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THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION

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The Mediterranean region has gradually evolved into a true theater of operations where endemic instability can easily erupt into open conflicts, where the elements of threat have multiplied and diversified, and where the geostrategic linkage with the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the Central African belt, extending from the Horn to the Sub-Sahara, has become stricter and more evident.

At present, the Mediterranean region's security equation is characterized by several factors. I will list them, but not in a priority order.

First factor: a qualitative, more than quantitative, increase in the military capability of the Warsaw Pact's Southern region countries (Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria), and a quantitative as well as qualitative increase in the military capability of the Soviet Union.

The strengthened military capabilities of the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron (Sovmedron) and the deployment of Soviet Naval Aviation's "Backfire" bombers, armed with air-to-surface missiles and with a combat radius of action covering the entire Mediterranean, has changed the East-West military picture in the area.

The Soviet military presence is an element which not only will have a great influence on military operations in case of a Nato-Warsaw Pact war, but also limits and conditions the range of political and military options open to the United States in peacetime and in case of extra-Nato crises. In other words, it diminishes the flexibility of American crisis-management policy and the political significance of American military presence. Furthermore, it increases the risks of a superpower confrontation over a local crisis gone out of control.

Second factor: the presence in the region of many international issues which are difficult to solve. Of significance is the fact that the tension areas - tensions which derive from problems very diverse in terms of historical and ethnic roots, political and economic interests, and security needs - are not located along the borders between Nato and Warsaw Pact countries, and that the situation of latent crises cannot be attributed to elements of confrontation between the two military alliances in Southern Europe.

In fact, the issues do not directly effect the East-West relations, but do involve either members of Nato (the problem of the Aegean Sea between Turkey and Greece and the controversy over Gibraltar between Spain and England) or countries outside Nato's area of responsibility (the longstanding crisis in the Middle East, the active and destabilizing foreign policy of Libya, the problem in the former Spanish Sahara, etc).

Third factor: the further militarization of the Mediterranean region caused by the strengthening of the military power of all riparian countries, with a particular emphasis on the modernization of their air and naval forces. This acquisition of significant military capabilities by the Mediterranean countries poses a series of problems. First, the concept of high seas might be increasingly put into question. Second, it increases the propensity of those countries to utilize military means as a method to solve political controversies. Third, it renders those air and naval operations of the type included in what is commonly referred to as "gunboat diplomacy", more difficult and risky. Fourth, it will complicate any future attempt to reach arms control agreements applied to the Mediterranean Sea.

Fourth factor: the technological development of modern air and naval weapons systems. This factor will have an effect on the military operations in the Mediterranean region in any type of conflict.

Fifth factor: the repercussion on the Mediterranean region of any crisis in the Gulf which might result in a direct involvement of the two superpowers.

Sixth factor: the integral application of the Law of the Sea, with the institution of "Exclusive Economic Zones" (EEZs) up to 200 miles off the shores of the coastal countries and the extension of the territorial waters from 6 to 12 miles, on the one hand, and, on the other, progress in the sea mining technology which will make it possible and economically feasible to exploit seabed resources. The problem in the Mediterranean appears particularly complex. Given the Mediterranean's geography, the institution of EEZs will lead to a series of super-imposition and overlapping, and hence to reasons for controversy. Even the extension of territorial waters does not appear of easy application, especially in the Aegean. Progress in mining technology will tend to make it more difficult for the countries whose EEZs overlap to reach agreement on their exploitation.

Seventh factor: the growing international economic importance of the Mediterranean.

Eighth factor: international terrorism, which is becoming an ominous and pervasive element in the Mediterranean region and an increasingly important parameter of the security equation of all Mediterranean countries. And the risk of nuclear terrorism, i.e. the danger of terrorists stealing a nuclear bomb or the material to make one. According to Paul Leventhal, a former congressional staff member, if current processing rates continue, there will be 400 tons of separated plutonium in private hands by the year 2000, twice the amount now contained in Soviet and American nuclear weapons.

Ninth factor: the possibility, albeit in the long term period, of nuclear proliferation in the Mediterranean region through the acquisition by a riparian country of an explicit military nuclear capability.

Now the facts:

- that the strategic situation in the Mediterranean has changed more in terms of a globalization of the threat (including the terrorist threat) than in terms of direct Soviet military threat;

- that any South-South or North-South crisis could eventually evolve into a superpowers confrontation and then to an East-West conflict;
- that new regions (the Gulf, Central Africa) have entered into the Mediterranean, and therefore, European security picture, is of serious concern for Italy.

