Global Geostrategy and the Mediterranean

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After having been a strategic cornerstone of international relations for several centuries, the Mediterranean lost its importance in favour of the Atlantic, followed later by the Pacific. In this early twenty-first century, will it manage to regain a role, if not equivalent to its earlier status, at least essential to the world balance? The Mediterranean is currently a region of high tension and probably one of the most unstable seismic fault lines of international relations.

Thus regional conflicts, of different intensities but some of which endure and are growing worse, have an importance that goes beyond Mediterranean shore countries: Morocco-Algeria, Cyprus-Turkey and, of course, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has proven central. The Mediterranean Region is also a stage for the strategies of international actors, in particular the United States, due to the major energy stakes existing there (Algeria, Libya) and in its immediate proximity (the Arab Persian Gulf States). Moreover, the countries along the southern shore of the Mediterranean have been experiencing strong internal tensions due to the weak legitimacy of the majority of regimes and the related authoritarian repression, explaining the radical nature of opposition forces, which can rarely express themselves legally. The Arab uprisings in the winter of 2010 and spring of 2011 constitute stunning proof.

The Arab Movements of Late 2010 - Early 2011: Domino Effect or Shock Wave?

Lenin used to say that a single spark could start a prairie fire. In Tunisia, a tragic incident turned into a major geopolitical event. A young, 26-year-old Tunisian graduate, Mohamed Bouazizi, faced with the impossibility of finding a job after his university studies, resigned himself to selling vegetables. When the police harassed him, he set himself on fire on 17 December 2010. He did not survive the injuries. A desperate individual gesture? No! Tunisian youth and the general population considered it the expression of collective malaise. The incident unleashed a wave of protests, shattering the image of a country where the regime seemed to easily control the political and social situation. The incidents led to the flight of President Ben Ali on 14 January 2011, after 23 years in power. For the first time, an Arab regime had been overturned, not by a coup d'état, but by a popular revolution.

Under Ben Ali, a social pact had been concluded with the Tunisian population: political liberties were radically limited and controlled in exchange for continually increasing access to consumer goods and services by the majority of citizens. Western countries, in the name of the struggle against Islamism, closed their eyes to the breaches of elementary democratic principles.

Ben Ali was both a victim of his success and responsible for his downfall. The population's high level of education, which allowed it to be in contact with the outside world, created a public opinion that could no longer remain prisoner to official discourse. The regime's closed nature, its consideration of all criticism as intolerable, considerably isolated it and cut it off from reality. Not allowing any space for opposition actually created a void which young people

rushed to fill. Hence, when the economy began to show signs of slowing down, the restrictions on liberty and the corruption, tolerated until then, became unbearable.

The youth of the Arab world, a globalised youth, compares its fate with others. It no longer accepts being bereft of its rights and liberties in the name of the so-called struggle against Islamism. Governments can thus no longer hide behind the argument of a foreign plot or a terrorist danger. Young Arabs are patriotic and want to be able to live and be successful in their own countries; it is therefore highly unlikely that circumstantial measures will suffice to satisfy them.

In the Maghreb as in the Mashreq, the situation in Tunisia was followed with fervent attention: everywhere, economic and social difficulties had created an environment ripe for protest. After Ben Ali, it was the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, who hurriedly left power, namely on 12 February 2011. Beyond this victory, however, the transition under army control promises to be complicated.

Despite real differences between States, there is one certainty: peoples, everywhere in the world and thus including the Arab world, are becoming true political actors. They confirm Brzezinski's statement, according to which, "for the first time in history, almost all of humanity is politically activated [...]." The Arab world cannot escape this generalised movement. The combination of an increasingly educated youth and increasingly flagrant social inequalities is explosive and cannot be checked by authoritarianism.

To grasp the depth of these political upheavals, historical analogies have been advanced. However, we should not get carried away after the success of the Tunisian revolution and the surprise flight of Ben Ali, nor even after the fall of Mubarak in Egypt or the shaking of Colonel Gaddafi. Certain observers were too quick to predict a domino effect in the Arab world. Indeed, it is improbable that such an effect will take place, which would see the ensemble, or even the majority, of the Arab regimes be overturned one after another in a short time span. However, the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutionary processes are creating a shock wave that will be felt not only in the entire region but beyond Mediterranean bounds.

The domino effect predicted for the Arab world was the fruit of an analogy made with the end of communism in Eastern European countries in the latter half of 1989. In just a few months, all the communist regimes, considered immutable, were overthrown, one after another with astounding ease. All of these regimes had, however, a factor in common: they had no internal legitimacy and only remained in place through the external pressure exercised by the Soviet Union. From the moment when Gorbachev clearly indicated that each member state of the Warsaw Pact could go its own way and that he would not oppose any national political choices by military force, all the regimes were overthrown with a speed that no one had predicted.

