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SECURITY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Owing to a particular combination of political, military and economic conditions at both a regional and a global level, the security of the Mediterranean poses problems which are both delicate and complex. The aim of this paper is the examination of those factors which lie behind Mediterranean instability and the evaluation of the present situation in terms of security. The factors to be considered will be primarily political and military.

What lies behind the high degree of instability in the Mediterranean? Two principal reasons may be adduced: namely the everpresent risk that purely local conflicts in the area might precipitate conflict on a world scale and the political fragmentation of the region which prevents the effective use of normal methods of conflict management. Neither détente nor deterrence in the Mediterranean function as efficiently as they do at a world level.

So far as concerns the risk of escalation one is obliged to emphasize the direct presence and to varying degrees the involvement of the superpowers in the defence and security of the states of the region. On account of this most conflicts in the area become rapidly polarized along East-West lines.

The tactical presence of the Soviet and American fleets gives concrete form to the potential dangers of conflict inherent in the Mediterranean. Both fleets are large and technologically advanced. Both confront each other on a day to day basis. Their surface vessels are exposed to the risk of tactical surprise attack and are thus in a state of continual alert, this in a highly unstable area of the world in which the states in conflict have close relations with the superpowers and where, during recurrent periods of crisis, there exists uncertainty as to the future of these relations.

The difficulties of controlling this situation of direct superpower involvement are rendered even worse by the uncertainty which exists as to the frontiers between the zones of influence and between the vital interests of the superpowers. The fluctuation in the Soviet presence in Egypt is an example of this.

At the same time conflict in the Mediterranean, despite its East-West polarization, lends itself only with great difficulty to the normal forms of conflict management (i.e. détente and deterrence) used in inter-superpower relations. It is in fact generally difficult to translate these superpower relations onto a regional level. If détente appears as a reasonable objective in Europe this is because more than in other regions the divisions of the continent run along classic East-West lines. (What is more, in the last few years the experience of negotiations such as the European Security Conference has shown that the degree of détente is inversely proportional to the degree of reciprocal interference between East and West). In the Mediterranean on the other hand there exists no clearly defined and stable East-West regional division.

Parties, States and movements enter into conflict and thus form alliances along East-West lines; the latter are however unstable and attempts at détente (in terms of East-West divisions) are rendered inope-

rative. It should be added that, this model, relevant today, principally in the Middle-East, could soon become of relevance to Southern Europe if the recent political difficulties of NATO in this area should worsen.

If the use of détente as a form of conflict management poses problems, so deterrence may also prove ineffective. At a certain danger level, Soviet-American intervention, with the objective of avoiding a direct showdown between the superpowers has aimed at avoiding violent confrontations (such as the various Arab-Israeli wars). This deterrent function is however too limited to succeed in overcoming the internal economic and political problems at the origin of the various Mediterranean conflicts. The effect is to "freeze" crises without eliminating their underlying causes.

The basic reasons behind the particular instability of the Mediterranean area seem to lie within the region itself. For this reason crises may not be definable in East-West terms. The presence of the superpowers nonetheless forces these local crises into the framework of world confrontation. At the same time the local roots of these crises render their resolution along the lines used by the superpowers in their own relations impossible. The result is that the superpowers, while risking involvement at a world level in conflicts with purely local origins and while succeeding, on occasions, in "freezing" such conflicts, fail to resolve them.

It is this contradiction which renders the Mediterranean not only locally unstable but dangerous to world security. What alternatives are there to the present situation?

There are many possibilities (a standstill, an increase in the superpower presence, the diversification of the latter, superpower disengagement). We will seek here to discuss certain hypothesis only, namely those concerning the disengagement or diversification of the superpower presence.

The possibility of disengagement exists above all at a strategic level. The US strategic presence in the Mediterranean is at present represented by missile-bearing submarines, the so-called SSBNs (Strategic ballistic missile submarines). The missiles carried by the latter, with a range of 2,500 nautical miles, are capable of reaching from the Mediterranean cities such as Moscow, Sverdlovsk and Tashkent. The new generation of Tridents, scheduled to become operational between 1978 and 1982 has a range of 4,500-6,000 nautical miles. The same cities would thus come within range of missiles launched from the Atlantic; at the same time the operational capability of SSBNs in the Indian Ocean would be increased.

It is clear that the development of SLBMs constitutes a factor working towards a devaluation of the strategic importance of the Mediterranean, at least in so far as regards the defence of US territory. This renders possible a US disengagement in the area and inessential the use of bases such as Rota. One should at the same time bear in mind that with the development of satellite based intelligence systems the present NADGE network may be expected to lose some of its importance.

From a strategic point of view a US disengagement is thus conceivable (together with a parallel disengagement by the USSR). Such a development does not, however, necessarily imply tactical disengagement,

on the contrary it could well lead to the reinforcement of the tactical presence of the superpowers. It would perhaps be useful to examine this point more closely.

