

## ***The role of Italy in the Berlin Process: Challenges and Opportunities***

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## Abstract

The launch by the European Commission in 2018 of an EU enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans illustrates a renewed activism of the Union toward its immediate neighbourhood. This activism builds on five years of Berlin Process, which did contribute to keep the Western Balkans Six afloat in the European agenda. Simultaneously, a decline of America's interest in the region, coupled with a return of Russia's influence – especially through the energy instrument – compel the European Union, and Italy in particular, to step up their engagement in the Balkans. Even more importantly for Rome would be the elaboration of a long-term strategy for the region, having clear obstacles and interests at stake, while creating the necessary conditions to concretely influence the process of decision-making at the European level. This is imperative for Rome to advance its own national interests and to contribute to the successful implementation of the EU enlargement strategy toward an area that represents a strategic priority of Italian foreign policy, and whose developments have an immediate impact both on Italy's internal security and on its external relations.

## Introduction

Launched in 2014, the Berlin Process represents an intergovernmental cooperative platform aimed at sustaining the Western Balkans' European aspirations through annual meetings between the six governments of the region and some selected EU Member States, which share a common interest in the successful integration of the Western Balkans. Italy's Balkan policy is mainly aimed at easing strained relations between the Six strengthening the bilateral intra-regional dialogue, sustaining the Western Balkans' inclusion into the Euro-Atlantic structures and favouring economic and social development in the region, empowering at the same time existent political and economic opportunities for Italian players.

Since 2011, however, badly hit by the economic crisis and the consequent reduction of spendable resources, Rome partly lost the influence it earned in the past thanks to its involvement in the stabilization of the region, while its commitment became more declaratory than substantial. Hence, Italy witnessed the rise of Germany as the main actor in the EU foreign policy towards the Balkans and the decline of the UK, without being able to carve out any meaningful space for itself. After Brexit, however, Rome would remain one of the few big member states with an explicit stake in the process of enlargement towards the WB.

This paper attempts to retrace Italy's interests in the Balkan region and the role Rome played and could play in the future within the framework of the Berlin Process. The first section briefly discusses the initiative launched by Merkel in 2014, its key objectives and the impact it has on the governments of the Western Balkans. The second section analyzes Italian interests and stance toward the Balkan region and the renewed EU enlargement strategy, while, in conclusion, it highlights lights and shadows of Italy's position, interests at stake and structural/political constraints, which hamper the efficiency of Rome's action and the process of securing its own national interests.

## The Berlin Process

The European project suffered a number of crises in recent times, some of them even of an existential nature. In an international environment more uncertain and unstable, challenges for the European Union (EU) are coming both from the East – with a renewed Russian assertiveness in the common neighborhood – and from the South, given the dramatic developments of the migratory crisis in the Mediterranean. In this context, it is not surprising that enlargement has not been a priority in the EU agenda for some time, with the so-called “enlargement fatigue” prevailing over a more coordinated and proactive policy of engagement toward the European neighborhood. This notwithstanding, after the February 2018 Communication of the European Commission (EC), there have been attempts to define more clearly the position Brussels holds toward the Western Balkans Six (WB6), a necessity recalled also by President Juncker in his address on the State of the Union.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the new enlargement strategy issued in February, coupled with the EU-WB Summit convened in the same year in Sofia, illustrates the new impetus given by the EU to its enlargement policy, an impetus that builds on four years of Berlin Process, which predates the EU enlargement strategy towards the WB6 and did contribute to keep these countries afloat in the EU agenda.<sup>2</sup>

