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A TRANS-MEDITERRANEAN PARTNERSHIP FOR PEACE?

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Paper presented at the Seminar on “The Future of the Mediterranean Dialogue: Deeper or Wider?”
Options for the Istanbul Summit, NATO Defense College,
Rome, 5-6 March 2004

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1. The Greater Middle East comes back

In a book² they edited in 1997, Robert D. Blackwill and Michael Stürmer took into consideration the Greater Middle East as “the huge area from North Africa through Egypt, Israel and the Tigris-Euphrates valley, through the Persian Gulf region into Turkey and on to the Caspian basin”. In that book, while the Maghreb area and Libya were not considered, the significant expansion of the Middle East notion was due to the inclusion of Central Asia. The concern the book intended to tackle were the divisions among allies deriving from the perceived US necessity to shift the Alliance’s strategic axis towards Central Asia and Turkey after the demise of the Soviet Union. The American authors were soliciting a reluctant Europe to join the United States in such shift.

It was not the first time that the Americans advocated a European strategic shift from a purely defensive alliance in Europe to the assertion of Western geopolitical interests in the Greater Middle East. In the nineties, the Rand Corporation published a number of articles and reports³ fostering joint European-US policies towards the Gulf by enlarging the European notion of Mediterranean eastward. Rand’s ideas were supported by Spain and Italy (perhaps unconsciously anticipating their attitude on the Iraq war). While Rand aimed at involving the Europeans in the Gulf to give the United States a fresh interest in the Atlantic Alliance and NATO, Spain and Italy aimed at involving NATO in Southern challenges to reinforce their national security. On the whole, though, Europe and the EU once again proved reluctant.

All in all, those proposals were triggered by US wishes and needs to revitalize the Alliance in the face of the growing strategic significance of the Arab-Muslim area in the post-Cold war context and came from non-unilateralist quarters. Today, the proposal and exhortation to join forces in the “Greater Middle East” again stem from a US need to obtain support from the Alliance in the very difficult aftermath of American-led interventions in Afghanistan and - more particularly - Iraq within the overarching context of the fight against Islamic terrorism after 9/11, and again in a non-unilateralist perspective.

Between the end of 2003 and the beginning of 2004, the idea of revamping the Alliance by committing NATO to support of the US *res gestae* in the “Greater Middle East” was once

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² Robert D. Blackwill, Michael Stürmer (eds.), *Allies Divided. Transatlantic Policies for the Greater Middle East*, MIT Press, Cambridge (Ma), London, 1997.

³ R.D. Asmus, R.L. Kugler, F.S. Larrabee "Building a New NATO", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, n. 4, Sept.-Oct. 1993, pp. 28-40; Ronald D. Asmus, Robert D. Blackwill, F. Stephen Larrabee, "Can Nato Survive?", *The Washington Quarterly*, 19, 2, Spring 1996, pp. 79-101; D. C. Gompert, F. Stephen Larrabee (eds.), *America and Europe. A Partnership for A New Era*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 191-217; F. Stephen Larrabee, Jerrold Green, Ian O. Lesser, Michele Zanini, *Nato’s Mediterranean Initiative: Policy Issues and Dilemmas*, Rand, Santa Monica (Ca), 1998; 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.

again aired and is expected to be discussed by the North Atlantic Council gathering in Istanbul at the end of June 2004. This paper considers this recurrent idea to assess its merits and make suggestions on ways in which it could be implemented. First, it illustrates the political context of the Alliance in which the proposal is being put forward, with a view to evaluating its relevance from the point of view of the different actors involved – the United States, the Alliance and the allies, namely the Europeans and the Canadians. Second, the paper comments on the limits and challenges to the proposal stemming from the regions towards which it is directed with a view to adjusting it to realities. Third, it provides suggestions about how relations with the Greater Middle East, in the shape of a Dialogue and/or a Partnership, could be implemented from the institutional and operational point of view. Finally, it draws some broad conclusions.

