CONNECTIONS
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The Countries of the Southern Mediterranean and the Advent of a European Defense Policy

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Who can forget the outcry in most Arab countries following the decision by France, Spain, Italy, and Portugal in 1995 to deploy Euroforces in the Mediterranean?[2] Those four European countries had announced that they would undertake missions as defined in the WEU's Petersberg Declaration of 19th June 1992 (humanitarian tasks, peacekeeping tasks, tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peacemaking). The point was to provide Europe with its own autonomous military capability for force projection, while noting at the same time that these Euroforces could be used within a NATO context as a reinforcement to its European defense pillar.

In the southern Mediterranean, the strongest criticism came from Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli, showing quite clearly the prevailing suspicion in those three capitals concerning any military initiatives undertaken by the powers to the north. Libya denounced a military enterprise that she saw as targeted against the Arab nation.[3] Tunisia criticized an initiative "which includes goals that provoke amazement and surprise."[4] For Algeria, the political context in which the Euroforces were being established gave rise to fears of scenarios for intervention in a southern Mediterranean country, embroiled in a civil war, in order to evacuate expatriates (it is easy to guess from which country!). The Arab League echoed these concerns by deploring the lack of consultation with the countries of the Mediterranean's southern shore.[5]

There is no doubt that the dearth of information provided by the countries whose initiative established these forces certainly did feed suspicions that the intention was interventionist. Aware of the upheaval it caused throughout North Africa, the governments of France, Spain, Italy, and Portugal reconsidered and came up with an offer to give all the countries of the Mediterranean the chance to cooperate in Euroforces operations, including participation in certain military operations within the framework of Petersberg missions.[6]

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[2]   The communiqué announcing the establishment of Euroforce's rapid reaction force (EUROFOR) and European maritime force (EUROMARFOR) was issued in Lisbon on 15 May 1995 by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and of Defense of the four participating countries.

[3]   See Colonel Gadaffy`s call for the Euroforces to be disbanded in BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts, Part 4, The Middle East, 19 May 1997, ME/2922 MED/17. For Tunisia, see Nouvelles de Tunisie, Wednesday 13 November 1996, Tunis.

[4]   Council of Ministers communiqué, Tunis, 11 November 1996.

[5]   Declaration by Arab League Foreign Ministers, Cairo, 20 September 1997.

[6]   Declaration by Ministers of Foreign Affairs and of Defense of Euroforces Member States, Paris, 13 May 1997.

Periodically, they put out reminders of their willingness to contemplate long-term cooperation with, in particular, the countries of North Africa, including port visits, joint exercises, and exchanges of observers. To date, however, no southern Mediterranean country has responded to these offers. Since 1997, attempts by EUROMARFOR HQ to obtain permission from the relevant authorities for visits by that force's naval units to southern Mediterranean ports would appear to have ended in failure.[7]

These criticisms from the South should be viewed in the light of the absence of any reaction when the EUROCORPS, a multinational force with German, French, Belgian, Spanish and Luxembourg contingents, was created; the explanation is presumably because deployment in the Mediterranean was not part of its mission, unlike EUROFOR and EUROMARFOR.

More recently, the European Council (in Helsinki, in December 1999) decided to develop the European Union's capability for international crisis management with the aim by 2003 to deploy within 60 days and sustain for at least one year a rapid reaction force of up to 50,000-60,000 persons. At the Nice summit there was even more detailed discussion on the new European defense architecture. The force in question would provide for humanitarian missions, peacekeeping, and crisis management, and would receive its orders from the Council of Ministers. It would not be a substitute for NATO forces, but could act as a part of the European defense identity. However, to date, the southern Mediterranean nations have not provided any official reaction to this initiative, and their representatives (diplomats in the European capitals) have merely reaffirmed in private their traditional suspicions of any military capability deployable in the Mediterranean.

Unhelpful Stereotypes

The issue of force projection in the Mediterranean highlights just how far we still have to go to prevail over the fears of one side and the anxieties of the other. In point of fact, the case of the Euroforces reflects "distortions" in how security is perceived and the lack of transparency that is typical of the relationship between the two shores of the Mediterranean. As things stand in relations between nations on the northern and southern shores, security perceptions remain dominated by suspicion and by an image of each other that is fundamentally negative.

For the North (i.e. Europe), the source of perceived threat lies in a crisis crescent that arches from the Western Sahara across to Iran. The Alliance's new Strategic Concept, adopted at the 1991 Rome meeting of the Atlantic Council, defines new risks as the result of multiple factors (political, economic and social instability, territorial disputes, migratory pressures, terrorism, and the proliferation of weapons of mass

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[7] See Admiral Fransisco Rapallo, "EUROMARFOR and Security Cooperation in the Mediterranean," WEU Institute of Security Studies, Occasional Papers No.14 (edited by Martin Ortega), March 2000, 29-33.

destruction), all of which they situate mainly in the Mediterranean region.[8] This approach was criticized in the majority of Arab capitals because they saw it as legitimizing the "threat from the South" described in, among other places, Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations."[9]

