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ITALY, NATO AND SECURITY IN THE SOUTHERN FLANK

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Crises are as numerous as ever in the Mediterranean. Even more so, however, if one considers the area which stretches from the Northern Atlantic shores of Morocco to Central Asia, pushing southward as far as the Horn of Africa. This area is much larger than the Mediterranean. However, crises arising in this wider area are closely intertwined by ideological, ethnic and political factors, such as islamism, assertive nationalism, inter-Arab rivalries, Arab-African disputes and by the fact that boundaries of poorly constituted new States often cut across established ethnic and religious solidarities. For these reasons, when considering Mediterranean security, one cannot help identifying the Mediterranean with the wider "arc of crises" professor Brzenzinski used to talk about. Twenty years ago the many different regions included in this "arc of crises" were strategically separated and Nato was essentially preoccupied with the Soviet presence in the Mediterranean. Today these different regions have merged and the Mediterranean, more or less consciously, has become short hand for a "Southern Flank" which has expanded tremendously.

The reasons this environment is dangerous are not fundamentally different from those Western countries used to identify ten or twenty years ago: continued instability in the area could only too easily combine with the important Soviet presence in the Mediterranean and in the Caucasus - and today in Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa as well. This situation makes both the defense of the Central European Front and access to South-west Asia more difficult for the Western powers.

However, relative to even only ten years ago, important circumstances have changed. As I have just said, the theatre has expanded to include more crises. These crises are interrelated and this fact constitutes a crucial factor in making crises intractable. The most evident case in point is the war between Iran and Iraq. Thanks to a number of ideological and political factors (Iranian involvement in the Palestinian issue via anti-imperialism, its alliance with Syria, etc.), Iran has come to be a factor in inter-Arab politics, to the point that the war can be considered de facto as the first great inter-Arab war in contemporary history. This entanglement has confronted external powers with thorny trade-offs. Similar problems, though on a lesser scale, led to complications in other cases as well. Furthermore, the tendency

of regional crises to get entangled is emphasized by the emergence of new transnational factors, such as fundamentalism and terrorism as well as a fresh anti-Western impetus. These new factors add crucial new dimensions to old crises and make them more numerous and complicated.

These events have made the issue of the allied presence out of the Nato area more and more urgent. The Usa has encouraged the European allies to operate direct interventions or to intervene side by side with them. Otherwise the European allies have been asked to increase their own capabilities on the European Front to allow American forces to move out of the Nato area. More or less the Europeans have responded. If one has to appreciate prospects, in relation to the fact that instability in the Southern Flank is likely to continue unabated, a balance sheet is in order. This balance sheet doesn't seem very positive. There are basic dissensions between the Usa and Western Europe, as well as among European countries themselves, regarding how to manage crises, their origins and cures. Moreover, the absolute pragmatism and unevenness which govern allied cooperation in the Southern Flank, in the absence of even a modicum of institutionalization and fairness (that is, sticking to the rules of the game), is detrimental to the effectiveness of allied policies in the area, not to speak about inter-allied relations.

Dissensions and ineffectiveness are due to a number of elements which it may be worth noting here. First, while the Europeans are convinced that local security perceptions are the starting point to come to manage or to solve crises, the Usa is looking at the region from an exclusively East-West angle. The tendency of the American administration is to cash in the "American option" taken by an important group of Arab countries - the so called "moderate" countries - as an asset on East-West ground. At the same time it doesn't take any interest in assuring its consistency with local security perceptions. In the eyes of Arab opinion this means that the "American option" is not paying. As a consequence it isolates governments and their policy of staying allied with the West. It emphasizes anti-Western feelings, reinforces Islamic opposition domestically and exposes Arab allied countries to "more principled" regimes - like Damascus - and anti-imperialist countries - like Iran. As a result pro-Western alignments weaken and their weakness is certainly among the causes for the clear shifts underway in the region as far as the East-West balance of power is concerned. Moreover, in the eyes of local allied powers - as in the case of the Arab Gulf countries - this American attitude is turning Western countries from security guarantors into factors of insecurity.

Second, American and European attitudes regarding the possibility of inviting responsible cooperation from the Soviet Union are also different. Apart from a number of propagandistic moves, like the recurrent proposal to withdraw the respective fleets from the Mediterranean, prospects for an International Conference on the Middle East and more generally, for the participation of the Ussr into the peace process are more or less regarded positively by the Europeans. So were, quite recently, prospects for a Us-Ussr cooperation in the Gulf to protect navigation. In European quarters this was also considered an opportunity to test the likeliness of a more responsible and reliable Soviet attitude toward the region. On the contrary, the fundamental American attitude, after the very short-lived attempt included in the Joint Declaration of 1977, is simply to keep the Ussr out of the region. More or less

consciously, the Europeans do not consider this option consistent with their security, especially in the very moment East-West summitry is managing to reduce tensions inside Europe, while leaving them intact in the Southern Flank.

