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IAI-TEPSA Seminar

ITALY: ITS SECURITY PROBLEMS IN THE CONTEXT  
OF THE ATLANTIC ALLIANCE

Sala Cenacolo  
Piazza Santa Maria in Campo Marzio, 42  
Rome

19-20 October 1984

THE SOUTHERN FLANK OF NATO  
PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES

by

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IAI/23/84

My presentation is based on a premise followed by a three-fold analysis: an analysis of the factors which characterize the security situation of the Mediterranean region, an analysis of the problems this situation poses to the Western countries, and an analysis of the actions which might be taken.

The premise is that the Mediterranean area cannot be defined anymore as NATO's Southern Flank. In the Fifties this definition was correct, the Mediterranean being simply the extension of the line of ground defense of the Central European front, along the Yugo-Italian border, the Greek-Turkish Thrace up to the eastern Turkish-Soviet border. Today, that definition appears inadequate. The Mediterranean area has evolved into a true theater of operations. The threat has increased and diversified, the elements of instability have multiplied and the region is now more strictly linked, in geostrategic terms, with the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the Central African belt extending from the Horn to the Sub-Sahara. (1)

At present, the Mediterranean region's security equation is characterized by several factors.

First factor: a qualitative, more than quantitative, increase in the military capability of the Warsaw Pact's Southern region countries, (i.e. Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria), and a quantitative as well as qualitative increase in the military capability of the Soviet Union. (2) The Soviets are now present in the Mediterranean with a fleet averaging daily from 40 to 50 ships (the average was 5 ships in 1964), and logging annually since 1979 about 16,500 ship-days (in 1964 the ship-days were 1800). Furthermore, the deployment of Soviet Naval Aviation's "Backfire" bombers, armed with air-to-surface missiles, and with a combat radius covering the entire Mediterranean area, poses a new, relevant threat to the Western navies and to the sea lines of communication. (3)

The presence of the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron and its capability to perform what I usually define as a "mission-denial mission" has had three effects.

NATO's navies have lost the total control of the sea they enjoyed until the mid 60's.

In case of war, the US Sixth Fleet would no longer be in a position to support the defensive battles of NATO's ground forces right from the outbreak of hostilities. The Sixth Fleet, together with other allied naval forces, will have first to neutralize the Soviet aero-naval threat and win the battle at sea. In other words, sea control has become an initial priority for at least a major portion of NATO aero-naval resources.

Even in peacetime, or in the event of extra NATO-Warsaw Pact crises, the Soviet naval presence limits and conditions the range of political and military options open to the United States and its possibility of using the Sixth Fleet to pursue

or support foreign policy objectives. In other words, it diminishes the flexibility of American crisis-management policy and the political significance of American military presence.

It is obviously a reciprocal limitation in that the Soviet Union is, in turn, conditioned by the American aero-naval forces. Indeed, the Soviet Union is even more conditioned because of its limited capability to operate effectively in the Mediterranean, both in political and military terms.

But the limits are felt more by the United States, whose interests and involvement in the area appear more vital and extensive.

Due to this reciprocal limitation, the management and control of any South-South crisis in the Mediterranean region has become more difficult and complex, and the risks of a superpower confrontation over a local crisis gone out of control have increased.

Second factor: the presence in the region of many international problems which are difficult to solve. These are problems that do not directly affect East-West relations, but do involve either members of the Atlantic Alliance (the problems of the Aegean Sea between Greece and Turkey and the controversy over Gibraltar between Spain and England) or areas and countries outside the NATO's area of responsibility (the long standing crises in the Middle East, in the former Spanish Sahara, in Chad).

These unresolved problems, possible cause of confrontation and conflict, add to those elements of instability and latent crisis which stem from the domestic situation of several riparian countries, from the Soviet attempts to expand its political influence in the region, and from the active and radical foreign policy conducted by Qaddafi.

In fact, the Mediterranean is a region divided into a number of different "tension areas". This feature makes it unrealistic, if not impossible, to consider the region as a single entity to which a common parameter of political and strategic analysis can be applied. The tensions in the various areas derive from problems which are very diverse in terms of historical and ethnic roots, political and economic interests, and security needs.

This fragmentation into a number of distinct "tension areas" does not, however, exclude the possibility, should the tension in one area break out into open conflict, that other areas of the Mediterranean or countries belonging to another region may be affected or that the two superpowers and East-West relations may be directly or indirectly involved.

Also of significance is the fact that the tension areas are not located along the borders between NATO and Warsaw Pact countries and that the situations of latent crises cannot be attributed to elements of confrontation between the two alliances in southern Europe.

