The Politics of Proximity: The Italian Response to the Albanian Crisis

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This article focuses on the apparent disjunction between the Italian reluctance to allow Albanians to come as refugees and Italy’s enthusiastic leadership of the United Nations military-humanitarian mission. It explains the Italian response both in terms of Italian popular opinion regarding Albanians and Italy’s concern for the impression on Europe that its politics would make. Italy’s leadership of the mission represents the first time a medium-sized power has assisted a neighboring country with whom it has had deep historical connections. The conclusion argues that such proximate interventions are likely to increase in the future, and spells out the implications of the Italian case.

During the spring of 1997, the failure of a pyramid scheme in Albania produced massive disorder and a refugee crisis. The twin challenges of restoring order and providing protection to those fleeing a crisis internal to a country are an increasingly common phenomenon in the post-cold war international order. From 1989 to 1995, the conflicts generating refugees and inviting outside intervention have been more likely to occur within national boundaries than between warring countries – of the 82 armed conflicts, at least 79 could be classified as intrastate (Weiss, 1997:3).

From the Italian vantage point, the Albanian situation commenced as a refugee crisis. In six days, 10,619 Albanians crossed the Adriatic Sea to land in Puglia. After accepting the initial migrants as refugees, the Italian reception became more restrained. Concerned that these migrants were coming for economic motives as part of a venture run by criminal elements and not as true refugees, Italy responded more aggressively, patrolling the Adriatic to “convince” those fleeing Albania to return home. As the crisis continued, the Italian government decided that intervention into Albania was necessary to restore order, to insure that humanitarian aid would reach those in need, and to prepare for elections scheduled for June 29. When Europe proved incapable of assuming collective responsibility, Italy took the lead, persuading the United Nations to provide it with a mandate to lead an international force of 6,000 soldiers.

The Italian leadership of a U.N. “military-humanitarian mission” (Weiss and Campbell, 1991) represented a break from past practices, since the United States had led all previous missions. This break with precedent brings
two new concerns into play. It is the first case where a medium-sized power was involved in leading a mission, and it is also the first case where the responsibility has been given to a country with such a direct interest and a history of military occupation. These innovations are analyzed below in terms of a politics of proximity which focuses on the historical and political relations between the countries involved. Italy’s geopolitical location makes it a natural link and therefore an important point of contact (and conflict) between Europe and the Balkans (see Santoro, 1991:56–70).

Medium-sized powers traditionally exhibit a great concern for what their larger and more powerful neighbors think of their politics. Italy is seeking entry to the Economic Monetary Union (EMU) in 1998 and, thus, is particularly interested in acting in ways which show that it can conduct an effective and trustworthy foreign policy. Although there are technical criteria for admission into the EMU, a substantial component of the judgement is political. This concern helps explain what otherwise would seem paradoxical, i.e., Italy’s determination to lead an aid mission to restore order in Albania and at the same time seek to deny those fleeing Albania the possibility to apply for asylum.

A history of military and political involvement in a neighboring country makes it difficult for a country leading a military intervention to be neutral, or to be perceived as neutral. In Albania, Italy’s neutrality will be particularly important since one goal of the mission is to permit free elections. A perception of partisanship is thus likely to have especially volatile effects on Albania’s domestic political processes and the reception that the mission receives. The traditional justification for having an international body (or a distant hegemonic power) conduct military-humanitarian missions is that its detachment will guarantee impartiality and respect for international norms. This article examines how the proximity of Italy, both to Europe and Albania, has shaped its concerns and involvement.

After a brief description of Italy’s traditional relations with Albania, the European response to the Albanian crisis and the process which authorized the military-humanitarian mission is explored; the Italian response to the Albanians is then analyzed, explaining how the policy was driven by Italian popular opinion towards Albanians and by Italian concern for how its foreign policy capacities will be regarded in Europe. Our conclusions show how these issues interrelate, and tease out the implications for the traditional concerns of humanitarian missions and refugee policies — the maintenance of neutrality and respect for international norms.

Albania is a small country in southeastern Europe, bordered on the west by the Adriatic Sea, the north by Serbia and Montenegro, on the east by the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), and to the south by Greece. The population of Albania is approximately 3.4 million, and its size
is approximately one-tenth that of Italy. Across the Adriatic, roughly 90 miles, lies Puglia, a region in the south of Italy. Albania’s boundaries owe more to the geopolitical concerns of its neighbors than to any coinciding of state boundaries with nationality. Throughout most of its modern history, the Albanian people were under the rule of the Turks. Only in 1912, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, did the Conference of London recognize the state of Albania, which had declared its independence six months earlier. The Conference acceded to the creation of a “small” Albania, which only encompassed one-half of the Albanians in the region. The interested powers – the Austrians and the Italians – were more concerned with limiting Serbian access to the Adriatic than any sympathy for Albanian nationalism (Rossetti and Thérese, 1995:702).