The Berlin Process should be theoretically kept divided by the EU official enlargement policy. In the latter case, the EC has a pivotal role, while the EU institutions are primary responsible for managing the various aspects of the enlargement policy. The Process, by contrast, represents a state-driven, intergovernmental approach that a self-designed small group of Member States (MS) initiated without prior consultation with the EC.<sup>3</sup> Launched indeed as an additive, complementary process to the EU’s enlargement strategy, the Process was designed to give new impetus to the “business-as-usual” approach pursued by the Union hitherto, facilitating indirectly the re-engagement of EU MSs in the region.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the diplomatic initiative proposed by Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2014, signed the entrance of Germany as the main actor in the EU foreign policy towards the Balkans, whose proactiveness has been instrumental in keeping the question of enlargement towards the Western Balkans on the EU agenda.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> State of the Union 2018. The Hour of European Sovereignty. Authorized version of the State of the Union Address 2018, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/soteu2018-speech\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/soteu2018-speech_en_0.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The European Union and the Western Balkans: Moving apart or together?, Foreign Policy Initiative BiH, October 1, 2018, <http://vpi.ba/en/2018/10/01/the-european-union-and-the-western-balkans-moving-apart-or-together/>

<sup>3</sup> Florent Marciacq, The EU and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process. Reflecting on the EU Enlargement in Times of Uncertainty, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung - Dialog Südosteuropa, Sarajevo, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Tobias Flessenkemper, The Berlin Process: resilience in the EU waiting room, in Sabina Lange, Zoran Nechev and Florian Trauner (eds.), Resilience in the Western Balkans, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Report No. 36, August 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Davide Denti, Balcani: Dopo Vienna. A cosa serve il Processo di Berlino?, East Journal, September 8, 2015, <http://www.eastjournal.net/archives/64794>

The initiative aims at sustaining the WB6's European aspirations through annual meetings between the six governments of the region and some selected EU MSs, which share a common interest in the successful integration of the WB6. Key objectives include the resolution of bilateral disputes among the WB6 – labelled as chief obstacle to EU integration – through cooperation and dialogue, the improvement of regional connectivity and cooperation on areas of mutual interest (e.g. security), and the boosting of infrastructures and economic development throughout the region.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the Process, whose meetings took place since 2014 at annual frequency, landed in a series of regional initiatives that revitalized multilateral ties between the governments of the Western Balkans and the Union, while providing an important contribution to foster regional cooperation among the Six, investments in regional connectivity infrastructures, and the reform process in the countries of the region.<sup>7</sup>

This notwithstanding, and despite many positive achievements in the past five years, the Berlin Process has its own limitations as well. Indeed, it did not aim to innovate the EU enlargement policy, nor it was equipped with its own institutions and budget. It has been argued, for instance, that the Connectivity agenda – one of the “fundamentals” of the Berlin Process – fall short of producing visible results in terms of implementing concrete projects as well as transforming domestic processes in the region.<sup>8</sup> However, it would be unfair to address these criticisms to the Process per se. Indeed, while not denying the difficulty in bringing projects “from feasibility to bankability”<sup>9</sup>, or the incisiveness of the initiative as regards governance patterns in the region, these and others shortcomings should be evaluated in the light of an overall weakness at the EU level, which the Berlin Process tried partly to mitigate. We should not forget the initiative was meant to build on the EU enlargement policy itself, with the main goal of maximizing Brussels' impact in the region at times when the enlargement of the Union was anything but a priority.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ardian Hackaj, Gentola Madhi and Krisela Hackaj, *Monitoring the Berlin Process: From Paris to Trieste*, Working Paper “Berlin Process Series”, Cooperation and Development Institute, January 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Donika Emini and Donika Marku, *Rethinking security: Western Balkans as a security provider*, Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” – Skopje, July 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Tobias Flessenkemper, *The Berlin Process: resilience in the EU waiting room*, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>10</sup> Matteo Bonomi, *The Western Balkans and the European Union: Moving? In the right direction?*, Centre International de Formation Européenne, Policy Paper No. 77, October 22, 2018.

