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TURKEY AND THE ITALIAN SECURITY DEBATE

by Marco De Andreis

In analyzing Turkey's security, virtually no Western observer fails to stress several factors which make this country key to the security of Nato as whole.

"Turkey (is) a concrete link between ..two continents. The country is also at the center of the intersection between the East-West and the North-South arteries of the Middle East and Persian Gulf areas. Finally, Turkey serves as a barrier which hinders Soviet access to the Mediterranean and the Middle East" (1).

The cultural - and increasingly economic - links with the Arab world are also very often emphasized. Accordingly the West is seen to benefit by a potential bridge-gapping role Turkey could play between the West and the Arab countries.

Yet very little is done by the Western community, in terms of concrete policies, to help Ankara overcome a complex set of military, economic and political problems. Again there is an ever-ready long list of plausible reasons for this attitude: the multi-faceted issue of Turkey's accession to EC; its dispute with Greece, which forces fellow Nato countries into inaction through equidistance; the troublesome human rights violations which allegedly took place in Turkey before and after the November 1983 general elections. This last issue undoubtedly has repercussions on the former two, deeply influencing European - and to a lesser extent American - attitudes toward Ankara.

Going through these questions once more would add little to other authors' skillful reviews of the various factors influencing Turkey's security (2). Therefore, it may be interesting to change perspective and to see how much attention is paid to Turkey in the security debate of other Nato countries.

Indeed, it could be argued that, apart from the US, the FRG and (for very different reasons) Greece, no other ally pays very much attention to Turkey's security. Italy, however, has good reasons to do that. A southern flank country itself, home port of the major naval asset in the Mediterranean - the US 6th fleet - Italy considers the control of that sea vital for its security. In turn, the loss of Nato control over the straits would immensely aggravate Italy's threat perceptions. If only for this reason, Rome should feel compelled to closely follow any development in Ankara. Eventually, both countries' security is mutually linked.

But there is also an additional factor which makes the Italian security debate interesting from a Turkish viewpoint. That is the recent emphasis placed by Italy on the so-called threat from the South, on out-of-area missions, and on the creation of a national "forza di pronto intervento" (rapid deployment force).

From the very beginning of its post-unity history, Italian foreign policy has always had two poles of attraction: central Europe and the Mediterranean. Both of them can be further qualified. Because of competing territorial claims with Austria and Yugoslavia the first pole had mainly - in terms of security - a North-Eastern emphasis. While the colonial adventures of

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the Italian imperialism added a clear African dimension to the Mediterranean pole.

This post-war period marked a strong predominance of the former over the latter. Soon after the war Rome was coopted into the core of European initiatives. As a result it has been a member of Nato, the WEU and EC since their formation.

Militarily, this sort of Northern pull was even stronger. From the East the only access route by land is the Gorizia gap at the Italo-Yugoslavian border. Thus, the bulk of air and land forces has been concentrated there. As for the Navy, its limited radius of action was perfectly justified by the presence of the US 6th fleet on one hand, and by the very limited presence of Soviet naval assets in the Mediterranean on the other.

By the mid-seventies many internal and international factors began to change this well-established pattern of Italian security policy.

In contrast to the early post-war period, when the Italian armed forces were badly trained and equipped, the economic recovery has allowed for an increasingly effective military instrument. In 1975 a fifteen-year modernization plan for the three services was launched: since then the average yearly increase for arms procurement has been more than 8% in real terms (3). Moreover, with the formal settlement of the Italo-Yugoslavian border question (1975, the Treaty of Osimo), the military balance on the North-Eastern theatre appeared even more satisfactory, if not favorable.

However, contrary trends emerged elsewhere. The first oil crisis dramatically underlined the vulnerability of industrialized societies to energy shortages or - which amounts to the same thing - to energy price increases. This was especially true for Italy which in 1978 was dependent on imports for 82% of its energy supply, while 69% of its electricity output was fueled by oil.

Furthermore, the political event which led to that crisis - the Arab-Israeli war in 1973 - was only the first in a long chain of crisis throughout the seventies and the early eighties. It is needless to stress the geographical proximity and the economic interest of Italy to the "arc of instability".

Finally, "the deployment of a Soviet naval force in the Mediterranean, its qualitative and quantitative increase up to a level of substantial threat, and the introduction of the Backfire bomber into Soviet Naval Aviation units, have been the main factors of change on the overall military picture of Nato Southern flank" (4).

