

12/32

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"DETENTE AND DEFENCE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN"

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CONFERENCE ON EUROPEAN DEFENCE
ROME, 21-22 APRIL 1975

Equilibrium in the Mediterranean is tied to a series of military, political and economic factors. The latter two in past years have rapidly evolved and have created a situation of relative uncertainty.

The United States has seen its relations with Turkey, Greece and Portugal worsen and Kissinger's last peace initiative in the Middle East fail.

The southern European countries have been hard hit by the increase in oil prices. Economic difficulties have been complicated by grave political and institutional problems: new regimes in Greece and Portugal (the latter still of uncertain physiognomy); problems of government stability in Turkey and Italy; difficult successions in Spain and Yugoslavia (and in the future perhaps also in Albania). Ties between central-northern and southern Europe have not been strengthened but risk further deterioration.

Soviet presence in the area does not yet play a clear role: though militarily notable, it doesn't seem to exert a political influence sufficient to play a balancing role. On the contrary, the USSR oscillates between a general tendency to agree with the USA and support for the harder, more intransigent positions of the Arab world.

The Arab countries are becoming an international political reality (thanks to petroleum), but there has not yet emerged from among them a clear and determined leadership capable of accepting compromises and of giving Pan-Arab policy a coherent international orientation.

It is easy to verify the practical absence of western Europe and the decline of the traditional British and French presences.

Détente and deterrence in the Mediterranean have thus become something quite difficult to define. One can not simply recur to the relation USA-USSR, nor can one be limited to the solely military aspects of the balance of forces. Mediterranean crises are, moreover, internal or circumscribed, but the shakiness of the political framework of the area makes them risky and makes one think of immediate possibilities of escalation.

Détente ought to be based on a reinforcement of incentives to resolve the crises by peaceful means and by negotiations. In the Mediterranean a series of military

crises have made this assumption problematic.

There remains, however, deterrence. Up to a certain level of dangerousness American and Soviet intervention has aimed at avoiding violent confrontation in order to avoid the risks of a direct showdown between the superpowers. This function of deterrence is, though, too limited to succeed in embracing internal and economic political problems which are at the root of the diverse Mediterranean crises. There is thus an effect of freezing the crises, which leaves intact on a different level their original causes.

The Mediterranean and Deterrence

The Western military prevalence in this area is quite evident; it could, however, quickly change. The importance of the Mediterranean for nuclear equilibrium is tied above all to the range of American nuclear missiles. Given the almost 3000 miles of Polaris and of Poseidon, the presence of nuclear submarines in the Mediterranean can be necessary to guarantee the coverage of objectives in Soviet central Asia and in western Siberia. However, the reinforcement of the protection for ICBM's and the development of SLBM's of greater range (Trident) could diminish the strategic importance of the Mediterranean.

Its significance vis-à-vis the European areas rests. The present balance of forces in central Europe (and the prospective of eventual reductions and of a freezing of force levels) increases the importance of the "flanks". The increment in the Soviet military fleet, the construction of helicopter carriers and aircraft carriers, the growing presence of Soviet squadrons in the Atlantic, in the Mediterranean and in the Indian Ocean indicate the increase in importance of naval strategy.

Nuclear armament for tactical use of the sixth fleet and of the American forces in southern Europe on the one hand serves to reinforce a naturally dispersed and chopped up land force, entrusted to national forces incapable of withstanding an eventual large-scale attack. This notwithstanding, the growing Soviet nuclear naval presence leads one to consider the possibility of a nuclear naval battle during the first moments of a conflict.

The Soviet fleet in the Mediterranean is practically without air cover, unless it operates only in the

north-east Mediterranean and unless it succeeds in neutralizing from the beginning the Greek-Turkish air forces. Its inferiority with respect to the western forces could obligate it to attempt an initial blow destructive of the major number of adversary forces, probably with the employment of nuclear arms.

The nuclear threshold in an East-West conflict in the Mediterranean could be then very low. In the future, equilibrium could be complicated by the acquisition of nuclear arms by other Mediterranean countries (Israel, Egypt, Turkey...*). The credibility of such deterrents in a generalized conflict would be very low but probably the factor of further uncertainty which they would create would lower the nuclear threshold even more.

Furthermore, we must note that in the Mediterranean Soviet or American deterrence is not used solely in relation to a possible conflict between NATO and Warsaw Pact countries but is called into question by the Middle East conflict. And this is the example of a conflict limited to conventional weapons and regionally circumscribed which could though involve the nuclear forces of the superpowers.

If the strategic importance of the Mediterranean from the point of view of global nuclear equilibrium is decreasing and if its local importance increases (equilibrium in Europe and in the Middle East), it is possible that American strategy in this area could evolve differently.

The risks of an excessively low nuclear threshold could suggest the building up of conventional presence. However, this is made quite difficult by the diminution of military bases in this region. The loss of the North African bases makes the entire allied military system rest on the countries of southern Europe. These already host a large number of bases; it is improbable for mostly political reasons that they would accept opening new ones or enlarging significantly the old ones.

