

inverto. IAI/10/85

## THE NEW MEDITERRANEAN SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

by Roberto Aliboni, Director Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome  
European Study Commission, Istanbul, June 13-14, 1985

The usual Western perception of the Mediterranean region is related to its NATO dimension. In other words it is seen first and foremost as the Southern flank of NATO. In the Fifties this definition was correct, the Mediterranean being simply the extension of the line of ground defense of the Central European front. Today, however, it appears inadequate. The Mediterranean area has evolved into a true - and eventually separate - theater of operations. The threat has increased and diversified. The elements of instability have multiplied.

What is also wrong today with this perception of the Mediterranean area is that it emphasizes East-West factors and dimensions. That appears to be a narrow vision, because in the Mediterranean area dimensions related to regional and local factors have never ceased to be very important and - even more than in other regions - those factors have a particularly direct impact on the East-West dimension. Moreover, in the last decade the relevance of these further dimensions and factors has been growing stronger and stronger.

NATO's perception of threat, because of the changing security environment in the Mediterranean region, is affected by three sets of factors. First, the traditional presence of the USSR and other Warsaw Pact's countries. Second, the growing impact of the local actors on the East-West dimension, as a result of the interdependence which has emerged between the Mediterranean Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea and of the political and military strengthening of the local actors. Third, the growing capacity of the local actors to pose a threat to single NATO countries and to wider NATO's interests (e.g., oil supplies) which is not necessarily related to and need not escalate to an East-West dimension.

1. This is not to say that global factors are less influential in shaping the Mediterranean security environment than in the past. The Soviet presence in the region continues to affect the regional strategic balance in a fundamental way.

We will discuss below the links which unify the Mediterranean Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Even excluding these links, however, the Mediterranean region does not lend itself to a clear-cut definition. True, the Mediterranean is less an area per-se than a focus which attracts surrounding areas, such as Europe, Central Africa, the Middle East, etc. In any case it cannot be confined to the riparian countries. Generally a slightly enlarged definition of the area is adopted whereby both the Middle East and the whole Balkan peninsula are included.

If this broader definition is adopted, the presence of the Warsaw Pact forces within the Mediterranean region is certainly not negligible. It is characterized by a qualitative, more than quantitative, increase in the military capability of the countries of the Warsaw Pact's Southern region (i.e.

4/29

Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria), and a quantitative as well as qualitative increase in the military capability of the Soviet Union(1). The Soviets are now present in the Mediterranean Sea 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 the 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(2).

While the qualitative increase in the military capability of the Warsaw Pact's Balkan members reinforces their pressure on the traditional Southern flank, especially on Italy, on the one hand, and Turkey and Greece on the other hand, that is, on a relatively sensitive segment of NATO's frontier (because of the fact that relations between the latter two countries continue to be plagued by strong controversies, such as those over the Aegean Sea and Cyprus), the presence of the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron and its capability to perform what Maurizio Cremasco defines as a "mission-denial mission"(3) has had - as he points out - three effects:

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

- sea control has become an initial priority for at least a major portion of NATO aero-naval resources, because 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; together with other allied naval forces, it will have first to neutralize the Soviet aero-naval threat and win the battle at sea;

- 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 the NATO allies in pursuing or to support foreign policy objectives; in other words, it diminishes the flexibility of any Western crisis-management policy.

All these arguments only confirm that the Soviet and Warsaw Pact's threat continue to be fundamental to the definition of the Mediterranean security environment.

2. However, because of a number of very different factors which are discussed below, this threat has been expanding and diversifying.

2.1. The first factor spurring the expansion and diversification of the threat in the Mediterranean region is the growing interdependence of the latter with the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea areas.

