Today, Albania is a key political, military, and economic partner of Italy: as a member of the Atlantic Alliance, the Land of Eagles shares the Italian concerns over the growing instability in the Balkan and Mediterranean area; as a candidate for the admission in the European Union (EU), Albania is also deepening its relations with the Union and Italy is expected to be the kingmaker of the future potential Albanian adhesion. As regards bilateral Albanian-Italian relations, the existence of a strategic partnership is confirmed by the high degree of commercial exchanges and by the existence of a large Albanian community in Italy (the Albanians are the second largest community of immigrants in Italy after the Rumanian one).

The origins of the Albanian-Italian ties are rooted in the first decade of the twentieth century, when the Italian government used the newly born Albanian Kingdom to penetrate the Balkan region. Bearing in mind this long-term premise, it has to be underlined that current relations between Rome and Tirana are the result of the last twenty years of history, when Italy has been involved in the transition of the Western Balkans and has played a key role in the reconstruction of Albanian institutions and society.

Antonio Varsori’s essay looks at the crucial years 1989-1991, when the Italian government and public opinion were forcefully attracted by the Albanian question. In 1989, for most Italians Albania was considered a nightmare of the past: invaded and annexed to Fascist Italy in 1939, the Albanian territory was transformed into a trap for the Italian troops after the armistice proclaimed on 8 September 1943. After the war Albania became probably the most rigid and obscurantist communist regime of Europe. As a result, the Italian state virtually forgot this small and hostile country; during the Cold War Italy’s main concern in the Balkan region was Yugoslavia. Varsori explicitly writes that the Italian authorities...
“almost completely ignored this strange neighbor.” (619) In the summer of 1989 the situation unexpectedly changed.

Varsori had access to the unpublished records of Giulio Andreotti, foreign minister of Italy from August 1983 to July 1989 and Prime Minister from July 1989 to June 1992. Andreotti’s archive, which also contains documents concerning the activity of foreign minister Gianni De Michelis, gives new evidence on Italian foreign policy in the post-Cold War transition and confirms the interest of the Italian ruling elite in Central and Balkan Europe. The Italian government’s main concern was of course the impact of the German reunification on the European balance of power.1 Nevertheless, both Andreotti and De Michelis wanted to transform Italy into the ‘bridge’ between east-central European countries and the European Community. The author discusses De Michelis’ initiative to connect in an alliance Italy, Yugoslavia, Austria, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Yugoslavia was, of course, a crucial partner in this game but, as the Italian diplomat and historian Sergio Romano pointed out, the sudden collapse of the Belgrade regime frustrated the Italian plans.2 The author recalls these forgotten diplomatic moves to show the difficulties that Italian diplomacy faced in finding its own role in the changing world of those years. In particular, Varsori argues that the Italian diplomatic initiatives towards Balkan and Central-European countries were carried out both to restore the Italian diplomatic role in Europe and to contain the growing role of France and reunified Germany.

Albania was not perceived as a key partner in this game, given its territorial and political size. Since 1990, Italian diplomats in Tirana have expressed concern about political and living conditions in Albania. But as is pointed out by the author, the Italian government and public opinion, at the end of that year, were captured by the Gulf War and other concerns. The situation completely changed in March 1990: in that month violent mass demonstrations were not adequately managed by the authorities. Protests against the poor living conditions spread and the institutional system collapsed. A huge mass of Albanians, attracted by a cinematographic image of Italy, abandoned their country and made landfall at the eastern Adriatic coast.3

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1 Varsori provides an extensive analysis and interpretation of the Italian foreign policy in these years of transition in the book *L’Italia e la fine della guerra fredda* (Il Mulino Bologna) forthcoming in 2013.

2 Sergio Romano, *Guida alla politica estera italiana: de Badoglio a Berlusconi* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2004), 245.

'Boat people’ transformed Albania into a priority of Italian politics, as did the Italian public’s ear of an Albanian ‘invasion.’ Italy, traditionally a country of emigrants, was in fact unprepared to deal with a massive flow of immigrants. This humanitarian crisis reached its peak in August 1991 and lasted until the end of that year. According to Varsori, the Albanian crisis was the first ‘stress test’ of the Italian post-Cold War foreign action. In actual fact, the crisis served as a test of the capacity of Italy to act as a stabilization force: the test was positively passed, according to Italian leaders, as was confirmed by a memorandum drafted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in early 1992, which underlined the capacity of the Italian emergency plan to reach the proposed goal (i.e. improvement of the living condition of the Albanian people, stabilization of the domestic situation, coastal control on the Adriatic Sea). According to Varsori, the intervention in Albania can be considered as the first step in the building of the Italian capacity to act as a pro-active peace-keeping player at regional level.

In these years, Albania became a key partner in the new Italian Adriatic strategy. The author discusses the details of the main political meetings that were organized during the crisis: in August 1991 the Italian president Francesco Cossiga met his Albanian counterpart Ramiz Alia. In this meeting the Italians agreed to support the enforcement of the rule of law and democracy in Albania. Strategic agreements were signed and cooperation in crucial areas, such as the maritime one, was established. During the 1990s Albania became more and more a strategic partner for Italy, whose importance was confirmed during the Yugoslavian crises that occurred in that decade. Varsori provides this insight on bilateral political and diplomatic relations to show that in these years Italy made important changes in its strategic partnership, with the end of the past ‘geometrical’ alliances of 1989-90 and the adoption of a more concrete strategy (which includes mainly Serbia and Albania).

From an historiographic point of view, Antonio Varsori’s essay provides an useful insight on Italian foreign policy in the transition from the bipolar age to the so called multi-polar age. Between 1989 and 1992, Italian attention was captured by the main events which were taking place in Europe: the collapse of the Soviet world, German reunification and the opening of a new era in European integration. Varsori confirms that Albania was not originally in the ‘core business’ of Italian foreign policy. However, the Italian political, diplomatic, and military leadership had to address the growing instability affecting the Western Balkans. In this framework, the Albanian case played a key role in the definition of Italian policy towards the other side of the Adriatic Sea.

In conclusion, Varsori’s essay paves the way for new research on Italian action in the Balkans from 1990s up to the most recent developments. This essay also provides an interesting opportunity for new comparative studies on the approach adopted by European Economic Community/European Union’s biggest countries (i.e. Germany, France and Great Britain) towards the transition in the Balkan region.