As other European countries have done (the political and military role played by France in Lebanon, in the Maghreb and the sub-Saharan Africa, the participation of British military contingents in the multinational force (MNF) in Beirut and in the mine-hunting operations in the Suez Gulf), Italy has in recent years paid more attention to the Mediterranean region.

The overall picture of the last five years is one of more active foreign policy, with a higher profile and a more explicit willingness to assume responsibilities and commitments. And it is also a picture of a foreign policy which finds its way of expression through the means of the military instrument, i.e. through the employment of armed forces, even though always by means of "peace-keeping" operations.

In fact:

- in 1979, an army helicopter unit was deployed in Lebanon as part of the UNIFIL;
- in 1980, Italy committed itself to safeguarding Malta's neutrality and signed a treaty for economic, technical and military assistance;
- in 1980, when the US Navy was forced to move one carrier battle group from the 6th Fleet in the Mediterranean to the naval force building up in the Indian Ocean, the Italian Navy partially filled the gap, expanding naval operations outside its designated gravitation areas;
- in March 1982, Italy agreed to participate in the multinational force in Sinai (MFO) and a naval contingent of three minesweepers is still today conducting its daily patrolling mission in the Aqaba Gulf;
- in September 1982, an Italian military contingent participated in the two multinational forces which were deployed to Beirut;
- in August 1984, a naval force composed of three minehunters was deployed in the Suez Canal to search for the mines which had impaired the navigation through that sea lane.

On the other hand, there has been - in particular after the Fiumicino terrorist attack and the Libyan threat to attack the Italian bases where American forces are located - an evident southern projection of the Italian military posture. The air defence system has been strengthened (the radar net in Sicily was modernized, an interceptor squadron was deployed to Trapani Birgi in Sicily), the Lampadusa and Pantelleria islands' military defence has been upgraded, a rapid intervention force is being created.

As far as the future perspectives are concerned, the following trends are the most likely:

- Italy will continue to play a prominent role in the Mediterranean. Its foreign policy, however, will be "corrected" in terms of: a less explicit mediatory role, a stricter connection with the Mediterranean policy of its European partners; a revaluation of Italy's relations with those countries which can be made responsible - through credible evidence - for their support to international and Arab terrorism.

- the possibility of participating in international peace-keeping operations will depend on how these could eventually be justified in front of the Parliament and the public opinion. The humanitarian aspects and the U.N. management are elements which will have a bearing on the political parties' attitude and consent. Military missions outside the Mediterranean region will be unlikely, except for very small forces in the U.N. role.
- there will be the tendency to support the U.N. initiatives aimed at solving the international crises and to privilege the "European" framework versus the "Atlantic" one in the approach to crisis management. If the present political trend will continue, there will be the tendency to avoid a too evident identification with the American policy, particularly in areas where it is felt that the Italian interests will be damaged by that identification.
- the military policy will continue to be firmly tied to Nato, but with more attention dedicated to the "national" parameters of the security equation of the Mediterranean area.
- any role Italy will decide to play in the Mediterranean region will be limited by the endemic instability of the Italian government and conditioned by the influence of the domestic political struggle on foreign policy decisions.

In a broader framework and in larger perspective, I think that:

- it appears necessary to re-evaluate the military equation in the Mediterranean region in terms of a new level, type and dislocation of forces; in terms of a greater integration of European forces on the operational and technical level; and in terms of the acceptance of precise responsibilities by the European countries most interested in Mediterranean stability;
- it appears necessary for the European countries to make a more careful evaluation of the connections between the Mediterranean area and the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the African belt from the Horn to the sub-Sahara region;
- it appears necessary to establish a closer cooperation among the European countries, within the framework of the EPC, on the problems of security in the Mediterranean;
- it appears necessary to involve in the European response also the non-aligned countries of the Mediterranean;
- it appears necessary to pursue a Mediterranean policy aimed at defusing all potential crisis situations, at arms control agreements capable of reducing the military confrontation in the region and a tight non-proliferation policy;
- it appears necessary to lay the foundation for a new balance that privileges a closer Euro-Arab and Euro-African dialogue.

Of paramount importance is the furthering of the peace process in the Middle East. The solution of the Palestinian problem, when accepted by all states concerned, will not dissolve the Arab terrorism, but certainly will reduce the latitude of the support it actually enjoys today.

And the successful solution of this problem will stand as an example of the possibility to always find political answers, thus facilitating the peaceful composition of the other destabilizing Mediterranean issues.