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However, though the Arab countries have certain facets in common, the differences are sufficiently great to check the domino effect. It is therefore methodologically mistaken to make an analogy between Eastern Europe in 1989 and the Arab world today.

As we have seen, the first country to experience the effects of the Tunisian revolution is not a Maghreb country but Egypt. In **Algeria**, though part of the population considers the mismanagement of oil revenue as a fundamental injustice and access to employment and housing remains a nagging problem, the country also remembers the horrors of civil war, from which it has only just emerged and into which it has no desire to return. The army, moreover, plays a specific role. However, on 23 February, popular protest forced the government to lift the state of emergency that had been in effect for 20 years. In **Morocco**, there is a climate of intellectual freedom that Tunisia did not have and which offers several forms of political participation that constitute safety valves. Though there are major social inequalities, the system seems more open than in Tunisia, and, above all, the King, with a significant public presence, still retains great personal popularity, not to speak of his legitimacy as Commander of the faithful. In this case, there is an aspiration to greater political openness and social justice, but not to revolution, which the King's speech

of 9 March 2011 and the proposed reforms seem to confirm.

It was **Egypt** that had the most points in common with Tunisia. A worn regime, complete political stalemate, the absence of liberty, corruption among the Head of State's entourage and, on another note, a significant number of internet users and members of social networks. But the differences are also great: the army, in contrast to Tunisia, holds power and does not intend to give it up, even if it let go of Mubarak. Moreover, the strategic importance of Egypt has nothing to do with that of Tunisia. This is why Egypt did not undergo a revolutionary process identical to the one occurring in Tunisia. It is likewise certain that popular protest will not cease after the fall of Mubarak, that other significant political disruptions will occur along the borders of the Nile and that the deep movement underway will not be ended through simple cosmetic changes.

In **Libya**, Gaddafi has chosen to attempt to drown the popular revolt in a bloodbath. Here comparisons can also be made with Tunisia and Egypt: a regime in place since 1969, the squandering of national riches (to the benefit of Gaddafi's dreams of Pan-Arabic and Pan-African grandeur) and the temptation of dynastic succession. As we write these lines, Libya is in a state of war, but whatever the outcome, the Gaddafi regime is doomed.

In **Yemen**, confrontations are taking place against a regime that has been in power for thirty years. In **Bahrain**, the religious composition of the country (70% Shiites) distinguishes it from its neighbours, who to date are not experiencing any protest movements.

The **Iranian regime** is delighted with this spirit of revolt, wishing to make people believe it was the instigator, but the Green Movement has experienced it rather as a signal to again take up the torch of revolt, not directed at the United States but rather at the repressive regimes of which Iran forms part.

Some regimes have fallen, others will fall, and yet others will evolve. Those who manage to best anticipate political and social demands will survive. Speaking of a general shock wave means that the regimes could remain in place if they radically modify their behaviour so as to be less cut off from their populations. In any case, the future status quo is hardly foreseeable.

These processes are not limited to the Arab world alone. Africa and Asia are equally involved. The shock wave is a global phenomenon. It concerns the ensemble of emerging countries where the population is sufficiently educated not to take official propaganda at face value and where social inequality, corruption and political resistance to change have become unacceptable. All countries having attained a certain stage of development and education are concerned. Regimes will have to demonstrate political and social openness and take into account their populations' aspirations for fear of being overthrown.

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Apart from the analogy with Eastern Europe in 1989, another, just as inaccurate, parallel was also drawn between Egypt and Iran in 1979. Numerous government officials and experts who had long deplored the absence of democracy in the Arab world suddenly became concerned about its possible establishment. Wasn't there an Islamist danger? Wasn't there the risk that the Muslim Brotherhood would take power in Tunis or Cairo? The analogy was rapidly established with the Iranian events of 1979, where a revolution deposing a dictator itself turned into a religious dictatorship. In reality, the comparison was quickly exhausted. First of all, the Iranian clergy, highly organized, had directed the revolution; moreover, if the Islamic Republic has managed to endure, all the while exercising a great deal of repression, it is primarily due to the sensation of external threat, which has allowed the regime to rally the population to it. The fear of US intervention to overthrow the regime was coherent, the memory of the overthrow of Mossadegh in 1953 being still vivid. But above all, the Iraqi aggression in 1980 created a sudden burst of patriotism that benefited the Iranian regime. Must it be reiterated that at the time, the Western world as a whole gave its support to Saddam Hussein's Iraq? Moreover, this sentiment of external menace likewise

explains the difference between Tunisia, Egypt and Iran. In Iran, after the fraudulent presidential elections of 2009, there was likewise a revolt by youth who were educated, informed and in contact with the outer world despite censorship. But repression managed to stifle it, in contrast with what happened in Tunisia and Egypt. In cases where there is a perception of external threat, a regime has less trouble staying in place, even if it is unpopular.