The reasons for this interdependence are manifold and may help to explain the point we are trying to make here:

- the invasion of Afghanistan, first, and later the endless crisis in the Persian Gulf have convinced the most important oil exporters of the region to redirect their shipment systems in order to reduce vulnerability. Shipments by extra-large tankers are gradually being diversified by operating a new network of pipelines from the fields of

production around the Gulf to terminals on the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. The widening of the Suez Canal is also part of this attempt to disperse risks by means of diversification(3). This new pattern of oil transportation is a powerful factor of interdependence of the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea areas. In this frame, it must be underlined that, though this new pattern contributes to diminish the concentration and the intensity of risks, by its expansion to a wider area it creates at the regional level a new kind of vulnerability and therefore the need for a more flexible and quick capability of political and military response. At the global level it increases the exposure of that more interdependent area to East-West crises and issues, in the sense that what may happen in Ethiopia or Afghanistan with its consequences in terms of East-West confrontation is now less indifferent to the distant Mediterranean region and Western Europe (and viceversa). It is also true, of course, that this interdependence increases the possibility for the Superpowers to be involved into local crises and hence the risk of triggering East-West tensions;

-a second factor which contributes to creating interdependence between the Mediterranean and the two other areas concerned is the fact that the war between Iraq and Iran has brought about a sort of political integration between Iran and the Arab politics, an integration which in the recent past was limited essentially to Gulf politics. The alliance between Syria and Iran has made this latter country a factor in inter-Arab politics and the Arab-Israeli conflict(4). This factor has deeply affected the perceptions and policies of the Arab Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia's. On the other hand, as Iran sees the Palestinian problem as an aspect of its struggle against the American "devil", the evolution of inter-Arab politics and the Arab-Israeli dispute may not be indifferent to the evolution of Iranian politics and may affect decisions in Teheran, not to mention the domestic balance of power. Probably destined to survive any future evolution of the war, this integration works in the same direction as the interdependence spurred by the redirection of oil shipments south of the NATO area;

-a third factor of interdependence is the movement of persons and capital which has been set in motion by the financial surpluses of the oil exporting countries. Though this movement now seems destined to stabilize itself at a lower level than that it reached throughout the last ten years, it has immensely widened the scope for economic co-operation and integration within the Arab world and can be considered on several respects as a feature irreversibly linking the Arab countries to one another(5). This development represents a long-term interest of the Western Alliance. In this sense, not unlike the new pattern of oil transportation, it creates simultaneously strenght and vulnerability and needs to be defended as an important element of the broad security environment south of NATO area.

One consequence of the stronger interdependence of the strategic setting south of NATO which we have already noted is a greater exposure to East-West confrontation, both in the sense that distant regions may be more rapidly involved in crises emanating from Superpower interventions and controversies, and that the Superpowers may in turn be more easily involved in regional and local crises.

2.2. This enhanced exposure of the region to the East-West dimension is related not only to its greater interdependence but also to the capacity of local actors and factors to have an impact on the East-West dimension. In other words, the interdependence of the so called "arc of crises" is not bound to produce a direct threat from the Warsaw Pact forces to NATO (and viceversa). However, tensions and confrontations between the two Alliances may be more frequent and likely because of the the local actors' increased capacity to act.

Moreover, this means that local and regional factors generate their own threats, not necessarily bound to manifest themselves within the East-West dimension.

Both from a global and regional point of view, the growing multipolarity in the areas south of NATO, particularly in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, must be viewed as a powerful factor of instability.

As a matter of fact, in the course of these last fifteen years, especially after the third Arab-Israeli war in 1973, the political situation in the Arab world has changed deeply. Also thanks to the economic development set in motion by the wealth coming from oil, the Arab States have grown politically and institutionally stronger. The process of militarization which went on in that period is impressive, even if we limit ourselves to the riparian countries. Today - according to Cremasco - the air forces of the Mediterranean countries deploy medium bombers (not only the old Egyptian TU-16 "Badger", but also the more modern Libyan 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 buildup of the armed forces of even the smallest riparian countries raises problems(6). The acquisition of significant military capabilities by the Third World Mediterranean countries implies a greater capacity to take military initiatives and, by the same token, makes peace-enforcement or crisis management by outside powers a more difficult and risky task.

Such military and political consolidation of the States and regimes of the region reinforces and accelerates the process of growing multipolarity. This development - as we have just pointed out - risks increasing instability. In this context one also has to mention the possibility, albeit in the medium-long term, of nuclear proliferation in the Mediterranean region through the acquisition by some Middle East countries 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 on regional targets.

