

Meloni's US Dilemma: Balancing Ideology and Strategic Interest

by Riccardo Alcaro and Leo Goretti

The task that awaited Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni during her meeting with US President Donald Trump in the White House on 17 April was nothing short of arduous. In the same breath, she had to reiterate Italy's proximity to the United States and her own to the right-wing agenda of MAGA Republicans, defend Italian commercial interests and avoid creating rifts within the EU. All considered, she performed well on all fronts. The balancing act she put up once again shows her political deftness. But it cannot hide deeper, perhaps unsolvable, dilemmas.

Commercial interests

Meloni had good reasons to be worried about Italy's commercial interests. In 2024, the US market, the second largest destination for Italian goods after Germany, generated 64.7 billion euros of revenues for Italian exporters.¹ If the

Trump Administration were to confirm the 20 per cent tariff rate on EU imports adopted on 2 April after a 90-day pause expires in July, Italian losses would be significant.

Nor would the picture be much rosier if the current threshold of 10 per cent were to be maintained, to which 25 per cent duties on aluminium, steel and cars must be added.² Even more worrying is the prospect that US tariffs – especially the escalating trade war with China – could bring about a slowdown in global growth. The Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance has already halved its growth forecasts for this year.³

all'import/export di merci italiane, updated on 18 April 2025, <https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/osservatorio-economico-intercambio-commerciale-italiano-mondo.php>.

² Madalena Barata da Rocha, Nicolas Boivin and Niclas Poitiers, "The Economic Impact of Trump's Tariffs on Europe: An Initial Assessment", in *Bruegel Analysis*, 17 April 2025, <https://www.bruegel.org/node/10843>.

³ "Govt Halves 2025 Growth Forecast to 0.6%", in

¹ Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Osservatorio economico: Statistiche relative*

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It comes as no surprise then that Meloni eventually overcame her deep-seated reluctance to criticise Trump and described the tariffs as “wrong”. This said, she remains sceptical about the effectiveness of adopting countertariffs, arguing that the effect would be to add harm to harm.⁴ Her government has argued in favour of a negotiated route, though the ruling coalition holds different views on which path to take. Matteo Salvini's Lega has pushed for bilateral negotiations,⁵ while Forza Italia's Antonio Tajani, who's also Italy's foreign minister, insists on a coordinated position with the EU.⁶

The first path has always been unworkable, and not just because trade policy is an exclusive competence of the EU. Seeking exemptions for Italian products would create an internal rift within the Union, isolate Italy and reduce its influence in negotiations on crucial dossiers such as the possible relaxation of deficit ceilings or the use of common resources to support defence investments.

Ansa, 9 April 2025, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2025/04/09/govt-halves-2025-growth-forecast-to-0.6_f1a32a85-ef8a-4720-90af-19c58a577787.html.

⁴ “Meloni Says Trump's Tariffs on EU Goods Are ‘Wrong’”, in *Ansa*, 3 April 2025, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2025/04/03/meloni-says-trumps-tariffs-on-eu-goods-are-wrong_c16ae22f-2225-470e-b5ef-e8f063bad3aa.html.

⁵ “Only Tariffs in Place Were Imposed by Brussels - Salvini”, in *Ansa*, 15 March 2025, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/general_news/2025/03/15/only-tariffs-in-place-were-imposed-by-brussels-salvini_of3aea36-8ec9-40c6-ad52-041e932aa8f1.html.

⁶ “Italy Supports EU in Tariff Negotiations Says Tajani”, in *Ansa*, 7 April 2025, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2025/04/07/italy-supports-eu-in-tariff-negotiations-says-tajani_fc54179d-27b9-4dc0-894e-0c44f499dcfd.html.

Arguably more important still is that the United States' commercial relevance for Italy pales in comparison with that of its fellow EU partners: 10 per cent of Italian overall exports cross the Atlantic, but more than half of them stay in the EU. And it is not just trade: Italian companies – including exporters – are deeply integrated into European supply chains. There is no way the Italian economy may prosper at the expense of the EU. Prime Minister Meloni is keenly aware of this, which is why her main objective in Washington was to create an opening for an EU-US negotiation on tariffs.