## The Role of Italy

Beyond the six governments of the Western Balkans and two countries of former Yugoslavia now members of the European Union (i.e. Croatia and Slovenia), the Berlin Process involves four “sponsor” EU MSs, which share an interest in the successful integration of the Balkans countries into the EU. These are Germany, Austria, France, Italy and the UK, the latter hosting the last Summit in London despite Brexit, thus confirming its interest in the stabilization (and influence) of the EU south-eastern neighbourhood.<sup>11</sup>

Rome’s foreign policy has traditionally considered the Balkan region as a key area of political, economic and even cultural projection since its own unification in late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This tradition of engagement with the Balkan countries translates nowadays in a keen interest in the future of the WB6. Rome is currently one of the main economic partners of the region, both in terms of investments and foreign trade. It is the main trading partner of Serbia, Croatia and Albania, the first importer in Kosovo and the second importer in Slovenia. Moreover, the number of Italian companies in the region is considerable, as well as the presence of Italian NGOs. Rome maintains also a strong military presence in the region, particularly in Kosovo and Albania, and to a lesser extent in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BH).<sup>12</sup> Finally, Italy is committed to development cooperation in the region, mainly focusing on the infrastructure sector, energy, public administration and support of Small and Medium Enterprises, while the government recently approved the financing of two reconstruction programs – respectively in Serbia and BH – for the total amount of 2 million euro.<sup>13</sup>

Overall, Italy conceives the integration of the WB6 in the EU as highly beneficial to its vital interests, notably related to geo-economic influence and regional as well as domestic security. Indeed, one of the few long-term strategic document issued by the Italian MFA during the Prodi II Cabinet, identified Italy in the new international environment as “overexposed” in relation to emerging threats from a new “arch of instability”, which runs from former Yugoslavia to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), areas of traditional Italian interest and economic presence. The document also identified among the immediate threats to national security illegal trafficking, transnational organized crime, terrorism and clandestine immigration. The MENA region and the Balkans figure therefore

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<sup>11</sup>Valerie Hopkins, In Balkans, Britain rejoins battle for influence, Politico, March 31, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/balkans-bbc-britain-rejoins-battle-for-influence-russia-soft-power/>

<sup>12</sup> Italy is the third largest contributor of NATO KFOR Mission in Kosovo and a major contributor in the EU Mission EULEX. In Albania cooperation involves the defense sector, where since 1997 an Italian delegation of experts is assisting Tirana’s Armed Forces in achieving NATO standards. Finally, Italy is contributing to the Mission EUFOR Althea in BH. See Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, Italy-Balkans Bilateral Relations, [https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica\\_estera/aree\\_geografiche/europa/balcani](https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica_estera/aree_geografiche/europa/balcani)

<sup>13</sup> Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, Italy-Balkans Bilateral Relations, [https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica\\_estera/aree\\_geografiche/europa/balcani](https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica_estera/aree_geografiche/europa/balcani); Dossier XVII Legislatura, Documentazione per le Commissioni. Il processo di integrazione europea dei Balcani occidentali: la prospettiva regionale (Commissione per gli Affari esteri del Parlamento europeo), November 16, 2017, <http://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/01057534.pdf>

as Italian priorities in terms of regional security. With regard to the Balkans, Rome's interests are mainly related to strengthen internal stability, with a focus on justice and the rule of law, to decrease illegal trafficking and to sustain the WB6 alignment with the Euro-Atlantic structures, as well as to favour economic and social development in order to consolidate existent opportunities for the Italian production system. Hence, in Rome's view, the EU enlargement to the Balkans is considered, in the long run, less onerous than a mix of direct presence and indirect management of risks coming from the region.<sup>14</sup>

