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MEDITERRANEAN DIALOGUE**

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## THINK TANKS AS A COOPERATIVE FACTOR IN NATO's MEDITERRANEAN DIALOGUE

by Roberto Aliboni

This paper discusses the perspective of setting up a network of think tanks (NTTs) dealing with international relations and security in the framework of official regional security organizations (RSOs).

The paper refers, in particular, to the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue (NMD). In 1997 and 1999, the task of promoting the establishment of a non-governmental network of institutes in the NMD framework was suggested in the Reports prepared by Rand for the Italian and, then, the Spanish Ministry of Defense<sup>1</sup>. The same task was then included by the Mediterranean Cooperation Group (MCG) in its agenda.

The first section considers the NTTs' role in shaping public foreign and security policy in general terms. The second section analyses the characters of the NMD as an RSO. The third section argues which kind of NTTs fits with the NMD and which tasks they can pursue.

### **The role of think tanks in shaping foreign policy**

The think tanks and institutes of international and security affairs we refer to in this paper are part of the wider category of institutions that contribute to shape public policy in their respective polities. The task of the public policy institutes consists in bringing together the varying components (policy-makers, businessmen, military, scholars, trade-unionists, etc.) of the society they belong to in order to consider and discuss public policies. By cutting across their polities, they contribute to upgrade the democratic character of the public debate, allow for cross-fertilization, and increase socio-political cohesion. This process can regard whichever public issue, from education to energy, including foreign policy and international security.

To reinforce their action, these institutions use to network. Beside networking domestically, they network internationally. When they do so, they use to perform two functions: they contribute to (a) build up confidence between international actors; and (b) make their professional know-how available, (i.e. analysis, information, proposals). The impact of these two functions is more important and effective when non governmental institutes and think tanks do network in the frame of a RSO, like the OSCE, the Partnership for Peace, the Euro-Med Partnership (EMP), etc.

These two functions - confidence-building and professional know-how - can combine in different ways and to diverse extents depending on the character of the RSO they refer to. In cohesive RSOs, like the European Union (EU) or the Atlantic Alliance, the professional contribution is more relevant than confidence-building, whereas in less cohesive frameworks, like the EMP, confidence-building may be more important than

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<sup>1</sup> The two Reports were presented in two successive seminars organized respectively in Rome (F.S. Larrabee, J. Green, I.O. Lesser, M. Zanini, *NATO's Mediterranean Initiative: Policy Issues and Dilemmas*, Rand, Santa Monica (CA), 1998) and Valencia (I.O. Lesser, J.D. Green, F.S. Larrabee, M. Zanini, *The Future of NATO's Mediterranean Initiative. Evolution and Next Steps*, Rand, Santa Monica (CA), 2000).

professional analysis. In any case, confidence-building is an important factor in terms of broad integration and inclusiveness.

While the merit of the NTT's analytical contribution is largely obvious, it may be worth pointing out more specifically the mechanism whereby NTTs may help building up confidence: This happens in two ways:

1. the think tanks being public policy institutions, the debate and the exchanges that take place internationally in networks tend automatically to be transferred in the domestic arenas; thus, "foreign" security assumptions, concepts and conclusions acquire more transparency and inter-fertilization in domestic circles;
2. again, thanks to NTTs' transversal professional and societal composition, information and transparency circulate among different social and political actors (military, businessmen, etc.), thus multiplying confidence-building effects.

The NTTs' are voluntary associations. In many cases, they may be promoted or encouraged officially with a view to contribute to the strengthening of extant RSOs, like in the case of EuroMeSCo. However, in order for them to perform the tasks we have just pointed out, it is important that they keep independent from governments and other official bodies, whichever the role the latter may have in promoting their networking and contributions.

The NMD as a regional security organization: limits and opportunities

What kind of RSO is the NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue? More perspicuously, what security cooperation is allowed in the NMD framework by the security relations actually linking the NATO members and their Mediterranean counterparts? An answer to this question is needed if we want to determine the possible role and tasks of a network of think tanks in the NMD's framework.