2. European interest in the Greater Middle East perspective

The new Secretary General of NATO, Mr. Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, inaugurated his mandate by declaring that his most important priorities will be Afghanistan and Iraq. While, these priorities may appear obvious from a purely operational point of view, politically they are bound to raise perplexities among the allies, in Europe as well as in Canada, not so much because of the need in itself to intervene in these two countries, but because of the wider strategic agenda in which such intervention is construed by the United States. In fact, in the eyes of the Americans, these priorities are regarded as part of a wider NATO agenda to be developed in the so-called “Greater Middle East”.

The military organization of the Atlantic Alliance is already in the field today, in Afghanistan as well as in Iraq, with an agenda about to be expanded in Afghanistan and one contemplating an indirect and limited presence that could soon turn into a direct and broad intervention in Iraq. The priority given to NATO’s presence in these two countries takes US concerns into account. The United States, especially after the end of conventional hostilities in Iraq, had to realize that the two initiatives undertaken in Iraq and Afghanistan are by far more militarily and politically engaging than expected. But it also takes the allies’ concerns into account. The latter, even if they weren’t in favor – as in the case of Iraq – of the American initiative, can’t help but fear the consequences for international and Western security of an American failure or withdrawal. At the same time, they are interested in a re-evaluation of NATO by the United States so as to re-consolidate the transatlantic framework after the uncertainties of the last years.

These developments are bound to come up against difficulties and opposition, which could prove to be not that slight. With the launching at the 2002 Prague North Atlantic Council of the allied rapid reaction force to fight terrorism, the United States already began to return to NATO the role that it had played down immediately after the events of 9/11. However, NATO continues to be pushed onto the sidelines by Washington as the Bush administration clearly wants to maintain the essential point it stuck to throughout the entire post 9/11 sequence, that is keeping its hegemony high and its hands untied. Present circumstances clearly demand an Alliance comeback, still the administration wants this to take place on its conditions, namely without submitting to the conditions of the allies. Obviously, this will be accepted wholly by some, less by others and rejected by others again.

However, there is no doubt that the American attitude tends to be less intransigent with time and is being replaced by cooperative proposals that it would be wrong for Europeans and Canadians to ignore. At the end of the day, not only will the Americans never yield completely or explicitly but, in particular, this administration will hardly renounce keeping its hands free. Nevertheless, one should not overlook that some US prospects and proposals currently emerging are bringing about significant degrees of convergence with the allies – a convergence which a good diplomacy should not leave unheeded, committing itself to expanding and strengthening today's narrow and uneasy platform of transatlantic cooperation, in particular towards the Greater Middle East.

The proposal being put forward is some form of deepening and enlargement of NATO towards the Greater Middle East. This would enlarge the framework of relations NATO now entertains with Eastern and Southern Mediterranean countries within the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue (NMD) and deepen such relations by upgrading them to the level of a Partnership. The NMD has accomplished limited tasks of information and transparency towards the Southern Mediterranean countries and initiated a number of bilateral policies of cooperation in the military realm. The Partnership would establish common instances, more or less institutionalized, for carrying out a political dialogue and would prepare the ground for turning military cooperation into a concept of common security and other cooperative actions. The Partnership would have the task of supporting from the outside the political transformations and the transition to democracy and free market that US nation-building is expected to foster in Afghanistan and Iraq and to propagate to the whole of the region.

What form this enlarged and/or deepened relationship between NATO and the Greater Middle East would assume is being considered in several quarters, in particular in the NATO Secretariat, with a view to submitting it to the next North Atlantic Council in Istanbul. Meanwhile in a meeting organized by the US Mission at NATO in Brussels at the end of January 2004, Senator Chuck Hagel (R, Nebraska) presented a proposal whereby an emerging NATO Greater Middle East (or Trans-Mediterranean) Partnership would have five tasks to perform: strengthening Turkey's integration into the Western world; ensuring Afghanistan's political transition; ensuring that of Iraq as well; reinforcing NATO Mediterranean links; and contributing to the solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In other words, the proposal is to bring together all the most contentious transatlantic issues regarding the Middle East under the label of the "Greater Middle East", in the attempt to find a more cooperative outcome than in the present situation.