In any case, the Tunisian revolution and the Egyptian revolt should lead to deeper reflection on political Islam. The Islamist threat was a pretext for the Tunis and Cairo regimes to develop political repression against the population, with the support of Western countries. What was evident in these countries was that the revolts were grass-roots (they were not coups led by a handful of officers), pacific and secular. A process of political integration of movements claiming to belong to political Islam can be expected: the way of the ballot boxes will allow them to avoid choosing to take up arms.

The Tunisian revolution and Egyptian upheavals represent the "second death" of American neo-conservatives. The latter had theorised on the need to establish democracies in the Arab world, including through external intervention and even war. The dramatic results were seen in Iraq. The establishment of a democracy after internal political dynamics as in Tunisia is manifestly a much more promising course, less destabilising and less costly in human lives, even if we are only at the beginning of the process.

Strategic Issues, the Mediterranean Partnership and New International Paradigms

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), established in November 1995 in Barcelona, was structured around a political-security, economic and financial triptych, and then a social, cultural and human one. Its audacity was to attempt to formulate an overall response to the ensemble of issues while reasserting the inseparable link existing between security, economic and human development and political democracy. This partnership, from the perspective of its initiators, was designed to limit the risks of any violent confrontations that could emerge due to the much too unequal development prevailing between the two shores of the Mediterranean. Obviously, concern with risks of unrest and therefore security problems were central to the origins of the EMP, while at the same time, it attempted to provide a global response to the set of challenges the region posed.

In any case, in 1995, under pressure from Washington, the Mediterranean Partners inopportunely decided to keep the EMP out of the issue of Middle East peace, though in a climate when many actors still had hopes in the Oslo Process. There is no denying that over the course of the years, the context has become radically different. Thus, particularly after 11 September 2001, the incontestable consolidation of the US's strategic hold on the region can be seen: on the one hand, in the strengthening of privileged ties with certain key States of the South shore of the Mediterranean (Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Egypt, Israel), in the signature of bilateral trade agreements with Jordan and Morocco and its increased presence in the oil sector in Algeria, but also in its insistence on recognition of the primacy of politics as a stagnation factor for societies in the region and thus the strengthening of the discourse on the progress that needed with regard to democratic practices; and on the other hand, in the strengthening of the security dimension, namely the improvement of NATO's position through the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) established in 1994 (Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria in 2000), which rendered the EMP more illegible, in particular with regard to its security basket.

Therefore, beyond the modification of the strategic equation, the Mediterranean Partners are more than ever under the political obligation – and it suites their fundamental interests – of implementing a process taking into account all challenges in the region. For, though the EMP, and later the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) proclaimed in 2008, were conceived as coherent wholes, it is nonetheless difficult to believe that the two shores of the Mediterranean have succeeded in reaching a common perception of the stated security and development matters, which explains their respective failure.

The new political situation opening up in the region and the shock wave traversing the Arab world are promising, from this perspective. They magnificently refute all those who, in a more or less open fashion, considered that this part of the world was definitively recalcitrant to the process of democratization that all continents have been experiencing for the past twenty years. The Arab world was often perceived as a sort of black hole of democratic evolution! In reality, the Arab world and the Mediterranean are active-

ly involved in the same evolutions occurring in the rest of the world. What Westerners have not managed to discern – or have taken a long time to see –is the end of their monopoly and hegemony over the conduct of world affairs, the major phenomenon of our times. Of course, this does not mean the end of the role of the stated Westerners, because their power – political, economic and military – will remain decisive in the world order for a long time yet. But for the first time in human history, all the peoples of the world are politically active.

Nevertheless, beyond the real political and strategic divergences existing between the Western powers, there is a point in common that unites them: for them, it is, in the end, the West that is the alpha and omega of international relations and that organises the planet according to its interests and at its pleasure. Thus, beyond their differences, Westerners share to a large extent the same illusions regarding universal values and democracy and their capacity to impose it abroad.

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Clearly, the point is not to deny or minimize the importance of individual and collective democratic rights, and we must lend unfailing support to the numerous democratic militants and figures of all continents who demand these rights and struggle to attain them. The point is to grasp that human rights are often perceived by some peoples of the South as an instrument of Western interference and a means to perpetuate the West's domination. The result is that what Westerners consider and present as universal values are often a source of mistrust. The colonial period has left wounds that have not healed.

We come up against the same problems with regard to the issue of democracy. To believe that it is possible for populations to have immediate access thanks to external intervention is a naïve and dangerous illusion. Recall, for instance, the nonsense peddled by the Bush Administration when it explained its will to "reshape" the Middle East (policy of "Reshaping the Middle East") after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Democracy cannot be decreed, and can certainly not be carried in the bomb bays of bombers. It is the product of a long process that is never linear, often punctuated by uneven progress, with some steps forward and some back.