2.3. This growing multipolarity, together with the increase in military capabilities, is proceeding hand in hand with an increase in the very number of crises. Old crises, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and Cyprus, though they have undergone remarkable changes in the course of time, are becoming endless, while new crises, such as that in Western Sahara and that in the Gulf, continue to emerge and others, such as that in Chad, flare up from time to time.

The reason behind this development is that the political and military consolidation of the new States of the region, which started with decolonization, has emerged in an environment of growing nationalism, political

tyranny and poor international institutionalization. While this makes it more difficult for regional actors to manage their own crises, crisis management by external powers, particularly the Superpowers, is getting more and more difficult because of the number of local factors and perceptions involved and because of the multiplicity of crises which are not consistent with one another and hence require separate treatment.

The increase in the importance of local factors and perceptions has lessened the impact of the Superpowers' crisis-management. Traditionally and structurally, the Superpowers have had always some difficulties in paying attention to local factors and perceptions because their own perceptions - and consequently also their policies - are essentially dictated by the global dimensions in which they are driven and constrained to act. As a result of this trend a vicious circle is set in motion whereby the increase of crises makes the importance of local factors and perceptions grow and at the same diminishes the ability of the Superpowers to manage crises.

One argument which is often put forward in this respect is that the West European countries could help solve crises because, unlike the Superpowers, they are thought to have a better understanding of local factors and at the same time to inspire less fear in the developing countries(7). Though there is a good deal of truth in this argument, one should not fail to note that local actors, once they are involved in controversies and crises, emphasize the Superpowers' military and diplomatic roles (in solving the crises or supporting them against their local enemies). The Lebanese crisis, not unlike the whole history of inter-Arab politics, is a clear demonstration of this point (and also of the fact that the mechanism by which external powers become involved in the Orient has not changed substantially from the time of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire)(8).

To conclude on this point it should be noted that this new relationship between local actors and Superpowers has an important impact on the political influence the Soviets manage to exercise on their Mediterranean allies, such as Syria, Libya, Algeria, etc. As a matter of fact, one concern NATO countries have always felt, and continue to feel, is related to the possible use by Soviet air and naval forces of selected ports, airports and other facilities in the Mediterranean littoral and elsewhere within the wider area south of NATO we are considering here. Apart from other shortcomings which normally affect Soviet ability to establish a lasting political influence on Third World countries(9), the strengthening of local actors in the Mediterranean is reinforcing the national priorities which have always guided the Arab countries - but also Iran and the countries in the Horn of Africa - in their relationship with the Superpowers. Though this national priority is a difficulty for the Western allies, it proves no less an obstacle - to say the least - for the Soviet Union.

2.4. A final point which must be raised to underline the diversification and the enlargement of the threat in the Mediterranean has been made by Cremasco in relation to the impact of the technological development of modern weapons systems in a relatively narrow theater(10): " 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". Thus it seems that while the technological evolution of military hardware in the Mediterranean would call for a single military strategy for any Mediterranean crisis or conflict, the political factors we listed earlier are increasing the multipolarity and the differences in the region (even while the interactions between local crises are increasing). Again, this possible contradiction could increase the difficulties of the Superpowers in dealing with local crises: any intervention would be confronted with the technical risk of immediate escalation.

3. As has already been pointed out the threat brought about by this new situation of multipolarity in the Mediterranean and geopolitical interdependence in the wider space south of NATO amounts to a threat to NATO itself which is altogether "additional" and "new".

It is "additional" because, though it does not derive from the East-West dimension proper, it may easily escalate to this dimension and trigger an East-West confrontation. Though this is not a new kind of threat in the Mediterranean, because of the new multipolarity which characterizes the area it is remarkably increased.

Besides this "additional" threat, there is a "new" threat, that is, one which may affect single NATO countries or the Alliance's wider interests (e.g.: the disruption of oil supplies), though it does not amount to an attack on NATO as such, and therefore cannot activate the institutional defensive responsibilities of the Alliance.

