

Italian-Turkish Relations before and after the War in Ukraine: From NATO Membership to Food Diplomacy

ALESSIA CHIRIATTI

Instituto Affari Internazionali, Italy

ORCID No: 0000-0003-0350-5058

ABSTRACT *This paper explores Italy-Türkiye relations and food diplomacy's role in shaping international relations, drawing parallels between Harry S. Truman's 1951 decision to provide emergency grain aid to India and current global diplomacy, especially amid the Ukraine crisis. Truman's choice, driven by humanitarian concerns and India's significance during the early Cold War, is examined. The article also explores how Türkiye employs food diplomacy, exemplified by the Black Sea Grain Initiative, to bolster its regional and global influence. It delves into complex Italian-Turkish relations amid the Ukraine conflict, emphasizing NATO membership and food diplomacy's role in shaping their future ties.*

Keywords: Food Diplomacy, Truman Administration, Ukraine Crisis, Turkish Foreign Policy, Italian-Turkish Relations

Insight Turkey 2023

Vol. 25 / No. 3 / pp. 63-70

Received Date: 3/9/2023 • Accepted Date: 21/9/2023 • DOI: 10.25253/99.2023253.5

Introduction

On February 12, 1951, Harry S. Truman, at the time the President of the U.S., formally recommended to U.S. Congress that India be provided with two million tons of grain “in emergency assistance in order to meet a food crisis of potentially catastrophic dimensions.”¹ Truman’s decision was influenced by several reasons. Firstly, it was driven by humanitarian purposes, aimed at meeting India’s food needs. Secondly, the centrality of India as a new independent state (created on August 15, 1947), with its vigorous leadership, rich natural resources, size, and population, convinced American policymakers to strengthen diplomatic ties with ‘a major Asiatic power.’ India, at the beginning of the Cold War, was led by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s non-alignment philosophy against Western colonialism. This stance was influenced by the Korean War, and India was alone in a position to compete with Chinese communism for hegemony in Southeast Asia.²

Considering this Indian case and drawing a parallel with the ongoing situation in Ukraine, we can affirm that food has been and continues to be a crucial factor in diplomacy in the last decades (as it has been since the inception of the institution of diplomacy with the creation of the modern nation-state). The Black Sea Grain Initiative, strongly advocated by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, after the start

of the Ukraine war in February 2022, helped ease the global food crisis and continues to be a top issue on the foreign policy agenda of Türkiye, especially after the decision by Russia to suspend its participation in the deal.

Food diplomacy is just one example of how Türkiye, in line with its foreign policy of the past two decades, is reshaping its regional and global influence. This evolution aligns with the ongoing dynamism exhibited by the ruling party, the Justice and Development Party, (AK Party), since it assumed power in 2002.

If we consider the regional dimension and the centrality of the Mediterranean and Black Sea after the outbreak of war in Ukraine, one of Türkiye’s crucial strategic partners is Italy. Italy and Türkiye have had a long history of diplomatic, military (both Italy and Türkiye are members of the NATO), economic, and cultural interactions. Both states have a strong stance in response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine: Italy has firmly condemned the invasion and offered its full support for Kyiv’s territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence; Türkiye has taken several steps in support of Ukraine, denouncing the invasion and voting for UN resolutions condemning Russia, supplying armed drones to Ukraine, and blocking the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits connecting the Black Sea and the Mediterranean to warring parties, as the Montreux Convention of 1936 permits, preventing Russia from reinforcing its Black Sea fleet.

Italian-Turkish relations have been consequently modeled by the war in Ukraine, with competitive cooperation that sees the two countries cooperating in some scenarios and on some international policy dossiers (such as the agreement on wheat and security in the Mediterranean Sea), but competing on others (as demonstrated by some of the tensions that have animated the debate between the two countries and between Türkiye and the European Union on the migrant issue in recent years). The future of relations between the two countries will therefore depend greatly on the balance in the Mediterranean Sea and the possible future resolution of the war in Ukraine. Essentially, we can consider the future ties of the two countries by analyzing two main dimensions: the NATO membership of the two countries and their historical partnership, now evolving after the aggression against Ukraine; the food diplomacy and the importance of the Black Sea Grain Initiative, from the perspective of the geopolitical balances of countries bordering the Mediterranean and African countries.