Third, there are dissensions on the evolution of terrorism. The Usa look at terrorism as at a global factor. As a matter of fact, events in Iran, Lebanon and among Palestinians have radicalized existing crises by emphasizing on both an ideological and a political level, their anti-imperialist (therefore anti-Western and anti-Usa) character of a struggle for liberation from colonial rule. It has been chiefly Iran's role and initiative to project this struggle internationally by means of terrorism, as a new form of war, against the Usa and other Western targets. Iranian initiative has brought about a more general radicalization of other crises and has encouraged and revived the use of terrorism from other quarters as well. At least under regional eyes, this war waged against the Usa is successful and it is certainly true that the Usa did not manage to counter it either in Lebanon (wherfrom they withdrew under a succession of blows) or elsewhere. This actually amounts to a threat to their international status of superpower which cannot be easily tolerated. Though indirectly, it is also true that it plays into the hands of the Ussr. In this sense, terrorism is a global factor. Still -so European argument runs- bombing over Beirut and Tripoli are useless because Western countries are here again confronted with a new manifestation of old regional factors, that require political as well as military responses. Military responses alone may be counterproductive.

Who is right? Comparing two cases of Western intervention in regional conflicts, the French combination of military presence with subtle intra-Chad and inter-African diplomacy appears to have been much more successful than the presence of the Western Multinational Force in Lebanon, that acted on the basis of different political approaches to the problem and a Us policy that proved mistaken. Actually, while the Italians were there to "protect Palestinians" -according to the terms of reference given by their Parliament-, French intervention was motivated by their supposed "national" interests. On the other hand, the Americans supported a Lebanese national unity based on the Israeli policy of Maronite dominance and a separate peace of Lebanon with Israel. Quite obviously this policy provoked national disunity and the upheaval of the Shi'ites against Israel (and the Usa) in South Lebanon, a problem which previously didn't exist.

These arguments may only be polemic. The real issue lies elsewhere, specifically in the general rationale of the Mediterranean policies more or less consciously carried out by the Usa, the Northern and Central European countries and those in Southern Europe.

As pointed out by Stefano Silvestri (1), there are two ways of looking at the Southern Flank of Nato. There is a "safety belt" approach, based on the assumption that this region is crisis prone and basically unmanageable without the direct intervention of the Superpowers. Western focus in the area should therefore be on "damage limitation" and the principle instrument would be military policy and the capacity to enforce external will on local powers. A second approach, aiming at "overall stability", is based on the idea that

Mediterranean instability can be cured because there is in the area a growing awareness of the existence of very important shared interests between Mediterranean and European countries. The instruments of such policy would be more of an economic and political, rather than military, nature.

Of course this is only a first intellectual framework of analysis. As a matter of fact, one has to remember that it was the Federal Republic of Germany to contribute decisive support to Portugal and Spain at the moment they got rid of their old totalitarian regimes. This policy fit very well with the "overall stability" approach despite the fact it was carried out by a Central European country. In any case, this difference exists, and particularly in the more recent years it separates Southern European from other European countries and especially the Usa. No one of course would willingly resort to force when other ways are readily available. Still, there is a great difference between a policy of "consensus gathering" and a policy of "decision sharing". The first is in search of clients, the second of allies.

Today, Southern European countries -as well as moderate Arab allies- which are expected to be on the forefront of the out-of-the-area cooperation policy find themselves subjected to a Us "consensus gathering" approach rather than to one of "decision sharing". The absence of a multilateral institutional framework similar to that of Nato with the aim of sharing analyses and decisions, however, may be detrimental to the success of such cooperation. Bilateral cooperation between the Usa and the different Mediterranean countries will create only tensions and contradictions. Some institutionalization is badly needed both among Atlantic Allies and among the latter and the Arab allies. In the same sense, poor institutionalization is a problem which affects the Europeans as well. European cooperation could provide strong support for Southern European countries at the very moment they cooperate (or quarrel) with the Usa over crises management in the Southern Flank. Present European Political Cooperation, however, is helpful but totally insufficient. As a consequence Southern European countries remain isolated, faced with crises which are of concern to everybody but involve them more immediately. Furthermore, while their initiatives are stimulated, the absence of an appropriate institutional environment may turn such initiatives into sources of tension with the Usa.