Albania emerged from these accords as a weak state. Throughout the twentieth century it sought political protection and economic support from abroad. Partially as a result of its original boundaries and the lack of ethnic homogeneity within them, Albania has been at odds with two of its neighbors, Greece and the former Yugoslavia. Albania has traditionally sought aid from countries other than these immediate neighbors – first from Italy in the 1920s and then from Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, and China during the Albanian Communist phase, and most recently from the European Union and Italy in particular. Under the leadership of Enver Hoxha, who ruled the country from 1944 until his death in 1985, Albania had been one of the world’s most isolated countries. Since the fall of communism, Albania has commanded the attention of the world community more for contested relationships with its neighbors than for any strategic or economic resources that it might command. Particularly troubling are the irredentist movement of Albanians in the Serbian province of Kosovo and unresolved border disputes with Greece. The latter are exacerbated by Greek concerns over treatment of Greeks in southern Albania and by Albanian concerns over the treatment of its foreign workers in Greece.

The present Berisha government dates from his election in April 1992, replacing a Socialist transitional government that had won in the first free elections in 1991 but had been forced to resign. Berisha’s election had been welcomed as a break with the past, and the West heavily subsidized the Albanian economy. Berisha came to be seen both as a social and political reformer and one who was willing to restrain the more volatile Albanian communities in Kosovo and Macedonia (Draper, 1997:136–137). Western Europe has put more resources into Albania than into any other country in Eastern Europe. The $400 million per annum that flowed into the country from EU and European country resources since 1991 was equal to the inflow into the Albanian national budget from tax revenues. During the period from 1993 to 1995, the country appeared to be making economic progress.
and to be opening to the West. Even industrial production, which had been in decline throughout the 1990s, had posted a 6 percent increase in 1996. Although the economy had been growing, it was clearly not capable of providing sufficient jobs for all of its citizens. Approximately 20 percent of the workforce was employed abroad, and 20 percent was unemployed. Albania was the first of the eastern European countries to apply to NATO and has been quite accommodating to American and European military interests, particularly regarding the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia.

The Search for a European Solution

By 1996, the political conditions in Albania began to deteriorate. Although certified by the European Union, the elections in 1996 in which Berisha was reelected with an overwhelming majority were seen by many, including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as largely fraudulent. Concern was heightened when, after the elections, members of the opposition were beaten up at a public demonstration. These events drew attention to an Albanian record on human rights concerning such elementary questions as tolerance of opposition parties, a free press, and an independent judiciary. In the eyes of the human rights community, Albania did not meet international standards (Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, 1996).

The crisis in Albania began in early January 1997, when financial pyramid schemes collapsed, costing Albanians approximately $1 billion in lost savings. The subsequent political protests led to a breakdown of order in which armories were looted and rebels seized control over most of the important cities in the south. The government responded with a series of repressive measures, including closing down the free press and roughing up the opposition, but did not resolve the crisis.

The collapsing pyramid schemes produced immediate international repercussions. The decline of law and public authority was so rapid that European countries were forced to use military means to withdraw their nationals, in scenes reminiscent of the American evacuation from Vietnam in 1975 (Maclean's, 110(12):24, 25). When this breakdown occurred, Italy and other neighboring countries braced for a stream of refugees. Two waves of refugees from Albania, each of approximately 20,000 people, crossed the Adriatic in 1991, when the Communist system was collapsing, and landed in Southern Italy. Despite the fact that the numbers were not large, this wave of migrants had shown Italy’s lack of preparation and caused considerable political embarrassment to the government (Pittau and Reggio, 1992).

In early March, even before the refugees started arriving, the Italian navy was stepping up its patrols and the Foreign Ministry was calling on the European Community to develop a plan for concerted action. The European
response appeared to be to do nothing beyond sending a European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) commission. To many, it appeared as though Europe was revisiting a phase of Bosnia-like indecision, prompting newspaper headlines like “Europe fiddles while Albania burns” (London Times Literary Supplement, 4904:13, March 28, 1997; see also Yorkshire Post, March 5, 1997; Le Monde, March 26, 1997). However, on March 19, the European Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee called for humanitarian aid convoys in Albania to be given military protection, and called on the Council to take the necessary steps to support democracy in Albania. Simultaneously, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe declared its willingness to participate in a multiinstitutional mission to Albania with the European Union and the OSCE (European Report, March 22, 1997). On the question of deploying troops, British and German resistance foreclosed any collective European military response (The Reuter European Community Report, March 22, 1977; March 25, 1997).

Italy was the natural leader of the military mission. It had the strongest immediate motive – to avoid a flow of refugees similar to 1991. Aside from its longstanding historical relations, Italy had recent experience with Albania, including operation Pelican where 1,000 Italian soldiers had distributed aid for two years after the 1991 refugee crisis. Although there had been some resentment that the mission had provided too much support to the interim Socialist regime, the mission had left Albanians with a favorable opinion of Italians (Lisimberti and Todisco, 1992:127–138). Approximately 60 percent of all foreign investment in Albania was Italian, and Italy was the largest donor of foreign aid. Despite its occupation of Albania from 1939 to 1943, Italy has historically been seen by the Albanians as less threatening than its immediate neighbors, Greece and the former Yugoslavia, with whom it has ongoing disputes.

