Looking at a geographical and political map of Europe, one sees how Italy lies at the crossroads of three European dimensions.

As a founding member of the European Union, Italy is a full-fledged and indeed primary actor in the Union's integration process. At the same time, Italy also has very strong links to the countries of Central Europe and the Balkans. Finally, Italy is a Mediterranean country, an ideal bridge to the Middle East and the Arab and North African countries.

These three European dimensions are complementary. Italian foreign policy aims at pursuing them simultaneously and in parallel. The antiquated and erroneous notions that if one looks to the East one cannot look South, and that by looking South a country distances itself from Europe, need to be overcome.

As a matter of fact, the exact opposite is true. Italy can act as a crucial bridge between the European Union and those regions closest to it. Precisely on account of its being part of the Euro-Atlantic community, Italy acts as a reference point both for those Central European countries which aim to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic institutions and for those Mediterranean countries which intend to strengthen their ties to the West.

This is the framework in which a new "Italian Ostpolitik" - a policy which aims at projecting and deepening Italy's presence in Central and Southeastern Europe - needs to be placed.

Italy has firm historical relations with Central Europe and the Balkans, which go back to the mid-19th century and are rooted in the common struggle by many of Europe's peoples for national independence. Over the course of the past century these ties have enabled Italy to establish special relationships with countries in the region. In the past few years, moreover, political relations have intensified, and links will become systematic with the expansion of the European Union and NATO. In particular, Italy's territorial contiguity with this region furthered a strategic interest in a common security architecture. On the level of economic and business interests, Italy ranks second overall as a trade partner in the area which stretches from Warsaw to Sophia, and holds a strong commercial lead in a number of countries. We also have deep-rooted and longstanding cultural ties which have been renewed with the return of democracy in recent years. All of these factors have brought about a growing and widespread circulation of people, and the establishment of stronger ties between Italy and the societies and public opinions in those countries.

Moreover, Italy's interest in building a strong presence in Central Europe and the Balkans is not a one-way street. From a reciprocal angle, countries in Central Europe and the Balkans can discover Italy once again as an important partner. As a member of the EU, of the G7, of NATO, and as a five-time member of the UN Security Council, Italy can play a key role in the integration of Central Europe's countries in multilateral institutions.

At the same time, Italy is an advanced industrialized country with the know-how, the technology and the resources required to meet the need to restructure and deconvert the large and obsolete industrial plants inherited by the centrally planned systems of production. Italy can also meet the demands for a push for the modernization of infrastructures as well as the drive to set up an array of small and medium enterprises with the flexibility and adaptability needed to succeed in young consumer markets.

Although an integral part of the stronger industrialized countries, Italy is also perceived as a nation with which an equal partnership is possible; a relationship which doesn't run the risk of becoming hegemonic.

Italy is therefore ideally placed to take on the role of a bridge between Western Europe and the region running from Central Europe to the Balkans.

This requires us to identify Italy's priorities for political, cultural and economic cooperation, and the means with which to concretely carry out such a strategy.
A key aspect of Italy's Ostpolitik is its commitment to the enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic institutions. Enlargement is not a "concession" made by the Union to the Central European countries. It is a choice for stability and growth which is no less of interest and useful to the European Union than it is for its future members.

Central Europe's countries see their integration in Europe as a means of finally overcoming their "second tier" position and look to the integration process as a way of guaranteeing democratic stability and economic modernization. Hence their wish for a full and rapid integration. A crucial aspect of the European Union's enlargement is in fact to ensure that the process not provoke feelings of exclusion or, worse, result in new dividing lines being drawn within Europe.

If political or military reasons advise a step-by-step NATO enlargement process, with respect to the European Union the negotiations should begin simultaneously for all candidate countries. The concrete outcome of the negotiations between each individual country and the Commission would then define the timetable of each country's accession. Through Cooperation Accords and further use of the instrument of Association, the Union is called to offer other countries as well the opportunities for democratic stability and economic growth.

With respect to NATO's enlargement, Italy's policy has moved along two directions. On the one hand that of fully involving Russia in the definition of a pan-European security architecture, so as to avoid that the enlargement of the Atlantic Alliance is seen as a threat or as a destabilizing factor. On the other hand, the objective is to enlarge in a "balanced" manner which brings into a wider security strategy both the nations of Northern and Central Europe - Poland and the Czech Republic - and the more central countries - Hungary, Slovenia and Romania. It is crucial that the doors of NATO's enlargement remain "open" and that we don't limit ourselves to singling out the countries which are candidates for a first round of enlargement but that we use other means, such as the PIP plus and the newly created Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council to tie into a security framework all of the countries of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

Italy backs this strategy not only from a purely political point of view but also in terms of its military and operational aspects. It is in this context that we should place the numerous military cooperation accords which Defense Minister Andreatta has signed this year with his Central European colleagues. This same strategy also contemplates the decision by Italy, Slovenia and Hungary, which once belonged to opposing military alliances, to create a common trilateral brigade for peacekeeping and humanitarian actions.

In the field of political cooperation, institutions for regional cooperation are no less important. Their action can prove precious in order to avoid that the enlargements of the EU and NATO result in "new walls" through the heart of the continent.

The Central European Initiative (CEI) - promoted mainly by Italy and Austria - can play a dual role: as an institution which promotes cohesion between countries which will enter the EU and NATO and countries which will remain outside, while simultaneously launching cooperative projects as tools for the infrastructural, economic and social modernization of countries in the region.

The initiatives of "re-enforced cooperation" that Italy is bringing forward within the framework of the CEI should also be seen in this context. A concrete example of this strategy is the "trilateral" cooperation we are developing with Slovenia and Hungary by means of three-way political and military accords. It aims at backing on the one hand the integration of these countries into the Euro-Atlantic institutions, and on the other at furthering the construction of Corridor 5, a multimodal road, railway and technological axis which will initially link up Venice, Lubiana and Budapest, continue on to Kiev, and eventually reach Moscow. This common project has already