Already at that time, Rome envisaged the multilateralization of regional costs as the only strategy possible to deal with emerging threats from the Balkan region. When the Berlin Process was launched, however, Italy was not included among the "sponsor" MSs involved in the initiative proposed by Merkel. Rome, however, successfully pleaded to be included in the follow-up conferences and took part at the second Summit hold in Vienna in 2015. In that occasion, the refugee crisis remained the hottest topic of discussion, while economic development was the central theme of the meeting. However, despite Italy's participation, no declaration had been issued in that occasion by the Italian MFA Gentiloni, as if for Rome its very inclusion in the initiative was already satisfactory per se, a behaviour which drew the government commentators' fire, which labelled Rome's attitude in Vienna as yet another example of Italy's traditional foreign policy of *presenzialismo*.<sup>15</sup> The second Summit, hold in Paris, was marked by the results of Brexit referendum and therefore it was particularly vocal in reassuring the WB6 on their unwavering European perspective. In that occasion, it was highlighted the need for intensification of cross-border and multi-country initiatives as well as the creation of joint ventures to reduce fragmentation and incentivize trust and economic growth. Neither in that occasion, however, the Italian role has been particularly relevant. The chance to host the third Summit of the Berlin Process, in Trieste, gave nevertheless Italy more visibility. The stated goal of Italian presidency was to valorise and increase the added value that EU and WB6 economic actors get from the connectivity measures and financial support in transport, energy, and from an open market approach. Other subjects of interest for the Italian presidency were security, organized crime and migration flux.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, in Trieste, the Italian government strongly supported the signature of the Transport Community Treaty with the WB6, aimed at strengthening regional cooperation in the field of transportation and at harmonizing national legislation with the EU. Another central objective of EU strategy in the region – and of interest for Italy – was the proposal to create a common market in the Balkans, a possibility which would

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<sup>14</sup> Unità di Analisi e Programmazione – Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rapporto 2020. Le scelte di politica estera, 2008, [https://www.esteri.it/mae/doc/rapporto2020\\_sceltepoliticaestera\\_090408.pdf](https://www.esteri.it/mae/doc/rapporto2020_sceltepoliticaestera_090408.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> i.e. mere attendance for the sake of status recognition. See Andrea Fontini & Davide Denti, Italy and EU enlargement to the Western Balkans: the Europeanization of national interests? Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2017; Pierangelo Isernia, Italia malato d'Europa: quattro ragioni per cui forse è vero, Affari Internazionali, November 2, 2017, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/2017/11/italia-malato-europa-ragioni/>

<sup>16</sup> Ardian Hackaj, Gentiola Madhi and Krisela Hackaj, Monitoring the Berlin Process: From Paris to Trieste, op. cit.

turn out to be very advantageous, in economic terms, for Rome.<sup>17</sup> Finally, in London, despite general achievements, preparations for the Summit and the meeting itself remained partly in Brexit's shadow. Expectations surrounding this last Summit were however already quite low, thus creating questions about the utility of the Berlin Process itself nowadays, especially after the EC issued an official enlargement strategy toward the WB6.<sup>18</sup>

Why, then, Italy is not, at present, as relevant as one should expect from a country with traditional interests and a strong economic presence in the region? Structural constraints and internal political dynamics are among chief causes of Italian behaviour. In the first case, structural constraints have an impact on the concrete possibilities for Italy to act in the European and international context, thus limiting the projection capacity of the country. High public debt, strong energy dependence from abroad and a weak military instrument figure among key obstacles for Rome. Moreover, despite a tradition of pro-enlargement attitude toward the WB, internal divisions make difficult to create consensus on the position the government should hold in Brussels as well as on policies to pursue at the EU level, while the country is also suffering, in some cases, of a reputational problem with some EU partners. All in all, this contributes to create a gap between expectations and capacities.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, despite Italy recently reaffirmed its commitment to include the WB6 in the EU,<sup>20</sup> the trajectory of Italian interest in the region waves. Indeed, not surprisingly, strong instability in the MENA region represents at present the main subject of national debate in foreign policy and the focus of attention of large part of the elite and public.<sup>21</sup>

