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## **SALVINI PROCLAIMS ITALY TO BE WASHINGTON'S BEST EU ALLY**

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18.06.2019

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EuroNews (18 June 2019)

ROME (Reuters) □ Italy is the United States most reliable ally in Europe, Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini said on Monday, keen to present himself as a strong, trustworthy statesman during a flying visit to Washington.

Fresh from his triumph in last months European parliamentary election, when his League party came top of the polls in Italy, Salvini went to Washington to burnish his credentials as a dynamic EU leader with a glowing future.

At a time when European Union institutions are fragile and changing significantly, Italy wants to be the first, most solid, valid, credible and coherent partner for the United States, he said on his Facebook page.

Salvini held talks with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Vice President Mike Pence and visited Washington landmarks, sending home a flurry of Facebook videos and tweets to chronicle the brief trip.

Salvini, who also serves as interior minister in the government, has no direct say in foreign policy, which is overseen by Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and Foreign Minister Enzo Moavero □ neither of whom have direct political affiliation with any group.

As head of Italys biggest party, Salvini seemed eager to reposition Italian diplomacy during his trip, however, saying he shared a common vision with Washington on China, Iran, Venezuela, Libya and the Middle East.

Italy has often adopted cautious lines in key diplomatic areas, seeking to serve as a bridge between various worlds.

Earlier this year, Rome angered the United States when it refused to recognise Venezuelas opposition leader Juan Guaido as interim president □ a position imposed on the Italian government by the Leagues coalition ally, the 5-Star Movement.

Italy further incurred Washingtons displeasure in March when it became the first major Western power to endorse Chinas ambitious Belt and Road infrastructure project in an effort to boost its own vital export market.

However, in a news conference posted on his Facebook page, Salvini said the government was considering banning Chinas Huawei Technologies Co. Ltd from bidding for infrastructure projects in

Italy following warnings from the United States that it could endanger national security in the West.

When you raise the issue of national security and also have a shared vision and shared values with the United States, then you reach a time when business deals have to stop, he said.

Salvini was one of the first prominent EU politicians to throw his weight behind Donald Trump in 2016 as he campaigned to become U.S. president and attended one of his election rallies.

He left Washington on Monday singing the praises of the presidents economic policy.

The next Italian budget will have to be Trumpian he said, referring to tax cuts introduced by the U.S. administration.

Salvini has pledged to introduce a flat tax in 2020, but the European Union executive has warned that heavily indebted Italy cannot afford such budget largesse and has threatened Rome with disciplinary action unless it gets its accounts in order.

We will try to convince the EU with numbers and by being polite. But we will cut taxes regardless and they are just going to have to get used to the idea, he said.

(Reporting by Crispian Balmer; Editing by Sonya Hepinstall)

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