Third factor: the further militarization of the Mediterranean

region caused by the strengthening of the military powers of the riparian countries with a particular emphasis on the modernization of air and naval forces.

Today, the air forces of the Mediterranean countries deploy medium bombers (not only the old Egyptian TU-16 Badger, but also the more modern Lybian Tu-22 Blinder) and a whole series of new generation combat aircraft (F-15, F-16, Mig-23/27, Mig-25, SU-20/22, Mirage F-1).

For the naval forces, the situation can be summarized as follows: greater diffusion of submarines; increase in the ex-novo procurement of frigates; a noteworthy increase in light missile armed ships (corvettes, fast attack craft and hydrofoils).

Now, the build up of the armed forces of even the smallest riparian countries raises a series of problems. (4)

First, in the Mediterranean, the longstanding concept of high seas, to which freedom of navigation, fishing rights, exploration and exploitation of the sea's resources, etc. are closely linked, might be increasingly put into question. Second, it increases the propensity of the riparian countries to utilize military means as a method to solve political controversies. Third, it renders those air and naval operations of the type included in what is commonly referred to as "gunboat diplomacy", or what Edward Luttwak has called "naval suasion", more difficult and risky. Fourth, it will complicate any future attempt to reach arms control agreements applied to the Mediterranean sea.

In conclusion, the acquisition of significant military capabilities by the Third World Mediterranean countries implies a redistribution of political and military power that it would be naive to ignore or underestimate. Their "sea denial" power, which already exists and is likely to grow in the future, will have to be taken into account in any crisis which might arise as the result of controversies over the limits of territorial waters and of jurisdiction over the continental shelves, over the right to freedom of navigation and transit, etc.

Fourth factor: the technological development of modern weapons systems. (5) Among them: ocean reconnaissance satellites; radar aircraft (such as the NATO's AWACS or the American E-2C Hawkeye); fighter-bombers with longer combat radius, higher weapons load capacity, more accurate navigation and firing systems, and armed with terminally guided air-to-surface missiles; naval units with higher speed and fitted with very precise and difficult to intercept anti-ship missiles; sophisticated mines and mine warfare ships. All these systems have "shrunk" the Mediterranean sea in terms of operational employment of forces. Furthermore, they have increased the vulnerability of the surface naval forces, enhanced the role of the land-based air forces, and made it more difficult to transit through and easier to control the choke points in the Mediterranean.

This factor will have an effect on the military operations in

the Mediterranean region in any type of conflict.

Fifth factor: the repercussions on the Mediterranean region of any crisis in the Gulf which might result in a sharp reduction or in a permanent or temporary interruption of the flow of Arab oil toward Europe; or in a direct involvement of the two superpowers.

Sixth factor: the integral application of the Law of the Sea, with the institution of "Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) up to 200 miles off the shores of the coastal countries and the extension of territorial waters from 6 to 12 miles, on the one hand, and, on the other, progress in sea mining technology which will make it possible and economically feasible to exploit seabed resources. The problem in the Mediterranean appears particularly complex. Given the Mediterranean's geography, the institution of EEZs will lead to a series of superimpositions and overlappings, and hence to reasons for controversy. Even the extension of territorial waters does not appear of easy application, especially in the Aegean. Progress in mining technology will tend to make it more difficult for the countries whose EEZs overlap to reach agreement on their exploitation.

Seventh factor: the growing international economic importance of the Mediterranean. In particular, the increasing importance of the Sea as a waterway for oil transportation. A study conducted by the Internaft LTD has predicted that by 1985 as much as 425 million tons a year (about 8 1/2 million b/d) of Middle East oil might be moving to Western markets through the Mediterranean. If the Internaft assumptions are modified, including Iraqi use of its oil pipelines at full capacity plus the exports of Mediterranean rim oil producing countries, the total oil which will be presumably transported across the Mediterranean in 1985 reaches the figure of 10.4 million b/d. (6)

Eighth factor: the possibility, albeit in the medium-long term, of nuclear proliferation in the Mediterranean region through the acquisition by a riparian country of an explicit military nuclear capability. It should be remembered that the majority of the Mediterranean countries already have the military means (aircraft and missiles) to transport and deliver a nuclear device.

The new security picture of the Mediterranean region -- at present and in the short and medium term -- is of serious concern for the Atlantic Alliance.

The new Soviet military capability, and the possibility that Soviet penetration into and influence over certain North-African countries might become so deep, that these countries would side with Moscow in any international East-West crisis, has prompted NATO to expand its traditional threat assessment horizons. Thus, since the mid 60's, NATO

has considered not only the threat from the East in the Mediterranean region, but also the potential threat from the South. NATO's concern is mainly related to the possible use by Soviet air and naval forces of selected ports and airports in the North-African littoral. In reality, despite the bonds established through the sale of arms and equipment and the presence of Soviet personnel on their territory, the countries on the North-African littoral do not appear very willing to grant the Soviet Union particular, not to say exclusive, concessions.

