Migrants, AfD: 'Meloni's Successes Are a Model for Us,'" 3 February 2025, https://uk.lapresse.it/world-en/2025/02/03/migrants-afd-melonis-successes-are-a-model-for-us/.

especially given her party's historical associations with more Eurosceptic and nationalist positions, there has been little to no disruption in Italy's stance on critical international issues, such as supporting Ukraine in its struggle against Russian aggression.[64] Although Meloni and her coalition were initially viewed with some trepidation by international observers worried about how she might approach European unity and international alliances, those concerns have turned out to be misplaced, for the Meloni government has revealed itself to be in significant alignment with broader European and transAtlantic positions.

Under the leadership of Meloni, Italy has reaffirmed its commitment to Ukraine, continuing to support military and economic aid, as well as endorsing EU sanctions against Russia. This continuity can be understood not only as a reflection of Meloni's strategic decisions but also as a result of the constraints imposed by Italy's international commitments. Italy, being a founding member of both the European Union and NATO, has faced for decades a clear responsibility to align with broader Western coalitions. This geopolitical positioning has pushed the Meloni government to adhere to Italy's longstanding alliances, regardless of the party's more right-wing populist rhetoric.[65]

In sum, her government sticks to the trail blazed by previous governments and especially those led by Silvio Berlusconi, with only rare departures from that path.[66] And this stands the Italian model in stark contrast to that other right-wing populist model, Orban's sovereignism one. The Hungarian prime minister's trumpeting of the virtues of "illiberal democracy" has had a deep impact on the contemporary political debate over populism in the transAtlantic world, exposing as it does the concern widely expressed about democratic backsliding.[67] But so far at least, Orban's model has made few inroads within the alliance. Contrary to Meloni's, the approach pursued by Orban aims deliberately to be polarizing, with the Hungarian leader relishing each and every opportunity to poke not just EU leaders in the eye but elites in other international entities (especially the International Criminal Court), as well.

Take the case of immigration, in which Hungary and Italy have pursued divergent paths. Meloni's government, while embracing a hardline stance on immigration, has positioned itself as part of the EU's broader opposition to mass migration, and thus it remains somewhat aligned with mainstream conservative positions. In contrast, Orban has been a staunch advocate for an outright rejection of EU-mandated immigration policies, promoting radical nationalist rhetoric and sovereignty over EU directives. His government has introduced policies that are openly divisive and that prioritize the protection of national identity over cooperation with

[64] Valerio A. Bruno and Federica Fazio, "Italian Governments and Political Parties vis-a-vis the War in Ukraine," in *Polarization, Shifting Borders and Liquid Governance*, ed. Anja Mihr and Chiara Pierobon (Cham: Springer, 2024), 265–83.

[65] See Pierangelo Isernia, Sergio Martini, and Claudio Cozzi-Fucile, "Between Prudence and Selfishness: Pooling the Polls on what Italians Think of the Ukraine War," *Contemporary Italian Politics* 16, no. 3 (2024): 1–13; Valerio Vignoli and Fabrizio Coticchia, "The Politics of Military Assistance: Italian Parties' Positions on the War in Ukraine," *South European Society and Politics (published online* 2024): 1–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2024.240823; Polina Zavershinskaia, "The Mobilization of 'A Difficult Past' in Narrating the Russian Invasion of Ukraine by the German and Italian Backlash," *American Journal of Cultural Sociology, (published online 2025):* 1–30, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-024-00237-5; Zavershinskaia and Francesco Spera, "A Change of Paradigm? How the Russian Invasion of Ukraine Influenced Italian Memory Laws," *Contemporary Italian Politics (published online* 2024), 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2024.2439175.

[66] Lorenzo Cladi and Andrea Locatelli, "Explaining Italian Foreign Policy Adjustment after Brexit: A Neoclassical Realist Account," *Journal of European Integration* 43, no. 4 (2022): 459–73, https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2024.2439175.

[67] There are numerous works on "illiberal democracy." For an introduction see Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 2007). On important country-specific variants, especially Hungary's, see Tímea Drinóczi and Agnieszka Bień-Kacała, "Illiberal Constitutionalism: The Case of Hungary and Poland," *German Law Journal* 20, no. 8 (2019): 1140–66, https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2019.83; András L. Pap, *Democratic Decline in Hungary: Law and Society in an Illiberal Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2017); Jacques Rupnik, "Hungary's Illiberal Turn: How Things Went Wrong," *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 3 (2012): 132–37, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2012.0051; and Peter Wilkin, "The Rise of 'Illiberal' Democracy: The Orbánization of Hungarian Political Culture," *Journal of World-Systems Research* 24, no. 1 (2018): 5–42, https://doi.org/10.5195/jwsr.2018.716.

