

The EU as a Security Actor in the Mediterranean: Problems and Prospects

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Introduction & Overview

The title of this paper suggests that it is probably not in its role as a security actor that the European Union (EU), as an institution, feels most comfortable. The suggestion that exercising this role involves confronting “problems,” rather than the more palatable “challenges,” is indicative of the type of changes taking place both within and outside the EU that render its security goals difficult to attain. One of the reasons for this is that the EU, along with other international organizations, has moved from responding to the symptoms and manifestations of insecurity to attempting to identify and address root causes of instability and insecurity, both on its periphery and elsewhere.

Arriving at a shared analysis of what these root causes might be, across different national and community agencies, even before considering the appropriate level of response, is a task of enormous complexity. Above all, it has meant that the EU’s common security ambitions have become as problematic *to define* in a conceptual sense as the ensuing responses are to coordinate in practice. The goal posts of Europe’s security debate, in other words, have been shifting since the late 1990s, and these shifts will now have to be taken into account in the way that the EU approaches regions such as the Mediterranean.

This paper will examine the ways in which the changing character of the EU has complicated the tasks of first identifying and then addressing its policy priorities in the Mediterranean. I will argue that the EU needs to reassess the EMP in a context that goes beyond the parameters of the Barcelona template alone. This is because changes in this broader context of security planning now directly impinge on its future prospects. In 1995, the security climate in the Mediterranean was different from the climate obtained in 2001, just as the EU’s responsibilities in the defense and security-planning sphere have grown beyond what was envisaged five years ago. The EU’s linkage of these developments to the Mediterranean context has nevertheless been slow.

It could be, for example, that the concept of the “Mediterranean” as a region—currently conceived as comprised of the EU’s twelve southern partners—needs to be revisited in terms of its continuing utility as a functional regional unit. If the EU were to determine its priorities more fundamentally, it might make more strategic

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sense to approach the region in thematic rather than strictly geopolitical terms. If, as increasingly appears to be the case, the emerging and most pressing concerns of the EU in the region are both sub-national and supranational in character, then the heavily government-to-government focus of current policy may need to encompass other actors and forms of co-operation than those that exist under the current EMP model. One might cite the destabilizing consequences of uneven economic development in states lacking democratic accountability as a sub-national problem, and the transnational links of organized criminal networks engaged in trafficking people, drugs, and arms as a supranational problem. In order to address the root causes of both problems, more flexible response mechanisms are required than those that have evolved through the multilateral and state-centered mechanisms of the Barcelona process; it is this area that crucially needs to be included in a review of the EMP.

Security: Problems of Conception

Adjusting to this change of emphasis will also, however, require Europeans to reconsider what they actually mean by security with regard to the specific (and largely non-military) challenges Europe faces in the Mediterranean and Middle East. The initial objective of the Barcelona process, put most succinctly by Bechir Chourou, was that, "Europe wanted a secure access to oil and gas and protection against waves of migrants."² This is not, however, how the "political and security" chapter of the Barcelona Declaration reads. Its focus is instead on co-operation with respect to the more standard agenda of "hard" security objectives, such as arms control, the peaceful settlement of conflicts, confidence-building, and conflict prevention. In contrast, southern Mediterranean definitions of security are almost entirely drawn in economic terms, the principal aim being to secure European financial and technical assistance in pursuit of existing development goals, while accepting the restructuring of markets to meet the needs of increased international competition (if not the direct needs of the citizens and subjects of each state). The political and diplomatic aspects of Barcelona are acceptable only insofar as they remain unspecific, universal, and inapplicable to real crises or internal affairs.