Following an initial reluctance to join Italy and France, other Mediterranean countries finally did agree to support the military-humanitarian mission. The eventual list would include 6,000 troops: 2,500 Italians, 1,000 French, 700 Turks, 680 Greeks, 450 Spaniards, 400 Romanians, 120 Austrians, and 60 Danes. The greater difficulty was to find a “sponsor” for the military-humanitarian mission. The EU Foreign Council was willing to authorize humanitarian aid, but passed the responsibility to the 54-member OSCE, of which Albania was one. The OCSE was highly involved in setting up a coalition government in Albania, and in assuring that this government continued to function. The majority of OCSE members supported the military-humanitarian mission, but there were sufficient internal divisions that the organization could not endorse any intervention. The OCSE passed the responsibility to the United Nations, which endorsed a three-month intervention for humanitarian reasons, but did not provide any financial support.
This resolution passed the U.N. Security Council on a unanimous 14–0 vote, with the abstention of China. The mission, which began in mid-April, was code-named Alba. This name held a triple significance: it is the Italian word for dawn, signifying a new beginning; it is a natural word play on Albania; and the “A” represented Italy’s first military-humanitarian mission.

Throughout this period, the Albanian coalition government was largely supportive of both the patrol and the military-humanitarian mission as necessary for Albania to regain its own autonomy. Head of the coalition government Bakhmin Fino agreed that “Italy should patrol the entire Adriatic to stop this exodus because Albania’s problems have to be resolved by the Albanians themselves in Albania.” He emphasized the importance of the military-humanitarian mission: “That is the only way to give Albanians faith in this government’s ability to govern” (The Reuter European Community Report, March 25, 1997).

SOLIDARITY LOST: ITALIAN RESPONSES TO THE ALBANIAN CRISIS

The Italian response to the flow of Albanian refugees, initially one of acceptance, rapidly turned to an emphasis on expanding Italian intervention in order to keep Albanians in Albania. Those who fled Albania on March 13 and the week that followed were accepted; but then Italian policy changed to one of “persuading” the Albanians not come. This persuasion took the form of a patrolling of the Adriatic that the Italian government claimed was not a blockade but which gave the international community, as well as domestic critics, considerable pause. This policy did not convince the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) either that refugee claims would be heard or that international laws against refoulement would be respected (Corriere della Sera, March 28, 1997). The UNHCR would have preferred that those fleeing be allowed entry, and that a protected status be created. A few days later, Amnesty International addressed a similar set of criticisms to the Italian government. The refusal to allow refugees to apply for asylum was particularly problematic because the situation was so unstable that 6,000 troops were necessary to permit the delivery of humanitarian aid. The critics reasoned that if troops were necessary to restore order and to allow aid to be delivered, it was difficult to exclude the possibility that some people had a legitimate fear of persecution. Other controversies ensued over the status of the patrol. The legal basis was quite flimsy, an article of agreement between the two countries that apparently had not been signed by the two governments at the time the patrol was in operation (L’Espresso, April 10, 1997, 44).

Although this mode of patrol was controversial, it was not an entirely unexpected practice by the Italian government towards the Albanians. The
treatment of Albanian refugees in 1991 had also drawn criticism from the United Nations and human rights groups for not allowing Albanians to make asylum claims and for the ways in which they were housed when they arrived (Nascimbene, 1992). The housing of a large number of Albanians in a stadium in Bari, an event that ended in a riot, reminded people of Pinochet’s Chile (Pittau and Reggio, 1992:233).

In 1997, those who reached the Italian shore and could demonstrate “grave danger to personal safety as a result of events occurring in their area of origin and of their particular condition,” were allowed to stay for two months, with a potential extension to three months. The refugees were distributed in camps throughout the country. The decree allowed for wide-ranging exclusions, which concerned immigrants’ rights advocates. It granted the police the authority to deport an immigrant without proper documents, as well as anyone even accused (segnalato) of involvement with drug trafficking (Decreto-legge No. 60, Gazzetta Ufficiale 66, March 20, 1997).

The uneasy political consensus on the treatment of refugees would turn to overt conflict when the question of supporting the military-humanitarian mission came up for a vote. Elected in April of 1996, the Italian government was a center-left coalition, led by the liberal economist Romano Prodi. The major party in the coalition was the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS). The governing coalition also included smaller liberal and Catholic parties. The government was supported externally by the Refounded Communist Party (RC), which, although it had run joint electoral lists with the other center-left parties, did not participate directly in the government. Its support, however, was necessary for the government to have a parliamentary majority. The opposition center-right coalition was led by a liberal party, Forza Italia (FI) and included a large post-fascist party (AN) and smaller Catholic and liberal parties. It was led by Silvio Berlusconi (FI), who had been Prime Minister at the head of the center-right government in 1994. In opposition, there was also a regional-separatist party, the Northern League, which had been a part of the Berlusconi government.

