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Italy Seeks to Turn Food Into Foreign Policy

A new report says agrifood can expand Italy’s influence through trade, technology, cooperation and global standards-setting

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Italy’s food and agriculture sector is being recast as a tool of foreign policy, not just an engine of exports, in a new report that argues the country should use its food system to build influence abroad through trade, technology, cooperation and standards-setting.

The report, “Quattro Mondi - Dialogo globale di prospettiva strategica con le nuove generazioni per il futuro della diplomazia agroalimentare,” was prepared by the Rural Hack research-action task force, a Naples-based platform focused on innovation in food systems, sustainability and future farming technologies. It was promoted by Nicola Caputo, adviser on export and internationalization for the food and agriculture sector to Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani. The study was presented in Rome in recent days at the Foreign Ministry, where about 80 young scientists, scholars and researchers from around the world gathered to discuss what the report calls “food diplomacy.”

The central argument is that Italian agrifood should be treated as a strategic infrastructure of foreign policy. The report says the sector’s economic weight, reflected in export figures, can be translated into geopolitical influence if Italy approaches it as a differentiated system of relationships rather than as a single export category. That means looking at where Italy sells food, what it sells, and how products, machinery and know-how shape ties with different countries.

The study divides global markets into four clusters. The first includes mature economies with high purchasing power, especially Germany, France and the United States. In those markets, the report says Italy is not simply a supplier of consumer goods but an exporter of premium culture and lifestyle. Protecting a high-end position in those countries is described as essential to the resilience of the national supply chain and to Italy’s soft power.

The second cluster covers emerging economies such as the Gulf states, led by the United Arab Emirates, as well as Brazil, India and countries in Southeast Asia. These markets are marked by population growth, rapid urbanization and expanding middle classes. In those places, the report says Italy must move beyond selling finished products and position itself as an industrial and technological partner. Agritech tools, digital traceability systems and blockchain applications are presented not just as operational improvements but as strategic assets that can reshape value capture in local and global supply chains.

That shift also helps explain why exports of agricultural machinery and food-processing equipment are growing in some cases faster than exports of finished food products. The report argues that while packaged food introduces Italian brands and culture abroad, machinery and agritech create a form of technological dependence that places Italian systems at the center of production and traceability abroad.

The third cluster focuses on economies in transition, especially in parts of Africa such as the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and North Africa, along with the Middle East. These regions face food insecurity, water stress and climate-related pressures. In those settings, the report says Italy's role should move away from immediate commercial gain and toward scientific cooperation, humanitarian diplomacy and rural development. The goal is not only emergency food aid but also stronger local resilience through agronomic training, sustainable water management and support for local supply chains. The report links that work to efforts to reduce instability and migration pressures.

The fourth cluster includes major global actors such as the United States, China, the European Union's institutional framework and leading G20 economies. In those arenas, the report says competition is increasingly about setting rules for international trade rather than simply moving goods across borders. Italy should use its economic weight and cultural reach to become a regulatory hub capable of influencing decisions on food safety, sustainability and traceability.

That effort would also serve another priority: protecting geographical indications and fighting Italian Sounding products that imitate Italian brands without being made in Italy. The report says turning production excellence into regulatory influence is key to making agrifood a strategic part of foreign policy.

Caputo said at the presentation that food is becoming a tool for dialogue, cooperation and international presence. He said Italy's agrifood system is not only an economic asset but also a cultural, technological and relational one that can help build new forms of diplomacy. The meeting was intended to produce a summary document to guide future policy thinking on Italian agrifood diplomacy.