Security across the Mediterranean Sea is an elusive concept, because it is predicated on asymmetrical perceptions and concerns as well as factors only very partially military and defensive in their character. Challenges in this area are mostly relating to social, economic and political issues, though military concerns are not lacking. This situation has emerged very clearly in the attempts by the EU to set up a cooperative security relationship with the Southern Mediterranean countries in the EMP. For the time being, these attempts have failed because of the disruption suffered by the Middle East Peace Process in the second part of 2000 and its consequences. But, independently of the outlook of the Middle East Peace Process, the scope for security cooperation and cooperative security in the EMP has proved limited and complicated anyway, because of the reasons we have just pointed out: very different security agendas between the North and the South, different perceptions, challenges and concerns.

For these reasons, some authors tend to discard the viability and even feasibility of Mediterranean security arrangements. Because of its asymmetries, the Mediterranean looks like a gray area between conflict and cooperation. North and South are not divided by a conflict like the Middle East countries, nor are they united by the conditions which use to allow for security cooperation, like for instance in the CSCE context. Because of the heterogeneous character of its security relations, it cannot be defined in terms of a "security complex"<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> O. Wæver, B. Buzan, "An Inter-Regional Analysis: NATO's New Strategic Concept and the Theory of Security Complexes", in S. Behrendt, C.-P. Hanelt (eds.), *Bound to Cooperate - Europe and the Middle East*, Bertelsman Foundation Publishers, Gütersloh, 2000, pp. 55-106.

As a matter of fact, a theory of security cooperation in asymmetrical contexts like the Mediterranean one has perhaps still to emerge. In any case, one has to note that the NMD, in particular, doesn't aim at using cooperative means to solve defensive or military security dilemmas that are just not there. Its purpose is to increase transparency in a multidimensional security context with a view to establish gradually a common security culture and a context of broad cooperation. The finality of an asymmetrical North-South context like the Mediterranean is not that of securing the defense of national security but increasing confidence, taking care of the root causes of conflict and, thereby, upgrading broad attitudes to cooperation and conflict prevention.

In broader terms, what NMD is achieving is an agenda of cooperative security. The concept of cooperative security pertains in principle to the realm of military security. In fact, cooperative security regimes are primarily directed at implementing forms of military and security cooperation, in particular CBMs and CSBMs, with a view to limitation and control of armaments. Still, cooperative security accomplishes its ultimate purpose of providing security "through institutionalized consent rather than through threats of material or physical coercion"<sup>3</sup>.

It is in this more limited, precursor sense that the NMD must be considered as a policy of cooperative security<sup>4</sup>. For the time being its scope is limited to declaratory confidence-building with a gradual possibility to increase some operational measures (like cooperation in case of disasters). Still, this agenda of cooperation, as limited as it may be, has the valuable task of fostering changes in the security culture of the area and preparing the ground for more effective security cooperation. For this reasons, the NMD is, at one and the same time, a limit and an opportunity.

Another character of the NMD worth mentioning here is the bilateral shape of the relations between the different members. Unlike more cohesive and old-standing RSOs, e.g. the OSCE, relations among the NMD's members are not multilateral: the dialogue is essentially between NATO, in one side, and the Southern Mediterranean members, on the other side - though occasions for common meetings and activities are not lacking.

This character unveils the limit of the NMD as a RSO - for example, because of NMD's bilateralism CBMs cannot expand to and help solving ongoing regional conflict, like that in the Middle East. Still, this limit, while reflecting wider limits actually embedded in the Mediterranean strategic setting, contributes to establish the conditions when existing structural limits will be superseded. More ambitious approaches have failed, so far. No doubt, on the contrary, the NMD's more modest approach is allowing not only for its own survival but for the implementation of cooperative security policies in the area, as limited as they may be as of today. In this sense, it is an opportunity.