As noted, many would criticize such a proposal, as they would see it as nothing more than a way to make more resources available to American foreign policy with hardly any or very little political return. For NATO it will not be easy to set up effective joint actions to meet the challenges pointed out by the new Secretary General in Afghanistan and Iraq. Achieving a solidarity as engaging and ample as a Greater Middle East Partnership would require may not turn out to be that easy either.

Nevertheless, the proposal brings up challenges that are of the utmost interest for Europe as well for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is not to say that the Europeans should accept the proposal passively. They should agree to discuss and negotiate it, even toughly. The proposal has the advantage that it not only includes challenges of interest to Europe that the United States otherwise tends to play down, but that it also puts such challenges in the same basket as

those of interest to the Americans, thus allowing for possible issue-linkages which the European diplomacy is not enjoying at all in the present situation (more American engagement on Palestine against more European engagement on Iraq, and so forth).

3. Adjusting the Greater Middle East proposal to regional requirements

Against this backdrop, the proposal of the “Greater Middle East” must be adjusted to fit regional requirements and realities better. In the end, it will have to be accepted by Atlantic allies as well as by the Arab-Muslim countries to which it is addressed. Transatlantic negotiations should take regional requirements into consideration with a view to improving the proposal and achieving a more realistic and functional final setting.

First of all, the proposal airs the idea that a NATO Partnership should not be limited to military and security aspects, but should be enlarged to include democratization, human rights, and social and economic development. All of this is not part of the NATO identity and would not be convincing for Trans-Mediterranean and Greater Middle Eastern partners. This kind of transformation can hardly be expected of NATO after all the changes it already underwent in the nineties, as it would affect its very identity and capabilities. Here Europeans should point out a risk of which they are regularly reminded by Americans: duplication and inter-blocking policies. Not only is the promotion of economic and social development fostered by an impressive number of international institutions, such as the World Bank and the UNDP, but what is more, the EU has already developed the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) while the United States has launched the Middle East Peace Initiative (MEPI) and the Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA). Instead of figuring out unlikely new tasks for NATO, it would be better to improve upon existing initiatives in the realm of economic and social development and democratization and, above all, to provide coordination – a coordination that could well be discussed within the New Transatlantic Agenda.

Not only should NATO refrain from duplicating the tasks of other institutions, but these institutions should also be explicitly involved in the “Greater Middle East” agenda. It would be a mistake to conceive of the Greater Middle East agenda as a NATO-only matter. For example, it is true, as Ambassador Martin Indik has pointed out⁴, that NATO could play a significant peace-supporting role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by intervening to maintain security between the two parties. One should not overlook the fact, though, that such a role would be possible only if a minimum of political understanding is preliminarily assured between Israelis and Palestinians by political and diplomatic means. The latter cannot be provided by NATO, whose action actually needs to be complemented or made possible by other organizations and actors (Western and Arab governments, the Quartet, the United States, and so forth).

Any NATO Greater Middle East Partnership should be limited to developing military and security cooperation thereby crowning the very good job performed so far by the NMD by adding a more stringent political component to the dialogue. But such a crowning depends on the right proportions and articulations. The right proportions means that Western countries have to understand that a formal political cooperation with a higher profile cannot be accepted

⁴ Martin Indyk, “A Trusteeship for Palestine?”, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2003, pp.51-66.

by the Arabs if the “Greater Middle East” organization - as is currently the case with both the NMD and EMP - is to include Israel. In order to begin making any higher profile political cooperation possible, a decent solution has to be found to the Palestinian problem, decent enough to be presented by Arab governments as a convincing result to their public. Before that happens, political cooperation is still desirable and possible with Israel, but it will be forcefully limited by the need to save Arab governments’ honor and autonomy. One has to remember that the success of the NMD is due to its ability to avoid soliciting deadly kisses in the framework of too obliging institutions, whereas the failure of the EMP in carrying out the political and security cooperation envisaged in the first chapter of the Barcelona Declaration is precisely due to the illusion that this was possible.