Clearly Italy is for many reasons deeply involved in the issues I have just discussed. As a matter of fact Italy is participating in Unifil and the Mfos; has participated in the successive Multinational Interposition Forces in Lebanon and in the Red Sea minesweeping operations; has extended a guarantee to Malta's neutrality. Despite a number of reservations and conditions, these missions have been approved by the opposition as well. Perhaps the most important trend amidst this Mediterranean reorientation is the debate about reshaping the Italian military model, to date almost entirely directed toward the defense of Nato's South-eastern Front (i.e. the North-eastern boundary of the Peninsula). In 1985 the Defence White Paper clearly identified a number of new missions in the Southern Flank and gave guidelines for re-organizing forces and adopting necessary weapons systems. More or less this transformation of the Italian military instrument has started and, if it will be pursued, it will

become an important factor in the debate on the Italian Mediterranean role. At the same time the Italian government, particularly under Mr. Craxi's guidance, has engaged in an active diplomacy directed toward support for the moderate Arab countries and their efforts to involve the Plo's mainstream in peace negotiations.

^{With} ~~What~~ these Mediterranean debates and initiatives underway, in 1985 and 1986 Italy has been affected by two serious crises: first, the "Achille Lauro" liner hijacking followed by events at the Sigonella military base, after the Americans had diverted and forced to land the Egyptian aircraft carrying the authors of the "Achille Lauro" hijacking and their bosses; second, the succession of American clashes with Libya and the Libyan attempt to bomb the American guarded Loran station on the islet of Lampedusa with two missiles.

The "Achille Lauro-Sigonella" crisis shed a vivid light on the existing differences of opinion between Southern European countries -Italy in the event- and the Usa. The entire sequence was managed by the Italian government with two main priorities in mind: first, the aim of saving Mr. Arafat as the essential partner in the Jordanian-Palestinian process; second, and perhaps most important, the aim of protecting Egyptian role and credibility in the inter-Arab arena. The Italian government's decision to allow Mr. Abul Abbas to leave despite American pressures has proved carefully justified on legal grounds. However, that decision was taken essentially for political reasons. The nature of that decision underscores the emergence of the kind of dissensions I have described above: the Usa wanted to give priority to terrorism as a global factor, while Italy has given priority to regional factors.

As a consequence of the "Achille Lauro"-Sigonella crisis, the governmental coalition split and this split caused the first governmental crisis Italy has suffered since the second World War as a result of foreign and security policies. The split occurred between those who were willing to maintain Italian political options in the Mediterranean and those who suggested that these options were untenable in view of the tensions they were causing in Italy's relationship with its major ally. Originally a regional affair, the "Achille Lauro"-Sigonella crisis evolved into a major crisis between Italy and the United States. At the end the governmental crisis was overcome by a shared decision of the coalition to get closer to the American notion of terrorism by downgrading the Italian Mediterranean policy profile.

The incidents in the Gulf of Sidra and the bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi in the first months of 1986, after Libya had been identified by Washington as the sponsor of the attacks at the Rome and Vienna airports in December 1985 and other terrorist acts in the following months, led to similar consequences in the relationship between Italy and the Usa. Again, Italy corrected its Mediterranean policy amidst furious domestic wrangles.

Many lessons were taught by these events. The Italian opposition has complained about the role of Nato, but problems arose precisely because Nato was not there to regulate relations among the allies. The absence of institutions in the Southern Flank has left Italy isolated in its bilateral relationship with its major ally. Corrections made by the Italian government to its Mediterranean policy are a good example of "consensus gathering" vs.

"decision sharing". This absence of institutions must be also noted on the European side. In order to counter American pressures, Italy tried to rely on the European Political Cooperation framework. However, Epc's weakness prevented European countries from producing firm decisions and, most of all, prevented Epc from offsetting the Atlantic institutional vacuum. Again, Italy remained isolated.

As I have already noted, because of the absence of a multilateral procedure, security in the Southern Flank suffers from contradictions. The Usa wants the allies to take initiatives but is not ready to accept their initiatives. When dissent erupts, the only procedure left to reconcile policies is that of bilateral relations. But bilateralism between individual allies and the guide of the Alliance is not a healthy procedure. It brings about tension and frustration and discourages precisely the aim of the out of the Nato area cooperation, that is allied initiative and contribution.

Isolation is a more important point than generally believed when discussing Italy's contribution to the Southern Flank security is concerned. The Italian tendency to remain isolated on this issue is both subjective and objective. From an objective point of view, Italy is within the Mediterranean the only country fully and stably integrated into the Alliance and its military organization. From a subjective point of view, one must note that the domestic debate on Italy's presence in the Southern Flank is proceeding as if Italy would be expected act alone. Military and political factors are not envisioned in a strategy with the aim of balancing weapons acquisition and firm political alliances. The new military model is designed as if Italy had to implement a complete defense on multiple fronts.