The utilization of naval and air facilities is even less likely in case of an East-West crisis, when granting the Soviets the right to operate from their territory will mean for these countries a direct involvement in an eventual East-West military confrontation. Even Libya, whose relationship with the Soviet Union is often uncorrectly defined as a proxy type, would certainly think twice before supporting Moscow too openly in case of a NATO-Warsaw Pact confrontation.

In effect, NATO is, even today, only partially Mediterranean oriented. True, there is the perception that the strategic situation in the region has radically changed and the Soviet threat has increased. The military contingency planning now considers also the worst case of a direct or indirect support of Soviet operations by North-African countries. But there is also the perception that the overall military balance in the South is still in favor of the West, and that the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron, even though it has a significant military capability, is basically a "one shot naval force" lacking sufficient air cover and logistic support. Without full control of the Turkish Straits and use of facilities on the North-African littoral, the Soviet Squadron will be unable to sustain extended war operations.

Furthermore, the present ground forces situation in the South is such as to exclude any credible scenario of a Soviet surprise attack. This scenario, however hypothetical in political terms, can in fact be imagined in terms of military capability on the Central Front where 27 Soviet combat-ready divisions are deployed in East Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia

Finally, the real, potential threats to European security in the Mediterranean region do not arise from the eventuality of a NATO-Warsaw Pact confrontation. They derive from the potential crisis situations in Mediterranean areas outside NATO's area of responsibility and from events which might occur in other regions. Actually, the Atlantic Alliance is particularly concerned by the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the unpredictable evolution of the Iran-Iraq war, the future of Khomeini's regime and the increased diplomatic effort of the Soviet Union aimed at an expansion of its political influence and leverage. More specifically, the closer ties with Syria and Libya; the presence in Ethiopia; the re-establishment of full diplomatic relations with Egypt; the new political mood towards Saudi Arabia; the

conclusion of a major arms deal with Kuwait; the prospective sale of armaments to Jordan; and the recent signing of a treaty of friendship and cooperation with North Yemen. But these are areas for which the Atlantic Alliance has no institutional responsibility and hence does not possess any instrument or mechanism for a coordinated political response or military initiative.

Now, the facts:

- that the strategic situation in the Mediterranean has changed more in terms of a globalization of the threat to European security than in terms of direct Soviet military threat;

- that an extension of NATO's area of responsibility would be politically unfeasible and, in any case, have a destabilizing effect on the region, complicating European relations with Third World countries;

- that any South-South or North-South crisis could eventually evolve into a superpowers confrontation and then into an East-West conflict;

- that new regions have entered into the Mediterranean and therefore European security picture, have created a peculiar situation and a certain degree of Euro-American friction.(7)

The United States tends to judge events in the Mediterranean region mainly in an East-West context and to attune its political and military responses according to this evaluation. Further, the U.S. tends to judge the cohesion of the Atlantic Alliance on the basis of European support for American policy. The United States is rightly perplexed and sometimes annoyed by Europe's unwillingness to share the burden of the defense of interests (i.e. the oil flow) which are more European than American.

The European countries tend to judge the American East-West approach as an oversimplification of regional problems which do not easily fit into predetermined schemes. The Europeans feel that the Soviet penetration efforts should be met but think that the South-South or North-South elements are often predominant with respect to the East-West axis. While recognizing the importance of the American security commitment in the Southern region, the Europeans believe that political and economic, more than military, instruments should be created and utilized to defend Western interests, limit Soviet influence, defuse and control potential crisis situations, and maintain stability in the region. Europe's attitude is, of course, influenced by its energy dependence on the Arab states, by internal political factors, by its economic situation and its awareness of being more vulnerable to any crisis in the region.

On the other hand, the approach of the pro-Western Arab countries to the security issue of the region appears to differ little from that of Europe. For them, too, the problem of the Soviet regional policy is real, but is subordinated to the threat posed by the Islamic integralist movement, the

polarization of the inter-Arab conflicts, the danger of greater regional instability, an extension of the Iran-Iraq war, and the problem of the continuing Arab-Israeli confrontation.

Several questions arise from this complex situation.

- Which military posture should be adopted to face the strengthening of the Warsaw Pact's military capability in the Southern Region ?

- In which way should Europe contribute to the defense of European security interests outside NATO's area of responsibility ?

- How to better coordinate Western crisis management policies ?