Another caveat concerns Iraq’s transition. Arab governments, fearful as they always were of the arrogance of Saddam’s Iraq in inter-Arab relations and collective institutions, may now be afraid of some kind of Iraqi “democratic arrogance”. In fact, they have willingly invited the new Iraq to the next meeting of the Arab League but with a request for some “explanations”. It is not that easy to bring Atlantic allies together. It is very difficult to do the same with Arab governments. And even more difficult to gather Westerners, Israelis and Arabs. Some caution and finesse is in order.

Beside the need to give a reinforced “Greater Middle East” political dialogue the right proportions, there is also the problem of articulating relations within it and its numerous members. A Partnership stretching from Morocco to Afghanistan may appear very practical in Western eyes with a view to conducting cooperation policies in a simpler and more effective way. It may, however, overlook diversities that the concerned nations would be unwilling and unable to neglect. The most evident case concerns Maghreb countries. They are definitely in tune with major Arab-Muslim trends. They have always been unwilling, however, to get directly involved in Middle East conflicts. Besides, it is legitimate to doubt that Mediterranean Arabs would be willing to share their special relations with European and Western organizations with the Arabs of the Gulf. Even though the Greater Middle East is as of today a strategic reality that cannot be overlooked, sub-regional diversities should not be forgotten. Any too large and undifferentiated cooperation would risk running aground.

For these reasons, what should be planned is a large circle of cooperation throughout the entire “Greater Middle East” and, at the same time, different patterns of relations predicated on either sub-regional attitudes or different propensities to cooperate by the varying countries involved. In this perspective, it would be helpful to keep in mind the schemes the EU utilizes to organize its regional cooperation: from different levels of participation to the kind of competitive conditionality it is about to use in its incoming “neighborhood” agenda (in which countries complying with benchmarks get more than others, even though nobody will be left high and dry)⁵.

4. A framework for cooperating with the Greater Middle East

⁵ 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.

Against this backdrop, how should NATO “Greater Middle East” or Trans-Mediterranean cooperation be organized? If the above remarks are taken into consideration, the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue should be enlarged to non-Mediterranean Southern countries in the Middle East and Central Asia (so that the present NMD would turn into a NATO Middle East and Mediterranean Dialogue-MEMD). Within MEMD, the present NMD should be deepened to take on the form of a Partnership (NATO Middle East and Mediterranean Dialogue Partnership-MEMDP). The Partnership would be open-ended, in the sense that the prospect of joining it would be open to all countries in the region, contingent to members’ consensus, even though it would start more or less from the current NMD membership. The Partnership (MEMDP) and the Dialogue (MEMD) would be differentiated by the intensity of the political dialogue and the kind of commitments members would take on. In practice, there would be two concentric circles.

Let’s concentrate on the Partnership. The Partnership would encompass a limited number of trans-Mediterranean countries, first of all those having already successfully experienced the NMD and maybe others. In principle, according to what is suggested by the conclusions of the previous section, the countries involved in the MEMDP cannot proceed immediately to establishing a security partnership, still they have good reasons to start a transition towards such a partnership. They would be deluding themselves if they thought they could establish a full partnership now. Yet, they would be making a mistake if they failed to act at all. What they should definitely do is establish a clear and definite prospect of partnership with the aim of gradually consolidating it. Starting from the NMD platform, how can the MEMDP be worked out in such a perspective?