Diplomatic openings

In the months and weeks ahead of Meloni's visit to the White House, Trump had repeatedly ignored European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's entreaties for a meeting, showing his reluctance to acknowledge the EU as political interlocutor.⁷ Furthermore, exchanges between Trade Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič and US Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick had yielded no results at all.⁸

Thus, when Trump, sitting next to Meloni, nonchalantly flaunted his “100 per cent” certainty that a deal with Europe would happen,⁹ Meloni could

⁷ Steven Erlanger et al., “Europe Seeks a Direct Line to Trump, Skeptical That Aides Speak for Him”, in *The New York Times*, 17 April 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/17/world/europe/europe-trump-trade-defense.html>.

⁸ “Sefcovic: ‘With the US, a Targeted and Productive Dialogue on Tariffs, the EU Is Doing Its Part’”, in *Nova News*, 15 April 2025, <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/?p=410037>.

⁹ Jessica Rawnsley and Laura Gozzi, “Trump

legitimately conclude she had scored a significant point. True, Trump has remained non-committal on the idea, floated by Meloni, to use an incoming state visit to Rome to sit down with other European leaders, including von der Leyen.¹⁰ But the Italian prime minister has reasonable expectations that Trump can be won over incrementally.

Meloni's instincts are most likely correct. US Vice-President JD Vance, visiting Rome on the next day of her own trip to Washington, acknowledged tariff talks "with the EU" were in the agenda of his conversation with the Italian government.¹¹ After all, the US Administration cannot change the fact that, if it wants a deal, its interlocutor has to be the European Commission.

US expectations

If the assumption is accurate that a US-EU negotiation will take place, the question for Meloni is how far she will go – or wants to go – in advocating for meeting US expectations vis-à-vis her fellow EU leaders. She is likely to insist on two issues to keep the United States engaged: an increase in European purchases of US goods and a common front on China.

and Meloni Talk Up Chances of US Trade Deal with Europe", in *BBC News*, 17 April 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdjlr3mnlro>.

¹⁰ White House, *United States – Italy Joint Leaders' Statement*, 18 April 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/04/united-states-italy-joint-leaders-statement>.

¹¹ "Meloni Meets US Vice President Vance in Rome", in *Ansa*, 18 April 2025, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2025/04/18/meloni-meets-us-vice-president-vance-in-rome_a7631331-2263-4db9-bc9e-f5b2b844f153.html.

Communication technology could provide room for advancing both goals: from 5G to Starlink, Elon Musk's satellite communication system, the Trump Administration constantly reminds the Europeans that they need to choose between China and the United States. The Americans are also interested in increasing sales to Europeans of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and weapons systems. Nor is it a secret that the Administration sees EU digital, environmental and food regulations as discriminatory towards US companies and exporters.¹²

Limited room for manoeuvre

Meloni's room for manoeuvre is limited, however. Acceptance of US demands would result in a further consolidation of European dependence on the United States at a time when the demand for greater autonomy has become urgent.

The Italian government could overcome its own reticence to adopt Starlink, but other European governments are reluctant to give structural influence to a techno-billionaire who does not hesitate to directly interfere in their domestic politics by supporting far-right parties and promoting disinformation and anti-EU propaganda. The Commission has ruled out the possibility of reviewing the Digital Markets and Digital Services Acts, the European laws that regulate competition on digital markets and require high-tech giants to supervise the content disseminated

¹² US Trade Representative, *2025 National Trade Estimate Report on Foreign Trade Barriers*, 31 March 2025, <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/files/Press/Reports/2025NTE.pdf>.

on social platforms, respectively. A relaxation of import barriers for US beef treated with hormones, poultry washed with chlorine or genetically modified organisms is also next to impossible.¹³

Where the Italian premier has more leeway in Europe is on the aforementioned purchase of US LNG and arms, and she has made explicit pledges in both respects in Washington.¹⁴ On China, she could support stricter implementation of anti-subsidies rules and the adoption of targeted tariffs (as Italy already did in September 2024 with its vote in favour of EU tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles)¹⁵ – two fronts on which the Commission is already active. She could also promise Washington to fight for a less aggressive enforcement of digital regulations (which the Commission is already doing), against taxation of Big Tech (a national issue which nonetheless carries weight in the European debate),¹⁶ and for the removal or at least relaxation of environmental regulations (which European industrial actors also dislike).¹⁷

¹³ Sofia Sanchez Manzanaro and Thomas Moller-Nielsen, "EU Rejects Overhauling Agrifood and Tech Rules to Avoid Trump Tariffs", in *Euractiv*, 15 April 2025, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=2240285>.

¹⁴ Italian Government, *Remarks by President Meloni with the President of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump*, 17 April 2025, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/28248>.

