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CHALLENGES OF MIDDLE EASTERN SECURITY

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I. From containment to crisis management

The global strategic situation has profoundly changed since the end of the cold war, after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the retreat of the USSR from Eastern Europe and its fragmentation. The old Western strategy of defence and containment has lost its meaning while a new strategy of crisis management is developing. The first was meant to confront a major threat, the second is meant to reduce risks. For almost fifty years the West has planned for deterrence and defence, while now it is concentrating on *deterrence and crisis management*.

This change is not an easy one, and it is not yet completed. Among its major features, it is possible to stress the following:

- A. Crisis management is basically a multilateral exercise, even more than defence, however it cannot be based on the secure and smooth working of powerful, stable, multilateral alliances as NATO. The reason is simple: defence against a major, well-identified threat was a powerful coalition building factor - on the contrary, crisis management of relatively minor risks (which can be perceived differently by the various Allies) lacks the same automatic commitment.
- B. An effective crisis management would require the unitarian control of political, military and economic factors, and a strong unity of command (or at least of leadership) that could mobilize in time all the resources available: however, none of the present international crisis management institutions have enough credibility or legitimacy. The UN Security Council is undergoing a difficult process of change, and it has repeatedly failed, the G-7 has no legitimacy and it is institutionally weak, other institutions have a weak decision-making capacity;
- C. For decades NATO was primarily engaged in balancing games between the Allies and against the USSR. The success of these exercises over the years has guaranteed the primacy of security cooperation and has tended to downgrade differences on trade. Nowhere this effect was more visible than in the United States. For decades they have been the main generators of security though with modest exports of goods and a declining share of Western economic wealth. Today, the new international security situation is rapidly reducing the primacy of security consideration in the Atlantic relationship: both the United States and the European allies are reverting to national security policies (and national export strategies) less coherent with the aim of maintaining a stable and strong allied framework.
- D. Finally, crisis management requires a profound change of military instruments and operational strategies such as: higher mobility, Communication, Command,

Control and Information technologies, higher precision and selectivity, staying power as separate from firepower, intermediate political objectives as opposed to military victory, etcetera. They can pose difficult problems of moral acceptability and domestic consensus.

As of today, the USA is the only actor that can master all those requirements, yet it seems unable or unwilling to formulate a global stability and security strategy for the "New World Order" and to form stable international coalitions to that end. Thus, the new situation is characterized by growing risks of weakening of both deterrence and crisis management. On one side there is the proliferation of arms of mass destruction and of medium range delivery vehicles. On the other side, repeated failures of crisis management attempts will inevitably curtail the credibility of the American and Russian nuclear capabilities to guarantee strategic stability and global security. The continuation of such a trend would pose the difficult dilemma of choosing between a breakdown of deterrence or its (possibly traumatic) confirmation. Such a confirmation would be all the more violent and difficult as the failures of crisis management multiply.

Moreover, a new and complex relationship is developing between the USA and Europe and between the USA and the Asia-Pacific countries, partly due to the perception of a progressive weakening of deterrence, which may cause a global reassessment of the existing alliances and could increase the tendency towards the formation of trade and political "regional blocs".

II. The Middle East after the end of the Cold War

- A. The Gulf war, the peace process in Palestine, the decreasing importance of oil revenues and policies foster the fragmentation of the Arab World along national lines. National priorities become more important, as opposed to common Arab perceptions and policies. Factors like the common language and the common religion were normally an integral part of both the Arab and the national identities, and were important for maintaining domestic consensus. This fragmentation process instead sharpens the contradiction between the national states (theoretically "lay") and the Arab society and identity as a whole: the radical islamism profits from this contradiction and tries to deepen it.
- B. Also, in the Middle East appears a growing fear of strategic insecurity and of interference from the outside. The evolution of new "*global intervention strategies*" (especially in the US, but supported also by its allies) does not simplify the matter. Crisis management practices and peace enforcing policies (or "*humanitarian interventions*") challenge (disregard?) the traditional concept of national sovereignty - It is an inevitable and possibly positive evolution, which, however, points to the existence of a basic difference between the *actors* (the intervening countries) and the *objects* (the managed countries). It poses a problem of legitimacy and of consensus. Moreover, the perception of such a difference of power and role favours a vicious circle of re-nationalization, self-exclusion from integration processes and possibly a breakdown of domestic

consensus and the growth of radicalism in many Southern countries.