The West’s interest in strengthening security ties with the Southern Mediterranean countries is clearly motivated in terms of stability, international governance, domestic and international security. To be attractive, the prospect of NATO MEMDP should bring similar benefits to Trans-Mediterranean countries. For that purpose, the Partnership should embrace three broad interacting objectives:

?? An enhanced political dialogue that would give the Partners the chance to debate not only Middle Eastern and Mediterranean but also international trends broadly affecting regional and respective national security;

?? This political dialogue would serve to strengthen joint assessment and action capabilities and, in case of agreement, the joint management of international instability;

?? The political dialogue and operational security cooperation would contribute to consolidating the Partners’ domestic security and their capabilities for combating terrorism.

The achievement of these objectives requires institutional as well as operational measures of cooperation.

5. Deepening institutions

As far as institutional mechanisms are concerned, two main measures should be implemented. First, NATO should consider ‘involving interested Dialogue countries more closely in some activities of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council’- as already suggested in 2002 by Secretary General Lord Robertson. This involvement would give the Partners the chance to assess

international security trends alongside Western countries in a partnership role. It would begin to ensure the inclusiveness that Mediterranean relations lack today.

Second, as noted, a Middle East and Mediterranean Dialogue Partnership (MEMDP) should be developed, drawing from the PfP experience and cooperative activities, but specifically tailored to the realities of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean Dialogue countries.

To set this MEMDP in motion, the representatives and ambassadors should meet periodically (3-4 times a year) in a kind of “Middle East and Mediterranean Cooperation Council” (MEMCC), which, by its very denomination, would represent a regular political partnership between NATO and non-NATO Middle Eastern and Mediterranean countries. This should include a meeting of the MEMCC at the Foreign Minister level at least once a year. The MEMCC should also consider holding meetings at the Defense Minister level at appropriate times.

The deliberations of the “Middle East and Mediterranean Cooperation Council” should be prepared by a NATO Middle East and Mediterranean Cooperation Group (MEMCG), which would stem from the enlargement of the present MCG. This MEMCG would be committed to generating an agenda to be submitted to and jointly considered by the “Middle East and Mediterranean Cooperation Council”. In doing so, it should keep in touch with the Partnership countries’ representatives in formal or informal ways (seminars, routine diplomatic contacts and so forth).

Today, similar procedures in the NMD are only informal. The “Middle East and Mediterranean Cooperation Council” would institutionalize this process and give it a more pregnant political significance.

6. Operational activities for cooperation

As for operational measures, they should not be differentiated according to political status (whether Dialogue or Partnership). The menu of activities should be negotiated bilaterally with each member and should reflect the willingness and abilities of the country concerned.

The current agenda of operational measures already includes a considerable array of cooperative projects. This agenda should be enlarged either by upgrading the cooperative activities already envisaged, such as cooperation in peace-support operations (PSOs), in particular peacekeeping, or by introducing new activities, such as anti-terrorism cooperation and good governance in the security field. Let’s dwell here on a few principal points.

Peacekeeping operations have already proven to be a very promising field of cooperation. They have provided good results in terms of cooperation with Mediterranean countries. These results can be improved and upgraded. An *ad hoc* group, like in the PfP, could be developed in the enlarged Middle Eastern and Mediterranean framework to promote joint peacekeeping training; joint force planning for peacekeeping purposes; interoperability; joint logistics; joint command and control, and so forth.

Training Partners’ military forces to work together in a peacekeeping perspective would open the way for the use of such forces in civil emergency operations as well as specific interventions, such as demining. This kind of cooperation could also prove important were NATO called in to contribute to peacekeeping operations relating to an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement - if it became possible.

