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The EU after the war on Iraq

Over time, many American policies have had a divisive effect on Europe and transatlantic relations. None so strongly and visibly as the policy on Iraq pursued by President George W. Bush and his administration and the war that ensued from that policy in Spring of 2003.

After the war, attempts are now being made to mend rifts and recover both European and transatlantic cohesion. Efforts appear more successful in the transatlantic than in the European framework. And this does not help re-balance EU-US relations either.

In the transatlantic framework, in addition to the nations that already supported the war on Iraq, even those that did not have now taken on a broad co-operative attitude towards American-led efforts to manage post-war Iraq. As a matter of fact, nobody wants such efforts to fail. A failure would inevitably reflect on the Western alliance as a whole. Furthermore, the US administration, by initiating the “road map” process, has undertaken a decisive balancing act towards the Europeans, who can now - if so they wish - construe the war on Iraq as a first step in a wider process towards solving their long-standing and supreme interest: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Sadly, there does not seem to be a parallel recovery of European cohesion. First, the United States is putting emphasis on bilateral relations and NATO, while fully neglecting (if not opposing) a possible EU role. Second, European divisions have not been left behind, not only because the transatlantic environment is not helpful but also because of the current low ebb in the process of political integration. Consequently, in the informal Council meeting in Rhodes/Kastellorizo, the EU members were unable to go beyond a very general statement pointing out that the United Nations should play a role in Iraq’s political and economic reconstruction. On the contents and directions of reconstruction, however, they failed to be specific because their feelings and goals are very diverse.

Some EU members are already deeply involved in the process of Iraq’s reconstruction as it is being engineered and led by the United States, whereas others are staying on the sidelines with varying degrees of sympathy and expectations. Although the Commission is implementing limited humanitarian actions, the EU as such has not been able to set out any common political platform and, consequently, has no political role to play.

The Italian government is decidedly and directly associated with the reconstruction operations and the administration in the framework of the kind of trusteeship the United States has decided to put in place with the *post factum* blessing of UNSC Resolution 1483. Italy’s role in Iraq will hardly allow the Italian EU Presidency to foster a common European platform on that issue and act, as it intends to according to official statements, as a mediator mending fences between EU members and recovering some European

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cohesion. The whole of Middle East policy might create a similar obstacle if Italy continues to conduct the solitary, staunch pro-Israeli policy the premier has apparently adopted in opposition to broad European trends.

However, the challenge put to Europe by Iraq cannot be tackled in six months. Moreover, it cannot be isolated from the regional context. One has to take account of Iran and the Gulf and their relationship with the Near East, North Africa and the Muslim world. The EU faces both longer- and shorter-term problems with respect to this extensive region. What Italy can do in the next six months is to lay down the very first blocks on which the EU can develop a longer-term policy assuring Europe a role in Iraq, the Gulf and the Middle East in a more cohesive transatlantic framework. In this perspective, this paper discusses, first, longer-term EU challenges with respect to Iraq and the region and, then, challenges in the shorter-term.

EU and Iraq: long-term challenges

As an official statement by the Commission candidly says, under the 24-year regime of Saddam Hussein, “the European Community (EC) never had any contractual relations with Iraq, and very limited and low level political relations. Iraq is not part of the EU-Mediterranean framework of associations (the Barcelona process), nor is it included in the EU co-operation set up for south Asia and south-east Asia. There is no official dialogue between the EC and the Iraqi government, and the Commission does not have a Delegation in Baghdad”². As a consequence, most recent EU relations with Iraq have taken place essentially within the UN sanctions framework. Pending political decisions by the Council, this framework and Resolution 1483 are currently the only basis for an EU role in reconstruction. Thus the role is limited to humanitarian actions.

Instead, with respect to the other countries of the Gulf region - Iran and the Arab monarchies united in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) - the EU countries have set out common policies. EU relations with Iran are quite old and take the form of a political dialogue – the so-called critical dialogue. There is also a comprehensive agreement between the GCC countries and the EU that contemplates a political dialogue as well as trade and economic relations.

Analysts generally consider these relations with the Gulf countries undeveloped and unsatisfactory. While EU countries have developed very significant common political approaches to the Mediterranean and the Near East (the Arab-Israeli conflict), they have always maintained an extremely low profile with respect to the Gulf area. Only a few European countries, namely the UK, France, Germany and Italy, have developed bilateral relations with Iran and/or individual GCC countries. Still, while the UK and France have always included the region in their strategic perspective, the other European countries lack such a perspective altogether. And it is this lack of strategic perception that has prevented EU policies from emerging (as in the case of Iraq and Iran) or from taking on a more adequate profile (as with the GCC). The task has largely been left up to the United States and to the European members of the Security Council, i.e. France and the UK.

With this background, no wonder the EU proved powerless when the United States decided to go to war against Iraq and was deeply divided by the US intervention. In the

² <http://europa.eu.int/comm/world/iraqsit/overview.htm>, visited on the 6th June 2003.

longer term, things will change only if EU members recognise and define common strategic interests in the Gulf such as oil, financial relations (in principle upgraded with respect to the past by their common currency, the euro), the containment of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) proliferation in the region, and/or the setting up of a regional system of security co-operation. More broadly speaking, the EU's deep interest in the Near East cannot be implemented in isolation from the Gulf region; no political aims can be attained in the Near East if de-linked from the Gulf.

If the Europeans recognise their strategic interest in these issues and challenges, they will have to develop common instruments to deal with them. If they do, they will finally break away from the two alternatives of strenuous opposition of US policies in the Gulf or staunch support of such policies. A more responsible and cohesive EU would be able to have a positive and constructive dialogue with the United States.

