

The Tensions Between the Meloni Executive and the Trump Administration: A Clear Sign of the Growing Distance Between Europe and the United States

Jean-Pierre Danis

Posted to the World Orders Forum: 21 May 2026

Jean-Pierre Darnis is full professor at the Université Côte d'Azur (Nice, France) and coordinates their masters degree programme in “Languages and International Affairs - France-Italy relations”. He is managing three double degrees between the RFI master and laurea magistrali in partnership with the universities of Genova, Aosta and Viterbo (Unitus). He coordinates the program "La France, l'Italie et leurs Méditerranées" at CMMC Research Unit (Centre de la Méditerranée Moderne et Contemporaine / Université Côte d'Azur). He is associate research fellow at FRS, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (Paris) and adjunct professor/ member of the Center for International and Strategic Studies (CISS) at LUISS Guido Carli University (Rome).

The political cycle following the U.S.-Israeli war in Iran has been marked by a notable deterioration in transatlantic relations. The divergence between the two sides is multifaceted, manifesting in assessments of risks and threats, the use of military force, and information-sharing procedures—all against the backdrop of a critical observation of the evolution of democracies and the rule of law. The case of U.S.-Italy relations is particularly illustrative, even as Rome’s shifting stance aligns with the broader trajectory of all European Union member states.

Italian governments have consistently maintained open channels with Iran, even after the Islamic Revolution. This approach reflects both a diplomatic posture of engagement with all international actors and a distinctly Italian perception of the historical depth of ancient Persia—a vision intertwined with the ancient heritage that Italians claim as part of their own national history. The memory of the 1957 oil agreements signed between Enrico Mattei’s ENI and Iran remains a key part of this framework, shaping Italy’s attentiveness toward Tehran. At the same time, Italy has shown reluctance to use military force in international operations. The Italian Constitution, designed to prevent a return to the bellicose nationalism of the Mussolini era, strictly regulates the use of armed forces, limiting their deployment to international peacekeeping missions under a UN mandate. More broadly, Italian political forces across the spectrum often adopt positions described as pacifist, viewing foreign military interventions with caution. For instance, in 2011, Silvio Berlusconi’s government initially expressed reservations about military intervention in Libya, citing risks of destabilization in the event of regime change. Italy ultimately joined the French- and British-led coalition, but only within the framework of a UN resolution and to maintain its international standing.

As the Libyan case demonstrates, Italians generally approach international action with prudence. In Rome, the Iranian nuclear threat is perceived as highly hypothetical, and a diplomatic approach—aligned with the EU’s position—is seen as the only viable path. While the Iranian regime’s repression of its civilian population warrants criticism, it does not constitute a triggering factor that would justify military action.

From a broader perspective, the 2026 U.S.-Israeli military operations in Iran reflect political logics that Italy fundamentally does not share. More concretely, the war in Iran has directly led to a spike in oil prices, a tangible and highly negative development for Italy’s economy, which is heavily dependent on hydrocarbon and gas imports. From a realist standpoint, this conflict represents an economic burden for which Italy holds the United States accountable, as Washington’s actions are seen as contrary to Italian interests.

In this international context, other major factors have further exposed divergences between the United States and Europe—and by extension, Italy. Doubts about U.S. support for Ukraine, coupled with a conciliatory stance toward Russia, as well as American ambitions to annex Greenland at Denmark’s expense, have been universally perceived as critical issues. Additionally, the U.S. administration’s perceived indifference to the sacrifices made by NATO allies in Afghanistan—particularly the bloodshed—has deeply offended European, and especially Italian, collective memory.

Since the start of Donald Trump’s second term, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni had adopted an outwardly conciliatory stance toward the United States, carefully avoiding any public contradiction with the American executive. This approach echoed Emmanuel Macron’s strategy in July 2017, when he hosted Trump as the guest of honor at France’s Bastille Day military parade and warmly received him at the Jules Verne restaurant on the second floor of the Eiffel Tower. Macron quickly realized, however, that such attempts to appease the U.S. leader failed to contain what Europe perceived as a brutally assertive agenda. In 2025, Meloni reiterated grand declarations of transatlantic friendship, often emphasizing the concept of a united “Western camp”—a theme she holds dear—but this rhetoric found little echo in the Trump administration. In practical terms, Meloni’s positioning was part of a defensive strategy aimed at mitigating the impact of U.S. tariffs, which were seen as a threat to Italian commercial interests. Her conciliatory attitude was thus primarily driven by defensive considerations rather than genuine ideological alignment. It is worth noting that, for Italy—as for all European countries—the European Union remains the primary horizon, as it holds the competencies that matter most, particularly in trade. The Trump administration’s long-standing preference for bypassing the EU in favor of bilateral relations with individual European states appears increasingly anachronistic, as it disregards the reality of European integration.

Within Italy’s current right-wing coalition, some factions—particularly Matteo Salvini’s Lega—have expressed sympathy and alignment with Trump’s agenda, given the party’s populist and immigration-critical stance. However, these positions do not reflect a broader ideological convergence within the Italian coalition.

The war operations, however, have further distanced the Italian executive from the U.S. administration. On March 23, 2026, Meloni’s government suffered a significant setback when

54% of voters rejected a judicial reform referendum—a key plank of her political agenda. This defeat marked the first serious blow to the right-wing coalition, weakening its stability. While Meloni had appeared to enjoy a comfortable majority, the “no” vote mobilized Italian public opinion, which viewed the deaths of protesters in Minneapolis in January 2026 as a challenge to the rule of law, triggering a conservative reflex to protect Italy’s judicial institutions. Other observers noted that the rise in gasoline and diesel prices, passed on to consumers ahead of the vote, fueled public discontent that was expressed at the ballot box.

Thus, developments in U.S. politics served as a negative reference point that influenced the Italian vote, sparking both opposition mobilization and dissent within the right-wing electorate. This episode was widely interpreted as a wake-up call for Meloni’s government.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that criticism from President Donald Trump and Vice President Vance toward the Holy Father provoked a unified and indignant response from Italy’s political class, across the left-right spectrum. The Pope’s authority is deeply respected in Italy, and his calls for peace and negotiation are seen as entirely appropriate. Moreover, Italy’s Constitution guarantees freedom of religious expression, making it unthinkable for political leaders to criticize the Pope in his pastoral role—let alone question his legitimacy. Significantly, Giorgia Meloni broke from her usual caution to condemn the U.S. officials’ remarks as “unacceptable words.” Additionally, on April 14, 2026, Italy’s highest institutional figure, President Sergio Mattarella—a widely respected Christian Democrat—felt compelled to praise the Pope’s actions while criticizing the “intoxication of individual power,” an implicit reference to the style of the U.S. presidency.

The growing distance between Meloni’s government and the Trump administration illustrates deeper trends: the divergences between Europe and the United States extend beyond international agendas to encompass fundamental differences in their conceptions of democracy and the rule of law. This is far from a fleeting phenomenon.