Good governance in the security field must be introduced mostly as a tool for rationalization and effectiveness, leaving the Partners free to pick up on its democratizing goals at the right moment. For the time being, four main headings should be retained by the NATO and Dialogue countries' representatives in working out a concrete agenda to be submitted to the "Middle East and Mediterranean Cooperation Council": (a) defense expenditures and budgets and their relationship with domestic economic performance; (b) security aspects of economic development, that is: socio-economic aspects of regional instability; energy security; economic aspects of migration and the effects of refugees on security and stability; (c) interoperability; (d) defense conversion activities and their industrial and human impact.

Terrorism would be an important field of cooperation. If some degree of cooperation in combating terrorism were established today between the West and the Greater Middle East (in particular, the Arab-Muslim components of this area), a basic distinction would have to be made between global and regional, transnational and national terrorism. Any attempt to use anti-terrorism cooperation at the global level to fight the terrorism allegedly carried out by national and religious movements in the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean region would not be acceptable to Arab countries and would immediately bring cooperation to an end.

By the same token, any Trans-Mediterranean attempt to use national anti-terrorist policies to suppress opposition or abuse human rights would produce similar results in Western countries. In many respects, cooperation against terrorism will have to toe a very narrow line. To make cooperation possible, NATO officials in charge of the Partnership and Dialogue's agendas will have to set out very precise and limited objectives and guidelines. Like the rest of the Middle East and Mediterranean exercise in security cooperation, even anti-terrorism must be based strictly on what the PfP calls self-differentiation, i. e. the application of voluntary participation and variable geometry. More in general, the agenda should be less predicated on concepts than on specific endeavors.

7. Conclusions

In sum, the Europeans should look at the "Greater Middle East" proposal now coming from the United States with interest. Europe would be deluding itself if it were to see in this proposal nothing more than a US demand to share the burden of its policy towards the Arab-Muslim area, or if it were to look only at its shortcomings. Europe also requires a policy towards this area. The American proposal, accepted in principle, must be negotiated and modified so as to reflect European and transatlantic interests with respect to the Arab-Muslim area.

From the European point of view, the most important asset of a transatlantic Greater Middle East agenda would be the leverage such a common agenda would give the Europeans in dealing with issues of European interest such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In any case, an expanded role for the Alliance in the Greater Middle East would usher in a role and, perhaps even an expanded role for the European and Canadian allies.

Yet, NATO's role in the Greater Middle East should not give way to duplications nor prevent other actors from contributing to the complex task to which the West would be committed in that huge area. While NATO would provide security and military cooperation in a perspective of democratization, economic, cultural and political cooperation and the broad process of

political and economic reform would be carried out by the allies with the support of other Western and international actors such as the United Nations and the European Union.

This pluralism in Western policy towards the Greater Middle East would be fundamental in ensuring the broad political and economic change being aimed at. Pluralism will help solve the contradictions likely to emerge in the process. For example, NATO security cooperation, especially cooperation in the field of terrorism, will stabilize and reinforce present governments and their armed forces in the Greater Middle East countries. Yet, stabilizing present governments and regimes may prove in contradiction with the overall agenda of democratization the United States and its European and Northern American allies share. For this reason, the Western agenda towards the Greater Middle East needs to be coordinated at a broad level of transatlantic cooperation, a level that is provided partly by the New Transatlantic Agenda but is partly just not there.

This paper advocates a transatlantic cooperation agenda predicated on two broad concentric circles, the Dialogue Partnership countries and the Dialogue countries. While the Dialogue Partnership circle would envisage upgraded and more institutionalized cooperation, the Dialogue would organize cooperation at the same level as the present NMD. Countries from both circles would be given the opportunity to cooperate in a large menu of joint actions on a bilateral, self-differentiated and voluntary basis.

Finally, in organizing cooperation, NATO members have to realize a number of limits which would substantially differentiate the Greater Middle East Partnership from the PfP. Because of the presence of Israel, collective activities and the political dialogue among partners will be limited. The ability or inability of the West and the Greater Middle East Partnership to contribute to solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will have great significance with respect to the effectiveness of the Partnership. A degree of sub-regional differentiation among partners should be assured.