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The Obama–Berlusconi White House Meeting: Advancing U.S.–Italian Cooperation

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On June 15, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi will meet with President Obama in Washington, D.C., for the first time. This meeting offers an opportunity to move forward the important relationship between the U.S. and Italy in several vital areas in advance of the G-8 summit that Italy will host on July 8–10. Obama should publicly thank Berlusconi for Italy's continued and recently expanded support of the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan while encouraging Italy to expand its reconstruction efforts and end the national caveats that restrict the operational use of Italian troops.

As a leading member of NATO and the EU, and as a Mediterranean state, Italy has a significant strategic interest in the Middle East. Italy currently commands the UNIFIL II force in Lebanon. The President should urge Rome to build on Hezbollah's loss of the Lebanese elections by supporting the democratically elected government and promoting Hezbollah's disarmament. President Obama should also press the prime minister to curtail trading ties between Italy and Iran, which help to finance Iran's nuclear program, and allay Berlusconi's recently expressed suspicions about NATO's missile defense program.

Afghanistan. Italy has been an important supporter of the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan. In February, the Italian government announced that, in response to President Obama's request, it would increase the size of its deployment in Afghanistan, which is centered in the western province of Herat. The Italian contingent has since grown from 2,000 to almost 2,800 troops. Italy has also agreed to

deploy an additional 500 troops to provide security during the August presidential elections.¹

Just as significant is Rome's readiness to consider reducing the limits it has imposed on the use of its forces. These national caveats have restricted most European forces to the safer northern region of Afghanistan and left U.S., British, Canadian, and Dutch forces to do most of the fighting in the south. Italy has stated that, if other European states make similar concessions, it is willing to address the issue of the caveats.²

Finally, Italy is an important contributor to Afghanistan's reconstruction. It has taken a leading role in training Afghanistan's police forces, a vital mission for which Italy, with its renowned Carabinieri—or military police force—is well-suited. At the NATO summit in Strasbourg, Prime Minister Berlusconi announced a "Carabinieri surge" that will take the size of the Italian contingent to 100. Italy has wisely resisted a French suggestion to create a role in Afghanistan for the European Gendarmerie Force and has expressed a preference for continuing to work within the U.S. training command.³

The President should publicly thank Italy for its contributions and sacrifices in both Afghanistan

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and Iraq—where 33 Italian soldiers were killed in the line of duty—and, privately, encourage Prime Minister Berlusconi not only to end Italian national caveats but to press the other European members of NATO to do the same so as to leave operational decisions to commanders in Afghanistan.⁴

Lebanon. U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) of August 11, 2006, authorized the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon—known as UNIFIL II—to accompany and support the Lebanese armed forces as they deploy through southern Lebanon and to assist these forces “in taking steps toward the establishment...of an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL deployed in the area.”⁵ In plain language, the resolution seeks the disarmament of Hezbollah and the establishment of Lebanese authority over southern Lebanon by the Lebanese army with the aid of the UNIFIL II force, which is currently led by Italy.

This force has not fulfilled its mission. The defeat of the Hezbollah-led coalition in the Lebanese parliamentary elections offers an opportunity for progress that Italy, with backing from the U.S. and other democracies, should take the lead in grasping.⁶ Italy

should urge the Lebanese government to authorize disarmament of Hezbollah and thereby allow UNIFIL II to enforce Resolution 1701. Italy should also press the E.U. to add Hezbollah to its list of terrorist organizations.⁷

Iran. While Italy has played a constructive role in Lebanon, its approach to Iran has been less helpful. Italy has argued that the West needs to “re-engage [with Iran] over Afghanistan and Pakistan” so that Iran “may feel more motivated to interact constructively with the international community on the nuclear issue.”⁸ This assertion is an attempt to justify the fact that Italy has important trading ties with Iran and is crucial to Iran’s exploration for and export of petroleum products. In 2008, Italy’s trade with Iran was valued at 6.1 billion Euros, up from 3.85 billion Euros in 2003, an increase that has made Italy the EU’s top trading partner with Iran.⁹

Italy’s reluctance to oppose Iran may also explain the prime minister’s description of the deployment of a missile defense system in Eastern Europe as a “provocation” of Russia.¹⁰ In reality, the “third site” installations in Poland and the Czech Republic—and the broader missile defense program of which they are an essential part—were unanimously endorsed

