

Why a big country like Italy acts as if it were small

Calimero, a chick covered in soot who is no longer recognised by his mother, was hatched in an animated advertisement on Italian television in 1963. Ever since he has been moaning about his fate: “Everyone has it in for me because I’m small and black.” Notwithstanding complaints over the racial overtones, he has spread far beyond Italy in a string of cartoon series, the latest launched in 2013. In some countries a sense of powerless victimhood has come to be known as a Calimero complex. The term has been applied to France’s perennially aggrieved farmers. The Dutch, a small nation caught between bigger ones, say a Calimero complex explains their sense that they lack influence over international affairs. And in his recent book “Il complesso di Calimero”, Marco Del Punta, a former Italian diplomat, says his country too views itself as resembling the woebegone chick.

Italians’ sense of helplessness was on full show after their national football side was kicked out of the World Cup by tiny Bosnia-Herzegovina on March 31st. But it is rather odd. Italy is the European Union’s third-largest member. It has a bigger economy than Russia and more active-duty soldiers than Britain. Yet its lack of confidence, says Mr Del Punta, has led Italy to evolve “a tradition of not taking a firm stance in foreign policy, but of trying to please everyone and be friends with everyone”.

Nathalie Tocci, a political-science professor at Johns Hopkins University, recalls that when she was advising the Italian foreign ministry officials would wait to see other EU members’ positions before giving the minister a range of options. The aim was to find one close to the middle. “We hate taking sides,” she says. As a result, “I think that we have always punched below our weight.”

The upshot is that Italy is rarely among those who decide Europe’s affairs. Sir Ivor Roberts, Britain’s envoy in Rome in 2003-06, recalls with a shudder Tony Blair’s enthusiasm for having the EU’s key decisions taken by Britain, Germany and France.

“It caused more tension than any other single issue,” he says. Silvio Berlusconi, Italy’s then-prime minister, “felt like a jilted lover”.

The roots of Italy’s approach to foreign policy lie deep in history. They stretch back to a time when the south was ruled by foreigners and the north was a patchwork of fragile mini-states, vulnerable to attack by the Holy Roman Empire (their nominal protector) or by the emerging nations of Spain and France. *O Franza, O Spagna, purché se magna*, runs a popular saying in Naples: “France or Spain, who cares so long as we eat?” Dukes and princes stayed independent by hedging their bets, secretly negotiating with enemies and casually betraying allies. Duke Ludovico Sforza of Milan invited the French in as a counterweight to the King of Naples, but when they became too assertive he threw in his lot with an alliance including Venice and the Empire. He later dumped Venice for Florence, fell victim to a second French invasion and ended his days in a castle dungeon on the Loire.

More recently, Italy managed to emerge on the winning team in both world wars by changing sides. But the destruction and humiliation it suffered in the second left an enduring distaste for international protagonism. Like Japan and Germany, post-war Italy was content to become an economic heavyweight and a diplomatic featherweight. Still, the other former Axis powers have become more assertive of late. Could the same happen with Italy?

Perhaps. In late March Giorgia Meloni, the prime minister, did something uncharacteristically bold. Informed by the Americans that some of their bombers, heading for the Middle East, intended to touch down at an airfield in Sicily, her government refused them permission. The move was hardly reckless: under the agreement governing access to the base, American forces must ask consent to use it for anything but routine purposes, and Parliament should be consulted. Italy did not deny America the use of its airspace, as Spain has. It could even be seen as a typical Italian compromise. Mark Rutte, the NATO chief, flatters Donald Trump cravenly; Pedro Sánchez, Spain’s prime minister, is harshly critical. Italy’s “not in this case” put it smack in the middle.

Even so, it was telling. Until last month it had seemed as though the middle Ms Meloni was seeking lay not in Europe but somewhere west of the Azores. The prime minister hails from the MAGA-aligned populist right, but has governed as a good European. She has played Trump-whisperer for the EU and even signed Italy up to his Board of Peace as an observer, all while backing Ukraine, respecting the bloc's fiscal restraints and ditching the Eurosceptic rhetoric she once spouted.

La donna è mobile

Many in Brussels feared that if pushed to choose, Ms Meloni would side with Washington. But of late she has learned the hard way that schmoozing Mr Trump carries big risks for European leaders. In a referendum last month a majority of Italian voters rejected her proposed reforms to the judiciary. It is impossible to know what tipped the balance, but the reform had become a test of her popularity. What with Mr Trump's tariffs squeezing Italian industry and agriculture, his threats to seize Greenland and his belittling of NATO's military contribution in Afghanistan (including Italy's), Ms Meloni's closeness to the American president surely did not help. Small wonder she is now edging away from him.

She may be learning that sometimes choosing sides is unavoidable. Surprisingly perhaps, that was also the view of her country's greatest political thinker. Far from endorsing the endless tactical agility with which his name is often associated, Niccolò Machiavelli wrote that a prince was respected "when he is either a true friend or a downright enemy; that is to say, when, without any reservation, he declares himself in favour of one party against the other." A more confident Italy would take his advice.