In short, there are certainly new factors which have come to influence the Italian security equation. As usually, though, the problem is now to respond: what combination of military preparedness and political initiative is more appropriate?

From the beginning of the present decade Italian foreign policy has increasingly shown an interest in a settlement to the Middle-East turmoil. It is not by chance that the EC declaration on the Palestinian right to self-determination took place at the Venice summit of June 1980. The following years added a military dimension to diplomacy: since 1982 Italian minesweepers, based in Sharm El Sheik, patrol the Tiran strait, monitoring - together with other Western forces - the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai. The same year Italy joined American, British and French forces in the peacekeeping operations in Lebanon: with more than 2,000 troops involved, this was a complex military task. Finally, in response to an Egyptian request, Italian minesweepers patrolled the Suez Canal from August to October 1984.

While the trend is rather clear at a diplomatic level (5), the role of the military still has to be assessed. All these operations, in fact, took place outside Nato and the UN (6); that is to say outside those established frameworks of Italian foreign policy which has so far allowed the redeployment abroad of Italian forces.

Nonetheless, the term "minaccia da sud" (threat from the South) is nowadays part of the Italian security dictionnaire. Although the Army chief of staff, Gen. Umberto Cappuzzo, believes that "hypotheses of large-scale amphibious landings or paratroops operations in the heart of the peninsula are absolutely unimaginable"(7), the presence of the Army in the southern part of the country has been strengthened(8). More importantly, airfields in Sicily have been modernized to allow the redeployment of fighters squadrons; together with the planned purchase of air tankers, this would considerably extend the Air Force's combat radius in the Mediterranean. While these moves seem to be consistent with the role Italian forces have within Nato, others could be less so. The Navy chief of staff Admiral Vittorio Marulli, for example, recently called for a fixed-wings, sea-based aviation capability (9). The fact that he mentioned the Lebanon mission, where in his opinion Italian forces lacked air coverage, demonstrates that at least part of the Italian military seems ready to consider out-of-area operations. Moreover, as the example illustrates, such operations are seen in isolation from other allied forces.

These developments have not taken place in a political vacuum. In December 1982 the then Minister of Defence, Mr Lelio Lagorio, declared that "...our country must pursue an independent and autonomous policy, first of all as far as areas not covered by the Atlantic Treaty are concerned...because of a changed international situation, the Alliance can no longer offer to our country a guarantee of total defence" (10).

Similarly, the present Defence Minister, Mr. Giovanni Spadolini, made in November 1983 a distinction between the "global threat" and the "local threat". The latter is "a minor dispute stemming from a situation which regards Italy only....Italy...is in the position, within Nato, to take up some commitments to which other nations ..are less sensible...(Italy) must be concerned with and prepared for, potential crises in certain Mediterranean countries, given their internal instability" (11).

It is easy to relate these statements to the intended creation of an Italian task force, whose dimensions, composition, equipment and costs are yet unknown. The high likelihood of strong internal opposition, however, leads the government to be very cautious.

In an annex to the 1985 Military Budget presented to the Parliament on October 1984, the very same task force was justified under two contradictory statements. On one hand it seems that the Italian RDF could be useful because "re... difficulties of the UN and of the superpowers themselves to control specific crisis, can lead a Mediterranean state, like Italy, to take up limited responsibilities to prevent conflicts, to mediate in situations of tension with a function of peace-making interposition. Furthermore, the relevant presence of our trade, productive and research activities in the Mediterranean region, compels us not to exclude the possibility of operations for the protection of Italian firms and operators, with the aim of a rapid rescue in case of emergency" (12). On the other, though, "the Italian contribution to the allied integrated defence and the possibility of receiving UN and 'friendly states' requests to carry out peacekeeping, humanitarian or specialized missions, calls more and more for the availability of rapid deployment units - inter-service units, under a single command" (13).

In short, it seems that the fascination with the idea of an Italian task force has taken hold. But while little has been said about its hardware, much less is known about the software, that is to say what security concept would guide the task force.

Why, for instance, is it necessary to move so rapidly if it is to fulfill a request for "a function of peace-making interposition" - whether in or out of the UN framework? In such a case, in fact, there would need to be at least a minimal consent of the parties involved, and therefore no requirement for instant action. The rescue of Italian laborers - in some Mediterranean countries, like Libya, in the range of tens of thousand - is definitely out of the Italian military capabilities, unless the consensus of the host country is provided anyway. It is also doubtful that "the Italian contribution to the allied integrated defence" can justify a RDF. No Nato such decision has been taken so far. Neither is there any news of a particular Italian pressure on the allies to put the issue on the agenda.