All in all, as a would-be Adriatic power, Italy remains a vocal supporter of the EU enlargement to the WB6, while it aligns itself with the EC's understanding of conditionality. Nevertheless, the possibility for Rome to achieve substantial influence on EU enlargement policy is hampered by structural constraints and an insufficient focus on foreign policy priorities, as well as by a tradition of diplomatic presence rather than substantial contribution to the regional policy agenda.<sup>22</sup> While Rome has nurtured ambitions to act as a mediator between the Balkan region and the EU, at present its regional approach is almost

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<sup>17</sup> Pierluca Merola, Balcani: Dopo il Summit di Trieste, qual è il destino del Processo di Berlino?, East Journal, July 26, 2017, <http://www.eastjournal.net/archives/85548>

<sup>18</sup> Marko Savković, After London: What Next for the Berlin Process?, European Western Balkans, July 23, 2018, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/07/23/london-next-berlin-process/>

<sup>19</sup> Ettore Greco (ed.), L'Italia al bivio. Rapporto sulla politica estera italiana, Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri – Dipartimento Politiche Europee, La partecipazione dell'Italia all'Unione Europea. Relazione Programmatica 2018, <http://www.politicheeuropee.gov.it/it/attivita/informazione-al-parlamento/relazione-annuale-al-parlamento/relazione-programmatica/relazione-programmatica-2018/>

<sup>21</sup> Caterina Conti, Luca Susic, Il ruolo dell'Italia nei Balcani fra interessi locali e sogno europeo, Democratica, November 10, 2016, <https://www.democratica.com/opinioni/il-ruolo-dellitalia-nei-balcani-fra-interessi-locali-e-sogno-europeo/>

<sup>22</sup> Andrea Fontini & Davide Denti, Italy and EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, op. cit.

exclusively focus on trade and security. This, coupled with a tradition of domestic policy primacy over foreign affairs in the Italian public debate, contributes to hamper the formulation of a long-term strategy toward the Balkans and, consequently, to increase Rome's political leverage to influence the EU decision-making process in the field of enlargement policy.

## Conclusion

Two questions emerge from the above analysis. The first concerns the future and usefulness of the Berlin Process in the light of the new EU enlargement strategy issued in February. Indeed, some pundits highlight how, at present, the initiative lost part of its *raison d'être* after the Commission released an official strategy towards the WB6.<sup>23</sup> However, while the Berlin Process was never a real substitute to the enlargement process, it could realistically continue to perform the role of a venue for the six Balkans' governments, where they can tackle "legacy issues", practical problems and everyday obstacles, without reducing the original purpose of the initiative. In this case, however, the Berlin Process might evolve to include in its framework also those EU MSs that could benefit from a platform of intensified dialogue between the WB6 and EU leaders (i.e. Greece). This notwithstanding, the single most important driver remains a credible EU perspective for the countries of the region. Indeed, the incentive offered by the Berlin Process to strengthen resilience in the region is necessarily dependent on the unambiguous perspective of tangible EU accession.<sup>24</sup>

The second question that emerges concerns the possible future role Italy could and should play in this context. There are many reasons why Italy should be protagonist in the so-called "Europeanization" of the WB6. The Balkans are one of the few region where Rome matters, it has potential leverage and in the past carried out a successful foreign policy – even only for the ability to maintain good relations with all the WB6 after the breakup of Yugoslavia. Rome has also played a significant role in the stabilization of the region, initially with a strong military presence and later with the build-up of a fruitful bilateral dialogue with Serbia and Albania. This, notwithstanding, as mentioned above, the country is currently not exercising its political leverage with the due conviction. Sometimes, its domestic political instability undermines the efficiency of the government's policy, as it was the case during the 2018 OSCE Presidency. Other times, the debate on foreign policy in the Italian public sphere is weak and poorly structured, leaving the EU enlargement strategy exclusive preserve of foreign-policy experts. While, for instance, the Trieste Summit has been described as a diplomatic success, one cannot say it had particular visibility on national media, nor a significant impact on Italian public opinion. Another strong limit of Italian foreign policy is the lack of a "grand strategy", meaning a vision of a country's external action having clear the international context, its position in it, the objectives to be pursued, the identification of threats and interests as well as the allocation of (scarce) resources to efficiently implement strategic goals and to promptly catch opportunities for advancing the country's national interest. At present, there does not seem to be a national consensus on any of these topics, nor a thoughtful reflection on them.

