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Beginning a New Chapter in India-Italy Relations

By Prem Singh Gill

SYNOPSIS

The leaders of India and Italy strengthened their moulding of a transformative strategic partnership on the sidelines of COP28, transcending historical strains in their bilateral relations. They pledged to collaborate on economic and climate change initiatives, which were symbolised through a proposed “startup bridge” and the “Melodi” phenomenon.

COMMENTARY

A new page in India-Italy relations was turned when the respective prime ministers of both countries met on the sidelines of the 28th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) held in Dubai from 30 November to 13 December 2023. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni expressed their wishes for collaborative efforts to build a sustainable and prosperous future in bilateral ties. This also opened the door for Italy to play a pivotal role in supporting India's advocacy for the Global South, particularly in key areas such as development aid, economic collaboration, and cultural exchanges.

Overcoming Historical Strains

In March 2023, Prime Minister Meloni's state visit to India paved the way for the elevation of the relationship to a strategic partnership despite lingering echoes over the killing of several Indian fishermen by Italian marines on 15 February 2012. The arrival of Meloni and the outcome of her interactions in New Delhi not only repaired

frayed relations but also paved the way for collaboration in areas like the green economy, energy security, defence co-production, and blue economy.

The narrative gains its emotional resonance from the acknowledgement by both leaders of past grievances and their determination to move beyond them. The 2012 incident had symbolised a rupture that threatened to define the bilateral relations indefinitely. However, the two leaders' statements to foster a new era of cooperation demonstrated their willingness to rise above historical differences and disputes for a shared vision of progress and prosperity. Of particular interest to ASEAN member states such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand are Italian aspirations to participate in the Modi Government's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) at functional levels such as educational and scientific exchanges.

Sustaining the Startup Bridge and “Melodi” Phenomenon

The establishment of a startup bridge between Italy and India in March 2023, besides providing for collaboration in key economic sectors, has added significance in that Italy can extend support to entrepreneurs and businesses in the Global South. Initiatives like the startup bridge can help to foster innovation and economic empowerment, aligning with Italy's broader commitment to fair trade practices and economic partnerships that promote stability and inclusive growth.

Media reports and Invest India (the national investment facilitation agency) have indicated that Italy is India's top four trading partners in the European Union with over 700 Italian companies operating in India while over 140 Indian companies have made Italy their home. There are an estimated 200,000 citizens of India living in Italy.

Meloni's praise for Modi as the "most loved leader" injected warmth into their relationship. From the sidelines of the COP28 summit, the selfie that she had taken with Modi went viral on the Internet. Captioned “Melodi” – a play on the surnames of both leaders – the photograph symbolised optimism and a collective desire for unity which transcended political boundaries and reaches into the shared aspirations of the Global South.

Nurturing the Global South

While the commitment to better relations was a notable stride taken, there is potential for Italy to enhance its contribution to the Global South in terms of development aid and collaboration on projects in sectors like healthcare, education, and infrastructure, adding another layer to the partnership. Furthermore, Italy's emphasis on climate change initiatives can extend into support for vulnerable countries in the Global South involving the sharing of technological expertise and contributions to climate resilience efforts.

The diplomatic overtures between the two countries unfolded, not in isolation from but within the broader context of global geopolitics, where the alignments of nations are constantly recalibrated. Italy extended an olive branch to India amidst pressing global challenges, and both countries acknowledged shared interests by elevating their relationship to a strategic partnership.

However, while emphasising collaboration as imperative, there is no certainty that this triumph of diplomacy is a true turning point or merely a brief respite. Such scepticism can be expected given the historical strains in their relations and the understanding that geopolitical complexities may challenge the sustainability of the newfound diplomatic warmth.

Navigating Future Frontiers

As in most bilateral relations, the interactions between India and Italy extend beyond transactions, emphasising cultural exchanges that reach into the hearts and minds of their peoples. This highlights the role of cultural diplomacy shaping collective aspirations and driving international relations.

The improved ties between India and Italy seemed strategically motivated and supported by concerted efforts to overcome historical tensions and to jointly address global challenges, particularly in the realm of climate change. The commitment to collaboration as demonstrated through symbolic initiatives such as the startup bridge and hashtag “Melodi”, implies a strategic alignment between the two nations. This strategic partnership also holds the potential to influence security and stability in the Indo-Pacific, as evidenced by collaborative efforts outlined at COP28.

Conclusion

The interactions between India and Italy at COP28 symbolise resilience, renewal, and collaborative diplomacy, bringing closure to the poor relations between them and showcasing the transformative potential of dialogue. They represent a commitment to addressing global challenges and fostering a more inclusive and prosperous future through economic, environmental, and cultural collaboration for both countries besides advocating for the concerns of the Global South.

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