Furthermore, the country's constitution - in contrast to other states' institutional frameworks - requires a Parliamentary vote to authorize the use of the military forces, unless it was to put into effect legally binding international agreements. Again a "rapid" deployment force is not very well suited for the speed of a parliamentary debate.

Finally, no effort is made to see the whole question through the eyes of other Mediterranean states: it is true, for instance, that "if local regimes are unwilling to face regional security problems and internal insurregencies, US (or allied) military intervention would be useless, and even harmful to Western interests in the long and medium term" (14).

If anything can be said about this renewed attention toward the South and the Mediterranean, in the Italian security debate, it is that it lacks a clear Nato perspective. Therefore, valuable allied assets - which certainly need improvement but have the clear advantage of being in place - risk being overlooked. The case in point concerns very much Turkey.

Realistically, in fact, the only scenario which gives rise to the preoccupation with out-of-area operations, is a Soviet intervention in a region - say the Gulf - of vital importance for Western security. While an Italian brigade or so, however rapid, can make little difference in such a contingency, it can also be argued:

- that the probability of a Soviet intervention where high priority Western interest are at stake is very low (15);
- that emphasizing a given scenario too much, apart from its realistic likelihood, risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy: in other words an outspoken western readiness to intervene could end up attracting a corresponding Soviet readiness - the worst case being pre-emption;
- that, if a Nato reaction is a serious possibility in the Soviet eyes in spite of the Treaty's geographical limitation, a case can be made to strengthen Nato forces: first, wherever they are weaker; second where they are closer to the Gulf and the Middle East.

It should be clear at this point that this involves Turkey and its key-role in the Southern flank of Nato.

Limited but significant steps could be taken relatively soon. Maurizio Crenasco recently proposed a comprehensive set of measures, with regard to Turkey and to other allied assets in the region. Among them there are:

- "modernizing the Turkish air defense system which represents the first screening barrier for Soviet bombers directed toward the Mediterranean";

- "moving the line of radar coverage and air defense further to the South";
- "converting the present Nato 'on call' naval forces in the Mediterranean (NAVACFORMED) into a standing naval force (STANAVFORMED) similar to the standing naval force of the Atlantic" (16).

In addition to these measures others could be taken. If a country like Italy can think of creating rapid deployment units, why not to consider instead the redeployment of Italian and other allied forces in Turkey? Toward this goal, prepositioned War Reserve Materiel could be stocked in Turkey, both for air and land forces. In the meantime joint allied exercises on Turkish soil might be intensified. Eventually, a stronger Nato conventional defence in Turkey would:

- raise the nuclear threshold in the Southern flank, diminishing the overall prospect of triggering nuclear escalation, should deterrence fail (17);
- enhance deterrence against Soviet intervention both in and out the geographical limits of the Atlantic Treaty, given Turkey's proximity to the Gulf and the Middle East. To reach this goal there is no need of explicit and formal allied commitments: the very likely Soviet perception of available western capabilities at hand suffices;
- be more cost-effective for the allied collective security than the creation of national task forces. This is true especially as far as medium powers like Italy are concerned

It goes without saying that these efforts require of the allied policy-making process a more imaginative approach towards Southern flank security problems and the question of out-of-area contingencies. In other words the concept of collective security - which is the very essence of an alliance - should be reinforced at the expense of the "isolationist" course implicit in the concept of national task forces.

It would be wrong, however, to disregard all the obstacles which impede a fresh reappraisal of the importance to Nato security that Turkey deserves.

Tension between Athens and Ankara, for example, makes fellow Nato countries very careful to avoid any step that could be perceived as taking sides. Even more so when military capabilities are involved. The sooner a settlement of the Turko-Greek dispute is reached, the better.

The problem of military and economic aid to Ankara - via individual states or other institutions like the IMF, OECD, EC - is further compounded by the present state of transition in Turkish domestic affairs. It is up to the Turks themselves to speed up the pace of a full restoration of democracy and civil liberties. Again, the sooner the better.