- C. In strategic terms, the Middle East now includes Central Asia. Thus, Russia discovers new and more precise national and vital interests in the new Middle East (which is becoming part of its "*near abroad*"): a situation completely different from the past, when the Middle East was an important, but not vital, Soviet strategic theatre of military intervention. The strategic relevance of possible Gulf and Middle Eastern crises increases, both for the USA and for Russia (thus, for the World). At the same time, Turkey and Pakistan, normally considered as relatively *marginal* to the regional balance, are playing a greater strategic role.
- D. While Russian influence and power in the region has diminished, the American one is increasing. Still, the American policy will not depend only from local factors and developments, but from the appraisal of the global situation, and especially from:
1. The future relationship between USA and Russia. It is possible that a "de facto" alliance will develop over the management of crises in the Russian "*near abroad*". This could give more credibility and long-term substance to the American presence in the region, especially in the Gulf.
 2. The future situation in the Asia-Pacific. Test-cases could be the North Korean crisis and the development of a security community based on the deepening of the ASEAN-PMC experiment. If these developments will be positive for the US, this country will have a much greater influence over key regional actors like China, India and Pakistan.
 3. The future cooperation (division of roles? responsibility sharing?) between the USA and the European Union on non proliferation, oil security and Mediterranean stability (test cases: Bosnia, Turkey, possibly the Maghreb countries, Egypt).
- E. In this larger framework the Middle Eastern regional actors play an important role, but not the crucial one. Also the "Islamic" question should be seen in the wider perspective of inter-regional global management, thus diminishing its relevance. The Middle Eastern countries may be losing strategic leverage, even if the geo-strategic importance of the region remains high, and could even increase, but only if a greater Russian presence in the area will develop. The situation may rapidly worsen, however, if a general breakdown of deterrence and of crisis management ability will occur. Multiple, generalized conflicts may develop, which will reduce the American capacity to maintain a clear regional superiority in place.
- F. Non-military security factors are increasingly important for the future stability of the states of the regions. They are largely discussed by other papers produced for

this research project: demography, migration, urbanization processes, cultural and religious radicalism, a difficult and contradictory democratization process, an insufficient rate of economic growth, and so on. These factors greatly condition the behaviour of local actors and their ability to withstand international crises.

G. Also, local or domestic crises may rapidly combine with global interests and policies (nuclear proliferation, Russia, energy supplies, Israel, Mediterranean stability, etc.). Thus, the possibility of an effective crisis management is uncertain:

1. One hypothesis (*bottom up*) could be based on the greater mobilization of local actors and on the strengthening of regional factors of stability. The problem is that some allies are very fragile (and may even work towards greater local instabilities: i.e. the Saudi policy on Sudan and Yemen).
2. Another hypothesis (*top down*) could be based on the maintenance of the imposition of a strong external will on the region. The problem is that such a policy is very expensive and thus will increasingly need more than the USA alone, but should enlist the active cooperation of other important global actors such as Russia, Europe and Japan.

The *bottom up* strategy would certainly be a more interesting possibility, provided that it can overcome its weaknesses. Until now, however, it has failed also because of a lack of coherence between the strategic perceptions of the regional and of the global actors.

H. It seems therefore that the perspectives for regional security will depend from the future of the American presence and policy in the area. An interesting example can be drawn from the situation in the Gulf. From a geopolitical point of view, regional security in the Gulf will depend from the evolution and choices of the three major regional actors: Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Right now, however, none of them can modify the situation without major shifts of the American policy in the area. Various American choices are theoretically possible.

1. The prosecution of the present American "*dual containment*" policy - the most likely result is an uncertain stability based on the continued military American presence and on the ability to maintain Iraq under pressure, barring its political or military resurgence.
2. A progressive American retreat from the Gulf - the result would be a general strategic instability favoured by important bids for regional leadership among the three major regional actors (which may cause precarious alliances centred on Iraq: Iran and Iraq against Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Saudi Arabia against Iran); such a development would be easier if the American retreat was accompanied with an agreement between

Washington and Baghdad.

3. The re-establishment of better relations between the USA and Iran - still, it is difficult to imagine that such a relationship could evolve to the point of making it possible a return to a "*double pillar*" American policy. The Iranian regime maintains a strong ideological bias against the Americans, and Iran seems more interested in reviving some kind of relationship with Iraq than in abandoning its anti-Saudi stance.

III. The interplay with the international community

The Middle East has lost its strategic importance as a crucial strategic place in the East-West confrontation. Still, the international community can identify a number of reasons to continue to be involved in this region:

- the constant vital importance of energy supplies (oil and gas),
- the threats from terrorism (low-level violence),
- the unlikely (in the short term) possibility of high-level threats (proliferation of weapons of mass destruction),
- the control of migration flows,
- the long-term check (and eventual containment) of Russian power.

