

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF NATO ENGAGEMENT IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

The new strategic concept of the alliance looks at the Mediterranean situation as a shift in the engagement with a history that is as old as the origins of the Western bloc. In this history, the Italian role has been an example for the other Mediterranean countries that later joined NATO. The steps in the construction of the Atlantic coalition started also in Mediterranean with U.S. military engagement grounded in Truman's doctrine. Twenty years later, the North Atlantic Council's report on the alliance's future tasks examined crucial "exposed areas" for NATO, and first among them was the Mediterranean. After the collapse of the Soviet system, NATO worked on a relationship of coexistence and cooperation with Russia. The ongoing invasion in Ukraine has thwarted years of discussion and work, but the partnerships promoted by NATO with the countries of the so-called enlarged Mediterranean stand as a success story.

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The structures of the political-military alliance sealed with the North Atlantic Treaty were decided upon within the framework of the so-called Cold War. The conflict between the two superpowers, the United States, and the Soviet Union, arose in Europe. The continent was the epicenter of a conflict which never escalated into open warfare and revolved around the “Iron Curtain” British Prime Minister Winston Churchill announced had descended on the continent in his famous speech. So, the prospects of a dreaded conflict had a distinctly land-based character, with a possible battlefield moving from Germany to the Pyrenees. In the case of an invasion by the Warsaw Pact forces, the strategic debate of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) revolved around European fears of U.S. engagement.

The Beginning

By 1950, in the midst of the Korean War, the first line of defense was established in West Germany, disrupting assumptions that had placed the boundary much further West. This enabled Federal Germany’s participation in the Atlantic alliance in 1955, which in turn allowed it to guarantee to other European allies that the reconstitution of the German armed forces was not dangerous. The city of Berlin became the *topos* of the Cold War and the division of Europe. Along with this incontrovertible element, which called the U.S. commitment of the defense of Western Europe into question, there were other matters, such as the question of nuclear armaments or control of the Mediterranean, which has endured well after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet system.

Focusing on the Mediterranean, it is appropriate to retrace here the steps in the construction of the Atlantic coalition. U.S. military engagement is grounded in President Harry S. Truman’s doctrine, which wove U.S. national security with international aid to free peoples struggling against totalitarianism. Formulated in 1947, the doctrine was applied in 1948 in support of the governments of Greece and Türkiye. Two Mediterranean countries linked to U.S. national security, a founding element of the era that fixed the role of the U.S. in preparation for the North Atlantic Treaty and the organization that would derive from it, the NATO. The geographical focus for the application the Truman Doctrine was the Mediterranean as well, that is, Mediterranean countries that did not orbit the Soviet Union. The necessary background for the success of the Truman doctrine was the placement of the Italian republic in the Atlantic field. The defeat of the Popular Front in the first elections of Republican Italy and the country’s subsequent accession to the North Atlantic Treaty were preconditions obtained by overcoming various kinds of obstacles.

The French government pledged that the Italian Republic would be among the signatory states of the treaty on 4 April 1949. Ennio Di Nolfo recalls that, with Italy's entry in the treaty, the French strengthened the representation of Catholic countries within the alliance and off shouldered some of the responsibility of dealing with large swathes of coastline on the Mediterranean alone.¹ These reasons are certainly analytically valid with respect to the Western European balance of power – but from the American perspective, the strategic-political relevance of the Mediterranean and other crucial basins on the planet was already given. There was certainly a strong co-management of these areas with the United Kingdom, as the United States was moving from a comprimario to superseding it as global hegemon. A trend in the special relationship that united the British and Americans developed in the following years: it started in the Mediterranean, where the takeover occurred earlier than in other eastern basins and coincided with the beginning of U.S. support for the Greek government.

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Historically in the British area of influence, the U.K. government was no longer able to maintain effective patronage over monarchist forces loyal to it in the Hellenic Civil War of 1946-49, which pitted them against communist formations, already the backbone of the resistance against Nazi occupation. The victory of the Christian Democrats in Italy, followed by the victory of the Greek anti-communist forces, precluded Soviet entry on Mediterranean shores. However, this cardinal issue for the Anglo-Americans was not to be part of NATO's priorities at the time of the organization's founding, it was to remain a side issue. It was too far outside of the Atlantic line of defense, and it was too important to the respective British and

¹ The historical bibliography on NATO has in its essentials: David Calleo, *The Atlantic Fantasy: The U.S., NATO, and Europe*, (Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1970); Ennio Di Nolfo, *The Atlantic Pact Forty Years Later: A Historical Appraisal*, (Berlin-New York (edited by). 1991); Walter De Gruyter; Lawrence S. Kaplan, *The United States and NATO: The Formative Years*, Lexington, (The University Press of Kentucky 1984); Lawrence S Kaplan, Robert W. Clawson; Raimondo Luraghi, Victor Alba, *NATO, and the Mediterranean*, (Wilmington, Delaware, 1985); Scholarly resources; Lawrence S. Kaplan, *The Long Entanglement: NATO's First Fifty Years*, (Westport 1999); Praeger; Schmidt, Gustav. (Edited by). 2001. *A History of NATO. The First Fifty Years*. (New York: Palgrave).

