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RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE GULF CRISIS:
THE WEST AND THE GULF

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Only six months ago the Western media used to refer to the Iran-Iraq war as the "forgotten war". From time to time they reported on the high number of casualties, atrocities, like the use of chemical weapons and the draft of children, and the huge military expenses incurred by remarkably poor and backward societies. There was nothing like the present regular coverage of the war operations and its political evolution. The "forgotten war" was meant to be a moral judgement to blame both the countries at war and the culpable inertness of third countries in stopping the conflict.

Today, from the fact that the war is covered in full detail and a number of Western countries are more or less involved in the Gulf area, it may be more evident that the "forgotten war" was a political judgement too: the war was forgotten because for the Western countries -as well as for the Socialist ones- it was very difficult and politically unwise to take side in this particular crisis. Both on regional and global grounds, the balance between costs and benefits emerged as uncertain and unpredictable. This was the real reason for forgetting the war. Have things changed in these last six months?

The reasons it is difficult for the Western countries to take side in relation to the Gulf conflict are particularly clear for the United States. Two main reasons can be mentioned.

First, after the Iranian revolution the United States has kept on ascribing to Iran a crucial role in shaping the East-West balance within the South-Western Asia region. In the eyes of the United States no other country in the region is able to replace the role pre-revolutionary Iran had played in the global arena. Furthermore, there is the risk that because of international and regional pressures on its security, Iran will drop its present non-aligned posture by allying itself more or less closely with the Soviet Union. This would represent a definite blow to the US and Western possibility of withstanding the Soviet Union in that region as well as to the global balance of power. As a consequence, despite the provocative attitude of Teheran against the United States, Washington has maintained a very cautious and neutral posture in the Gulf crisis. So, the role assigned to Iran by the United States has acted as a first important constraint on US policy.

Second, the Iran revolution has politically unified the Middle East and Iran, two areas which previously were substantially separated despite a number of cooperative (Iran-Israel relations) and conflictual (Iran assertive role in the Gulf) relations. Its ideological interests have brought Teheran to search for an Iranian role in the Palestinian crisis. Its anti-Western Islamism has allied Teheran to fundamentalist domestic oppositions in the moderate, pro-Western Arab regimes. The radicalization of the Shi'ite population in Lebanon has encouraged Teheran's political interests to assert and expand its own presence in the region. On the other hand, the Iranian interests we have just mentioned have been rightly regarded by Syria as instrumental to its own interests in the inter-Arab arena. As a consequence Iran has become a new factor in inter-Arab politics. Inter-Arab relations have become extremely intertwined with the Gulf crisis. This development has acted as another constraint on Us policy both in the Middle East and the Gulf -as well as on the policies of other countries concerned- and has contributed to make their decision making even more difficult.

These constraints have prevented Washington from taking a definite stand in the Gulf war. Standing on Iraq's side might be helpful for its Middle Eastern interests. This could stabilize and strengthen the moderate group in relation to domestic oppositions, the radical Arab countries and the radical Palestinian groups and possibly ease some form of peace arrangement with Israel. On the other hand, however, this evolution could throw Iran into Soviet arms and stir up more or less open opposition in Israel. In other words it could hurt the two countries which are considered by the Usa as the two real strategic assets of the region. Similarly, if the United States decided to side with Iran -if allowed to do so by Teheran- this would upset its relations with the Arab allies.

A third factor which has contributed to prevent the Usa from taking a stand has been the fact that it has been prevented by its local Arab allies -the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Gcc)- from increasing its direct military access to the region. The transformation of Iran from a friendly strategic "pillar" into a harsh enemy prompted Carter's intervention doctrine and the setting up of a Rapid Deployment Force (later to be known as Rdjtf). This doctrine, however, assumed a military Us access to the region which proved unfeasible because it was perceived by the Gcc countries as a factor of domestic and inter-Arab insecurity. In subsequent years Us direct access has been surrogated by a number of facilities which surround the Gulf, in Egypt, in Oman, etc., but the very principle of its direct military presence has not been accepted by local allies. On the other hand it is also true that this presence, which in the early stages of the Gulf crisis was strongly demanded, was considered later as compromising in the eyes of the Iranians. As a consequence the indirect access which had materialized was seen as a satisfactory solution for everybody.