- How to increase the Euro-Arab and Euro-African political and economic cooperation ?

In recent years, the European countries have paid greater attention to the problems of Mediterranean security. One could mention: the political and military role played by France in the Maghreb and the sub-Saharan Africa in containing the Libyan expansionist designs; the Italian guarantee of Maltese neutrality and the expanded role of the Italian Navy; West Germany's economic and military aid to Turkey; the re-deployment in the Mediterranean of units of the British Navy, albeit for limited periods only. More recently, European military contingents have participated in the Sinai peace force and in the multinational force in Lebanon.

However, the overall picture is not very bright. The Western countries failed to elaborate a common politico-military strategy to adopt for crises which were easy to predict. And they have been incapable of acting in a closely coordinated fashion when the crises did erupt. Even when a decision to intervene was taken, as in Lebanon, the lack of consensus on the role of the military contingents, and on the perspectives on a solution of the crisis, led to poor military coordination and diverging political initiatives.

It is difficult to imagine that, faced by an "out of area" crisis, the United States and its European allies would achieve the necessary coordination and convergence of attitudes and actions. The most likely hypothesis is that of a multifaced response. Every country will base its reaction on its appreciation of specific national interests, on the domestic political situation, on the value of the economic interests at stake, and on the repercussions of its attitude in the regional context. Furthermore, it will probably try to avoid a direct identification of its politico-military initiatives with those of the United States.

Until such time as a coherent "European identity" in terms of foreign and security policies emerges, there will be no alternative to a certain dissonance in European responses.

Until such time, any change in the European security picture and any out of area crisis will be dealt with by the European countries on a "case by case" basis, with no reference to a



common policy and fully integrated political and military objectives.

However, even in this perspective, there is room for sound European actions.

The general framework should consider:

- efforts to increase European defense capabilities in the Southern region;
- active political mediation in crisis situations;
- a contribution to regional stability through closer political and economic ties with regional countries, supporting their industrial development and enhancing their autonomous defense capabilities;
- the pursuit of arms control arrangements.

In particular, in the military field a number of steps can be taken, such as:

- strengthening the allied land-based air forces in view of the important role they can play in a land-locked-sea like the Mediterranean;
- moving the line of radar coverage and air defense further to the south;
- modernizing the Turkish air defense system which represents the first screening barrier for Soviet bombers directed toward the Mediterranean;
- upgrading particular European bases to accommodate American B-52 bombers, armed with air-to-surface missiles, operating in a sea-control role;
- strengthening the allied naval forces' anti-submarine and mine warfare capabilities;
- converting the present NATO "on call" naval force in the Mediterranean (NAVOCFORMED) into a standing naval force (STANAVFORMED) similar to the standing naval force of the Atlantic. With the participation of French and Spanish ships, such a force could eventually become the core of a truly "European" military presence in the Mediterranean; (9)
- cooperating more closely within the Independent European Program Group (IEPG) on armaments projects considered useful as instruments of a common military policy in the Mediterranean;
- establishing of national rapid deployment forces.

Military actions can be basically taken within the NATO context. However, political initiatives designed to enhance European security without resort to a network of agreements directly involving the two superpowers will be more complex and difficult to envision, accept and bring forward.

However, even in the political field, I believe it is possible to pursue what I like to call a "collaboration in labor" -- instead of "division of labor".

This collaboration in labor must be realized first at the European level, among European countries -- not only European Mediterranean countries -- and then at the Euro-American level. (10)

At the European level this basically means proceeding step by step towards a fully coordinated Mediterranean policy. The priority within this policy should be given to political and economic contributions to regional stability. This involves the maintenance of close ties between Turkey and Europe (11) and the forging of closer political and economic ties with the Arab and African countries of the region by offering better trade opportunities, development aids and means to strengthen their defense capabilities. But it would be a big mistake to think that the region's instability can be resolved by the simple expedient of arms sales. Furthermore, the limits of Europe's scope for maneuver should be recognized. In fact, the European countries are not yet ready or capable to provide those guarantees which many countries consider essential for their security and for the maintenance of regional balance.

Step number two should be the establishment of a contingency political coordination process consisting of a basic agreement on a series of predetermined political and military measures to be taken individually and/or in concert in case of crisis. Of course these measures will necessarily be very general, but nevertheless it will be capable of providing an useful framework for decision. They should include the level of involvement each country is ready to accept, politically and militarily, and the latitude of support it is prepared to give to American policies. Furthermore, crisis-management centers should be organized to deal with out-of-area crises. They should be tightly interconnected, in order to facilitate consultation and coordination both in the political and military field.