A Regional Tie: The NATO Membership

Speaking of relations between Türkiye and Italy in the past and the ongoing situation, one cannot fail to mention the membership of the two states within NATO. Italy was a founding member of the North Atlantic Alliance; especially in the Cold War period, it has considered NATO

With regard to regional stability, Türkiye's strategic location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, and NATO's principal aim to counterbalance Soviet influence, Ankara's participation in NATO was seen as a stabilizing factor in the Eastern Mediterranean and the broader Middle East

to be the main pillar of its security and defense policy since 1949.

From Ankara's perspective, Türkiye's decision to join NATO in 1952³ was influenced by several key factors. After the Second World War, Türkiye faced security concerns related to its proximity to the Soviet Union. The Cold War was intensifying, and Türkiye felt vulnerable to potential Soviet expansionism in the region. Joining NATO was seen as a way to enhance its security and deter potential aggression. The decision to join the alliance was further influenced by the desire for Western integration. Türkiye, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, pursued a policy of modernization and Westernization. Therefore, joining NATO was consistent with Türkiye's goal of aligning itself with Western democracies, both politically and economically.

Food security has been constantly threatened by volatile food prices, political changes, high levels of population growth, climate change, and scarce and fragile resources, thus representing an accelerator to the fragility of the region

Prior to its NATO membership, Türkiye had signed bilateral agreements with Western powers like the U.S., which provided military assistance and support. NATO membership formalized and expanded these arrangements, offering Türkiye a collective security umbrella and allowing Türkiye to establish diplomatic and military ties with other member countries. This increased its international stature and influence in global affairs. NATO membership encouraged Türkiye to maintain democratic governance and the rule of law, as these were fundamental principles of the alliance. This contributed to the consolidation of Türkiye's democratic institutions and facilitated access to Western markets, technologies, and military hardware. This was particularly important for Türkiye's modernization efforts.

With regard to regional stability, Türkiye's strategic location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, and NATO's principal aim to counterbal-

ance Soviet influence, Ankara's participation in NATO was seen as a stabilizing factor in the Eastern Mediterranean and the broader Middle East. It has been several times defined as NATO's "Southern flank."⁴ Moreover, it helped maintain a balance of power and deter potential aggression in the region. By joining NATO, Türkiye aligned itself with the Western bloc, countering Soviet influence in the region. This contributed to the broader containment strategy of the U.S. and its allies during the Cold War.

Overall, Türkiye's decision to join NATO was driven by a combination of security, political, economic, and strategic considerations. It was seen as a means of enhancing Türkiye's security, strengthening its ties with Western democracies, and positioning itself as a key player in the geopolitics of the Cold War era.

Both Italy and Türkiye have established strategic ties and robust relationships within the framework of NATO. They engage in strategic cooperation on matters related to security, defense, and regional stability, working alongside other NATO members to collectively address shared security challenges. Both countries are concerned about regional security issues and collaborate within the alliance to tackle security challenges in the Mediterranean and other regions where NATO has a presence or interests.

Moreover, Italy and Türkiye have participated in various NATO operations around the world, from peacekeeping to combat missions. It can



Following the grain corridor agreement signed between Türkiye, Russia, Ukraine, and the UN in Istanbul on July 22, 2022 the first ships loaded with grain departing from Ukraine arrived in Italy on August 13, 2022.