The original proposals of the government to send troops in a military-humanitarian mission seemed to enjoy broad support both in the center-left government and in the political opposition, even if popular opinion was divided on the subject. However, when the government called on parliament to authorize the mission, the Refounded Communist Party (RC) expressed vigorous opposition. Until the Albania boat, the Kader I Rades sank, after colliding with an Italian ship on Good Friday, it seemed as though the parties could have worked out a compromise. However, when over 80 people appeared to have lost their lives and the next day’s headline in La Repubblica was “Massacre of Women and Children” (March 29, 1997), the political climate grew far more tense. On Easter Sunday, the leader of the opposition,
Silvio Berlusconi, flew to Brindisi to express his solidarity with the victims. He repeatedly broke down in tears in front of the cameras and condemned the patrol: “It was really an unfortunate, haphazard decision, unworthy of a civilized country” (L’Espresso, April 10, 1977). Instead of abandoning the patrol, the new policy involved moving the patrol even closer to the Albanian coast.

The incident also raised doubts about whether Italy should proceed with the military-humanitarian mission. It made clear the risk of loss of life and led to concerns about how Italians would be treated when they landed in Albania. The London Times editorialized that the mission be called off or delayed (April 2, 1997). While at first the sinking of the Kadar I Rades appeared to threaten Albanian-Italian relations, later the Albanians reiterated their support both of the patrol and of the military-humanitarian mission. After initially indicating his support for the mission in Albania, Silvio Berlusconi, under pressure from Gianfranco Fini, the leader of the post-fascist party (AN), voted against the mission. Together with the defection of the Refounded Communist Party (RC), the opposition of the center-right caused the government to fall. The conflict between government and opposition was exacerbated by the indiscretion of Piero Fassino (PDS), the Foreign Affairs Undersecretary, who during delicate negotiations between the majority and the opposition, made clear that Berisha’s withdrawal from the Albanian presidency should be a goal of Italian foreign policy. He was discussing this point at a meeting of the PDS leadership, but the contents were accidentally disclosed by the press and taken to be the stance of the government (La Stampa, April 9, 1997).

Even though the government would be rapidly reconstituted with the same coalition in power, this conflict over whether to support the mission made for a tremendously embarrassing week in Italian politics and exacerbated latent conflicts within the governing coalition. The mission appeared in jeopardy, and the political coalition was in disarray. Despite a large, bipartisan majority, that Italian government had difficulty in getting parliamentary approval for a mission for which they had already obtained U.N. authorization. The conflict over the mission raised questions among many, both inside and outside of Italy, as to the capacities and “seriousness” of the Italian government.

These events raise a central question: Why was the Italian government so willing to take the lead in an intervention in a country when they were so unwilling to grant its people asylum or temporary refuge? The simplest explanation, and the one advanced by the London Times, is that any politics that kept Albanians in Albania was the route that the government would choose. This concern clearly contributed to Italian policy, but it is not the entire story. First, this explanation assumes that the military-humanitarian
mission could accomplish this goal. There is, however, no certainty that the mission would involve controlling the ports from which refugees were crossing the Adriatic.

Second, this explanation undervalues other costs and risks. A more accommodating stance on refugees would have been less expensive and with much less risk of Italian loss of life. The holding of elections, which has been fixed as the end point of the mission, is in no way a foregone conclusion, and thus, the possibility for a quagmire is not to be excluded. A country where the armories have been looted and there are millions of Kalishnikovs in circulation is not one where the possibility of armed confrontation could be taken lightly. The lawless state that allowed criminal gangs to flourish and the general breakdown of order in the south also increased the risk of attacks on the troops in the military-humanitarian mission.

I will argue that an explanation for this peculiar combination of reticence and intervention needs to take into account both Italian popular opinion regarding Albanians and Italy’s aspirations in joining the EMU. Italian public opinion is solidly and remarkably anti-Albanian. Italian attitudes towards other immigrants would have led to the expectation of a more solidaristic and generous response. The obvious lack of public sympathy even in progressive circles and the perceived insensitivity of a left-center government provoked a good deal of public soul-searching, which in Italy occurred as a crisis of intellectuals. Berlusconi’s visit to Brindisi crystallized concerns that there was a lack of solidarity and concern for the Albanians on the part of a center-left government. This lack of solidarity was striking and unusual. Even if Italian public opinion, after a moment of openness in 1989–90, was as skeptical towards immigrants as that of other European countries (DOXA, 1991), powerful social institutions such as the Catholic Church and the trade union movement have always encouraged solidarity and nonrestrictive immigration policies. As recently as February 1995, 250,000 people had come to march in Rome in support of immigrant rights. As one journalist described the scene, “Only in a country like Italy could a Catholic bishop speak on a union stage to a gathering of workers who were almost entirely black and Muslim” (Il Manifesto, February 26, 1995).

When the first wave of immigrants came in 1991, the Italian newspapers portrayed the Albanians as historic neighbors. They were “sons of the same sea” sharing an “Adriatic patrimony” or as a close dependent: “our Kuwait” or “our East Germany” (Balbo and Manconi, 1992:65–68). Most critically, they were seen as racially similar and sharing common aspirations, and thus easier to integrate than the dark-skinned Africans. However, popular opinion has swung dramatically against the Albanians. Even on the radio call-in shows associated with a more progressive audience, the vision of Albanians has been overwhelmingly negative. Many cities and regions refused to take
any refugees. Irene Pivetti, a leader of a small party that split off from the *Lega* and who had been President of the House of Representatives, said of the Albanians “If they fire on us, throw them back into the sea” (*Corriere della Sera*, March 28, 1997).