U.S. imperial policies. This position was easily justified, since the line of possible aggression was coming from the heart of the European continent, as the Berlin Blockade of 1948-49 had shown, and not from the sea. The French, on the other hand, were fully engulfed in a situation that encompassed an arm of the Mediterranean in the national sphere, since Algeria was not simply a colony but part of France's metropolitan territory. This aspect marked a key difference between French and British participation in the integrated command of NATO's Mediterranean maritime forces because France had to take care of its Algerian shore as a priority.

The Enlargement

In 1951, the representatives of Greece and Türkiye signed treaty access and began their integration process in the structures of the alliance. This first enlargement intersected with the process of decolonization in the Mediterranean, not only of Algeria but especially of Malta. Consolidation was marked by the developments in military technology, namely new ballistic carriers armed with nuclear warheads. The entry into the so-called "missile age" reduced the deterrent value of the air force: it was no longer the sole carrier of nuclear weapons, as it had been in the early years of nuclear weapons. The bombers in the sky were in constant rotation, guaranteeing retaliation even if command centers were destroyed. In 1960, NATO deployed PGM-19 Jupiter strategic missiles to Apulia and, later, to the province of Smyrna, directly threatening the Soviet Union with nuclear warheads. The choice had many implications, but one that geographically seemed to express the value of Italian and Turkish territory as NATO's southern flank to the interior of the continent, not to the sea. However, it must be considered that the missile deployment came at the end of a period of fluid definition of NATO command structures, which would be followed by a phase – the one we are currently in – where the Mediterranean character of Italy, Greece and Türkiye became central to their integration into the Atlantic system.

The constellation of command centers was initially plotted according to a pattern with Naples as its main star. Here, the Allied Southern Command had been established in 1951, and it also included the command of the Mediterranean naval forces. As early as 1952, accompanying the entry of Greece and Türkiye into the treaty, the Mediterranean Naval Forces Command were reorganized in Malta and placed under British command. The entry of the two countries with a long history of conflict, in addition to marking a political success for the alliance, it also highlighted the need to find a new center of gravity for the maritime command. The island of Malta, still a British possession, was a strategic asset in this redefinition. The Naples command was converted into Allied Forces Southern Europe (AFSOUTH), one of the two operational strategic commands of Supreme Headquarters Allied

Powers Europe (SHAPE), established in 1953 at Rocquencourt in the Ile-de-France. So, the British had the Mediterranean Gibraltar Command (COMGIBMED) and the Southeast Mediterranean Command (COMMEDSOUTHEAST); the French the Western Mediterranean Command (COMMEDWEST); the Italians the Central Mediterranean Command (COMEDCENT); the Greeks the Eastern Mediterranean Command (COMEDEAST); and the Turks the Northeast Mediterranean Command (COMEDNOREAST), which extended its responsibilities over the entire Black Sea.

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Over the course of 1952, with NATO expanding in the Mediterranean, important changes were taking place on the other sides of the sea. In Egypt, the monarchy was being overthrown in a military coup, and from the republican ranks of the military emerged the character of Gamal Abdel-Nasser. In the anticolonialism that informed the insurgents, led by Nasser, there was a hostility toward the old European imperial powers, along with an emerging tendency to disengage from the confrontation between the blocs. There was no preclusion, however, toward the United States and the Soviet Union, with whom Nasser engaged in various negotiations, leading to a striking supply of arms from Czechoslovakia. Coupled with the support the Nasserites provided the Algerian rebels within the struggle against France, in the name of the pan-Arab ideology that aimed at the establishment of a unitary state of all Arabs, the Egyptian armament increased, and the hostility of French and the British governments made U.S. engagement with the new regime a tougher enterprise.