1. Julian Borger, “Italy Sends More Troops to Afghanistan,” *The Guardian*, February 6, 2009, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/feb/06/italy-troops-afghanistan-taliban-obama> (June 11, 2009).
2. *Ibid.*
3. Federiga Bindi, “Europe’s Problematic Contribution to Police Training in Afghanistan,” Brookings Institution, May 4, 2009, at http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2009/0504_afghanistan_bindi.aspx (June 11, 2009).
4. “U.S. and Coalition Casualties—Iraq,” CNN, 2009, at <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2003/iraq/forces/casualties/> (June 12, 2009).
5. “Lebanon—UNIFIL—Mandate,” United Nations, 2006, at <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unifil/mandate.html> (June 11, 2009).
6. “Lebanese Government Needs to Disarm Hezbollah,” *RIA Novosti*, June 9, 2009, at <http://en.rian.ru/interview/20090609/155210824.html> (June 11, 2009).
7. Sally McNamara, “How Europe and America Should Confront Islamic Extremism,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2073, October 3, 2007, pp. 10-11, at www.heritage.org/research/Europe/bg2073.cfm.
8. Op-ed, Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini, “Rethinking Iran,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2009, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/10/opinion/10iht-edfrattini.html> (June 11, 2009).
9. Phil Stewart, “For Italy, Iran’s Nuclear Hopes Carry High Price,” Reuters, June 5, 2007, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSL0572257920070605> (June 12, 2009); “Iran to Start Gas Export to Switzerland in 2009,” Fars News Agency, May 17, 2008, at <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8702281498> (June 12, 2009); “Italian Enterprises Eager to Expand Trade with Iran,” *Tehran Times*, May 18, 2009, at http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=194810 (June 12, 2009); John Phillips, “Italy to Leverage Its Ties with Iran,” *Washington Times*, March 6, 2009, at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/mar/06/italys-iran-link-could-be-boon-to-obama> (June 12, 2009).
10. Flavia Krause-Jackson, “Berlusconi Calls U.S. Missile Shield a ‘Provocation’ to Russia,” Bloomberg, November 13, 2008, at <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601092&sid=aWnbuqGuujeo> (June 11, 2009).

by NATO at its Bucharest summit in April 2008. As NATO recognized, the missile defense system is intended to protect its members against the rapidly advancing Iranian nuclear threat.¹¹

In his meeting with Berlusconi, the President should emphasize that, as he has stated, the U.S. supports “the full implementation of all United Nations Security Council resolutions” on Iran.¹² The U.S. and Italy must cooperate to achieve this goal. Obama should assure Rome that, if it acts, it will have American diplomatic support at the U.N. and in the Middle East. The President should also emphasize that Italian investment in Iran is strengthening the Iranian economy and thereby subsidizing the Iranian nuclear program, its military buildup, its support for terrorism, and its efforts to destabilize the region. Finally, the President should encourage Italy to desist from investing in Iran and reaffirm its previous commitment to support third site missile defense.

Reaffirming U.S.–Italian Cooperation. In recent months, Italian commentators have expressed a sense that ties between the U.S. and Italy have waned since the Cold War and have worried that Italy has not been able to communicate its importance to the U.S.¹³ The meeting between President Obama and Prime Minister Berlusconi offers an opportunity for

both nations to reaffirm these ties, which stem from Italian emigration to the U.S., the Anglo–American liberation of Italy in the Second World War, and the U.S. support for democratic government in Italy during the Cold War.

U.S.–Italian relations remain important today. In areas such as Afghanistan, where Italian policy is based on the values that underlie that cooperation, the President should thank Italy and express the appreciation of all Americans. In areas such as Iran, where Italian policy has been less constructive, the President should encourage the Prime Minister to reflect how Italian investment in the Iranian economy is indirectly funding the extremely dangerous Iranian nuclear program.

The U.S.–Italian relationship will continue to thrive only if it based, as it has been in the past, on a clear vision, held by both countries, of the importance of cooperative action against the enemies of their shared values.

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11. Sally McNamara, “Abandoning Third-Site Missile Defenses Would Threaten Transatlantic Security,” Heritage Foundation WebMemo No. 2173, December 12, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/wm2173.cfm>.
 12. UPI, “Obama Praises Lebanon Elections,” June 8, 2009, at http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2009/06/08/Obama-praises-Lebanon-elections/UPI-34071244484260/ (June 11, 2009).
 13. Op-ed, Federiga Bindi, “How to Improve U.S.-Italy Relations and Why They Matter,” *L’Occidentale* (Italy), February 26, 2009, at http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2009/0226_italy_bindi.aspx (June 11, 2009).