What has happened can best be described as the criminalization of the Albanian refugee. A common element in anti-immigrant concerns in all countries, criminality dominated anxieties about immigration since 1994 (Balbo, 1994). Albanians had become identified with a particularly brutal form of prostitution, in which any resistance is met with physical retribution. In its alphabetical guide to Albania, the *La Repubblica* web site dedicates “P” to prostitution. “One of the more festering and well-known Albanian wounds. There are in fact thousands of girls, forced by their countrymen to work the streets of half of Europe, mostly in Greece and Italy. A business that makes millions, a good part of which was placed in the financial piracy (e.g. pyramid schemes).”

Their difficulty in regularizing their status also worsened the condition of Albanian immigrants and made it more likely that they would find illicit employment. The Albanian immigration stream began in 1991 after the two amnesty campaigns had “regularized” hundreds of thousands of immigrants from other countries. In the years between 1992 and 1994, the number of those who have been able to obtain a legal status has been under 1,000 per year. Most continue to come illegally, with arrangements through the Pugliese Mafia “Sacra Corona Unità,” paying between $300 and $800 in a country where workers only make around $400 per year (Campani, 1996:19–20). The criminal image of the recent refugee wave was also enhanced by the fact that the prisons had been broken opened shortly before the refugees started coming.

Another element prejudicing the Italian view against the Albanians is their perceived lack of initiative, both as concerns a willingness to work and to improve their own living arrangements. Unlike other immigrants groups in Italy, Albanians have not found an economic niche with which they can be identified (Campani, 1996; Balbo and Manconi, 1992).

A third element of Italian resentment is that Albanians represent an earlier, poorer, more barbaric version of Italians, and one that is visually indistinguishable. Northern Italians have stereotypically resented the “backwardness” of southerners, and when discussing Albanians, have used a similar language to describe them (Campani, 1996:22). In the midst of the anti-Albanian fervor, an editorial in the liberal *La Repubblica* opened with the question “Sending them home is just, even stopping them at the limits of the territorial waters, but do we really need to hate them, these Albanians?” Most intriguing in its list of reasons why Italians so dislike Albanians is that the physical resemblance was disturbing: “If their jackets were of real leather and
their gym shoes real Nikes, they could be confused with anyone living in the periphery of a Southern city” (*La Repubblica*, March 27, 1997). The concept of likeness as a basis for solidarity (Enzesberger, 1994:80–85) had disappeared. The very characteristics that had originally made them seem easier to integrate than Africans now became a justification for their exclusion.

The confluence of these three concerns made it very difficult for the Italian government to put forth any policy that would be seen as welcoming Albanians into Italy. The fact that the commerce in “boat people” was controlled by the Albanian underworld only exacerbated Italian fears and resentments.

**ITALY'S EUROPEAN VOCATION**

Immigration questions in the 1990s were an issue that led Italy to consider where it stood vis à vis Europe. Until the early 1980s, Italy had been a country of emigration, with its citizens migrating to northern Europe as well as to the Americas and Australia. Italy’s development of a comprehensive immigration policy during the 1990s coincided with the European development of a common policy (Campani, 1993; Perlmutter, 1996a). The direct influence of Europe can be seen in the pressure put on Italy to develop restrictive policies to permit then to enter into the Schengen Accords. The indirect influence is apparent in Italian policymakers’ views of immigration policy choices as articulating Italy’s relationships with Africa and Europe. Within Italian political debates, antirestrictionist policy stances were often depicted by their opponents, mainstream as well as radical, as leading Italy towards Africa and away from Europe (Perlmutter, 1996b:235–236, 240).

Because it is trying to enter the EMU, Italy is highly concerned with its image in Europe. Since the end of World War II, the Italian political class has been pro-Europe. Italy was one of the charter members of the European Community, signing the Treaty of Rome in 1957. However, within the political institutions of the European Union, it has been neither an effective leader nor a loyal follower. Although Italy has consistently voted for measures that would strengthen the political power of the European Union and supported its expansion, within the EU Councils Italy’s influence always has been less than its size, population, and wealth would indicate. While it officially has the same number of representatives and voting rights as France and Germany, Italy has far less weight and influence within European Councils (Ross, 1995). Italian politicians, who have seen greater possibilities for advancement within the arena of national politics, have avoided involvement in European politics.

Italy has also developed a reputation for refusing to obey legislation passed in Brussels. While part of this failure can be attributed to administrative inef-
ficiency, other European countries have seen this as reflecting a lack of commitment to Europe. Even when it comes to spending funds that the European Union has allocated for development in its more impoverished areas, the Italian record is poorer than other countries (Spotts and Wieser, 1986:277).

Italy has often seemed more concerned with appearing to be a part of Europe than with having a great influence over the direction of European affairs. It has reacted most strongly to efforts to exclude it from European councils. This concern with being present at the tables of power where decisions are made is so prevalent that it has been given a name, "politica del sedere," literally the politics of seating, by former Ambassador Quaroni. The fact that Italy has seemed more interested in being consulted than in the content of the proposals has given its allies considerable pause over the seriousness of the Italian commitment to Europe (Dastoli, 1996:171; Corriere della Sera, May 18, 1997).