The following year, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal by expropriating the Anglo-French company that held rights to it. This led to a secret Anglo-French understanding with the Israelis in order to militarily undermine the Arab republic. Although in the heart of Europe the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 had shaken consciences and exposed the harsh order of the Iron Curtain, in that same year, in those same days, the Suez crisis and the war that followed touched the chords of the Atlantic alliance. In the frustration of Anglo-French designs to maintain some form of control over the seething Arab scene, which occurred in the wake of the Soviet threat to intervene even with nuclear weapons in defense of Egypt, and the harsh U.S. political censure

of the Europeans, new elements matured. Yugoslavia, led by Josif Broz, known as Tito, had joined Egypt and other southern countries in the nonaligned movement that year, making the political landscape of the Mediterranean states even more dynamic. The French resolutely embarked on the quest for an autonomous nuclear option in order to redeem the republic's international status from the Suez fiasco – and to avoid that form of American “nuclear-sharing” welcomed by the Italians with the Jupiter missiles, which remained under U.S. control with the dual-key system required for warhead activation. The French nuke was successfully tested in 1960, as the Algerian War flared up, which ended two years later with the Evian Accords that made the North African country independent of France. NATO's Western Mediterranean Command (COMMEDWEST) was moved from Algiers to Toulon, in an obvious strategic setback.

Crisis and Transformation

In the fall of that year, the Cuban missile crisis brought the focus of the Cold War back to the issue of nuclear armaments. After the deployment of missiles in Italy and Türkiye, to which were added the missiles deployed in Britain, the pro-Soviet choice of the Cuban revolutionary government seemed to scramble the cards of the strategic game. The Cubans intended primarily to defend themselves against a U.S.-sponsored armed intervention and only secondarily to politically weld their revolution to the Eastern bloc. The prospective deployment of Soviet missiles armed with nuclear warheads on the Caribbean Island made the risk of nuclear war concrete, as U.S. territory would cease to be sanctuary, that is, excluded from the range of nuclear missiles. The U.S. emerged with an image victory, politically important, because the Russians gave up installing missiles in Cuba, but had to strategically pay the duty of divesting missiles in Italy and Türkiye. It was an ambivalent decision, undertaken by John Fitzgerald Kennedy's presidency, that invested the two Mediterranean countries. In fact, the Jupiter missiles were deemed by the Americans to be technologically outdated, compared to the new UGM-27 Polaris missiles, which could be launched from ships and, especially, submarines. As always, technological choices are inseparable from political decisions. Granted that the Polaris missiles were only slightly newer than the Jupiter missiles, this could not mean that the latter, which had been deployed for only two years, were already obsolescent. Consequently, it was precisely the U.S. political commitment to the defense of distant Europe that was again perceived as uncertain. With the response to the Soviet threat consigned to missiles placed in submarines rather than in bases located on the territory of Allied states and subject to possible aggression, U.S. intervention became even more discretionary. The U.S. being the heart of the alliance, a – perceived or factual – weakening of it could shake the foundations of

NATO. Further, the treaty did not provide a go-to response in the face of aggression by a member country, so the quality of assurances to the Europeans was contingent, with the search for constant political confirmation. There is no doubt that the U.S. decision was part of the Kennedy Doctrine of flexible response: the U.S. would react proportionately to Soviet threats, without immediately moving to nuclear attack. Within this approach, however, sharing nuclear weapons was happening less, and the Italian affair was exemplary of this reduction. Indeed, the Italian navy had prepared the cruiser Giuseppe Garibaldi to be equipped with Polaris since 1961, and designed the Vittorio Veneto with the same feature, when in the end the United States did not donate the missiles. In this ever-changing climate, French President Charles de Gaulle in 1966 decided on the exit of French forces from the integrated NATO structures, which was accomplished the following year. The weight of the French decision was obviously disruptive, and it brought unprecedented transformations to the structures of the alliance. In the Mediterranean scenario, the Toulon command was closed, and its responsibilities transferred to Naples. In the same year, the British-led Mediterranean naval command was also dissolved following Malta's independence and the growth of a neutralist orientation on the island.

The NAVSOUTH in Naples, inheriting the role of the Allied Mediterranean Forces, was put in place with the organizational restructuring of 1967 and became the pivot of maritime command for the entire Mediterranean, not just the central-western part of it under direct responsibility. Along with this change, NATO had to start defining a new role for the Mediterranean in its defense policy. In short, the basin was no longer just the maritime link of NATO's southern flank, but a major strategic area.

