

THE MIDDLE EAST FROM A WESTERN EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

outline of Dr. R. Aliboni's presentation
at the IAI-IMEMO bilateral meeting

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1. This presentation discusses the situation in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf (referred here to as the South Western Asia, SWA) from a Western European perspective. SWA is seen, first, as a global factor and, secondly, from a regional point of view.

2. Looking at SWA as a global factor, the most important trend concerning West European countries is their increasing direct involvement in that area.

2.1. As a rule, when Us-Ussr relations are conflictual, Nato's European allies put pressures on the Usa in order to impress a more cooperative approach over East-West relations.

In this framework, after Mr. Reagan took over the Us presidency with the aim of restoring a more acceptable balance of power with the Ussr, the Usa and the European allies have been quarreling over three points related to the state of East-West relations: arms control negotiations and the development of new weapons systems (especially SDI); economic and technological relations; PLO's role in the Arab-Israeli crisis and, later, terrorism as an international factor. As Us-Ussr relations became more cooperative (from their 1985 summit in Geneva), up to the present agreement on dismantling intermediate and shorter nuclear weapons, allied pressure on the Usa have eased and almost disappeared. This is happening in relation to the SDI programme but also in relation to the Us policy in SWA. Intra-Nato conflict because of the Venice Declaration on the PLO role and the Us attitude vis-à-vis Afghanistan and Iran at the end of '70s has now given way to a remarkable cooperation at the occasion of the current Persian Gulf crisis.

More Us-Ussr cooperation brings about a reassurance to the Western Europeans. This allows for more cohesion and cooperation among Nato allies in Europe and out of the Nato area as well.

2.2. The recent disarmament agreement in Europe has changed the West European security perception on both subjective and objective ground. It brings about a rethinking of the West European defense. West European presence out-of-area is likely to become an important part of the new West European security concept.

Disarmament in the European theater is at the same time an outcome and a factor of a wider change in both superpowers' regional priorities. Both the USA and the USSR have undergone a growing involvement in SWA. This involvement is witnessed by the new military arrangements made by Washington and Moscow by setting up the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force in Tampa and the new Southern TVD respectively. Disarmament in Europe and the new US regional priorities coalesce in giving Western Europe a new and enlarged security concept. More and more security is getting a mutual concern. Security is not divisible. In order to keep alive an American supported European security, Western Europe has to match non-European US security requirements elsewhere. Regions where a West European presence is expected are quite naturally SWA, the Mediterranean and Africa South of Sahara.

In this changing environment objective West European interests, such as oil, trade, etc. are likely to become more visible to public opinions and more inescapable to governments. That will combine with changes in perceptions to reinforce the trend towards a strengthened West European presence in SWA.

3. At the regional level, the outcome of the Iran-Iraq war seems now linked to the global level as a consequence of the Western decision to protect navigation in the Persian Gulf. This makes it more unpredictable than ever. On the other hand, the Arab-Israeli conflict is undergoing important changes within the region itself. This is confronting external powers with new options.

First, the PLO is more and more appearing as a vanishing political force. The USSR sponsored reunification in Algiers has failed to reintroduce the PLO as a credible actor on the Middle Eastern stage. After they failed to enforce the option of acquiring a national status under the Hashemite dynasty (as the Italian "republicans" did under the Savoy dynasty) the PLO seems now left with no option any more. If this trend will stabilize it will reveal the real nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict as an inter-State conflict. This will require a deep change in the regional policies of the external powers concerned.

Second, Syria has proved unable to arrange any kind of stabilization in Lebanon. Furthermore, the contradictions of its alliance with Iran have begun to emerge and Damascus seems now obliged to pay more attention to its national interests and to its (never clarified) projection toward a Greater Syria. This trend is converging with the transformation of the Arab-Israeli conflict in a local (though very difficult) inter-State conflict.

Third, whichever Iraqi regime will survive or come next to the present crisis it will lead a country that because of the war has intensely industrialised, acquired discipline and consciousness, a strong security force and a stature which can not be compared by its neighbours, particularly Syria. This will complicate the inter-State conflict in the region. One important diplomatic task today is that of favouring a rapprochement between Iraq and Syria as to avoid strong conflict ahead. This has been very well understood by Moscow.

Contrary to what happens with the Western powers, all these trends seem very clear to the Soviet government, which in the last years has been able to evolve from a sectarian partner to a more responsible and balanced superpower. This evolution should be considered by Western powers not as a dangerous competition but as an opportunity to test the possibility of enlarging cooperation from the Western theater to SWA.

The West European countries, which are about to enter a deeper military involvement should be especially interested in exploring this option. Nevertheless their new military engagement is not alternative to cooperation but it is a necessary condition for giving cooperation more chances to succeed.

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