The Prodi government has risked much political capital on getting into EMU on the first round. In seeking to enter the EMU, Italy has been handicapped by the painful political transition that had wracked Italian politics for three years. From 1992 to 1995, Italy had been more concerned with resolving internal than foreign policy problems. The emergence of the massive political scandal "kickback city" (Tangentopoli) and the change in the electoral system from a proportional to a largely majoritarian system have meant that the focus of political attention has been almost exclusively inward. During this period, there were primarily technical governments. The one political government, the Berlusconi government, did not show a great interest in participating in Europe. The foreign minister, neo-liberal Antonio Martino, expressed ample sympathy for British reserve about participating in the European Union. Despite the fact that Italy had previously ratified the Schengen treaty, which allowed free movement of people across national boundaries within the treaty's jurisdiction, the government did not take the necessary administrative steps to permit Italian participation.

When the Prodi government took office, Italy was far from meeting the fiscal standards of European entry. On the most critical of the five criteria, the relation between budget deficit and gross domestic product (GDP), Italy's record of 6.4 percent in the summer of 1996 was more than double the 3 percent barrier. During its first year, the Prodi government has been successful in economic terms. Inflation, which was at 5.3 percent in 1995, had fallen below 2 percent by the spring of 1997. Italy's currency, the Lira, which had

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1A technical government is one in which experts are appointed to essential ministries. They are seen as being less driven by electoral concerns, but they also lack a mandate for foreign policy innovation.
left the European Exchange Rate System in 1992, was permitted to reenter in December 1996. To guarantee its entry into the EMU, the Prodi government raised taxes and cut expenditures. These austerity politics caused conflict within the governing coalition (see also, Rizzo, 1996; Rampini, 1996). Even with the increase in taxes and reduction in expenses, it is unclear whether there will be success in reaching the EMU goal. Italy has claimed success, but the European Commission has doubted the soundness of Italian accounting procedures.

Despite the risk of failure, the Prodi government has staked its reputation on entry into the EMU. In doing so, Italy has become dependent on the views of the major European powers for a judgement that, although it has technical criteria, is in many ways a political judgment. Since Britain has been ambivalent about its relations to the European Community and undecided as to whether it will enter the EMU, decisions will essentially be made by the traditional central axis of Europe, France and Germany (Janning, 1996:25).

The French appear unlikely to resist Italian entry. They see Italy as a likely ally within the EMU against Germany. Moreover, excluding the world’s fifth largest commercial power would have its own risks. An Italy outside the EMU could artificially undervalue its currency to gain a competitive export advantage (see also Janning, 1996:28). During the three years that it was out of the European Exchange Rate System, it had increased its exports: 9 percent in 1992, 11 percent in 1993, and 17 percent in 1995 (Rampini, 1996:69). There is also far more cultural amity than enmity between French and Italians. Although the French have periodically sought to exclude Italy from certain European governing bodies, French politicians can see no electoral advantage to excluding their “Latin sister” (Romano, 1995). In fact, during the election campaign in May of 1997, the Socialist Party candidate for Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, repeatedly asserted that Italy belonged within the currency union (Corriere della Sera, May 24, 1997).

The Germans have a quite different set of understandings about the value of admitting the Italians. The German government has been among the most ardent European advocates, although German popular opinion has clearly

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2The technical criteria are ambiguous and debatable. According to the economist Franco Modigliani, there are at least a dozen ways to calculate a public deficit. Hence, the idea that it could be reliably measured to 1/10 of a percent is absurd (La Stampa, April 25, 1997). At the same time that the European Union was excluding Italy, its estimates for France and Germany put them under 3%. The International Monetary Fund estimates, however, placed both France and Germany over the 3% barrier. A further ambiguity in the Maastricht treaty language is that it is not exactly clear as to what 3% means, since the treaty does not specify 3.00%. Under some interpretations, any number less than 3.5% or 4% would be in compliance with the treaty obligations.
been more skeptical. The Christian Democratic-Free Democrat coalition (CDU-FDP), which has governed Germany since 1982, has favored a strong European Union. Given the historical distrust many European governments feel towards it, the German government has advocated an institutionalized relationship within a united Europe as the best vehicle for pursuing its interests. As Peter Katzenstein (1996) has put it, "This has led German to a largely unquestioned European and international state identity. Institutional power is the coinage in which this Germany pays its debts and collects its bills."

While the German populace does not object to entering Europe, the decision to relinquish the stability of the Deutsche Mark for an unpredictable Euro is wildly unpopular (Ross, 1995:204; Medley, 1996:22). Prime Minister Helmut Kohl will be standing for re-election in the fall of 1998, at the same time that the final decisions will be made on which countries will be eligible to join the EMU. There is certainly the fear that Kohl will show his support for a hard currency by excluding the Italians. As one American analyst wrote in Foreign Affairs: "Italy will not be a first-wave entrant, since German bondholders view it (rightly or wrongly) as the incarnation of monetary delinquency" (Dornbusch, 1996:117). An interview with the Italian Finance Minister Carlo Ciampi conducted by Der Spiegel (1996), the most influential news-magazine in Germany, provides insight into these considerations. The interviewers questioned whether Italy had fixed its books to enter into the EMU, suggested that its motive for desiring entry was for prestige and appearance, and accused the Italians of being too "rebellious and anarchic" to live within the parameters of the EMU.3