This new situation constitutes the substance of the "out-of-area" issue being widely discussed throughout the Alliance. The necessity of some additional presence and responsibility for the West Europeans in the area south of NATO jurisdiction was timely pointed out in a well known report of the West European Institutes of International Affairs(11). A number of multilateral and bilateral West European interventions have already taken place beginning with the Iranian crisis in 1979. It is not the purpose of this paper to give a presentation of the "out-of area" issue. It is, however, a major conclusion that the new security environment of the Mediterranean makes the effort of the West European countries to deal with it one of the most important tasks the Alliance is to face in the next years.

An important corollary of this conclusion is that "out-of-area" intervention will be to a considerable extent a special responsibility of the South European members of the Alliance, particularly as regards what we have called here the additional character of the threat. This discussion is well advanced in Italy and in France, though from different perspectives and within diverse contexts (given that France is not integrated into the Alliance's military organization). In this respect, however, the process of consolidation of democracy started with the help of the German government and the EEC during the Seventies and the enlargement of the EEC to Spain and Portugal are of crucial importance. As is any effort to stabilize the EEC's relationship with Turkey and to advance the European Political Co-operation.

Though these new responsibilities of the West European countries - whether they take them over or not - will create some problems in the relationship between Western Europe and the USA, these problems will be more helpful to the Alliance than Western European indifference and inertness.

#### NOTES

(1) On the increase in 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.

(2) For a full analysis of the political and military significance of the Soviet Mediterranean Fleet, see M. Cremasco, "La dimensione militare" (The Military Dimension) in S. Silvestri & M. Cremasco, Il-Fianco-Sud-della-NATO (The Southern Flank of NATO) Feltrinelli, Milano, 1980, pp. 79-102. See also R. G. Weinland, "Soviet Strategy and the Objectives of Their Naval Presence in the Mediterranean", in G. Luciani (ed.), The-Mediterranean-Region, Croom Helm, London, 1984, pp.267-291.

(3) G. Luciani, "The Mediterranean and the Energy Picture", in G. Luciani (ed.), The-Mediterranean-Region, cit., pp.1-40; see also R. Aliboni, The-Red-Sea-Region, Croom Helm, London, 1985

(4) See R. Aliboni, "L'evoluzione in Iran e la politica estera dell'Italia" (The Evolution in Iran and Italian Foreign Policy), Paper IAI8419

(5) R. Aliboni et-al., Egypt's-Economic-Potential, Croom Helm, London, 1984, part 2

(6) See M. Cremasco, "The Military Presence of the Riparian Countries" in G. Luciani (ed.), The-Mediterranean-Region, cit., pp. 206-238

(7) S. Chubin, "Western European Perceptions of Europe's Stake in Persian Gulf-Indian Ocean Security", in A.Z. Rubinstein (ed.), The-Great-Game.-Rivalry-in-the-Persian-Gulf-and-South-Asia, Praeger, New York, 1983. Chubin made this point with remarkable finesse: "There is no doubt that in the Gulf-Indian Ocean region the Europeans enjoy certain advantages, especially a receptivity to them as more acceptable, less intrusive, less polarizing partners in the development process. This regional acceptability - an irony given their historical antecedents - is of course flattering to the European states, which pride themselves on a sophisticated understanding of complex societies derived from historical contact"

(8) See A. Hourani, "The Middle East and the Crisis of 1956", in St. Antony's Papers, n.4, Chatto & Windus, London, 1958, pp.14-19

(9) R.H. Donaldson (ed.), The-Soviet-Union-in-the-Third-World:-Successes-and-Failures, Croom Helm, London, 1981

(10) M. Cremasco, "The Southern Flank of NATO, Problems and Perspectives", IAI-TEPSA Seminar: "Italy: Its Security Problems in the Context of the Atlantic Alliance", Rome, October 19-20, 1984, Paper IAI8423.

(11) K. Kaiser et-al., "The European Community: Progress or Decline?", 1983

iai ISTITUTO AFFARI  
INTERNAZIONALI - ROMA

---

n° Inv. 7429

---

BIBLIOTECA