In discussions over the gaps between these visions, what is less frequently commented on is how difficult it has been for EU to operationalize its own security concepts in a harmonized way. The first challenge for the EU's coordination of Barcelona's broad objectives across political, institutional, and bureaucratic lines is that the core activities of security planning lie in ministries of defense and ministries of external affairs rather than in trade or development ministries. Even within the same ministries, the desk officers for the Mediterranean region

² Bechir Chourou, in written evidence submitted to the European Union Committee, Sub-Committee C (Common Foreign and Security Policy), House of Lords, London, November 2000.

are not always linked into debates on where to place the emphasis for coherent security planning. Indeed, it may even be the case that individual ministries are working at cross purposes, where one department of the ministry of defense, for example, is busy promoting arms sales in the Middle East, while another is engaged in arms control in the same region. Not all EU governments explicitly try to coordinate these issues, and few coordinate them well.

There is also a problem of cultures within security communities. The military, for example, tends to see things in a “can-do” way, while civilian officials, conscious of budgets and public responses, are perceived to be more cautious. There is also a disconnect between the theoretical or academic debate on security and the demands of practical policy-making. Academics may well have “redefined” security in the post-Cold War world to include the environment, human rights, “societal” security, and rule of law. In practice, however, governments have a tendency to adapt existing instruments and policies to prevailing circumstances in the hope that reinvigorating and renaming them—as in the case of the UK’s Defense Diplomacy—will somehow enhance any improvements in the overall security environment.

Another divergence that arises with regard to the definition of “security” is that not all EU governments see security in the same way. In the case of the Mediterranean, as already noted, those closest to the region have practical issues to deal with, such as illegal migration and organized crime, that only have distant echoes in Northern Europe. Where shared challenges and problems exist, they are different in both their scale and impact on individual European societies. For historical and other reasons, some EU member states attach more importance to human rights than others—usually in inverse proportion to their proximity to the region in question—where, for others, access to oil, gas, and other commercial interests sets the parameters for the debate. There are also special cases, such as France’s relations with Algeria, which, for a number of overlapping reasons, make the management of security issues extremely problematic.

Similarly, there are also differences—or, rather, varying emphases—over how to approach areas of contention, such as the Middle East peace process. A series of EU “common positions” may well have been formulated, but France has traditionally favored being more proactive on the political front than either the UK or Germany, the former because of the primacy of policy convergence with the U.S., the latter because of historical sensitivities vis-à-vis Israel. Where, as is the case with the Barcelona process, several actors on the EU side (nations, communities, EU presidency) are dealing with at least twelve actors on the southern side, the challenge of merely reaching an agreement, before even considering how it is to be implemented, is considerable. If, in turn, the security implications impinge on one or more parties, or are based on fundamentally divergent interpretations of the term “security,” it is small wonder that few substantive initiatives have either

emerged from this process or have been measurable against any independently agreed criteria.

There are likely to be no simple answers to these considerations, affecting as they do all areas of EU foreign policy. The utility of maintaining a process merely to keep lines of communication open over security issues has nevertheless been of diminishing returns since the inception of Barcelona. The failure of the Euro-Mediterranean Partners to adopt the Charter for Peace and Stability in November 2000 was spurred by the conceptual contradictions outlined above just as much as it was driven by the immediate fall-out from the situation in the Middle East. However, if the future process were to be scaled down, or graduated to accommodate specific issues at different regional levels, there might well be some potential to advance beyond general aspirations. The problem is that, even in the most critical assessments of Barcelona, such as the EU External Relations Commissioner's paper of September 2000 on "reinvigorating" the Barcelona process, there has been no question of adjusting or reconfiguring the geopolitics of the Barcelona model along with refocusing its content.

Under the rules of the EU, it is for member states to make this reappraisal. Their contribution, in the form of the Common Mediterranean Strategy (CMS) agreed upon at the European Council in Feira in June 2000, not only adopted Barcelona's geographical focus wholesale, but added Libya to its terms of reference. As a general list of existing EU policies towards the Mediterranean, to which were added references to the EU's new security and defense policy (ESDP) and developments in the JHA area, the CMS missed a genuine opportunity to revise the central tenets of the EU's relations in the Mediterranean, the better to match its instruments to achievable end-goals. Instead, as the EU's High Representative for CFSP, Javier Solana, wrote in the context of assessing the value of "common strategies"—strategies as instruments to enhance the internal coordination of the EU's external action:

"Regarding the Mediterranean, the perceived lack of added value of the C[M]S compared with the already comprehensive Barcelona Process and the difficulties in defining the relationship between the C[M]S and the EU's role in the Middle East Peace Process have put the consistency of the EU's approach towards the region into question. The unspoken competition between the C[M]S and the ongoing effort to draw up a 'Charter for Peace and Stability' in the Barcelona framework has added to this confusion."³

Security: New Times, New Instruments

If achieving political coordination and coherence has to date proved difficult, the EU has nevertheless been increasing the instruments at its disposal, adding a mili-

³ Report by the Secretary-General/High Representative, *Common Strategies*, Council of the European Union, Doc. No. 1487/100, 21 December 2000 (declassified 30/01/01), Art. 16.

tary dimension to complement its largely “soft” security tools. This addition offers opportunities, but also risks, for enhancing the effectiveness of EU policy towards the Mediterranean. The main opportunity consists of being able to offer more direct military-to-military contacts within the Mediterranean, with a view to adding an EU dimension to the type of cooperation in training and joint exercises which already takes place at the bilateral level and in smaller groupings. The key, as ever, is for EU member states to decide what the added value of a European dimension might be, particularly since it is not clear who, or which budget line, would assume the extra cost to national forces of including an EU dimension in any of the training activities they might already have planned for national purposes.

The main risk arises from the potential neglect of the EU’s Mediterranean partners as the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) agreed upon at the Helsinki European Council in December 1999 begins to take operational shape. Until now, the elaboration of the ESDP has largely focused on institutional arrangements, capabilities, and process rather than on the operational side of the policy, especially with respect to its geographical scope. Of the various potential scenarios envisaged for the deployment of the European rapid deployment force, none have focused specifically on the Mediterranean. Rather, in the planning stages, the aim has been to plan for generic types of activity (outlined as four types of “Petersberg tasks”) with no specific regional focus, even if Balkans-style ground operations (Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania) have undoubtedly colored their potential remit.

While the EU’s focus on internal arrangements, commitments, and capabilities is entirely understandable in terms of the way the policy has been conceived, it could nevertheless pose external problems—particularly in the Mediterranean—as these capabilities take shape. Multilateral and bilateral dialogues (as the WEU’s handling of the Eurofor and Euromarfor issue demonstrated in the mid-1990s) are often notorious for not discussing in a timely fashion exactly what is on people’s minds. It is in this connection that Barcelona’s confidence-building aspirations might best be put to effect, with an emphasis on prior (not *post facto*) consultation and joint engagement where individual Mediterranean states or their international waters may be affected.

The Common Strategy on the Mediterranean in fact updated the terms of reference of the Barcelona process by referring to the need to take developments in the ESDP “into account” in the context of promoting security in the Mediterranean (Article 13). More explicitly, the Strategy stated that, “the EU intends to make use of the evolving common European policy on security and defense to consider how to strengthen, together with its Mediterranean Partners, cooperative security in the region” (Article 8).⁴ What this might consist of, however, has yet

⁴ European Council, *Common Strategy of the European Union on the Mediterranean Region*, Annex V, Presidency Conclusions, European Council, Feira, June 2000 (SN 200/0 ADD I).

to be elaborated on, nor does the Strategy make any explicit linkage between the ESDP and the Barcelona process.

Given the demands of constructing the ESDP itself, explaining its potential effects on or relevance to the Mediterranean is clearly not a priority for its main promoters.

To date, the main external focus of the EU with respect to the ESDP has been to clarify and establish its relationship with NATO, which in the short run has meant a concentration on extensive explanatory efforts with the United States, both before and after the change of U.S. administrations. To a lesser but arguably no less important extent, this explanatory effort has also engaged Turkey, Russia, and non-EU NATO allies. For those outside these circles, however, the lack of a specific regional focus for the deployment of the EU's rapid reaction capability has raised some concerns on Europe's periphery. Despite reassurances, there is still a feeling that regions such as the Mediterranean could well be subject to some kind of EU-inspired military activity, if only in a "trial run" of these capabilities, for example.