For the South (i.e., the countries of the Magheb), the North is seen as also bearing responsibility for the evils afflicting them, such as the burden of debt, unstable commodity prices, and interference in the domestic affairs of others. After the collapse of the socialist camp, which had been the main ally of the Arab countries, the fear of a hegemonic Atlantic Alliance was bolstered in the South. American rhetoric about the danger of proliferating weapons of mass destruction was perceived in the South as targeted at Arab countries while glossing over the responsibility to be laid at the door of Israel in this respect. Interventionist and unilateralist initiatives on the part of the Americans and Europeans are frequently denounced as the expression of Western willingness to impose their anxieties and their security models without taking into account the differences, and the interests, of other nations. To sum up, Europe is accused of having settled comfortably into a tired old view of things which reduces the South to a source of threats and instabilities that have to be contained.

The Need for Transparency

It is clear that these distorted images, these unhelpful stereotypes, of one another have arisen primarily because of the lack of dialogue and of exchanges of information between the two shores of the Mediterranean, particularly on military issues. It also reflects the need for something to be done that would improve those images and perceptions. Aware of this need, the signatories of the Barcelona Declaration on Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (27 November 1995) expressed their willingness to work on consolidating an "area of peace and stability in the Mediterranean."

What is ambitious about the Barcelona Process is the fact that it proposes a new type of comprehensive cooperation in the Mediterranean to create a framework for dialogue within which the partners can exchange views on the problems affecting stability and security, including the issue of deploying intervention forces. In this sense, the Partnership is an extremely useful framework for conflict prevention.[10] So far, the Barcelona Process has not contained a military dimension, since the first stage of the process is confined to generalities about the political Partnership and the security Partnership (with reference to "soft security" measures). It is, however, clear that strong

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[8] See in particular the "Report of the WEU Assembly on European Cooperation in the Mediterranean," Document 1485, Paris, 6 November 1995. See also in this respect the analysis by Mark Stenhouse and Bruce George, NATO and Mediterranean Security: the New Central Region, London Defense Studies, no.22. London: The Center for Defense Studies, 1996.

[9] Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" Foreign Affairs, Summer 1993, 22-49.

[10] Abdelwahab Biad, "Conflict Prevention in the Euro-Med Partnership: Challenges and Prospects," The International Spectator 24:2, (April-June 1999): 17-31.

resistance to transparency and dialogue on "hard security" issues will persist because of the fact that, in many of the countries in the region, the military establishment is so impenetrable, and because of the continuing Israeli-Arab conflict.

As a priority, ways can already be envisaged by a limited number of countries (in Southern Europe and North Africa) to improve the perceptions they have of each other and to strengthen mutual confidence; such an initiative would prevent the kind of reaction that followed the deployment of the Euroforces. The kind of measures capable of reducing the distortions in these perceptions might include adopting exchange programs and cooperation on defense and security issues as a means to improving transparency and communication concerning military activities in the Mediterranean basin. Such programs would include things like exchange visits by staff officers, linking up military academies, inviting observers to maneuvers on a regular basis, and holding joint exercises, along with training for peacekeeping, crisis management, and conflict prevention.[11] Other measures, too, could be considered in order to provide better ways to communicate intentions and to foster transparency and clarity in military doctrines; for instance, hot-lines could be set up, along with strengthened procedures to prevent or manage any naval or airforce incident that might occur in the basin. The idea would be to promote non-confrontational postures for the military forces, in particular the naval forces, through prior notification when operational units were to be deployed, and through limiting the amount of large-scale naval aviation activity. In addition, exchanging information on maritime activities, participating in joint exercises, establishing mechanisms to prevent incidents at sea and to foster cooperation in fields like search-and-rescue, and preventing pollution would aid in improving perceptions on both sides of the Mediterranean.

The challenges to the stability and security of the Mediterranean are not military in substance; we should speak in the region of managing *risks* rather than of managing *threats*.[12] While it is generally agreed that there is no direct, major military threat inherent in the relations between northern and southern Mediterranean countries of the type that existed between East and West during the Cold War, it must still be recognized that, if there is a sizable disparity in military capabilities, then any military initiative (like deploying a rapid reaction force) is likely to create natural anxieties. Some Arab states experience a keen sense of vulnerability, not only regarding Israel but also regarding the powers to the north of the Mediterranean. Indeed, one state, Libya, makes that sense a cornerstone of its security rhetoric. In the final analysis, like so much elsewhere in Europe, the potential for destabilization in the region lies less in the existence of a major, identifiable, military threat than in an interlinking of structural risks that are political, economic, and social in nature.

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[11] Including cooperation in peacekeeping operations. See in this regard Carlos Echeverria, La Coopération entre les forces armées Euro-Méditerranéennes pour le maintien de la paix, Cahiers de Chaillot, no. 35, Paris: WEU Institute of Security Studies, February 1999.

[12] On the prospects for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership see Hans-Gunter Brauch, Antonio Marquina and Abdelwahab Biad eds., Euro-Mediterranean Partnership for the 21st Century, London: Macmillan, 2000.

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