The United States and the Mediterranean

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The terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 and the war in Iraq, events that have taken place on the periphery of the Mediterranean countries, have nevertheless shaped the scope and character of American engagement in the region. The wider state of flux in American foreign policy, including the turmoil in transatlantic relations and uncertainty in policy toward the Palestinian-Israeli crisis, is also having a pronounced effect on American behavior in and around the Mediterranean region. Longstanding assumptions about U.S. interests and policy can no longer be taken for granted, with important implications for the way Washington will approach southern Europe, North Africa and the Levant. Overall, the U.S. remains as it has been for more than two hundred years, a substantial Mediterranean power, affecting many Mediterranean societies, but without a Mediterranean consciousness or strategy *per se*.

Over the past decade, and as security concerns in the center of Europe have waned, Washington has come to take a more active interest in developments around the Mediterranean. Unlike the European Union, and quite distinctly from the leading states of southern Europe, the U.S. has not fashioned an explicit Mediterranean policy. Rather, American strategy is an amalgam of regional strategies framed in European, and Middle Eastern and North African terms. Simply put, the U.S. is ill suited, bureaucratically and intellectually, to developing a Mediterranean strategy as such, despite the country's wide-ranging political, economic and security presence across the region.

Declining Interest in the Mediterranean as a European Challenge

Even without an explicit Mediterranean strategy, the U.S. has had ample reason to focus on Mediterranean issues and participants. Broadly, American stakes in the region can be assessed within three frames. First, the U.S. has been concerned with the Mediterranean as part of the European security environment. During the Cold War, this interest was clearly subordinate to concerns about Central and Eastern Europe, and in the immediate post-Cold War years, a focus on NATO enlargement and the reintegration of the former-communist East kept Washington's attention focused north of the Mediterranean. That said, as America's partners in Europe have focused more explicitly on problems of development and security across the Mediterranean, bilaterally and through initiatives such as the Barcelona Process, the U.S. has acquired a stake in aspects of Mediterranean affairs that affect the future of Europe. These aspects range from questions of migration and identity that are shaping European societies as Europe interacts with its southern Mediterranean neighbors, to narrower questions of security, from missile proliferation to spillovers of political violence and terrorism. The latter have clearly become more prominent in the security-conscious climate after 9/11.

In considering the Mediterranean as part of Europe's new geopolitics, American policymakers and analysts have taken a special interest in Turkey.

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Twenty years ago, Washington had a series of distinctive bilateral relationships across southern Europe, including Portugal, Spain, Greece and Turkey. Today, with the important exception of Turkey, these relationships have essentially been subsumed within a wider American relationship with Europe, with positive results. The U.S. is a longstanding supporter of Turkey's bid for EU membership, and this support remains undiminished despite some turmoil in relations between Ankara and Washington during the past year. Notably, this turmoil has had nothing to do with the advent of a Muslim-oriented government in Ankara, which Washington is comfortable to offer as a model for political development elsewhere in the Middle East. Rather, the turmoil in bilateral relations has stemmed from unrealistic assumptions about Turkish cooperation, and the lack of a shared strategy toward Iraq.

The American argument regarding Turkey in Europe is essentially strategic. The U.S. and Europe are seen as having a common stake in the continued convergence of Turkey with European norms, and Turkey's deeper integration in European institutions. Important new reform legislation has moved Turkey closer to meeting the EU's Copenhagen criteria, but questions of implementation remain, and key issues such as Cyprus are as yet unresolved. More fundamentally, will Europe be prepared to acquire new borders with Iran, Iraq and Syria? Washington sees the virtues of this process as a means of anchoring Turkey in the West, while shaping the strategic environment on its borders. But American lobbying on Turkey's behalf may have reached its useful limits. The question of whether and when to open accession negotiations with Ankara is now on the table in Brussels, and Washington does not have any credible standing in this increasingly legalistic and administrative decision. Given the current strains in transatlantic relations, such lobbying might even prove counter-productive.

Over the past two years, the focus on America's own internal security concerns, and the sharper interest in the Middle East as a place of strategic consequence in its own right, has probably diminished the importance of the European frame in Washington's Mediterranean engagement. The troubled state of relations with Europe as a whole has left many in Washington less concerned about Europe's interests in North Africa and the Middle East. Others would take the view that the Mediterranean, as Europe's backyard (an adjacent abroad?) is a natural place for Europe and European institutions to take the lead. Certainly, Europe is the leading economic partner for southern Mediterranean countries – a reality that is unlikely to change despite recent regional trade and investment initiatives (such as the proposed Middle East Free Trade Area) that have emanated from Washington.

A Bridge to the Gulf

The second way that the U.S. has approached the Mediterranean is as a political and logistical gateway to the Persian Gulf. During the first Gulf War, in 1990 to 1991, some ninety percent of the forces and materials sent to the Gulf region transited the Mediterranean by sea or by air. In the recent war in Iraq, the Mediterranean played a similarly critical role. Strategy toward Iraq, and the continued concern about Iran, has underscored the importance of the Mediterranean in the context of Gulf strategy, indeed a strategy toward what is fashionably termed the «Greater Middle East», from Morocco to Pakistan. But the experience of Iraq also demonstrated the tenuous nature of this logistical link, with key partners, including Turkey, differing on strategy and policy. Over the past year, the U.S., motivated by counter-terrorism objectives, has embarked on more active security cooperation across North Africa, including Algeria, where political and human rights concerns had previously encouraged an arms length approach. Whether this signals a more active American involvement in the region's political and economic situation remains an open question. In all likelihood, the substance of these enhanced relations is likely to remain focused on security matters.