For sure, such a development is hindered by EU members' national interests. On one hand, the less ambitious (or more opportunistic) members of the Union do not want to be involved in the Gulf. On the other, most ambitious ones – those that perceive themselves as “great” powers entitled to global and high politics, like the UK and France – do not want to place their ambitions in the common EU framework.

The task of setting up common policies and strategic views with respect to the Gulf region is doubtless very difficult. The question, however, should be tabled with an eye to gradually bringing the Gulf into communitarian policy. Step by step, issue by issue, the EU needs to build up a common “Gulf culture”, upgrading Europeans' awareness of the importance of this area for their security and prosperity. The war on Iraq has been a helpful signal – an opportunity that should not go lost. If the EU fails to work out a strategic vision with respect to Iraq and the Gulf, it will continue to be influenced by them rather than have a chance to affect events in this area.

Challenges in the shorter-term

Iraq is as a factor of fragmentation in the Union. To be sure, there are many others. As is well known, fragmentation stems from an institutional deficit in the Union, in particular its inability to shift from an entirely intergovernmental to a more communitarian CFSP/ESDP. This deficit could be overcome by the decisions the next Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) will take on the basis of the results of the European Convention.

Whatever the outcome of the reform currently taking place in the EU, Iraq needs responses in the short term. These responses should have a twofold function. On the one hand, they should set out the early conditions for developing a longer-term strategy towards the Gulf and the Middle East as a whole, as pointed out in previous section. No doubt, such a policy planning effort should be assisted primarily by the Commission, the High Representative and the European Parliament, more in general by permanent EU institutions. On the other hand, they should promote policies and initiatives with a view to containing damages from current divisions on Iraq and trying to recover some cohesion within the Union. This would seem to be the task of the Presidency, in the event, the next Italian Presidency which will be underway when the postwar conditions in Iraq unfold.

The two perspectives are very different. Let's discuss them in a separate way, beginning with the EU institutions.

The EU should prepare a comprehensive agenda for initiating and developing its relations with Iraq. The main directions of this agenda could be contained in a standard EU Communication to the Council and the European Parliament. In fact, while the Commission can hardly go beyond humanitarian aid before a political base of relations is established, it can set out an agenda and stimulate a debate in the EU that would help articulate a mid- to longer-term EU policy towards Iraq. This policy should envisage:

1. an Association agreement similar to those presently functioning with most Mediterranean countries;
2. the gradual inclusion of Iraq - and the other Gulf countries - in the very recent notion of “proximity”³; in fact, the emerging EU Iraqi policy should fundamentally provide a chance to overcome the senseless separation between the Mediterranean/Near East and the Middle East that for sheer historical reasons has dominated and distorted EU policy towards its Southern approaches. The prospect should be a EU MENA policy with distinctions, where need be, between sub-regions such as the Maghreb, the Gulf, the Near East, etc. It is high time for rationality and strategy to come back to the EU’s southern external relations;
3. Iraq should be included in the EU’s conflict prevention perspective;
4. MEDA should be enlarged and made available to Iraq as well, especially and most urgently with respect to MEDA Democracy;
4. Iraq should be allowed to export more oil products in addition to oil. Presently, EU limits such imports significantly within the framework of its relations with the GCC countries. The emerging EU policy towards Iraq should be seen as an opportunity to overcome such absurd EU protectionism towards the Gulf with respect to downstream oil productions;
5. The EU should be able to put forward an articulate plan for regional co-operative security in the Gulf, which is, at the end of the day, the key to a credible and durable peace in the region. Much has been said by individual analysts and institutions on the possibility of setting up a Gulf regional security system. Such a system was also successfully considered by the Madrid Multilateral Track Talks before they collapsed with the assassination of President Rabin. The EU-ISS should be given the task of taking stock of EU resources and know-how in this area (in governments and think tanks) with a view to co-ordinating an EU proposal on Gulf regional security. It should be clear that this proposal would be used by the EU to co-operate with the United States in supporting such a regional arrangement: hopefully, the EU would avoid another Barcelona first pillar;
6. The availability of EU peace forces should be forcefully and convincingly stated with reference to both Iraq and the Middle East in general; the link (and trade-off) between the use of such forces in the Near East and/or the Gulf must be pointed out.

This list may not be exhaustive. However, it provides indications on which the Commission and the High Representative could improve and enlarge. The basic idea is that a EU strategy for Iraq should be available shortly for public debate. The very short-term task of the Presidency should be precisely to start this process by committing EU institutions to generating an EU proposal as soon as possible. Even the Italian

³ Commission of the European Communities, Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, *Wider Europe - Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours*, Brussels 11.3.2003, COM(2003) 104 final.

Presidency, so far removed from the idea of a common EU policy towards Iraq, should be able to initiate such a policy planning process, or at least should not be opposed to it. A broad and more political task for Italy's Presidency should be to restore some cohesion among EU members. But this is close to a "mission impossible". Indeed, that cohesion was shattered by the US war on Iraq and, above all, is being entrenched by the fact that some EU members are participating in Iraq's reconstruction whereas others are not. The source of this situation is a transatlantic rift that no Presidency can overcome in six months' time. Again, what the Italian Presidency could do, however, is to lay down the first building-blocks for a transatlantic reconciliation to be fostered over time.

This could be done by a policy predicated on two elements: (a) a significant and convincing proposal for a EU common policy to be established and put forward in a spirit of transatlantic co-operation; (b) strong support for President Bush's "road map" policy (including the contribution of peace forces) with a view to merging it in a larger overall Middle East policy so as to extend EU-US understanding to the whole of the region. This second element looks like the key to whatever progress there may be in the Middle Eastern as well as Atlantic areas.