EU states on immigration matters. While Meloni's position, though tough, remains within the realm of acceptability for many EU member states, Orban's radical stance has alienated Hungary from mainstream EU policies, making his approach fundamentally irrelevant for collective action. Not so Italy's policies, with which the EU is likely to find a middle ground.

Stark differences within the right-wing populist family show up even more on foreign and defense policy. The war in Ukraine triggered by the Russian invasion of February 2022 set Hungary apart from its EU and NATO partners, especially on sanctions against Moscow and military support for Kyiv. Nor is Hungary's isolation on this score likely to be lessened, given what has been termed the "head-spinning pivot" toward support of Ukraine made by President Trump, following his meeting with his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelensky, at the United Nations in late September 2025.[68] In a denunciatory tweet issued subsequent to that meeting, Trump thundered against European allies who continue to facilitate Putin's warmaking by importing Russian hydrocarbon resources, implying that they might expect to come into his administration's crosshairs. Though no particular country was singled out, the censure obviously applies more to Hungary than to any other European ally, for Orban has been consistently vocal in opposing sanctions on Russia, citing their negative impact on his country's economy, an advocacy that has found little resonance elsewhere among leaders of the European allies, with the sole exception of Slovakia's prime minister, Robert Fico. Orban has also refrained from providing military aid to Ukraine, arguing for a more neutral and diplomatic approach to resolving the conflict. His government has been criticized for its perceived pro-Russia rhetoric, which has led to tensions within the European Union, with some members accusing Hungary of undermining the EU's unified stance on supporting Ukraine.

Conclusion: Berlusconi Is Dead, Long Live Berlusconi!

The Meloni government seems reasonably well-positioned to play an important role in shaping the transAtlantic dynamic over the next couple of years (or for however long the Trump administration endures), owing to its significant alignment with that administration's populism. However, the convergence between Rome and Washington is not limited to shared right-wing populist credentials. Personal relationships and informal networks between high-ranking officials in both governments also reinforce this alignment. Such networking is of course also prevalent in relations between liberal-democratic governments, but it is no less evident when it comes to dealings between populists, for whom personal connections and "transactionalism" are so important. These transactions are often cultivated through party alliances, international conferences, and mutual admiration among leaders, all of which contribute to a deeper level of coordination and validation that can and does transcend traditional diplomatic channels. Such dynamics suggest that, should the far-right continue to gain influence across Western democracies—and the court is still out on this prospect—Italy's capacity to act as both an interlocutor and a potential influencer within a reshaped Western alliance will be enhanced.

Nothing about this prospect is guaranteed. Much could transpire so as to make the Italian tutorial 2.0 and its vision of populist Atlanticism irrelevant. Populism might be forced into electoral retreat in other western countries, through the kind of reverse "Trump bump" witnessed in the Canadian and Australian elections during the spring of 2025, whereby distaste for the Trump administration is said to have played a part in causing conservative challengers to center-left incumbent regimes in Ottawa and Canberra to

[68] David. E. Sanger, "In a Sudden Shift, Trump Says Ukraine Can Win the War With Russia," *New York Times*, 23 September 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/23/us/politics/trump-russia-ukraine.html?

founder at polling booths where they had been widely expected to prevail until the U.S. president started to menace everyone with his erratic tariff policies and even, in the case of Canada, annexation musings. Even more to the point, American electoral prospects, starting with the 2026 midterm voting, could themselves bring to a halt the populist experiment.

But far worse from the perspective of Italy's populist government than a stalling of populism would be the nightmare of a strategic divorce between the United States and the European members of the alliance. The nightmare was glimpsed in late February 2025, with the disastrous visit of Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky to a White House that at the time was giving every appearance of preferring Moscow to Kyiv. It reemerged a year later, when in the wake of the unseating of Venezuela's dictator, Nicolás Maduro, worries surfaced within NATO that the Trump administration might next seek forcibly to annex Greenland! It is one thing to topple a tyrant whose demise is unlamented even by critics of the 3 January 2026 intervention in Venezuela; it is quite another thing for the alliance's leader to be suspected of seeking to pilfer territory from one of its staunchest European allies—sometimes said to be its "model" European ally.[69]

Meloni's participation in a hastily assembled Paris meeting of the "coalition of the willing" shortly after the Caracas raid is a clear marker of the value her government attaches to the preservation of the alliance. The meeting of the coalition was mainly intended to demonstrate ongoing support for Ukraine, but in an important agenda addition, participants reiterated that Greenland, as part of Denmark, was also part of NATO; thus its future was a matter for *all* the allies, not just one of them, to be pondering.[70] The Greenland crisis that erupted a few days later further illustrates Meloni's strategy—if not her emerging role as transAtlantic "diplomatic broker."