Moreover, from 1973 on the political willingness to concede the use of military bases in European territory for

* The majority of Mediterranean countries have not signed or ratified the TNP.

whatever type of operation in the Middle East has diminished. Another airlift of massive proportions between the USA and Israel could no longer depend on the Azores and only with great difficulty could it utilize the bases in Spain. Germany and Italy have publicly declared their intention to not be involved unknowingly and that they are not favorable to too militarily committed actions. Even if the German and Italian positions are in reality more subtle than the declarations would suggest, it is still clear that a process of political consultation (which could turn out to be long and difficult) must now precede any American initiative.

These developments probably accentuate the importance of naval forces and communications (which could reach the Middle East both via the Mediterranean and via the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea). This could, however, make the American reaction slower than the Soviet and accentuate thereby the imbalance of forces due to geographical positioning.

Possible Changes and Crises

The American presence in the Mediterranean is tied to the Atlantic Alliance and to the bilateral agreement with Spain. Besides, the British bases on Cyprus could constitute a further support base for aerial operations.

The situation is open to many possible changes and crises.

A first summary would include:

A Greek-Turkish Conflict:

Both an open Greek-Turkish conflict and the withdrawal of one of the two countries from the Atlantic Alliance (or a real withdrawal from NATO) could seriously weaken the Allied forces in the eastern Mediterranean. This strategic sector is in the range of action of Warsaw Pact aircrafts and could be subjected to Soviet naval pressure from the south and from the north. If control of the Aegean were not secure, it could become risky for the sixth fleet. It would then be more opportune to shift the line of defense more to the west towards Malta, the Sicilian channel and southern Italy.

In the case that Greece were to abandon NATO, the

ties with Turkey would become problematic and entrusted above all to the permanence of the bases on Cyprus. This could stimulate nuclear proliferation in Turkey.

Finally, to the exit from NATO would be added that from NADGE and aerial defense of the eastern Mediterranean would become quite problematic.

Malta-Cyprus

The importance of these two islands is to insure aereo-naval reference points which link the eastern and western Mediterranean and the north and south banks.

If bases on these islands had to be done without, their role could be assumed by other bases in Sicily, Crete and Turkey. If however this happened in a political climate unfavorable to the setting up of new bases, this would accentuate the tendency to reduce the allied presence in the northern and western sectors of the Mediterranean.

In particular, if there were simultaneously the closure of the bases on Malta and the exit of Greece from NATO, the defense of the Adriatic-Ionian sector would become more problematic, with obvious consequences both for the organization and armament of the Italian forces and for the Yugoslavian situation.

Portugal-Spain

The new Portuguese government has already announced that the bases on the Azores can no longer be utilized by the USA to help Israel during a new war in the Middle East.

If the evolution of relations between NATO and Portugal is limited to this, it does not substantially alter the situation of the American forces for what regards an East-West conflict. If, however, the situation were to evolve towards a more neutral Portuguese position, this could cause new difficulties. In particular, ties between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean forces lean on both Great Britain and Spain, extending the lines of communication and increasing the politico-military weight of the USA-Spain agreement.

If then a real overturning of alliances were to take place, if, that is, Portugal were to accept under various forms a Soviet military presence, this would make

the bases in Spain much more vulnerable and would also complicate the strategic situation in the North Atlantic, where Soviet ships could complete a strategic triangle with apices in the North Sea, in Cuba and in Portugal. On the other hand, the uncertainties of the politico-institutional situation in Spain and the Portuguese example indicate just how fragile in the long run are special relationships with regimes whose own internal is fragile. The whole Iberian peninsula then could become an ever less secure area for an American military presence.

Summary

These and other pessimistic hypotheses (we are almost at the worst case analysis) suggest some constants:

- NATO in the Mediterranean is represented above all by the American presence. There does not exist another serious multilateral tie.
- The United States can not utilize NATO as a prop for its policy in the Middle East: this requires a diverse type of bilateral agreement evermore difficult to elaborate.
- The military predominance is still Western, but this could be challenged by internal political changes within the Mediterranean countries.
- It is difficult to obviate by only military measures the weaknesses which are being created. The major difficulty also in this case depends on political factors.
- The nuclear threshold of an eventual conflict in the Mediterranean could be quite low. Nuclear proliferation could further lower it.
- The importance of the Mediterranean for USA-USSR nuclear strategic equilibrium tends to decrease.
- The importance of the Mediterranean for European defense and for the control of "gray" areas tends instead to increase.

It is possible that these diverse factors pose a dilemma for American policy.

- Is it opportune to be further entangled in this "risky area" without great political prospectives, or is it

not more opportune to separate clearly the two problems of defense in central-north Europe and commitment in the Middle East, limiting military presence in the Mediterranean to eventual support forces of these two zones? In this instance a limited military presence would be enough, with perhaps an increment in naval forces in the Indian Ocean.

The interest of Europe is instead a closer tie between its central-north sector and the Mediterranean, both for strategic and even more for evident political, economic, and energy reasons. It is possible that on this point Americans and Europeans will make divergent evaluations.

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n° Inv. 10271

09 MAG. 1991

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