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## Italy flexes its muscles

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Dennis REDMONT

ROME -- Nothing like a decisive election victory to trigger that rush of self-confidence. No, this is NOT Turkey. It's Italy, which celebrated its Republic Day Monday with jets streaming over the Colosseum, and troops parading down the Imperial Forum. Premier Silvio Berlusconi, the center right tycoon, standing cordially beside former Communist Giorgio Napolitano, now respected president of Italy, reviewing the military. It's a honeymoon period for government and the center-left opposition after Berlusconi's election victory last April. And it's Italy now – today, bidding for a place at the international table at the start of ten crucial days of diplomacy in Rome: Ban Ki Moon, Ahmadinejad, and Robert Mugabe (for good measure) attending a UN food and environment summit at the Rome-based agricultural agencies Tuesday. It will be followed next week by a visit from President George Bush, who will make Rome one of the centerpieces of a European trip to Slovenia, France, Germany and Albania.

### **Italy, Iraq and Iran:**

Keep your eyes fixed on Rome for the next ten days and watch: Here are Italy's chips. It promises: We will increase aid to the Iraqi government, we will train a greater number of Iraqi soldiers, we will increase pressure on Iran, and we will change the rules of engagement for the Italian troops who are stationed in Afghanistan, side by side with the Turks. Italy's second-time foreign minister Franco Frattini made those promises to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the International Conference on Iraq (Iraq Compact Annual Review Conference) last week in Stockholm. What does Italy want in exchange? It wants U.S. support to get into the important "Five Plus One Group" (The five permanent Security Council members, plus Germany), which is involved in the Iranian nuclear standoff.

This will enhance Italy's stature once again, something which is dear to Mr Berlusconi. Don't forget that Mr. Berlusconi started off his premiership with a bang last month by greeting Vladimir Putin at his Sardinian paradise resort on the Russian premier's way back from a meeting in Libya with Moammar Khadafi. Of course, nothing comes easy. It's not just the other Europeans who might not like this approach. When you have Ahmadinejad in Rome Tuesday after one more round of his vows to obliterate Israel ... and the Iranian leader is attending a world conference, and you are the host country, you have to dance around diplomatically so no invitation to dinner for him with the other heads of government. Giving a hand to Italy, his holiness Benedict XVI is not receiving Ahmadinejad either (actually none of the conference participants – the Vatican made that clear). And neither will any significant Italian member of government have any official meeting with the Iranian. Italy – like many other countries – still hasn't resolved the main question about what is worse. Is it Iran with "the bomb," or a war to prevent Iran from getting it? But at least Italy has started to take steps to tighten the screws on Iran, thanks to the new Italian government headed by Berlusconi, the man who addressed the U.S. Congress, sold the U.S. President his Marine One helicopter (through an Italian state-participated company) and who has visited Camp David. And who is coming calling in Rome on June 11? President Bush, himself, for three days. We have seen Italy's bidding for importance before, and we know Italy can play tough. For example, in 1995, Italy did deny a request to station Bosnia-bound Stealth fighter planes on its military runways of U.S and NATO bases here during the Balkans conflict. It said to the allies: If you don't let us into your tree house and treat us like the big boys, then we won't let you play with our toys. At that time, Italy wanted a seat on the five nation "contact" group, which had been trying to negotiate the fate of the former Yugoslavia. But the truth is, Italy has pulled its weight in the past. Italy's assistance has

been crucial to the international effort in the Balkans. It selflessly stepped forward, along with Turkey into the treacherous territory of Lebanon to keep the peace, despite growing Hezbollah control. And in Afghanistan it has the third highest military contingent. Let's not forget that Italy is a founding member of the European Union, with 57 million people (plus maybe a million immigrants?), one of world's largest economies and a cultural heritage which is admired and revered the world over. In his first weeks at the helm of a new government Berlusconi still has to overcome two main challenges: removing the stink of the Naples garbage and stopping the hemorrhage of Alitalia, the flagship airline. But still, the new government has moved with some assurance to recommit Italy to nuclear power to address the country's rising oil and gas prices and rising French electricity imports. Never mind that it will take one or two decades (like the newly relaunched project of the bridge to Sicily at Messina) – and the fact that no one wants to see a nuclear reactor in their neighborhood.

### **Getting tough on immigrants:**

And on the domestic security front, more muscle flexing with threats to confiscate property rented to illegal immigrants, restrictions to the grant of asylum and tougher barriers to legal immigrants to bring in family members. And a special law which gives mayors power to deny residence to EU citizens who cannot show they have adequate earnings and decent housing. Translation: beware to the 50,000 Romanian gypsies who are particularly blamed for rising crime. The European Union may bellow and even the United Nations complain about this new arrogance toward immigrants, but the new government has public support for the get-tough policy. This new beginning will make Italy feel stronger despite the world's third largest public debt (1.624 trillion Euros) in the world community. Can it withstand the pressure from other European allies and in-fighting? It can and it will, most probably. When it wants the Expo, the Olympics, even the World Cup, Italy likes to astonish. Because it wants to celebrate this political renewal in a little less than 1,000 days in 2009 when it will host the G-8. Guess where? In Berlusconi's favorite island, Sardinia .....

Dennis Redmont, an executive at the Council for U.S. and Italy, is an American journalist and consultant, who divides his time between Rome and Istanbul.

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