Last but not least, there is arms control. In this case too, Turkey is at the crossroads between East-West and North-South efforts. Would Ankara revise its present cold attitude toward a nuclear-free zone in the Balkans, if Nato improved its conventional posture in Turkey? It is perhaps a question worth raising.

As far as the North-South dimension is concerned, the only attempt made so far concerned the involvement of Mediterranean riparian countries in the CSCE process. The Arab-Israeli question loomed large in both cases - Malta in 1979, Venice in 1984 - since the Arab countries almost unanimously refused to take part, given the presence of Israel. There is no doubt, however, that the special relations Ankara enjoys with the Islamic world could make a difference, in or out any existing framework.

N O T E S

- (1) Maurizio Cremasco, Strategic Relevance of Turkey/EC Relations, unpublished paper, IAI, Rome, 1984. This paper is part of a research project on the EC and Turkey conducted jointly by the Deutsches Orient-Institute (Hamburg), the Institut fur Europaische Politik (Bonn), the Istituto Affari Internazionali (Rome), the Federal Trust for Education and Research (London) and the Foreign Policy Institute of the University of Ankara.
- (2) In addition to the Cremasco's paper quoted in note n.1 see, first of all Ali L. Karaosmanoglu, "Turkey's Security and the Middle-East", Foreign Affairs, Fall 1983. See also Bruce R. Kuniholm, "Turkey and Nato: Past, Present and Future", Orbis, Summer 1983. Slightly outdated, but very useful for the pre-coup events, is Duygu Bazoglu Sezer, Turkey's Security Policies, Adelphi Papers n.164, IISS, London, 1981. Although perhaps too polemic, see Kenneth Mackenzie, Turkey in Transition: The West's Neglected Ally, European Security Studies n.1, Institute for European Defence & Strategic Studies, London, 1984, which is a useful overview of the most recent Turkish political landscape - it also covers the March 1984 local elections.
- (3) See Marco De Andreis, Le Armi della Repubblica, Gammaliori, Milano, 1984, p.69.
- (4) S. Silvestri, M. Cremasco, Il fianco sud della Nato, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1980, p.116.
- (5) On October 1984, for instance, Italy hosted in Venice the CSCE "Seminar on Economic, Scientific and Cultural Cooperation in the Mediterranean".
- (6) An Italian contingent, however, takes part in Lebanon UNIFIL.
- (7) Speech by General Cappuzzo at the Center for Advanced Defence Studies (Centro Alti Studi Difesa - CASD), Rome, May 21, 1982.
- (8) An infantry brigade was transformed into a mechanized one.
- (9) See Il Giornale, Aprile 18 1984. The all-deck cruiser Giuseppe Garibaldi would accordingly be equipped with V/STOL aircraft instead of ASW helicopters as presently planned.
- (10) Informazioni Parlamentari Difesa (IPD), n.21, 16-31 dicembre 1982. Only one year before, on December 1981, the same minister had stated: "The Italian flag is fine where it is; therefore Italy is unwilling to employ its military forces in any way but a strategy of defence of its territory..Italy does not ambitiously aim to operate outside its geographical and strategic limits, or outside the traditional areas of responsibility". IPD, n.21, 16-31 dicembre 1981.
- (11) IPD, n.19-20 1983.
- (12) Ministero della Difesa, Nota aggiuntiva allo stato di previsione della difesa 1985, Roma, 10 ottobre 1984, p.3.
- (13) Ibid, pp. 12-3.
- (14) Ali L. Karaosmanoglu, op.cit.
- (15) "When the Arab oil producers launched their embargo against the West during the October War, Moscow...made no effort to reinforce the embargo itself. There is evidence that it even increased its own sales of oil to the United States and the Netherlands, despite Arab criticism". Johnatan Steele, Soviet Power, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1983, p.204. Recently, the Soviet Union firmly denied the rumor that it was withholding supplies of energy products to the UK in support of British mine strikers; it called an "insinuation" the idea that the Soviet Union would use trade relations with capitalist countries "as an instrument of

- political pressure". See International Herald Tribune, November 5 1984.
- (16) Maurizio Cremasco, The Southern Flank of Nato, Problems and Perspectives, paper presented at the IAI-TEPSA seminar on "Italy: its security problems in the context of the Atlantic Alliance", Rome, 19-20 October 1984, p.8.
- (17) The concept of nuclear threshold is too often taken into consideration with regard of the Central Front only, which may well be a mistake, given the military balance elsewhere.

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