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<sup>23</sup> Marko Savković, After London: What Next for the Berlin Process?, op. cit.; Florian Bieber, It is time to ditch the Berlin Process, European Western Balkans, July 10, 2018, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/07/10/time-ditch-berlin-process/>

<sup>24</sup> Tobias Flessenkemper, The Berlin Process: resilience in the EU waiting room, op. cit.

Hence, despite transnational ties between Italy and the Western Balkans are constantly improving and intensifying, the rise of euroscepticism in Europe and Rome in particular could change the attitude citizens hold toward the EU and its enlargement perspective, thus complicating Italy's position in this context. Italy should therefore be vocal in clarifying that integration of the WB6 in the EU is a strategic national interest for political, economic and security reasons. Rome should also make better use of the existing transnational networks with the WB6, investing efforts to involve in the process a wide range of different stakeholders, ranging from economic actors to social and cultural ones, in order to step up a more proactive and comprehensive action in the region, which, ultimately, could allow Italy to promote its national interests and, at the same time, to advance the EU integration process.

During 2017, Rome strengthened its commitment to grant real membership perspective to the WB6 and to maintain stability in the region. It is clearly not enough, however, to simply renew political will and commitment. To avoid wasting the positive achievements of the past five years, a decisive shift in Rome's foreign policy is imperative. This should translate in the revamp of Italy's natural "Balkan vocation", especially in the light of Brexit, which leaves Rome as one of the few EU big MSs with an explicit stake in the process of enlargement towards the WB6. It is also important to bear in mind that Italy and the EU are not the only actors with an interest in the future of the WB6. China, for instance, is heavily investing in the Balkans, a factor that over time could increase the WB6's dependency on Beijing, both in economic and political terms.<sup>25</sup> Moscow also maintains strong interests in the region as well as privileged ties with some of the WB6 governments, thus making of the Peninsula a potentially conflictual terrain, especially if we consider the renewed EU engagement in the area along with the Six's declared European aspirations. In this context, given its traditional ambition to act as a mediator, Italy could perform the role of intermediary between, for instance, Brussels, the Six and Moscow, which remains a difficult stakeholder in the Balkans and with whom Rome maintains strong bilateral relations.

Finally, a crucial challenge for Italy remains the elaboration of a long-term foreign policy strategy for the Western Balkans. Without a thoughtful reflection on it, it would be impossible for Rome to strategically direct its action and to properly allocate scarce resources to secure its own national interests. If this does not happen, in fact, Italy would remain at the tail-end of Europe's high politics, even in a region of priority interest such as the Balkans. Something that would be unacceptable for one of the major European powers. Hence, the Balkans has to remain a foreign policy priority, which should be address coherently and independently from different cabinets and domestic issues. This is the difference between a reactive/event-driven approach to foreign policy and a proactive, long-term strategy, which acknowledges the potential of an area of strategic interest and

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<sup>25</sup> Matej Šimalčík, China in the Balkans: Motivations behind growing influence, Euractive, October 19, 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/opinion/china-in-the-balkans-motivations-behind-growing-influence/>

takes steps to carve out a diplomatic space in it. Perhaps most importantly, it is time for Italy to unite the tables of concrete and symbolic policy,<sup>26</sup> a necessary step in order to overcome the systematic lack of political leverage Rome needs to influence the EU decision-making process and, relatedly, its enlargement strategy.

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<sup>26</sup> Pierangelo Isernia, A che serve la politica estera italiana?, Affari Internazionali, February 16, 2017, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/2017/02/serve-la-politica-estera-italiana/>

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