Beyond the Iraq situation, other developments inside the Gulf may influence the American role in the Mediterranean. Iran remains a focus of concern for the Administration, although with the deepening resistance in Iraq, policymakers will almost certainly wish to explore the leverage that would be offered by improved relations with Tehran. Given the range of Iranian medium-range missiles, and the uncertain status of the country's nuclear program, the near-term risk emanating from Iran is, above all, a risk to Iran's neighbors and southern Europe. Any military confrontation with Iran would almost certainly require cooperation with eastern

Mediterranean allies. But that cooperation is very unlikely to be forthcoming.

The year 2003 has seen a substantial reconfiguration of America's forward military presence in the Mediterranean hinterlands. Alongside new agreements in the Maghreb, the U.S. has sharply reduced its presence at Incirlik airbase in Turkey, and has moved its longstanding operational presence from Saudi Arabia to Qatar. Over time, and given the difficulty of achieving consensus on cooperation with Mediterranean allies, the U.S. may well move to an over-the-horizon strategy, with few standing deployments, and a wider range of *ad hoc* access arrangements. Again, this is a process that started in southern Europe twenty years ago, but has been given substantial impetus by events in Iraq.

Crisis Management in the Mediterranean

The third dimension of America's Mediterranean engagement has been Washington's stake and involvement in regional flashpoints, from the Western Sahara to the Aegean Sea, from the Middle East peace process to tensions with Libya. In combination, «Mediterranean» issues have occupied an extraordinary amount of high political attention in Washington, even though they may rarely if ever be described in «Mediterranean» terms. The last year has seen substantial change on many fronts. The U.S. continues to be involved, in a low-key manner, in diplomacy over the Western Sahara, although the opening to Algeria may well complicate the traditionally close relationship with Morocco over this question. With Libya, the apparent settlement of the Lockerbie dispute paves the way for the end of multilateral sanctions against Tripoli. But it is far from clear that the Congressional politics of American policy toward Libya will allow for an end to U.S. sanctions in the near future. U.S.-Libyan relations have been improving, quietly, for some time, and there has even been some rudimentary cooperation on counter-terrorism since 2001. Nonetheless, resistance to normalization of relations remains significant in many quarters, and unlike the potentially transforming implications of an opening to Iran, an opening to Tripoli would yield few geopolitical benefits for Washington. New developments with regard to weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles in Libya could even spur a renewed confrontation with Qadafi, something the Libyan side is presumably keen to avoid.

The war with Iraq has led many observers around the Mediterranean to ask who will be next. That is, who might be the next target for preventive action in the post-September 11th climate? Aside from Iran, the most likely candidate could well be Syria. Certainly, American policy toward Syria has become far tougher in the wake of the Iraq war, with steady allegations of Syrian complicity with the former Iraqi leadership, and continued involvement with terrorist groups. Barring an overt crisis, it is unlikely that there will be any «next» object of American intervention around the Mediterranean. But the evolution of relations with Syria will certainly be a key area to watch over the coming year.

The deterioration of the Middle East Peace process poses special dilemmas for an American Administration that is committed to the primacy of counter-terrorism, while still looking to a comprehensive settlement as a diplomatic and strategic prize. 2003 has seen this dilemma posed in sharp relief, with a steady cycle of violence and counter-violence. The possibility of Palestinian-Israeli conflict escalating and acquiring a wider, regional character, involving Syria, Lebanon, perhaps even Egypt or Iran, would pose extraordinary challenges for American interests, especially in the light of the unresolved and increasingly costly intervention in Iraq. A key question in a Mediterranean and transatlantic framework will be to what extent Washington will invite the participation of Europe and possibly other regional partners in fresh approaches to the peace process. Certainly, the traditional diplomacy appears to be dead, but it remains to be seen whether the current Administration will overcome the longstanding American discomfort with multilateral negotiations. Indeed, much of the apparent American diffidence toward Europe's Mediterranean initiatives reflects wariness regarding European involvement in the peace process and related issues of political and economic change. This too may change as frustration with the current impasse mounts.

One area of clear-cut, positive improvement has been in the Aegean region. For decades, the U.S. has had a strong interest in reducing tensions between Greece and Turkey, a standing complication for American policymaking and an impediment to NATO cohesion in the south.

In this field, 2003 has seen a consolidation of Greek-Turkish détente, and the growing possibility, so far unrealized, of a solution to the Cyprus problem. These developments, little noticed against a

background of more dramatic events elsewhere, have markedly improved the strategic climate in the eastern Mediterranean from an American perspective.

Transatlantic Relations - A Critical Factor

Events in the region itself are not the only factor affecting the American role in the Mediterranean. Looking ahead to 2004 and 2005, the evolution of transatlantic relations will be a leading, perhaps a determining factor, in how the U.S. sees its role, and how Washington's actions are interpreted on both sides of the Mediterranean. A European-American consensus on challenges in and near the Mediterranean, whether on political and economic development, or on matters of security, is likely to be at the center of any revitalized approach to the transatlantic partnership.