Despite constraints, this situation has gradually evolved toward some Us tilting in favour of the Arabs. Sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia and the stationing of an Awacs fleet in that country have made material a form of Us low profile access. A long political process has brought Iraq and the Usa to restore their diplomatic relations. Most of all, however, the uncompromising hostility displayed by Teheran towards the "Great Satan", and its practice of terrorism against American citizens and Arab allies alike, have prevented any

open rapprochement, much as this may have been sought after. It is true that from time to time Iranian hints at a more moderate attitude towards the Usa have emerged, from the end of the hostages saga to Mr. Rafsanjani's mediation on the occasion of the June 1985 highjacking of a Twa aircraft in Beirut. These developments, however, have never translated into an official Iranian policy. Rather they have always appeared as instrumental to domestic political struggle. As a result, the Usa have simply been left with no other option than that of maintaining generally normal or good relations with the Arab countries and abnormal, not to say very bad, relations with Teheran.

In any case, the Usa has officially maintained a strict neutral stance and, despite its good relations with Arabs as opposed to its bad relations with Iranians, it has continued to do so because of the major strategic preoccupations we have mentioned above. The war therefore has continued to be "forgotten".

West European allies have taken positions remarkably different from that of the United States. In contrast with other cases, like the Multinational Force sent to Lebanon, in that of the Gulf crisis the West's out-of-area solidarity has not worked for more than seven years. West European countries up to very recently have strongly de-emphasized the opportunities the Gulf crisis seemed to open to the Ussr. By applying a notion of global security divisibility at a time of strong East-West tensions, they have been rather afraid that a hardening of the East-West dimension of the Gulf crisis would have made more difficult an East-West entente, thus affecting security in Europe. As a consequence they have strongly supported the Gcc countries' opposition to the Us request for easier access to the area.

This has brought West European countries to neglect the Gulf crisis too. At the same time, however, because of their peculiar East-West perception in relation to the Gulf area, they could maintain a freedom of action unknown to the Usa and, though it would be unfair to say that they took sides, it would be equally unfair to say that they were as neutral as the Usa. In fact, France has openly taken the side of Iraq and sold Baghdad weapon systems, like the Mirages, which have proven decisive in keeping Iran at bay. On the other hand, the Federal Republic of Germany and Italy have kept on increasing their trade with Iran. Japan, even more detached than the Western Europeans on political grounds, has maintained strong commercial ties with Teheran, thereby sustaining its war effort.

One has to say, however, that this West European stance has been more opportunistic than politically inspired. It didn't amount to an open support in favour either of the Arabs or the Iranians. On the whole a war often regretted on moral and humanitarian grounds was no less "forgotten" on political grounds (though less so as business) by West Europeans and Japanese than by Americans.

These antecedents make the eighty Western warships which are today present in the Gulf only a more unexpected and astonishing event. As unexpected and astonishing is the fact that forty out these eighty vessels belong to West

European countries (Belgium, France, Italy, Netherlands and Uk), while for the first time since the war even the Federal Republic of Germany has indirectly contributed to this military effort by sending four warships to the Mediterranean so as to allow other allied vessels to be diverted to the Gulf. Only Japan, though contributing financially to the expedition, has refrained from a direct military contribution. Is this event to be interpreted as a change, not to say a turnabout, in the Western stance? Does it mean that the Usa have now taken sides with the Arabs and that the West European countries are doing so with the Usa? Is the Western East-West perception in the region undergoing a change?