The North Atlantic Council's report on the alliance's future tasks, presented in the same year 1967 by Belgian Foreign Minister Pierre Harmel, opened an unprecedented process of NATO's transformation. In its military aspects, the report examined crucial "exposed areas" for NATO, and first among them was the Mediterranean. Indeed, a renewed Soviet assertiveness was shifting substantial Black Sea forces beyond the Straits: from 1964 to 1970 Soviet naval transit tripled, and from 1965 the Black Sea Fleet deployed its Fifth "Eskadra" in the Mediterranean, called SOVMEDRON (Soviet Mediterranean Squadron) by NATO. It was meant to balance the power of the U.S. Sixth Fleet, attempting to orient according to Cold War patterns and the existing conflicts among the riparian countries as part of the strategy that had been underway for years of building an "anti-imperialist" camp of non-European countries. In the face of SOVMEDRON, the Turkish position was on the firing line, but bound by treaties of free transit from the straits; Greece was weakened by the colonels' regime established in 1967; France and Britain were in retreat for the reasons mentioned above. Against this backdrop, attention to the Arab Israeli conflict

was heightened and superpowers intervened. The Soviet Union expanded support for the Arab sphere, particularly increasing military cooperation with Egypt through maritime cooperation. There is no question that Soviet shipping at the roadstead in Alexandria and Port Said deterred the Israelis from bombing these ports during the 1967 war. Between wars, Soviet presence in Egypt ran its course, and on the eve of the 1973 war Egyptian President Anwar al Sadat expelled Soviet military advisers from the country. In the course of peace talks, Egypt has moved closer to the West and NATO, while the Soviets firmly held Syrian ports.

The Roots of the Present

In 1969 in Libya, a revolutionary coup d'état established the republic and opened the long season dominated by the figure of Muhammad Gaddafi, who proclaimed himself heir to Nasserite pan-Arabism. Qaddafi shifted the strategic balance in the Mediterranean, not only because Libya was no longer tied to the Western bloc, but also because he began to exert strong pressure on Malta to become a Libyan semi-protectorate. Eventually the Italians negotiated a favorable position for Malta with the Atlantic allies, while in the eastern Mediterranean the Greeks and Turks were wrapped in the coils of the Cypriot question that bogged down the British themselves, holders of the island with its strategically located Akrotiri base.

While maintaining the Maltese policy of neutrality, the country entered a guardianship agreement with Italy that effectively blocked both Soviet aspirations and the aggressive Libyan interests in the island's maritime space. Thus, throughout the 1980s, NATO structures in the Mediterranean were increasingly called into question by crises and interventions only tenuously related to defense against Soviet expansionism, whether real or perceived, but increasingly related to the issue of Middle East based terrorism as a threat to world security or more generally to those areas of instability outside the bipolar confrontation, such as the Persian Gulf after the Iranian revolution of 1979. It is worth recalling the case of the multinational force in Lebanon which, although under UN auspices, employed NATO structures to carry out the two missions in the early 1980s.

The fruits of this policy were not long in coming, as during the same 1980s Egypt began a partnership with NATO itself, hosting and participating in joint exercises going by the codename "Operation Bright Star," repeated usually on a bi-yearly basis to this day. A remarkable rapprochement, which dragged NATO in the middle of political game of the MENA countries, inevitably exposing facilities and personnel. As early as the late 1970s, the strategic debate was marked by the deployment of BMG-109 Tomahawk and MGM-31 Pershing missiles, the so-called Euro-missiles,

to bases in European countries that agreed to their deployment. Italy also allocated the NATO base of Comiso in Sicily as a site for the Euromissiles.

In 1989, the onset of the collapse of the Soviet system posed the need for the redefinition of the alliance in the face of a relationship of coexistence and cooperation with Russia. The ongoing invasion in Ukraine has thwarted years of discussion and work, but on the Mediterranean side, it is useful to recall the significance of the partnerships promoted by NATO with the countries of the so-called enlarged Mediterranean. The first was the Mediterranean Dialogue, promoted in January 1994 by the Italian government.² The Mediterranean Dialogue created a bilateral partnership of NATO countries with countries on the southern shore of the sea, promoting cooperation, exchange of information and in general security concepts. This approach has undoubtedly increased the quality of NATO's public diplomacy, and has made possible cooperation aimed, for example, at countering terrorism. In 2004 a restructuring of the commands created the Allied Joint Force Command (JFC) - Naples from the former AFSOUTH, first in the Bagnoli neighborhood and then since 2012 in Lago Patria. Within the JFC, the NATO Strategic Direction South - Hub was established in 2017 - where the spirit of the Mediterranean Dialogue is translated into operational lines to countries on the southern shore of the sea. In the same year, the Istanbul NATO summit established a second relevant partnership, the Istanbul cooperation initiative, targeting Gulf countries.³ It signified the completion of NATO's bilateral approach toward the broader Mediterranean, in a cooperative approach that has so far ensured the success of the North Atlantic political and military alliance.

² Massimo Ambrosetti, *NATO's Mediterranean dialogue*, (The International Spectator 2001), n.1: p. 83ss.

³ Cüneyt Yenigün, *Gulf Security, NATO and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative*, (Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 2015), Vol. 3, No. 2: 13-27.