

Salvini's trip to the US

Deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini's trip to Washington is the League's gauntlet to EU institutions at the time of the maximum pressure from Brussels on Italian public finances. As well as an explicit message addressed to the M5S after its openings to China and the contradictory choices made by the anti-establishment party in foreign policy matters. Even if the institutional protocol has precluded the coveted meeting with US President Donald Trump, the trip to Washington of League leader can be seen as a small personal success that places Salvini directly among the strongmen to whom the doors of the White House were opened in 2019: Hungarian President Viktor Orbán and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. In addition, meetings with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Vice President Mike Pence were the occasion to reaffirm Italy's Atlantic anchorage, as well as to deepen the relationship between the Trump administration and the man that has become the real *dominus* of the Italian government after the European elections. At a critical international juncture marked by the implications of Brexit, the fatal weakness of the EU and the distance between the governments of Washington, Paris and Berlin, Salvini intends to present himself and Italy as the new points of reference for the US in Europe. Proof of this are the enthusiastic declarations of loyalty to the Iranian, Venezuelan, Libyan, Middle Eastern and Chinese US policy. As well as the fears for the interference of "non-democratic countries in the strategic infrastructures" of Italy. If the obvious reference is to China and its growing investments

in Europe, the harsher criticism is to the 5Stars and their illusion of being able to dialogue with a global colossus such as the People's Republic is, separating economic and financial issues from the major strategic choices that contribute to determine the geopolitical positioning of a country. The only relevant foreign policy issue on which Salvini maintains some distance from the US is his affinity with Vladimir Putin, although it is a fact that Italy can play a useful role of dialogue with Moscow now that Washington's priority is to weaken the Kremlin's entente with Beijing. On the domestic and European political front, the American trip of the Italian Deputy Premier took place in the midst of negotiations with Brussels over the Italian rising public debt and against the unresolved tensions between the League and M5S that are even exacerbated by the overturning of their balance of power following the European elections at the end of May. While it is certain that in the near future the bilateral meetings of Salvini in Washington will not produce tangible advantages for the interests of Italy, the journey has had the merit of corroborating his image as a strong, responsible statesman in the eyes of domestic public opinion and Italy's most important ally. A striking difference with the trips to the US made by Luigi Di Maio or the French initiative of the M5S leader last February, when he met with members of the "yellow vest" movement bypassing institutional ties with the French government only to open a rift with Paris and prompting the call back of its ambassador to Italy for a time.