Let us begin from the West European attitude. If Western Europe has opted for such a significant involvement in this out-of-area operation, it is because security conditions in Europe are changing and the role of South Western Asia (Swa) among these European security conditions is changing too. In this sense the Europeans cannot fail to consider that both the Usa and the Ussr have undergone a growing involvement in Swa. Independently of recent developments in the Gulf, this involvement is witnessed by the new military arrangements made by Washington and Moscow in setting up the Rdjtf (Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force) in Tampa and the new Southern Tvd (Russian acronym for "operative strategic theater") respectively. The recent disarmament agreement between the two superpowers in the European theater may be regarded as an outcome and a factor of this change in both superpowers' regional priorities.

Whichever their relationship may be, disarmament in Europe and the new Us regional priorities coalesce in urging Western Europe to work out a new and enlarged security concept. It is an enlarged concept in the sense that it must account for European and the Southern Flank (including Swa) regional security alike. In fact, as a consequence of changes occurring in Us-Ussr relations, especially in the European theater, West European countries are expected not only to take up more responsibilities in defending the European front, but also to do so out of the Nato area. For in order to keep alive American support to their security in Europe, Western Europe has to meet Us security requirements elsewhere. West European countries will not be allowed to think of their security as divisible any more. More and more, the East-West dimension in regional crises outside Europe, especially in Swa and more generally speaking in the Southern Flank, is going to become a mutual concern. Another argument to reach the same conclusion is that the detente now prevailing in the relations between the two superpowers is reassuring for Western Europe and as a consequence it allows for more Atlantic cohesion. Whichever the arguments, they suggest that West European presence out-of-area is likely to become an important part of the new West European security concept. Its remarkable presence in the Gulf today can be considered as a first outcome of this new posture. Past trends seem to have been reversed and Western Europe is expected to stay closer to the Usa in out-of-area operations generally and in the Gulf particularly. Accordingly, West European policy toward the countries in the region should become less fragmented and opportunistic and the Western presence in the area more effective and stable.

The change in global and European security conditions is not the only factor allowing for this more cohesive and effective Western presence in the Gulf. Another important factor is the substantial Atlantic consensus on policies to carry out in the area, both on regional and global grounds. One

could hardly say that the "reflagging policy" and, more generally, that of protecting international navigation in the Gulf emerged, from Washington as a conscious and pondered policy. It may be that this policy was adopted as a way out from the "Iran-Contras" quagmire at a moment when US credibility among Arab and Western nations seemed seriously in question and American policy was regarded as a blow to the stability of the allied moderate Arab regimes. Whichever its origin, it has rapidly proved effective. Its effectiveness comes also from the parallel action carried out at the Un starting with Resolution 598. In some Western quarters -as in Italy for instance- a direct Western military presence in the Gulf has been regarded as in contradiction with policies carried out through the Uno. Military presence has been considered as an obstacle to the possibility for the Un to mediate between Iran and Iraq and for the Ussr to be associated with a more authoritative peace process. Quite on the contrary, though this Western policy has been neither thought out jointly nor officially agreed upon, it looks like a deliberate and well-conceived double-track policy. On the one hand, Western moves at the Un keep the door open to the Ussr should it be willing to initiate a cooperative policy to moderate and conciliate the contenders by joint pressures and by isolating them politically. Furthermore, Un moves have prevented the Ussr from using easy propaganda against the Western military presence in the area and have also made clear that there are oscillations in its attitudes towards the crisis. Some Soviet steps have appeared in harmony with the overall cooperative attitude shown by the new leadership and the search for a responsible role in this regional crisis. Other steps have appeared closer to old fashioned opportunism. Anyway, the door is kept open and this is definitely an important element in reassuring West European allies and in allowing a strong cohesion among them. On the other hand, military presence is a clear signal to the Soviet Union, to Iran and Iraq and to the Gcc and the other Arab countries that the Western nations are determined to protect their interests and those of the allied countries independently of the absence of expected cooperative policies. In the end, this may be a good argument for urging such cooperative policies. Consensus on this double-track policy is making Western cooperation work, even if it is working as a spontaneous coordination outside any institutional framework.