Desiring admission into a European "club" that seemed as though it might reject them, the Italians saw a responsible foreign policy as a necessity. The desire to enter Europe gave greater incentive to carry out this military-humanitarian mission in Albania. Once committed, a successful execution of the Albanian mission was critical. Italy's European ambitions made backing out much more difficult, even after the sinking of the Albanian ship caused some to call for reconsidering or delaying the mission. Within the government, Defense Minister Nino Andreatta and the top ranking military official, Guido Venturoni, pressed for delaying the mission, whereas Foreign Minister Lamberto Dini insisted on the diplomatic necessity of continuing (L'Espresso, April 10, 1997, 43). In an interview on this subject, Dini, who had been deeply involved in arranging the Albanian mission, said, "Look, foreign politics is not a trivial affair. It represents the other face of the entry of Italy into the Economic Monetary Union. If we can not provide guarantees here, how can

3The extent to which Italians take these criticisms seriously is revealed by Giampi's response to the bella figura accusation. He said that Italian entry is a fundamental question of "credibility" (Glaubwürdigkeit) and "self-trust" (Selbstvertrauen).
we do it in other fields?” (La Stampa, April 25, 1997). The political opposition accepted the premise of considering performance in Albania as tied to Europe. In criticizing the government during the parliamentary on Albania, one member of the center-right opposition asserted that the executive in office, which wants to bring Italy into Europe, could hardly bring the country into Albania. Particularly having made the commitment, the Prodi government was reluctant to back down. Prodi sought to quiet his domestic critics by saying, “Even if there are those who doubt our capacities, all the countries in Europe have faith in Italy” (Corriere della Sera, April 1, 1997).

In justifying the military-humanitarian mission, the most revealing geopolitical rhetoric was the parallel struck between Italy’s relations with Albania, and the past relationships between the United States and Italy. During the cold war, U.S. foreign policy constrained not only Italy’s foreign policy, but also its domestic politics. In expressing their newfound foreign policy autonomy, Italian political elites picked up on the American imagery and reversed the roles.

Even the Italian left, which had traditionally opposed America’s “imperialist” tendencies and its resistance to its participation in national governments, stating that Italy had a special responsibility towards Albania – as the “America” to which the Albanians look. Opponents of the mission, such as Luigi Pintor, an editor of the left newspaper Il Manifesto, spoke in similar terms. Pintor said that the solution to the Italian problem was not a military-humanitarian mission, but a new Marshall plan, similar to that which the United States launched towards Europe after World War II (Corriere della Sera, April 8, 1977). This has been the dominant, but not the only, image of the mission. On the left, there has also been some effort to paint the mission as a form of neo-colonialism, but given the lack of material advantage to subjugating Albania, the case has hardly been persuasive (L’Unità, April 12, 1997).

The collision of European and Albanian concerns occurred in mid-April, when the mission’s arrival in Albania coincided with the European Commission’s review of countries’ progress towards meeting the 1998 targets. The preliminary considerations on the state of Italian finances projected that their debt to GDP ratio would be above the 3 percent barrier, making them ineligible for admission to the EMU. Unfortunately for Italy, it received this news at the same moment that its flagship, the Vittorio Veneto, was running aground on the shoals in Albania. Even the stoic Parisian newspaper Le Monde (April 25, 1997) could not resist a foundering ship of state comment.

The Italians took this threatened exclusion from the EMU badly. Prodi, the head of the government, was reportedly enraged by the decision, which he decried as “incomprehensible.” Most Italian press accounts emphasized how the country was on the verge of slipping away from Europe. Massimo Giannini’s comment best summed up the Italians’ sense of exile and exclusion: “Prodi and D’Alema had confirmation of what they knew since last week,
but proudly refused to accept: according to the *nomenklatura* of Bonn and Paris, we are the ‘Albanians’ of Maastricht” (*La Stampa*, April 23, 1997). As symbolized by the quotation, Italy’s geopolitical self-understanding, as well as its image of the Albanians, has underpinned its response to the breakdown of order in Albania and the subsequent wave of refugees. In particular, this understanding strengthened Italy’s resolve to carry out the military-humanitarian mission.

**CONCLUSIONS: THE DECLINE OF UNIVERSALISM AND THE PERILS OF PROXIMITY**

The Albanian events reveal the weakness of “universalistic” political institutions and draw attention to the potential problems facing middle-sized powers navigating the treacherous waters of “neutral” interventions. European institutions and international norms had a minimal effect on the Albanian crisis. Despite an increasing concern about military burden-sharing, Europe as a broader political entity showed itself to be marginal to resolving the crisis. Even though the European Union was responsible for humanitarian aid, it provided neither the cover nor the troops. Instead, there emerged a subregional solution, with Italy leading a force into Albania consisting primarily of soldiers from southern European countries, the so-called “Olive Coalition,” under the aegis of the United Nations. The resistance of northern European countries, primarily Britain and Germany, had assured this outcome.