In conclusion, the NMD can be defined as an agenda of cooperative security pursued by means of a web of bilateral relations organized in the framework of a "light" RSO. This conclusion, with respect to the numerous RSOs that emerged in the Mediterranean in the last decade, reflects both the limits and the opportunities the NMD provides in view of building-up of regional security in the area concerned.

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<sup>3</sup> Janne E. Nolan, "The Concept of Cooperative Security", in Janne E. Nolan (ed.), *Global Engagement. Cooperation and Security in the 21st Century*, The Brookings Institution, Washington D.C., 1994, pp. 3-18, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> See Alberto Bin, "L'OTAN et la Méditerranée", manuscript about to be published in the new journal *Les Cahiers de la PESC* (Brussels).

### **A network of think tanks in the NMD framework**

In the kind of RSO the NMD generates today, both the functions of confidence-building and analysis the NTTs use to perform can be carried out. Their analytical task, however, must be qualified and attuned to NMD's characters.

From the point of view of confidence-building, given the importance of declaratory confidence-building in the area concerned, and given the effectiveness of the NTTs in multiplying transparency and information in international networking, there is no doubt that NTTs activities and networking in the NMD must be fostered as much as possible.

As we pointed out, NTTs cut both ways: they foster information and dialogue in their international relations and, then, pour off information and clarifications in their respective domestic arenas. Furthermore, they include in their public activities people from diverse quarters. In this sense, they help overcoming the reluctance governmental quarters (especially officials and officers) may have to meet and provide them with uncommitted tribunes and observatories.

Research work by NTTs is also obviously helpful. Here a distinction should be kept in mind. One has to distinguish, in fact, between cooperation relating to the regular research agendas of the network's members, and research cooperation functional to the aims and challenges of the RSO the network refers to. These two aspects, of course, are normally intertwined. The first, however, is tied to the function of confidence-building. In this sense, the simple fact that the members of the network meet and compare their agendas is a building block. For sure, the process of confidence-building is also strengthened whenever the members of the network establish common research agendas or other common activities.

The second aspect concerns the other typical function of a NTT, as pointed out in the first section of this paper, namely the possibility of taking advantage of the professional capabilities of the think tanks. This function has been very important in RSO like the CSCE and the ACRS, both of them enjoying a strong "security complex". Where this character is weak, like in the case of EMP and NMD (in general, every Mediterranean RSO), professional contributions by NTTs aimed at upgrading official cooperation in concerned RSOs tend to be weak. In other words, as shown very clearly by the case of EuroMeSCo in the EMP, the network's ability to make professional contributions with operational or structural implications may be extremely constrained by the weakness of the common political ground.

In this case, the activities of the network, including common research agendas, tend to emphasize confidence-building. Thus, in the case of the politically-loose NMD, it would be helpless and even counterproductive to wait for a "political" contribution from the think tanks, that is contributions directed at responding to the political dilemmas involved by the NMD process. In such environment, NTTs should not be asked "what the NMD has to do", rather "how things are evolving in its circle".

Consequently, a NTT in the NMD should be given the task of building on conceptual questions (the nature of security, civilian-military relationship, existing common grounds and challenges), analyzing specific challenges without aiming at common conclusions, bringing together to monitor crises and list policies the parties involved would like to be implemented. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the network could reflect more easily than official institutions the broad notion of security involved by the partnership dimension in the NMD.

Should the NTTs of the NMD opt for a formal or an informal organization? EuroMeSCo has been given, according to the EU Commission long-standing

philosophy and modus operandi, a rather formal format. In the case of NMD, this format can be very light. Many institutes are already cooperating and sometime have good and important relations. What is important is to mainstream networking in their relations and establish a minimum common agenda and shared organizational references.

In conclusion, the NMD would certainly taking advantage from the establishment of a network of think tanks. This network needs be “light” and flexible in its format. Its agenda should be based on confidence-building rather than policy support. In this sense, priority should be given to

- conceptual debate;
- electronic networking;
- crises monitoring and analysis;
- comparative policy-oriented analyses;
- meetings and workshops;
- diffuse involvement of individual institutes in organizational tasks.

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