These perceptions do not necessarily require a continuous Western military presence, unless a major crisis arise, threatening vital interests. Moreover, different international alliances with local actors can secure these Western strategic interests. In other words, the local actors have lost leverage on the external actors. This situation could be reversed only if a powerful process of regional integration will succeed in unifying the political control over a large part of the Middle Eastern assets.

Any integration process, however, should confront the complex pattern of fragmentation of the Middle East region, mainly based on the weakness of local governments. Their priorities are domestic more than international (inward looking). Their international alliances and regional policies aim at strengthening their own stability and permanence in power. It's a kind of defensive nationalism that can lead to new instabilities.

These perceptions largely explain why Saudi Arabia and Kuwait embrace the "unholy" alliance with Washington, why Egypt (notwithstanding its domestic islamic opposition) choose to pursue a policy of special relationships with the USA and Israel and why Tunisia and Morocco are open to any proposal that may help to contain the Algerian islamic fever. Yet, this also means that some Middle Eastern countries end up like "international pariahs", politically

isolated and condemned to the role of trouble-makers¹: Iraq, Libya and Iran are cases in point (even if the latter could exploit some political alternatives in Asia, i.e. through the ECO). Syria may be able to avoid this downgrading thanks to the international willingness to reach a "global" peace between Israel and its neighbours. Still, Damascus should probably avoid too long a negotiation and unrealistic demands.

On the opposite side, other countries, formerly "marginal" to the Middle Eastern region, have increased their importance and role, fitting perfectly into the new geo-strategic reality of an "enlarged" Middle East. Cases in point are Pakistan and Turkey.

IV. The regional security model

The present regional security model is centred on the United States and based on the overwhelming US military presence in the Gulf, on the American guarantee of Israeli security, on the ongoing peace process in Palestine, on the Russian weakness and on the interest of the most powerful "peripheral" states (Turkey and Pakistan) to maintain good relations with the USA.

Can this model resist contrary pressures and expand to the entire region? Are there credible alternatives?

Among its most evident limits we can list the following:

- excessive reliance on military force,
- almost exclusively based on the commitment of the American government only,
- no serious social-political project (no long-term perspectives to reinforce local autonomy and self-reliance) to deal with economic and social domestic crises,
- strong religious and political opposition and relatively weak governments,
- "pariah" states,
- high economic costs.

Its greatest limit, however, is that this model could identify with the defence and the survival of the present arab *regimes*, thus countering the democratization processes: a kind of neo-colonial metamorphosis, which would finally put into question also the American and Western contribution to such a model (by diminishing its acceptance by the public opinion).

¹ The fact that these countries have acted in such a way as to allow their own isolation doesn't modify this conclusion.

The end of the Cold War has released the traditional Middle Eastern conflicts from most international constraints. Regional war were always locally motivated. The last forty years have seen more than 36 important conflicts (69% of them with the use of military forces) among the Arab countries only. The Gulf war was simply the logical development of deep seated national confrontations. The American military commitment in the region cannot deal with all these conflicts (i.e. the Yemeni wars). Moreover, the American military presence cannot shield national governments from domestic instabilities.

The analysis of the two models discussed by B. Korany in his paper to this conference² is convincing. Both the "Exclusivist" and the "Expanding" tendencies reveal important weaknesses. His own preferences, however, cannot be realised without the active American contribution (and wider international support).

Western Europe may play a significant role (adding to or even substituting for the American one), but it should first overcome some important strategic limits of its own:

- the difficulties of its integration process,
- the absence of significant military might,
- its largely negative (confrontational) perception of Islamism and of Middle Eastern migrants,
- its difficulty of devising a coherent strategy and of mobilizing enough resources to deal at the same time with Eastern Europe and with the Mediterranean-Middle East.

Other actors could play an interesting role (albeit marginal, at least for the time being). Russia is clearly interested in the enlarged Middle East, coinciding with large regions of the former Soviet Union. Also China could be drawn into Middle Eastern power politics through Central and Southern Asia. South-East Asian countries and Japan have important interests in the stability of the Middle Eastern region, but are not playing any significant political or strategic role as yet.

In general, however, the policies of these other external actors will be largely shaped by their own relationships with the Americans. Thus the main question is if the model centred on the US can be considered viable and can outgrow its present limits.

V. Possible improvements of the present model

It may be possible to increase the stability of this model

² Bahagat Korany, *The Old-New Middle East*, pages 43- 48.

- giving higher priority to social-economic and cultural factors,
- devising a strategy to redeem "pariah" countries,
- increasing the importance of regional mechanisms for conflict reduction and crisis control,
- multilateralizing the present "central" American role (sharing burdens and responsibilities),
- accepting an higher degree of cultural diversity, provided that the democratization process will continue.

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