As for the first point, Nato's actual position today in the Southern Flank leaves Italy in a position of singularity. To begin with, Portugal only very formally can be considered a Mediterranean country. History, economy and politics set the identity and the interests of this country definitely elsewhere. It is difficult to imagine Portugal as a country more actively interested in Eastern Mediterranean than, say, Denmark. France and Spain, definitely members of the Alliance, do not belong to its military organization and, while France does not have any bilateral military agreement with the Usa, Spain is reducing its military bilateral relationship with Washington. As for Greece and Turkey, their attitudes toward Nato are very different. However the real point is that their dispute is creating increasing reservations regarding their actual participation into the life of the Alliance (ex.: military exercises). As a consequence of this situation, Italy may be faced by more security demands from Nato and the Usa than it can actually meet. This question is not only a military one. It is chiefly political. Different degrees of integration into the Alliance coupled with a very poor institutional environment once again may easily leave Italy isolated in its bilateral relationship with the Usa. At the same time, it may well create expectations which in the end will never be shared and/or supported either by Northern European or by Southern European allies.

From a subjective point of view, isolation comes from the tendency to develop a military Mediterranean role more rapidly and organically than its

political counterpart. Despite explicit warnings on the part of the 1985 White Paper, the debate on the new military model is going on as though Italy could assemble a full collection of weapons systems in order to accomplish all the necessary missions. It is clear that there are limits and that the upgrading of the international profile of the country requires a sensible and feasible mix of weapons, economic ties and alliances. A secure Mediterranean environment depends first of all on the capacity to create a firm and stable network of consensus, economic links and political alliances. Military quarters tend to underestimate this point. After the Libyan attempt to bomb Lampedusa, the three armed forces have stressed the necessity to strengthen Italian security by shopping lists as exaggerated as to lose any credibility. On the other hand, the government, as we saw when discussing the "Achille Lauro"-Sigonella crisis, attaches a decisive importance to alliances in the Mediterranean. However, its initiative has not been steady, rather somewhat uneven, and it seems more focussed on the Middle East than on the overall Southern Flank. Its major weakness lies with its limited attention to the strong links any Italian policy must maintain with the allies. At the same time the institutional point I have raised here seems alien to Italian vision. The consequence is, somewhat ironically, a risk of self-isolation.

The overall environment of Southern Flank security is a problem for both Italy and the Alliance. If Italy's isolation can not be overcome, its contribution to the security of the area will bring about tension. This tension could convince it to withdraw its contribution. It could also damage Italy's overall political equilibrium, domestically and internationally. This in turn would be damaging to Alliance interests as well as to security prospects in the region.

The Italian government seems aware of this position of isolation and singularity. To deal with it, it has generally tried to develop political and diplomatic relations with both the European and the Arab countries of the Mediterranean. Beyond bilateral relations it has also tried to develop forms of collective understanding. At the time it decided to extend a neutrality guarantee, it asked a number of other Mediterranean states to participate in this guarantee. More recently, in 1986, Mr. Craxi championed the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean "support group", which was expected to involve three Nato countries (Italy, France and Spain) and three non-aligned countries (Yugoslavia, Egypt and Algeria). None of these initiatives has succeeded. The relevant point, however, is that, even if such initiatives had had the chance to succeed, still they would have required the support of the Alliance to become effective. It may be that the reason they did not succeed is that this support was missing. In any case, without this support, any initiative by Italy or another group of countries would create tension within the Alliance and in the end this tension would not allow any initiative to work.

As I have already noted, the coalition led by Mr. Craxi has initiated a number of policies related to the Southern Flank. However, these policies have been carried out as part of the Italian domestic decision process and not as part of a collective European or Atlantic understanding. It is true that in carrying out its policies, Italy has kept duly in touch with the European-Atlantic network, but policies have been implemented on an independent

basis. For example, at the end of 1985, when Italy was about to assume the European presidency, it requested its European partners to endorse its policy of explicit support for Arafat and the Jordanian-Palestinian negotiations. Italy failed to obtain their support and nevertheless maintained its independent policy. This procedure is definitely mistaken. Italy should submit proposals within existing allied institutions, seek consensus and joint action in the Mediterranean by clauses of non-singularity. Its diplomacy must apply first to allied institutions.

Nevertheless, the problem of American unilateral initiatives remains. Nato can endorse Mediterranean initiatives to a very limited extent only. European Political Cooperation is closer to such a competence, but it is in itself very weak. As a consequence, out-of-area operations and policies are dominated and fundamentally directed by the bilateral relationship between single Mediterranean countries and the Usa. I have already argued that bilateralism and the absence of a multilateral institutional framework seems to me detrimental to both inter-allied relationship and to Southern Flank security effectiveness. The need for some form of institutionalization of security relations in the Southern Flank remains perhaps the most important problem at stake.

(1) Political Factors Affecting Cooperation between Italy, Greece and Turkey, paper presented at the International Seminar organised by the Istituto Affari Internazionali, the Panteios School of Political Science and the Foreign Policy Institute on "Prospects and problems of Cooperation between Greece, Italy and Turkey", Castelgandolfo (Rome), 20-22 December 1986.

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