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Betting on Addis Ababa: Meloni's African Strategy Between Realpolitik and Risk

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At a time when Ethiopia is experiencing domestic instability, Rome is doubling down on its support for Abiy Ahmed — a bold move that combines opportunity with significant political risk. The Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's visit on 27–28 July 2025 — which marks her second trip in two years and her seventh meeting with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed — underscores an exceptional level of bilateral engagement for Italy in recent African history. The large number of meetings is not just a symbolic gesture; the Mattei Plan has become the foundation of Rome's involvement in the continent, with Ethiopia playing a prominent role within this initiative.

Launched shortly after the start of the legislative term in autumn 2022, the Mattei Plan sets out the Meloni government's agenda for Africa. Described as a 'horizontal' and pragmatic approach, the plan aims to establish mutually beneficial bilateral agreements while minimizing the constraints and conditions typically associated with Italian and European cooperation. Two key priorities of the Italian government's foreign policy agenda towards Africa emerge: diversifying energy sources in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and tackling migrant flows. Firstly, Africa is seen as an alternative energy supplier, as well as a potential source of raw materials. Regarding migration, the government continues to favour a containment strategy, treating countries of origin and transit as the 'front line' of a broader border control approach. More explicitly than other European countries, Rome aims to link these two core objectives to private investment and a more deeply rooted bilateral economic presence. This approach echoes Washington's Africa policy under the first Trump administration in terms of its mechanisms.

From the perspective of the Mattei Plan, Ethiopia appears to be an exception. Indeed, for Italy, it is not a significant target in terms of either energy or migration. Consequently, Rome's decision to strengthen bilateral relations is primarily driven by geostrategic considerations. With a population of over 120 million and a strategically important location between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, Ethiopia is considered by many Western governments to be a key "anchor state" in the Horn of Africa. It is also the seat of the African Union and IGAD, making Addis Ababa a pivotal diplomatic capital where Italy seeks visibility and leverage. At the same time, Ethiopia's demographic trends suggest that it will be one of the largest markets in the coming decades. For these reasons, Italy considers Addis Ababa to be a key partner in its new approach to Africa. In recent years, Rome has allocated substantial resources to the country, including €310 million for cooperation and the Climate Fund, starting from 2021, with the allocation increasing to €350 million over the next three years. This commitment is complemented by a new three-year programme scheduled for 2026–2028. The programme covers a wide range of areas, including agriculture (such as coffee production, climate resilience, and agricultural modernisation), infrastructure (including transport, water, and hydroelectric power), and health and training initiatives. Italian firms such as Webuild are already involved in major projects, including the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and the Koysha Hydroelectric Dam. In addition to Webuild, other Italian companies, including ENI, SACE and agro-industrial firms, are exploring new opportunities in the Ethiopian market, attracted by its demographic potential and urbanisation trends. Understanding this private sector dimension is essential to grasping how Italy intends to establish a long-term presence in the country extending beyond development and humanitarian aid.

Security is also a key part of bilateral relations. Rome is enhancing security by providing military training and collaborating on counter-terrorism efforts. While Ethiopia is not a primary country of origin for migrants travelling to Italy, instability in some regional states could generate secondary flows into Sudan and Libya, which would indirectly impact the central Mediterranean route. This adds another layer of interest for Rome in supporting stability in Addis Ababa. The Red Sea crisis, the security of maritime chokepoints such as the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and Italy's participation in missions such as EU NAVFOR Atalanta underscore the broader geostrategic significance of engagement in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.

Stability in Addis Ababa, therefore indirectly helps to safeguard European and NATO interests in sea-lane security. Therefore, the Italian government's decision to prioritize Abiy Ahmed as its key partner in East Africa is evident.

The relationship between Italy and Ethiopia is evolving in a highly sensitive context. Having emerged from a two-year civil war in Tigray (2020–22), Ethiopia is now grappling with open conflict in the strategically significant regions of Oromia and Amhara. Some of these ongoing violent crises have a regional dimension, involving Eritrea and creating tensions with Sudan. In a nation plagued by instability, the United Nations and various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have reported serious human rights violations and war crimes, some of which have been committed by government forces. Additionally, the economy is slowing down, while Addis Ababa stands out as a relatively safe haven amidst the surrounding instability. Lastly, concerns are growing about Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's methods of governance, as he consolidates more and more power in his hands.

In this context, Italy's decision to prioritize its relationship with Abiy Ahmed is both strategic and controversial. Rome has recognised the crisis surrounding multilateralism and the need to adopt a more transactional approach to international politics. By strengthening its bilateral relations, Italy aims to establish a distinct foreign policy position, thereby separating itself from European interests in Africa, which are often perceived by Rome as being driven by French priorities. However, this approach could present a challenge for Italy in relation to its EU partners. Rome's approach is bound to clash with the EU's Global Gateway initiative. While Brussels emphasises multilateral frameworks and sustainability standards, the Mattei Plan prioritises bilateralism and flexibility. This marked difference between the Italian and European approaches is a gamble for Rome. Although the Meloni government has the ambition to lead the change in the European approach towards African countries and set a new model, Italy also risks being isolated from EU policies.

While the Mattei Plan continues to be a double-edged sword with European partners, generating potential friction if not better integrated with EU frameworks, it has been received markedly differently in Washington. Since the beginning of President Trump's second term, the Meloni government has tried to act as a facilitator between Washington and Brussels, with

mixed results. At the European level, the political and reputational costs of aligning too closely with some of Trump administration's policies have outweighed the benefits. This has reduced the influence and trust that Italy enjoyed under the leadership of former Prime Minister Mario Draghi, distancing Rome from the Franco-German core on multiple issues. In the context of Africa, Italy's proactive stance and the specific objectives of the Mattei Plan are closely aligned with U.S. strategic interests. Rome's less explicit aim is to counterbalance Chinese and Russian influence, particularly in strategic regions such as the Red Sea and North Africa — a goal that is significant to Washington. However, the lack of significant resources could reduce the potential impact of the Italian approach in Ethiopia, as in other African countries. Beyond the rhetoric, it is unclear whether Italy has the economic, diplomatic and military resources to fulfil such a commitment in the long term. While the Mattei Plan is ambitious, its successful implementation depends on political continuity and consistent funding — elements that Italian initiatives in Africa have not always been able to guarantee. Italy's renewed emphasis on Africa, particularly its relationship with Ethiopia, reflects a blend of strategic vision and realpolitik.

Looking ahead, Italy's proactive policy towards Ethiopia could take one of three distinct forms. Firstly, Italy could leverage its presence in Addis Ababa to establish itself as a reliable partner, integrating EU objectives while enhancing its autonomy. Second, if instability in Ethiopia could potentially escalate into renewed conflict with Eritrea, such developments would jeopardise Rome's investments and diminish Italy's credibility.. Lastly, Rome may choose to maintain a moderate commitment, making smaller progress while retaining Ethiopia as a useful, albeit non-transformative, partner. These potential outcomes highlight the dilemma between ambition and risk that lies at the heart of Meloni's Africa policy. Only time will tell if she has the determination to see this initiative through. In an era of intense global competition for influence in Africa, Italy has chosen to forge ahead boldly. If Meloni's policy on Ethiopia fails, Rome will lose more than just a key partner — it could lose its claim to be considered a serious player in Africa.

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