Step number three should focus on acting, again in a coordinated way, to reach arms control agreements acceptable both in terms of balance of power and reliable verifications. Arms control should be pursued not only in the East-West, but also in the North-South context, as a measure of regional stabilization. Strict non-proliferation policies should be an integral part of this effort.

With step number four stronger political support should be given to the IEPG as the organization responsible for the achievement of a better rationalization of the European arms production and of a wider interoperability and standardization.

A larger role should be assumed by the EEC and specifically, in the foreign and security policy fields, by the EPC. Turkey, Spain and Portugal should participate in the EPC's consultations dealing with Mediterranean area issues (especially the security issues) even though they are not yet EEC members. European security requirements cannot, in fact, be completely and credibly satisfied without at least Turkish and Spanish participation and contributions. The strengthening of the EPC role should be preferred to the planned re-vitalization of the Western European Union (WEU) which appears, in many respects, inadequate to tackle

European security problems.

In conclusion, it appears necessary to reevaluate the military equation in the Mediterranean area in terms of a new level, type and dislocation of forces; in terms of new weapons technologies and a less traditional utilization of them; in terms of a greater integration of European forces on the operational and technical level; and in terms of the acceptance of precise responsibilities by the European countries most interested in Mediterranean stability.

It appears necessary for the European countries to make a more careful evaluation of the connections between the Mediterranean area and the Persian Gulf, Red Sea and Indian Ocean, and between the Mediterranean area and Africa.

It appears necessary to establish a closer cooperation among the European countries, within the framework of the EPC, on the problems of security in the Mediterranean and in areas outside the NATO's area of responsibility where Europe has vital interests. It would be illogical and politically harmful to let Europe's vital interests be taken care of exclusively by the United States. Such an abdication of responsibility could have detrimental effects on both Euro-American relations and on the actual development of events in these areas, where the European countries can and should play an important role of political and military deterrence, mediation and stabilization.

It appears necessary to pursue a Mediterranean policy aimed at defusing all potential crisis situations, arms control agreements capable of reducing the military confrontation in the region, and a tight non-proliferation policy.

It appears necessary, finally, to lay the foundations for a new balance that privileges a closer Euro-Arab and Euro-African dialogue.

#### NOTES

(1) For a more detailed analysis of the strategic evolution of the region, see M. CREMASCO, "Evoluzione geostrategica e interessi nazionali all'interno della NATO", Politica Internazionale, 9, September 1983, pp.59-66.

(2) On the increase of Warsaw Pact military capabilities, see M. CREMASCO, "Military options for the security of the Southern Flank", Paper IAI/32/81, presented at the European-American Institute for Security Research Workshop on "NATO's Southern Flank, the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf", Naples, september 21-23, 1981.

(3) For a full analysis of the political and military significance of the Soviet Mediterranean Fleet, see M. CREMASCO, "La dimensione militare" in S. Silvestri e M. Cremasco, "Il Fianco Sud della NATO" Feltrinelli, Milano, april 1980, pp. 79-102. See also Robert G. WEINLAND, "Soviet strategy and the objectives of their naval presence in the Mediterranean", in "The Mediterranean region", edited by

Giacomo LUCIANI, Croom Helm, London, 1984, pp.267-291.

(4) On these problems, see M. CREMASCO, "The military presence of the riparian countries" in "The Mediterranean region" cit. pp. 206-238.

(5) On the subject, see M. CREMASCO, "Gli sviluppi tecnologici e il loro impatto sulle operazioni navali" in "Il Fianco Sud della NATO", cit. pp. 146-156.

(6) See G. LUCIANI, "The international economic importance of the Mediterranean", Lo Spettatore Internazionale, 1, 1981, pp. 15-28.

(7) For a full analysis, see R. ALIBONI and M. CREMASCO, "Il Fianco Sud della NATO nei rapporti tra Europa Occidentale e Stati Uniti", Paper IAI/12/83, Rome, april 15, 1983.

(8) On this question, see M. CREMASCO, "Alliance options for Persian Gulf security" paper presented at the European-American Institute for Security Research Workshop on "The Persian Gulf and energy security", Kronberg/Taunus, june 4-6, 1981.

(9) For the pros and cons of this proposal, see M. CREMASCO, "Il Fianco Sud della NATO", cit. pp. 167-170.

(10) See A. ARMELLINI, "Mediterranean security", paper presented at the Centre for European Policy Studies annual conference on "Western European priorities on the eve of the Parliamentary elections of 1984", Brussels, 23-26 november 1983.

(11) See M. CREMASCO, "The strategic importance of relations between Turkey and the European Community", The International Spectator, 1-2, january-june 1983, pp. 47-61.

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