MICHELE NOVAGA / AA

be mentioned that the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) in Afghanistan, when Italy and Türkiye both contributed troops and resources to the NATO-led ISAF mission in Afghanistan, being involved in security operations, reconstruction efforts, and training of Afghan security forces; the NATO maritime operation (called Operation Active Endeavour), launched in response to the 9/11 attacks and aimed at enhancing security in the Mediterranean, which included patrolling and monitoring activities; the Operation Unified Protector, developed during the 2011 military intervention in Libya, aimed at enforcing a no-fly zone and protecting civilians in Libya; the maritime security Operation Sea Guardian in the Mediterranean, focused on countering terrorism, supporting maritime situational awareness, and conducting other activities

to enhance maritime security; the KFOR (Kosovo Force), a NATO-led peacekeeping force responsible for maintaining stability and security in Kosovo. Italy and Türkiye contributed troops to the KFOR mission; the Baltic Air Policing mission to protect the airspace of Baltic states that do not have their own capable air forces; the highly ready and rapidly deployable NATO Response Force (NRF), to which Italy and Türkiye have contributed forces to address various security challenges; and Operation Ocean Shield, aimed at countering piracy off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden. Italy and Türkiye have also participated in numerous NATO exercises and training missions aimed at enhancing interoperability and readiness among NATO forces.

Ankara and Rome shaped their security policies for many years primarily

on the basis of their membership in the organization and thus their alliance with the U.S. On the other hand, the dissolution of the Soviet Union changed its role and tasks, and Türkiye reconfigured its position from the containment rigidity of the Soviet enemy to the flexibility and volatility of the post-bipolar world. This evolution has led Türkiye to conduct a freer and more autonomous foreign and security policy, at times less aligned with the requirements of the Alliance and the U.S. itself, particularly since the beginning of the 21st century. On the other hand, the security challenges for both Türkiye and NATO have changed profoundly over the past thirty years. To this day, however, Ankara not only contributes to NATO forces with the second-largest army after the U.S., but also through military spending that, particularly from 2011 to the present, has grown steadily, especially in the area of equipment.⁵

At the 2023 Alliance Summit in Vilnius, held in July, Italy emphasized the importance of the NATO Southern flank and the links between NATO, the Mediterranean, and the Indo-Pacific. Although the main focus was on issues related to protecting NATO's Eastern flank, the summit included the issue of instability in the Southern Mediterranean region on an expanded, far-reaching agenda, which is especially important for Italy and Türkiye. The representatives at the summit paid particular attention to the situation in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel, as well as the Black Sea region. These

are hotspots of instability related to complex issues (from climate change to economic crises, terrorism, migration, and food crises) that could be used by adversaries' penetration, such as Russia and China, to carry out destabilization or coercive intervention. It is for this reason that the North Atlantic Council is tasked with undertaking an assessment of the challenges and threats, as well as the opportunities, presented in the wider Southern Mediterranean region, the results of which will be presented at the next summit in 2024.

Food Diplomacy as a New Pathway between Italy and Türkiye

The situation of countries along the Mediterranean and Central African shores has become even more vulnerable following numerous political and economic upheavals in recent months. This vulnerability is compounded when one considers the potential impacts of the war in Ukraine on the entire quadrant. Over the past few decades, specifically in the Southern Mediterranean, the region has become increasingly dependent on food imports. Food security has been constantly threatened by volatile food prices, political changes, high levels of population growth, climate change, and scarce and fragile resources, thus representing an accelerator to the fragility of the region. The status of food security was already experiencing a relapse before the onset of the pandemic in 2020 and the war in Ukraine in 2022. Sev-

eral countries, such as Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Palestine, are highly vulnerable, and their food security status has been worsening over time. The World Food Programme (WFP) spoke about ‘hunger hotspots,’ where acute food insecurity is likely to deteriorate further in 18 hunger hotspots, comprising a total of 22 countries mainly from Africa and the Middle East, from June to November 2023.⁶

Considering this perspective and evaluating the food crisis as one of the more urgent issues on the international agenda, Türkiye has intervened since the first phases of the war in Ukraine to foster the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which has played a key role in addressing the global food crisis by acting like a breathing tube for those in need, like in the Southern Mediterranean and Africa. On July 17, 2023, Russia suspended its participation in the deal. President Erdoğan met Putin for a one-day working visit in Russia’s coastal city of Sochi to discuss current regional and global issues. The revival of the Black Sea Grain Initiative was a top issue at the meeting.

