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**Interview with Ambassador Stefano Stefanini,
Permanent Representative of Italy to NATO**

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By adapting itself to an evolving international environment, the North Atlantic Alliance was able to survive the end of the Cold War. How was this adjustment actually achieved?

In actual fact, before addressing the issue of an evolving international environment and the new security threats and challenges therein, in the early 90s NATO first had to deal with situations such as the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, with the instability of war and a humanitarian crisis unfolding at the heart of Europe. These are the events which NATO had to face after the fall of the Berlin wall. At the time, everybody was convinced that political influence from Europe and the rest of the world would suffice in guiding the Balkans towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The subsequent UN mission (UNPROFOR), though necessary, proved somewhat short-sighted as the rules of engagement did not permit the use of firearms except in self-defence. Photos of powerless Blue Helmets made their way around the world, projecting an image of a weak UNPROFOR...and, above all, the Srebrenica massacre was not averted. It took the arrival of a NATO force (SFOR) equipped with a stronger mandate to put an end to the violence and launch a true process of stabilisation. But to answer your question, from then on the Alliance embarked upon a period of major transformations, which have allowed it to adapt its operational concepts and military capabilities to fit the demands of the 21st century. The increased political dimension and an evolving military component have been the Aces in the pack for this adjustment.

In November 2006 NATO said it was ready to welcome new members, thus confirming its open-door policy. How is the enlargement process going and what prospects are on the horizon?

At the Riga Summit, NATO Heads of State and Government from the 26 member countries acknowledged the efforts made on the path to accession by Croatia, Albania and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), all of whom have for years now been engaged in NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP) for assisting and supporting aspirant countries. Based on the recent progress made and consolidated by Croatia, Albania and FYROM, it is everyone's opinion that they stand in good stead for being invited to join the Alliance at the next Summit, to be held in Bucharest in April. For Italy, bringing these countries into the enlargement fold is a strategic goal. That being said, the matter of FYROM's name still needs to be settled, with the only possible solution being a constructive approach in the framework of negotiations between Skopje and Athens, held under the aegis of the United Nations.

Furthermore, the accession of these countries constitutes the second stage in the process of NATO integration for all the Balkan states, a prospect concurrent with the one being led by the European Union. NATO traditionally precedes the EU on such matters, partly due to the fact that the different conditions to be fulfilled by aspirant countries are relatively more simple for the former, but the past few decades have shown that NATO and the EU are moving along on parallel tracks. All of the central-western countries in Europe are today members of both organisations.

And as for the rest of the Balkan states?

We will also be discussing them in Bucharest, and in particular the prospects for further strengthening the Alliance's ties with Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia (if it so wishes). In 2006, all three of these countries became NATO Partners. Having said that, it all very much depends on them, and if Montenegro and Bosnia seem to be going in this direction, for Serbia there is one topic on the agenda that eclipses all others: the future of Kosovo. For the time being Serbia doesn't seem to be ready to come any closer. NATO's policy will nonetheless remain an integration and open-door one, pending a change in the country's internal political situation. I repeat: the aim is time integration for all the Balkan states into NATO and the EU. While the division of the Balkans is a fact that won't be changing in the near future, it could be presided over if "spread out" within a larger system of unity such as those offered by European integration and Transatlantic ties. Moreover, this has been the Italian, European and Atlantic policy in the region since 1995.

Security and stability are crucial factors in developing economic relations. When faced with a global economic system - such as the World Bank for example - that calls the multilateral model into question, are NATO and its kind the right means for ensuring such priorities?

The answer is that for now there are no alternative means. At present, NATO is the only umbrella-organisation that the West has in terms of stability and security, as well as the only institution linking Europe with the United States. And not only that, but, as we have seen, the Alliance has displayed considerable adaptability. Along with the European Union, it is one of the international organisations that has best demonstrated this ability. The United Nations, first link in the politico-strategic chain of institutions founded after the end of the Second World War, has not displayed as much dynamism, and all the reform efforts carried out so far have produced only minor improvements. In the future, those organisations and types of organisations that are most able to renew themselves are the ones who will come out on top.

But is there a danger of rash ventures for NATO as well?

For NATO the risk emerged in 2003, with the formation of certain 'coalitions of the willing' that were essentially a form of reinforced cooperation in the military sphere. However, since then the prevailing feeling has been that NATO represents the tool of choice, and this from the United States, where those same coalitions of the willing originated. NATO does not have aspirations as a global policeman intervening all over the place. At the same time, it is aware of its role as a security provider and of the support it receives from an ever increasing number of members and partners. There is also a growing awareness of the need to broaden the scope of the term 'security' with respect to the past. In Bucharest, for example, we will also be discussing topics such as the protection of energy infrastructures and refuelling routes, and defending IT systems against cyber attacks.

What role does Italy play in the new NATO?

Italy's role in the new NATO is an important one. First and foremost, our country has a highly appreciated presence in all the ongoing military missions. At the moment this is especially true for the missions in Kosovo and Afghanistan, and Italy is the second highest contributor of the Trainers required for NATO's Iraq mission for training the country's armed forces. Our country is in command of the counter-terrorist and counter-narcotics operation "Active Endeavour" in the Mediterranean. Italy also plays an important role in promoting NATO's political dimension, and is extremely active within the Alliance's internal structure. The post of Deputy Secretary General was first entrusted to an Italian way back in 1958 - currently held by Ambassador Claudio Bisogniero - and the Chief of the Italian Defence Staff, Admiral Giampaolo Di Paola, was recently appointed Chairman of NATO's Military Committee. Strengthening the Transatlantic link has always constituted a key issue in Italy's foreign policy, on a par with the process of European integration.

And which NATO issues is Italy most closely involved in?

Italy in the new NATO is particularly focused on reinforcing two correlated dimensions: extending the Alliance's reach in the Mediterranean region (through the Mediterranean Dialogue) and relations with countries in the Gulf (the "Istanbul Cooperation Initiative"). In concrete terms, NATO has suggested cooperating with these countries – on a bilateral and multilateral basis – on issues such as defence interoperability and reform, and the fight against terrorism. These countries have a growing interest in cooperation with NATO and, as a first practical application of the Alliance's initiatives directed specifically at the Mediterranean and the Gulf, the NATO Defence College in Rome recently launched a new course aimed exclusively at enhancing relations with these countries (the "NATO Regional Cooperation Course"). Slowly but surely, things are moving ahead...

How do you perceive Italy's participation in NATO's calls for tenders for supplying defence goods and services? How could the Chamber of Commerce further support our country's industries?

Italy participates to the same degree as other member nations in the regular NATO calls for bids in the fields of communication, intelligence, military and civilian infrastructure, logistics, and equipment required for operations such as ISAF (in Afghanistan) and KFOR (in Kosovo). We do see good results, but it's true that there's room for improvement. The problem is often the size of our industry, which can be dwarfed by other players in sectors such as defence. Finmeccanica, for example, is large enough to compete, but it's a different story for Italy's small and medium businesses, who struggle to meet the costs of taking part in the bids. We should bear in mind, however, that in 2008 the first calls for construction contracts for the new NATO HQ in Brussels will be published, for which ANCE (the National Association of Building Constructors) has already expressed an interest, and that opportunities could arise for our companies in a variety of other sectors too.