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Jean-Pierre Darnis

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# THE CONVERSATION

L'expertise universitaire, l'exigence journalistique

## The Mattei Plan: why Giorgia Meloni is looking to Africa

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### Jean-Pierre Darnis

Professeur des Universités, directeur du master en relations franco-italiennes, Université Côte d'Azur, Chercheur associé à la Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (FRS, Paris), professeur et membre du CISS de l'université LUISS de Rome, Université Côte d'Azur



Chairperson of the African Union Commission Moussa Faki Mahamat delivers a speech next to Italy's Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, during the Italy-Africa summit in Rome on January 29, 2024. Andreas Solaro/AFP

Since coming to power, Giorgia Meloni's government has been remarkably orthodox in its foreign policy. Unwavering support for Ukraine, loyalty to the Atlantic Alliance and full participation in the European Union - these are the cardinal points of a commitment that seems to be fully in line with the leading European countries.

And yet on Africa, the prime minister has broken with convention, pointing to the intractability of the right-wing nationalist coalition's foreign strategy. In the wake of the Italy-Africa conference in January, Meloni has been multiplying visits southward, with [a trip in Egypt in March](#) and in [Tunisia in April](#) which prepared the ground for cooperation agreements in agriculture, water and education. This Italian focus on Africa was also evident during the G7 meeting of Foreign Ministers in Capri last week during which Italy insisted on its commitment towards the Sahel area.

What is Meloni exactly up to in Africa? How can we understand her pivot toward the continent, and how does it shed light on her own path to power through moderate transformation that today makes her the first woman to be head of government in Italy?

## The making of the Mattei plan

To answer such questions, it is worth returning to the first iterations of the Mattei Plan for Africa. Named after Enrico Mattei, a famous Christian-Democrat resistance fighter and the founder of oil giant ENI, the policy was first announced on October 25, 2022 at Meloni's investiture speech to the Chamber of Deputies - an important moment in which each government traditionally announces its program. On that day, the policy was framed as a collaboration between the European Union and the African continent, with a view to containing Islamic radicalism in sub-Saharan Africa.

This statement came as a surprise at the time, as it did not seem to correspond to any previous political line. From then on, this Mattei plan for Africa has undergone much scrutiny and driven Italy's partners wild as they tried to pin down the plan's contents. The reference to Mattei appears to be a way of evoking a consensual national figure for Meloni, but it also signifies a specific role for ENI, the Italian oil and gas colossus that has always been a fundamental player in Italy's international projection.

## Venturing beyond the Mediterranean..

It is worth highlighting the novelty represented by the demand for an African policy for Italy. For a long time, Italy has conceptualised its foreign action by referring to the geographical area of the "enlarged Mediterranean" as its core focus.

Giorgia Meloni's party, Fratelli d'Italia, is no exception to this automatic reflex. However, this concept of the Mediterranean does have its drawbacks, as it does not coincide with the Union for the Mediterranean (UPM) vision, which spans the two shores of the Mediterranean, nor with the various European policies dealing with the problems of the member states bordering the Mediterranean. In this way, the concept of African policy can be seen as a timely clarification on Italy's part. It should also be remembered that, implicitly if not unconsciously, it takes up a historical line of Italian nationalism from the late 19th century, which associates colonialism in Africa with the affirmation of the very existence of the post-Risorgimento nation, a mechanism that would be taken up by Fascism.

## In the steps of her predecessors

However, Meloni is not entirely a trail-blazer. Back in the days when he was head of government in 2014-2016, Matteo Renzi visited nine African countries, calling to invest in the continent in terms quite comparable to those of the Mattei Plan.

This policy was pursued under Paolo Gentiloni's government (2016-2018), with Interior Minister Marco Minniti expressing his support for the development of African countries in order to stem the flow of immigrants at the source, and sending a military contingent to Niger, the first time the Italian Republic had ever put boots on the ground in Africa. The idea of a correlation between the fight against immigration and the development of Africa appealed to the Meloni government, which associated it with the Mattei Plan. But for a long time, the latter remained empty words.

The Italy-Africa conference held in Rome on January 29, 2024 changed all that. The presence of many African delegations, including 26 heads of state and government, and international institutions (European Union, United Nations agencies) in the Italian Senate around Meloni marked an important milestone. Admittedly, the concrete prospects may appear limited, with 5.5 billion euros of investment announced by Italy and pilot projects in nine countries (Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Republic of Congo and Côte d'Ivoire), but the Italian approach, which does not intend to impose a ready-made plan on African partners, seems appreciated by the partners themselves who don't feel like they are being talked down to but rather actively included. The presence of European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen further added a European dimension to the initiative, a point not lost on [Italian President Sergio Mattarella](#).

## Italy's old ties with Africa

Italy is strongly rooted in Africa. We've already mentioned the importance of ENI, the state-owned oil and gas company that plays a pre-eminent role on the continent. Yet it's not the only company interested in opportunities in Africa, with other major companies, such as water services management group [ACEA](#), and other energy giant ENEL, appearing in the first pilot projects dealing with energy and environment. We should also recall the importance of Italian Catholic networks in Africa: from the Community of Sant'Egidio, which has acted as a mediator in conflicts such as [Mozambique's civil war](#) to the role of Comboni Missionaries of the Sacred Heart.

We therefore observe a remarkable intensity in the relationship between Italian non-governmental actors and Africa. The Meloni government's Mattei plan may appear limited in scope due to its current vagueness, but it could potentially benefit from an amplifying effect if it opens up to international players, led by the European Union, and also succeeds in federating domestic players. Russia and China are advancing their pawns in Africa with policies that combine influence and the capture of resources, while the European presence is being called into question, all the more so after a series of putsches have led to a withdrawal of the often-ostracized French military presence.

## Addressing the root causes of immigration

From this point of view, it should be remembered that the [2023 coup in Niger](#) did not call into question [the presence of the Italian military training mission](#), which is appreciated by the new authorities in Niamey. A greater role for Italy on the continent, in coordination with the EU, could help to renew Europe's image and action there, especially as Italy likes to present itself as free of post-colonial problems, leaving its past in Libya and the Horn of Africa in the dustbin of history.

Ahead of the European elections, it is easy to see how the trips of Meloni and Sergio Mattarella also enable them to claim concrete action in the fight against immigration from the southern shores by highlighting the “treatment at the source” of the problem, a subject that remains high on the Italian political agenda since the tragic landings of 2013. Italy’s African policy initiative thus corresponds to a necessity for Meloni, who has to deal with attempts by Matteo Salvini’s Lega party to outflank her on the right. But it also responds to a series of wider influences that reflect the importance and complexity of the relationship between Italy and Africa.