From its side, Italy is also particularly interested in the food crisis exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. “We keep attention high on the #ZeroHunger goal. Famine caused by the war in Ukraine and the humanitarian situation in the Horn of Africa require a cross-cutting response,” Ambassador Maurizio Massari said during a Security Council Open Debate under the agenda item “Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict.”⁷ “In

Taking into consideration the Italian-Turkish relationships, the latest efforts to revive the Ukrainian Black Sea Grain Initiative have been at the center of a phone call on August 8, 2023, between Türkiye’s Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and his Italian counterpart Antonio Tajani

the context of a pre-existing, deteriorating situation, the illegal Russian war against Ukraine further jeopardized global food chains, exposing the most vulnerable Countries of the Global South to even more dire consequences, especially in terms of limited access to food and bringing food price inflation at a record level,” said Massari. “The dramatic situation in fragile areas such as the Horn of Africa is deeply disturbing, particularly in Somalia.”⁸

Taking into consideration the Italian-Turkish relationships, the latest efforts to revive the Ukrainian Black Sea Grain Initiative have been at the center of a phone call on August 8, 2023, between Türkiye’s Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and his Italian counterpart Antonio Tajani. Also in the previous months, in an interview with the Italian newspaper *Il Messaggero*, Minister Tajani stressed that Italy trusts “Türkiye’s independent mediation.”⁹

Food diplomacy, already described at the beginning of this paper as a key element in the resolution of international disputes and historically as a tool that does not exacerbate or ignite new conflicts, is, therefore, a new plan that Türkiye and Italy are working on in foreign policy to ensure stability in the Mediterranean and mediate an end to the war in Ukraine.

Conclusion

As president of the G7 in 2024, Italy, along with France, could become the spokesperson for a new strategic partnership, bringing together Greece, Spain, Portugal, and Türkiye. Indeed, rapprochement with Ankara could facilitate its separation from Moscow and begin the process of de-escalation on a number of important issues of mutual concern, such as Libya, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, the Western Balkans, migration and the safety of maritime routes, and Black Sea ports. In this perspective, the bilateral meeting between Italy and Türkiye, held on the sidelines of the NATO Summit in Vilnius, is not a random or isolated event, but part of Italy's broader strategy to keep the Mediterranean anchored in the Atlantic context. ■

Endnotes

1. Robert J. McMahon, "Food as a Diplomatic Weapon: The India Wheat Loan of 1951," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (1987), pp. 349-377.
2. "Implications for U.S. Security of Developments in Asia," *CIA Reports File, Modern Military Branch, National Archives*, No. 197 (July 25, 1949).
3. Tarık Oğuzlu, "Turkey and NATO," *Adam Akademi*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2013), pp. 1-10.
4. Alessandro Marrone, "What's New on NATO's Southern Flank: Security Threats and the Alliance's Role after the Warsaw Summit," *Federal Academy for Security Policy*, (2016), retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep22159>.
5. "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries, (2014-2023)," *NATO*, (July 7, 2023), retrieved from https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_216897.htm.
6. "Hunger Hotspots FAO-WFP Early Warnings on Acute Food Insecurity," *Food World Programme*, (May 29, 2023), retrieved from <https://www.wfp.org/publications/hunger-hotspots-fao-wfp-early-warnings-acute-food-insecurity-june-november-2023>.
7. "Food Security: Italy at the UN for "Food Diplomacy," Crucial "to Mitigate Food Crisis,"" *Onuitalia*, (September 15, 2022), retrieved from <https://www.onuitalia.com/2022/09/15/food-security-italy-at-the-un-for-food-diplomacy-crucial-to-mitigate-food-crisis/>.
8. "Food Security: Italy at the UN for "Food Diplomacy," Crucial "to Mitigate Food Crisis.""
9. "Tajani, "If the Black Sea Is Blocked, There Will Be a New Wave of Migrants," *Il Messaggero*," *Ministero Degli Affari Esteri*, (May 15, 2023), retrieved from https://www.esteri.it/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/interviste/2023/05/tajani-se-si-blocca-il-mar-nero-nuova-ondata-di-migranti-il-messaggero/.

AK PARTY YEARS IN TÜRKİYE

DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN POLICY

Editors
Kılıç B. Kanat
Burhanettin Duran