At the time of writing, following Trump's escalation of his claim over the territory, including an implicit reference to the possible use of force, a group of European countries (Germany, Sweden, France, Norway, the Netherlands, and Finland) deployed military contingents in response. Trump, in turn, threatened to impose additional tariffs on imports from those same states. Meloni's reaction is indicative of both her broader strategy and her potential mediating role. At first, her Minister of Defense, Guido Crosetto, openly criticized European allies for sending troops to Greenland, arguing instead that any response should be coordinated within the NATO framework—a position shared, as will be discussed, by Orban's Hungary and Fico's Slovakia. Following Trump's tariff threats, Meloni sought to de-escalate the situation by framing the episode as a "problem of understanding and communication," suggesting that the United States had misinterpreted the European deployment as an anti-American gesture. While critics have plausibly argued that this reading stretches the notion of misunderstanding, what matters for present purposes is Meloni's apparent objective: to temper the growing tension between the administration and what Donald Rumsfeld once disparagingly termed "old Europe." Moreover, and perhaps for the first time, Meloni described the threat of tariffs as a mistake on the side of the Unted States. At the same time, she has remained notably reluctant to endorse the French proposal to activate the so-called "EU trade bazooka."[71]

So, Meloni's position therefore stands in clear contrast to that of the most outspoken European opponents of Trump's ambitions. At the same time, however, significant

[69] "The Loneliness of America's Model Ally," *Economist*, 22 November 2025, 54.

[70] "Italy's Quiet Imprint on the 'Coalition of the Willing' Talks," *Decode 39: Geopolitical Insights from Italy*, 7 January 2026, https://decode39.com/13012/italys-quiet-imprint-on-the-coalition-of-the-willing-talks/.

[71] Eddy Wax and Nicoletta Ionta, "Meloni versus the 'Bazooka'," *Euractiv*, 19 January 2026, https://www.euractiv.com/news/rapporteur-meloni-versus-the-bazooka/.

differences emerge when her stance is compared with that of fellow right-wing populist leaders such as Orban and Fico. Indeed, despite superficial similarities—notably the repeated invocation of NATO as the preferred forum for addressing the crisis—their positions have been far more closely aligned with, if not subordinated to, American demands. While returning from a visit to Mar-a-Lago, Fico publicly declared his "complete agreement" with Trump, including his assessment of the European Union's crisis. Orban, for his part, distinguished himself by maintaining silence on both Trump's territorial claims and his threats of tariffs.[72]

Likewise, Italy's involvement in the coalition of the willing stands in contrast to the emphatic *non*-involvement of Hungary in that same grouping, which in turn reiterates the importance of the distinction between Italian-style populists like Meloni and Hungarian-style sovereigntists like Orban. Of course, at the moment, it might be imagined by some in Washington that the Orban model shines much brighter than the Meloni one. But in this, appearances are deceiving. What may ultimately convince the Trump administration that populist Atlanticism outlook (Meloni's perspective) is to be preferred over sovereignism (Orban's perspective) is not just that the president really has no intention of quitting NATO, by exercising article 13 of the Washington treaty of 1949.

For sure, his administration, like all predecessor administrations since the time of Harry Truman, has been urging the European allies to heft more of the laboring oar in the job of securing their own continent. In this, the Trump administration is hardly any outlier from a developing consensus in the United States, where there is puzzlement on both the left and right as to why the European allies, boasting a population of 510 million people (if the United Kingdom is added to the EU total), along with a combined GDP only slightly less than that of America's itself, should remain incapable of generating the military means of protecting themselves from a Russia with a population of 140 million (and shrinking) and an economy the size of Canada's.

A crucial reason why the United States will not leave NATO, despite the bluster of some in Washington and the fear of many elsewhere in the alliance, is China.[73] The allies are regarded as central cogs in the American attempt to limit the geopolitical risk associated with China's elevation in its global status. And on China, Italy shows itself to be quite unlike a Hungary that openly touts the virtues of "economic neutrality" between the United States and its strategic rival. By contrast, Italy under Meloni has staked out a position closer to the American one. The Meloni government has distanced itself from Beijing, most notably by withdrawing from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in December 2023. And even earlier, just like her predecessor, Mario Draghi, Giorgia Meloni used the "golden power" (which refers to a constitutional power to block mergers and acquisitions of Italian companies by foreign agents in critical sectors of the economy) to oppose Chinese penetration in the Italian market. She has also publicly criticized China's support for Russia in the war in Ukraine, as well as expressed concerns over Taiwan and domestic repression, so aligning more closely to the U.S. position.[74]

In the end, Meloni's attachment to a transAtlantic collective identity may, faute de mieux, help fill the void left by the diminution of liberalism's content in the values base of the democratic alliance. For as two Italian analysts have observed, Meloni's "view of

[72] Sandor Zsiros, "Europe's pro-Trump Leaders Tread Carefully as Greenland Crisis Grows," *Euronews*, 19 January 2026, https://www.Euronews.com/my-Europe/2026/01/19/Europes-pro-trump-leaders-tread-carefully-as-greenland-crisis-grows.