¹⁵ "Italy Backs EU's Tariffs on Chinese Electric Cars", in *Reuters*, 16 September 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/italy-backs-eus-chinese-tariffs-foreign-minister-says-2024-09-16>.

¹⁶ "Italy Agrees with US to Oppose 'Discriminatory' Tech Taxes", in *Reuters*, 18 April 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/italy-agrees-with-us-oppose-discriminatory-tech-taxes-2025-04-18>.

¹⁷ "Meloni: 'Duties? No to Alarmism. Let's

Ideological affinities, strategic divergence

Ultimately, for Meloni, there may be a space of convergence between US and European interests that balances her ideological convictions and Italy's strategic interest. The path, however, is narrow and dotted with both short-term and long-term difficulties.

In the short term, a problem for Meloni is that not all Europeans may be willing, or able, to bear the costs of meeting US expectations. Ironically, this also applies to Italy, whose scarce fiscal resources may not be enough to fulfil her dual promise of buying more US LNG, which is generally expensive, while also increasing defence spending to meet the 2 per cent threshold of GDP agreed at NATO level. Difficult negotiations within the EU as to how to accommodate US requests for increased European purchases and member states' financial constraints will therefore emerge.

There are, however, also long-term strategic issues at stake. Meloni is convinced that European countries can only be part of a Euro-Atlantic order centred on the United States, and that if Washington changes course, the duty of Europeans is to adapt and not chase the chimera of autonomy.

At a first glance, this approach may seem to be in line with Italy's postwar Euro-Atlantic foreign policy, which has revolved around looking for

Think about Suspending the Green Deal for the Automotive Sector", in *Nova News*, 4 April 2025, <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/?p=406445>.

security from the United States and prosperity from EU integration. Italy's Euro-Atlantic alignment, though, has unfolded within a transatlantic framework marked by a shared commitment to liberal democracy, multilateralism and a rules-based order (at least in the West), with Washington on the whole being supportive of European integration efforts.

Rather than this normative vision, Meloni's view of the West is instead that of a community of nations of European origin, bound by history, traditions and religion, a 'civilisation'¹⁸ that must close ranks to protect itself internally from migrants and globalist elites and externally from China.

Sure, this identity-centred, essentialist view of the West also resonates within the Trump Administration, especially with Vice-President Vance. In Washington, however, it is directly linked with the belief that Europe is the weak link in the transatlantic community that is 'retreating' from Western values, stifling 'free speech' and 'cancelling elections', as Vance admonished in his infamous speech at the 2025 Munich Security Conference.¹⁹ With its commitment to advancing the rule of law, multilateralism and supranational integration, the EU is one of the main culprits for Europe's

supposed decadence. Behind the veil of ideological hostility is also the reality that strategically it is much preferable for Washington to have a dialogue with small and divided nation states led by likeminded leaders, rather than establishing an interlocution with Brussels.

Meloni has stated that she 'agrees' with Vance's analysis of Europe's ills.²⁰ However, as a declining middle power, Italy's long-term strategic interest cannot but be intimately tied to bolstering a supranational and multilateralist Europe. This is why the litmus test for the Prime Minister's balancing act will be whether the upcoming Italy-(EU)-US meeting that has been announced in Rome will eventually materialise and in what form. Trump's visit to Rome for Pope Francis's funeral may potentially provide a first photo-op with EU leaders that the Italian Prime minister could brandish as a success, but could also discourage a second trip involving more substantive talks in the near future. Whatever will happen (or not) in Rome in the coming weeks, in the long run, there is no guarantee that reconciling Meloni's personal ideological proximity to the Trump Administration with the Italian strategic interest in advancing a more cohesive and resilient Europe will really be possible.

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¹⁸ Italian Government, *Remarks by President Meloni with the President of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump*, cit.

¹⁹ Tim Hains, "Full Speech: Vice President JD Vance Tells Munich Security Conference 'There's a New Sheriff in Town'", in *RealClearPolitics*, 14 February 2025, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2025/02/14/full_speech_vice_president_jd_vance_addresses_munich_security_conference.html.

²⁰ "Meloni Tells FT She Agrees with Vance, Europe Has Lost Itself", in *Ansa*, 28 March 2025, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2025/03/28/meloni-tells-ft-she-agrees-with-vanceeurope-has-lost-itself_003c606f-bd15-4042-8b75-fe7691dc186b.html.

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