It is high time we understood that attempting to impose our democratic conceptions abroad is quite in vain and leads almost inevitably to results opposite those sought.

An aggravating factor: Westerners seems to accept the results of elections – when there are any! – only if they are in keeping with their interests and their own political choices. Thus, the major Western powers condemned the Palestinian election results in January of 2006 because they did not suit them, whereas – and despite the context of Israeli occupation – all international observation missions emphasized the technically impartial nature of the stated electoral campaign.This Western pseudo-universalism with a variable geometry clashes with the cold reality of power relations. Unfortunately, examples are not lacking to illustrate the inanity of the Western powers' pretensions. In the region that interests us here, it is the persistence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that embodies absolute injustice: UN resolutions systematically flouted, a policy of double standards, the known existence of solutions that the stated international community persists in not doing what it takes to implement…

These divisions also exist on the cultural level, between the proponents of different civilisations, even if this is often denied. Of course, nothing is written in advance in the history of humankind and we should not indulge in the concept of self-realizing prophesies, but it cannot be denied that the clash of ignorances fed by fantasized reciprocal fears or that increasingly numerous misunderstandings constitute factors fostering a hypothetic clash of civilisations, where the Mediterranean constitutes one of the fault lines.

Thus, on both shores, walls of incomprehension are slowly going up. The North's positive perception of revolutionary protest movements in the South is counteracted by the fear of a massive wave of immigration. In the South, reactions to Westernization are becoming more vivid and references to Islam often become the vector. In the North, secularist, feminist and "human-rightist" groups wish to do battle against, in their own words, Islamist barbarism or

green fascism. All one needs to do is to visit the Maghreb or the Middle East to grasp the damage done by such a policy. The anti-Americanism observable in all milieus and among all social classes is gradually turning into anti-Westernism.

Western policymakers should reflect upon such phenomena rather than adopting a self-righteous attitude consisting of dismissing the idea of economic, social and cultural divides with an arrogant sweep of the hand. In fact, what is possibly the most unsettling, given the magnitude of the challenges, is that a significant proportion of Westerners do not seem to wish to doubt what they consider the superiority of their values, or even subject said superiority to critical analysis.

The alternative is thus quite simple: either the Westerners refuse to see that they have lost their capacity to dominate the world, and their difficulties in making their ideas prevail and in defending their interests will grow more and more significant; or they adopt a realist policy constraining them to evaluate the current state of international power relations and defend their interests through negotiation in accordance with said relations. This return to realism would allow them, in addition, to effectively assert an influence that continues to be significant.

This leads to the matter of implementing real multilateralism. The latter, which, quite rightly, is an attempt to combat defensive nationalist reactions and the hegemony of one country over the others, has gained a great following over the past few years. However, the aim of fostering multilateralism runs up against singular difficulties. It is a fact that deciding by unanimity or majority can be long and laborious.

This is, however, the price to pay for the implementation of a practice that must absolutely respect the sovereignty of States. Indeed, if the latter agreed to give up some of their rights, we would obtain the opposite results of what is supposedly sought and, as former French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine well states, it would lead to a "mutualisation of powerlessness." States are already weakened by the effects of generalized deregulation. This is why, as H. Védrine asserts, the world today suffers from States' powerlessness rather than from their excess of power. If the trend towards the weakening of the State's role continues, resorting to multilateralism could seem like a comfortable capitulation. If nothing can be done on a national level, as the liberals insistently repeat, then governments are no longer responsible for anything… For in the current context, maintaining the role of the State is an objective factor of resistance against liberal globalisation.

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In any case, the results of multilateralism are to date rather slim, to say the least… Thus, for instance, and there are numerous examples, the Union for the Mediterranean is not working, probably because, among other reasons, the methods of practical decisions have given weight to the demands of the North-shore States, those of the South often being considered mere executors.

Obviously, this does not mean we should resign ourselves to this state of affairs. We are actually in a state of transition: there is no longer a Western hegemonic monopoly, but we have not yet found an alternative solution. Though the reference to multilateralism is a step forward, we must manage to go beyond its often yet incantatory nature.

Real multilateralism thus cannot take root if, at the same time, a multipolar world emerges where relations between the poles are developed and defined through a constant attempt to balance power relations and fluidize the course of international relations. From this perspective, the restructuring of a Mediterranean Partnership worthy of the name is undeniably part of the necessary implementation of new rules and new paradigms in international relations. The strong democratic shock wave sweeping all the South Mediterranean States constitutes an extraordinary opportunity to finally restore the Mediterranean Region's place in the international balance. A Partnership worthy of the name cannot be built unless the needs and interests of both shores are equally taken into account.

The challenges are great, and very exciting!