Once again, the conceptual problem associated with this is that the ESDP, like the Common Strategy on the Mediterranean and the EU's JHA agenda, is fundamentally about Europe itself, not its neighbors. Maintaining the separation between the EU's internal and external security policy agendas may nevertheless serve to create unhelpful negative impressions about the EU's intentions on its immediate borders unless these intentions are clearly articulated in the processes, such as Barcelona, where the parties involved may express their concerns. A prerequisite for this level of clarity, however, is that the EU conduct a deeper re-examination of its existing priorities and policy frameworks of the kind outlined here.

Conclusions

This discussion may appear to have strayed some distance from more standard or traditional discussions of security issues within the Mediterranean, but its intention is to contribute towards explaining why the stated ambitions of the EU are not always followed up in practice. To a large extent, their progress is dependent on the resolution of issues being worked out elsewhere, the results of which only gradually feed into the security processes devised for the Mediterranean itself. There is also the perennial question of internal EU coordination, both at the Community level and nation-state level, which remains extremely taxing. Here, the intricacies of the EU's decision-making processes come to the fore, since the way in which policy decisions are reached often has the most impact on the way they are expressed and acted on, or on whether or not they ever advance any further than declarations of unachievable intent. The uneven application of external

policy is, as a result, by no means due to a lack of good will or foresight *per se*, or for want of an effort to make all sections of the orchestra play in tune, often with no clearly identified conductor. The real problem and challenge for an enlarging EU is to revise existing policy formulations and refine the instruments deployed in ways flexible enough to make a difference in the arenas to which they are applied.

One approach might be to scale down the ambitions of regional policy frameworks and to concentrate on more focused and concrete strategies. Compared to the EU's country-specific policies (towards Russia and the Ukraine, for example), or even initiatives towards smaller regional configurations (such as the "Northern dimension"), the Mediterranean has perhaps always been too unwieldy a subject to permit a properly integrated, focused, or balanced European foreign policy. To admit this, however, does not necessarily mean that the Barcelona framework should be abandoned altogether. To use the parallel of the OSCE, there is scope for addressing a number of security-related issues in a framework of this size, even if measurable results are difficult to achieve over specific issues.

As far as more effective implementation of policy is concerned, however, the kind of framework adopted might better be determined by the objectives, rather than the other way around. Combating transnational crime, for example, requires coordination across regional boundaries (Central Asia and the Balkans as well as the Mediterranean, for example) where the networks and activities in question are concentrated.⁵ For the longer-term objectives of Barcelona, in turn, a more graduated and country-specific set of priorities is needed, above all to assist in creating stable processes of change. Along with targeted and decentralized development assistance, central to this graduated approach would be initiatives that strengthen the capacity of the populations of the region to determine their own political and economic destinies, not least in order to pre-empt more violent responses to demographic and other internal pressures. The counterpart to this is for the EU to avoid any unnecessary strengthening of the centralizing—and ultimately undemocratic—tendencies of a number of the region's current leaderships. The guiding principle should be to tailor responses to more objectively defined needs of security cooperation rather than to the demands and expectations of pre-established frameworks such as Barcelona.

Time is of the essence in a review of the EU's *modus operandi* in the Mediterranean, precisely because enlargement will change the parameters of debate about what security means for Europe. Territorial and cultural divisions can no longer act as the key determinants, or "gate-keepers," of what enters and leaves the European space. This is particularly true of regions like the Mediterranean immediately on the EU's borders, where the price for ignoring the demands of the peoples of the region, as opposed to those of their governments, is already making itself felt.

⁵ For a discussion of security and organized crime in the Mediterranean, see Claire Spencer, "The Mediterranean Matters—More than Before," *World Today* 57:3 (March 2001).

Rather than being the actors in the rise in organized crime and the trafficking of people, the majority of the region's populations are their victims. If the EU were to reformulate a strategy directly to address, rather than by-pass, their concerns, a future picture might be one of genuine partnership at different and more integrated levels. Only then would Mediterranean security be truly "indivisible."