Besides pluses, however, there are shortcomings. An uncoordinated military presence may be a good start. Definitely, it has had the merit of throwing Western countries out of impotence. However, it cannot be a surrogate for an overall regional policy. In the end, if Western military presence is not explicitly coordinated, it is because of the absence of shared Western policies. A policy based on nothing else but consensus -rather than on shared institutions- is only too vulnerable to changes in circumstances and conditions actually prevailing. As in Lebanon, it may work for a while, but sooner or later the lack of well defined goals -as well as the presence of wrong policies- is bound to backfire and make any military instrument void.

At Present, the prominent political goal which has prompted Western military presence in the Gulf is that Western countries' interest in protecting Arab moderate countries' stability has definitely prevailed. Fears about Arab stability have finally been confirmed by the Iranian decision to involve Kuwait in the war, by attacking it militarily after years of terroristic pressures. However, these fears have come up as a consequence of protracted American and then French ambiguities in reacting to Shi'ite terrorism in Lebanon, and

principally in the aftermath of the "Iran-Contras" affaire. Now, military presence has certainly sent to Western regional allies a strong signal. It is also true that this signal has been appreciated, though not necessarily in an open fashion. However, in the immediate future this policy will require responses to other -sometimes "old"- questions which in the end have been only postponed. First, effective and cohesive as it may be today, Western policy in the Gulf has not resolved its dilemma between Middle Eastern and Iranian interests. Second, if Western policy is expected to restore Gcc countries' long-term security perceptions, it cannot avoid accounting for "old" regional issues, such as Iraq-Syria rivalry, Iraq and Iran roles in the region, and the conflict over Palestine. If the West fails in responding to these wider questions, its military presence will be perceived once again by local allies as a factor of insecurity and the aim of stabilising Arab moderate countries as a middle-term goal will also be missed.

We have just hinted at the more or less covert negotiations undertaken by some Western states with Iran and its supporters. As unacceptable as those policies might have been, they are the expression of a widespread feeling, especially in the United States, that a relation must be restored with Iran because of its unavoidable strategic importance. Rightly or wrongly, recent Iranian moves towards Moscow as a reaction to Western military activities in the Gulf may keep alive the American feeling that Iran cannot be strategically surrogated. One can say that this feeling is sometime exaggerated. However, it remains true that Iran is part of both a Western Northern Tier and a Russian/Soviet Southern Tier which continues to be perceived as strategically determinant by both sides as in all our modern history. This means that the present Western tilt towards the Arab side is not to be maintained and developed in the near future. Today, there is an international agreement which involves not only the Western countries but the Soviet Union as well, over the fact that an Iranian victory over Iraq cannot be permitted because it would have a sweeping destabilising effect on the Arab world. However, there is also on the Western side the firm feeling that Iran cannot be entirely left to frustration.

For this reason Western countries have to find the way to restore working relations with Iran. The military stick must combine with a reinforced stream of offers for political and diplomatic cooperation. On this ground Western hints at recognizing that Iran suffered an aggression should be more explicit, because this could be a good argument in the hands of Iranian pragmatic wings. At the same time military pressure must continue unabated in order to make peace more desirable to those who want it and the war more costly to those who are not prepared to enter into negotiations. This will certainly be a major political task for the Western countries to accomplish.

An even more difficult task will be that of reassuring Gcc countries. Though, for their own reasons, these countries are as half-hearted as the Western countries. Their security could not tolerate an Iraqi defeat but an Iranian defeat is hardly wanted. By the same token, a situation where Iraq could prevail over Syria is not desired either. While on the first point, i.e. keeping a fair balance between Iran and Iraq, Western and Gcc interests seem to converge, as far as the second point is concerned it involves the whole Palestinian issue and the ultimate inter-Arab balance. Here regional and Western interests are not necessarily converging. Nor are the Usa and Western Europe's.

As a consequence, as satisfactory as the present state of affairs may be in terms of Atlantic cohesiveness and effectiveness in the Gulf, prospects depend on Western countries' ability to substantiate their military presence and their prevailing East-West orientation with proper initiatives on the ground of regional politics. This is a difficult and divisive task of itself and it is a severe test for the Western lack of institutions in an area where they need on the contrary a growing presence and cooperation.

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