A possible tactical disengagement of the superpowers from the Mediterranean would pose serious problems, partly military but above all political. The dimensions of a tactical withdrawal might be such, moreover, as to imply new strategic problems.

The most serious questions which would be raised by a withdrawal of tactical forces from the Mediterranean would concern existing alliances. The significance of any withdrawal of the American sixth fleet to Europe and to Israel may be clearly defined. From a military point of view one might argue that, especially if the Russians were at the same time to confine the operations of their fleet to the Black Sea, the stationing of the sixth fleet in the Eastern Atlantic would not reduce its capacity for tactical intervention in the Mediterranean via the Straights of Gibraltar. Nonetheless, from a political point of view, there can be no doubt that the respective allies of the superpowers would regard their withdrawal from the Mediterranean as a sign of a reevaluation in a negative sense of existing alliances.

So far as Europe is concerned, especially following the development of détente in the central part of the continent, the Mediterranean (ever if this would not appear to US strategists to be the case) is now of greater strategic importance than ever. The present balance of power in central Europe and (as a result of current talks) the prospect of force reductions or the freezing of forces at their present levels has led to an increase in the importance of the flanks over the traditional central front between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The Europeans will naturally be worried if a freeze or reduction of forces on the central front is accompanied by American disengagement on the South flank particularly in a highly unstable zone such as the Mediterranean.

Pressure from allies might well in the future constitute a strong factor inhibiting any American tactical disengagement in the Mediterranean. In this case the presence of the superpowers (implying the deployment of cruise missiles, the perfecting of Poseidon and Polaris for tactical use, the maintenance of MRBMs in Italy, Greece and Turkey) could be maintained.

At the same time the superpowers might themselves show an interest in strengthening their tactical presence in the Mediterranean (reinforcing for example, not only their tactical nuclear capacity, mentioned above, but also the strength of their conventional forces), and thus allowing themselves the option of a more flexible nuclear strategy. The Russian fleet would find it extremely easy to adopt such a role in the area. In this case the Mediterranean would take on a new kind of strategic significance, linked, if the superpowers should abandon their direct engagement in the area, to a new strategy on the part of the latter.

There are, however, factors which tend towards the weakening of the effectiveness of any pressure the allies might exert on the United States. Present developments in Southern Europe: in Turkey, Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy make any American presence, whether bilateral or multilateral, more difficult rather than easier to maintain. The reaction of the allies during the Kippur War leads one to believe in a weakening of the alliance. It cannot be denied that these developments could lead to a disengagement of the United States. The problem would

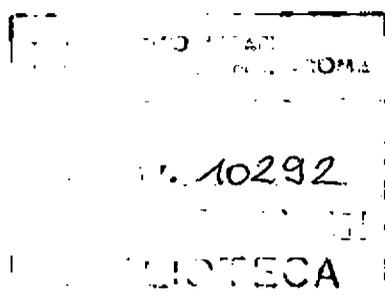
then become that of knowing whether this would constitute a unilateral act, an agreed withdrawal within the framework of negotiations such as the MBFR or rather a shift in the front between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

The hypothesis of Mediterranean MBFR talks would pose even more complex problems than those created by their Viennese equivalent. The second hypothesis of a shift in front might involve a strengthening of US positions in Iran and in the Indian Ocean and the setting up in the Eastern Atlantic of the framework for a net of new Arab and African alliances. This possibility appears less improbable when one considers that the principal route for oil transport continues to pass round the Cape of Good Hope.

It is however, difficult, at least for the moment, to formulate any equation between superpower disengagement and Mediterranean security. It is true that the withdrawal from the area of the USA and the USSR would allow the depolarization of conflicts and might thus constitute a basis for their resolution. It is however necessary to realize both that the vacuum created would hardly be filled by a sudden influx of peaceful feeling and that disengagement could have severe political implications at a bilateral level. It might result in rapid nuclear proliferation (many Mediterranean states have yet to sign the NPT). At the same time a loosening of multilateral links between the countries of Southern Europe and the US might be paralleled by a strengthening of bilateral relations, this in turn implying a reduction in the freedom of action of those countries concerned.

To conclude, one should note that the prospects for security in the Mediterranean might appear brighter if Europe and the Arab States together constituted a political and economic force sufficient to fill the vacuum left by the superpowers. A solution of the Middle Eastern problem would in this case involve European participation and thus the necessity for Europe to make certain political choices. It would at the same time be possible to see within the framework of a renewed European engagement a return of the French to the Mediterranean (either simply to replace British forces or, alternatively, to fill the vacuum left by US disengagement).

Whether or not this occurs one can see that the disengagement of the superpowers can produce those positive effects expected of it only if accompanied by the growth of Mediterranean political development poles. Without this, the prospects for the future are more than uncertain.



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