[73] For the case that America really does need its European allies to achieve its broader strategic aims, see Kori Schake, "Dispensable Nation: America in a Post-American World," *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 4 (July/August 2025): 8–21.

[74] Shairee Malhotra, *Italy's BRIexit: Not All Roads Lead to Beijing* (New Delhi, India: Observer Research Foundation, June 2024), 12, https://www.orfonline.org/public/uploads/posts/pdf/20240613103646.pdf.

the West is . . . that of a community of nations of European origin, bound by history, traditions and religion, a "civilization" that must close ranks to protect itself internally from migrants and globalist elites and externally from China. Surely, this identity-centered, essentialist view of the West also resonates within the Trump Administration, especially with Vice-President Vance."[75]

Meloni's emphasis on a common bond speaks to the existence of a transAtlantic collective identity shaped on values other than liberalism, while at the same time transcending "mere" strategic interests. Fostering such a bond poses considerable challenges for the EU (to say the least, it would seem to be a direct assault on that entity's founding principles). But it is less obvious that it similarly challenges the founding principles of NATO; for from the very beginning, the alliance had seen fit to back away from the idea that a sine qua non for membership must be a government's commitment to liberal democracy—else Antonio Salazar's Portugal would never have made it into the group of founding member-states. For that matter, neither was France's Fourth Republic during the formative years of the alliance smitten with the allure of a "liberalism" that had become widely discredited by the closing years of the Third Republic and remained taboo among all the major parties that mattered most in the postwar years.[76] At its outset, and despite the rhetoric, NATO was primarily a strategic, interest-based, enterprise; if it is to have a future, it will remain such an enterprise, notwithstanding the assumption of so many contemporary observers that populism must *necessarily* prove fatal to the continuing prospects of transAtlanticism.

Yet ideology will still matter to NATO's future, just as it had to its past. Cats, especially those making their abodes in alleys, are famous for walking alone. Allies, on the other hand, cooperate for their mutual benefit. Populist Atlanticism, to some a geostrategic oxymoron if ever there was one, gives us reason to imagine that the "democratic alliance" can continue to serve as the central institutional buttress of Western security, and *if* it does, the Italian tutorial will go a long way toward explaining *why* it did.

It will do so for two reasons. First, as alluded to previously, to the extent that more and more of the allies trend in a populist direction, an alliance characterized less by their bête-noir of liberalism becomes an alliance that increasingly, to populists, "looks like them;" this supplies an incentive to cherish alliance ties as a source of international legitimacy—something that even illiberal leaders not smitten with the dubious charms of sovereignism crave.

Second, it is to date an empirical observation, not just a hypothesis, that most European right-wing populists, once in power, have tended to "become Italian"—that is, to adopt pragmatic compromises similar to those pioneered by Berlusconi and now embodied by Meloni. They do so less for personality-driven than for structural reasons. Populists, facing similar constraints on either side of the Atlantic, generally adopt a recognizably "Italian" model of Atlanticism. This is intuitive for such second-tier powers as the leading European states, none of whom would wish the demise of NATO. It is slightly less intuitive for the alliance leader—the United States. But even Washington, if for no other reason than its rivalry with China, should understand the need for a moderate Berlusconi/Meloni type of populism in order to preserve allies.

[75] Riccardo Alcaro and Leo Goretti, "Meloni's US Dilemma: Balancing Ideology and Strategic Interest," *IAI Commentary* 25/27 (April 2025): 5, https://www.iai.it/en/publications/c05/melonis-us-dilemma-balancing-ideology-and-strategic-interest. Similar arguments were making the rounds during the first Trump administration; see for instance, Michael Doran and Peter Rough, "TransAtlantic Ties in a Populist Era," *American Interest* 12 (July/August 2017): 43–53.

[76] For France's stature as a non-"liberal" democracy at the time of NATO's formation, see David G. Haglund, "The Case of the Missing Democratic Alliance: France, the 'Anglo-Saxons' and NATO's Deep Origins," *Contemporary Security Policy* 25, no. 2 (2004): 225–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/1352326042000327361.