Although there has been a growing effort to make sure that the new forms of temporary protection guarantee the rights of refugees fleeing intranational conflict (Newmark, 1993; Churgin, 1996), these concerns apparently have had little effect on the Italian government’s decisions. The Italian propensity to disregard concerns over refoulement and the right to apply for asylum, amply demonstrated in the 1991 Albanian crisis, has reappeared. During the present refugee crisis, the UNHCR has twice indicated that it thought the Italian practices contravened international norms. The first case was the patrol that the UNHCR saw as a blockade. Even when this patrol resulted in the sinking of the ship, the Italian response (with the agreement of the Albanians) was to patrol closer to the Albanian shore and to tighten restrictions on those seeking to emigrate. The second concerned the return of a shipload of refugees. After allowing the women and children to stay, Italy did not permit the others to file asylum claims. There has been great concern that the temporary protection schemes, developed largely to respond to the Yugoslavia crisis, have produced a form of reduced protection (Fitzpatrick, 1994:16–17). The Italian treatment of Albanian refugees has done little to dispel these fears.
The proximity of aid-provider to recipient makes it more difficult to maintain neutrality. Longstanding relationships make it more likely that a country has already indicated its political preferences. Under any circumstances, a military-humanitarian mission risks appearing partisan and affecting the internal power balance since the governing authorities can take credit for the mission and direct aid in ways that support their political position (Betts, 1994). The restoration of order, a sine qua non in any aid mission, is likely to reinforce the very regime whose actions led to the crisis in the first place. The Italian debates about entering into Albania reflected these concerns: the left opposition argued that the effect of supporting Berisha was a reason not to proceed, or demanded Berisha's departure as a precondition for going forward with the mission.

The Italian mission is particularly problematic because its end point is an election, which, if fairly conducted, will likely result in President Berisha's loss and departure from the political scene. He would thus have every incentive not to hold these elections. Preliminary evidence suggests a great reluctance on his part and, according to some informed analysts, a willingness to see the country descend into chaos before he would depart (see Abrahams, 1997). In order to get the parties to agree on electoral rules, the leaders of the military-humanitarian mission have already had to threaten to withdraw. The relations between Italy and Berisha are made more difficult by the fact that the Italian government, or at least the major party within that government, has made clear its preference that Berisha not be the leader of Albania.

The other side of proximity is the concern that intervening countries have with the perceptions of their more powerful neighbors. The Italians justified their intervention, or at least their not backing away from this commitment to Albania, in terms of how the Europeans would see them. The Italian government was making these decisions on Albania at a time when it was preoccupied about whether it would be admitted to the monetary "club." To ensure entry, Italy had to overcome negative images as well as its own problematic relations with the European Community. One indication of this image problem was the tendency of northern Europeans to speak disparagingly of southern European applicants by referring to them as "Club Med" – denoting a pleasant place to vacation, but hardly a location to trust one's currency.

Intervention in Albania was a way for Italians to demonstrate, as much to themselves as to other Europeans, that they were not "Albanians." Italy was

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4 The claim that Italy was one stage more like Albania than it cares to admit has a considerable cultural resonance. See, for example the interview with Enzo Biagi in La Stampa, where he explains that the reason why Italians so dislike Albanians is "Because they remind us of our past, they are poor and migrants like our grandparents. Because they do not bring back good memories." More importantly, there is the film Lamerica by Gianni Amelio, who wrote and directed it with the intention of reminding Italians not to forget or repress their "Albanian-ness" (Amelio, 1994:21).
intimately involving itself in the Albanian affairs to maintain its distance from it. This encroachment on Albania sovereignty, by patrolling first in Albanian territorial waters, then up to the coast of Albania, and finally sending in troops, was intended to deter Albanians from coming to Italy. It was so restrictive that critics charged that the naval patrol effectively prevented credible Albanian applicants from seeking asylum in Italy. In leading the mission into Albania, Italy was taking on this role of guarantor of order and relief, with all its echoes of the U.S. role in Italy after World War II. It was doing so to show how far it had come from being Albania, and, in so doing, to demonstrate its proximity to Europe. Whether these actions convince the European Community, particularly on the controversial questions of currency, of Italian trustworthiness is another story. However, in the minds of the Italian policymakers, the issues are inextricably related.

In the past, military-humanitarian interventions of first world countries into the third world have been either universalistic, such as the “blue-helmet” intervention sponsored by the United Nations, or led by the United States, which as the hegemonic military power has rarely perceived the need to justify its behavior. As the commitments of the United States and the United Nations have exceeded their resources, the questions of where and how to intervene have become more urgent. Already, analysts are raising the difficult questions of triage, that is, allocating resources to countries where they will have the most impact, and conceding that there are some countries that can not, or will not, be helped (Enzesberger, 1994:86-90; Weiss, 1997:32-33). The temptation to encourage regional solutions will grow (Maynes, 1994). Operation Alba is clearly the alpha, but not likely the omega, of this form of military-humanitarian mission. As the burden for these interventions falls on neighboring, medium-sized states, the geopolitical concerns, both of aid-giver to recipient, and of aid-giver to its more powerful neighbors will become increasingly salient. The Italian operation in Albania bears a close watch.

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