

The United States and the Mediterranean in the 1960s

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1. The Atlantic context

With this presentation I would like to complete, going up to 1968, a particular interpretative pattern of the American policy in the Mediterranean that I had proposed to some European colleagues during a symposium in Assisi, in 1998.¹

Focusing the analysis on the transition from the Kennedy Administration to the Johnson years, in that conference, I had tried to observe the US action and influence in the Mediterranean through a particular point of view, that is, the relations with the Atlantic allies who were then engaged in the European integration process. Meanwhile, I finished a book on the whole complex of these relations in the Johnson years, mainly based on documents from the National Archives, College Park, and the Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, as well as on the series *1964-68* of the Foreign Relations of the US. This work has confirmed, I hope, the interpretative hypotheses I had used in 1998, in order to combine a general assessment of relations between the US and its European allies with more specific remarks on the Mediterranean aspects of those links. Trying not to invade the field of other presentations, mine will focus, in its more analytical section, on strategic issues affecting the Mediterranean theatre within the Atlantic context.

My basic thesis is that the American action in the Mediterranean in the Sixties had its more important turning-points, given the complexity of the theatre, in the multilateral Atlantic web rather than in the sum of bilateral relations necessarily focusing on day-by-day negotiations and specific episodes or crises.

¹ Luciano Tosi (ed.), *Europe, Its Borders and The Others*, Napoli, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2000.

I shall deliberately exclude from my attention, as far as possible, the Arab-Israeli conflict in itself, also because of the rich bibliography already available on that issue. I shall also set 1968, not 1970, as the final point of my analysis, since the Nixon Administration still needs general interpretative approaches. We have excellent synthetic works, but National Archives papers up to the Seventies have rather recently been declassified, as well as the FRUS volumes and Tim Naftaly's enterprise on presidential tapes.

Just to give a small hint, anyway, we could mention the fact that Richard Nixon, during the 1968 presidential campaign, heavily criticised the Atlantic policies implemented by the Johnson Administration, stressing in September that the American reaction to the Soviet expansion in the Middle East, the Mediterranean and Czechoslovakia had been uncertain and ineffective, that Washington had not been able to cope with Moscow's aims and threat, and that NATO disintegration was mainly an American blame.² We shall check in the end whether those statements were realistic or mainly electoral propaganda used by the Republican candidate.

2. Transatlantic Challenges

It may be useful to recall those general interpretative hypotheses I was mentioning before, not to avoid a necessary outline of Kennedy's approach to the issues at stake, even if excellent works are already available on it, thus allowing me to focus mainly on the Johnson years in our meeting.

In the general context of American foreign policy in the Sixties, the Mediterranean was at the same time a theatre of bipolar confrontation, that is, an area to defend from Soviet penetration (an objective that the US had to reach controlling the Alliance's centrifugal trends, especially on the French side), and an area of dissension or clash with the economic and trade competition of the European allies, since the sea was a critical contact-point

² LBJL, SpF, CP, box 15, "Cabinet Meeting of October 16, 1968", memo, D. Cater to L.B. Johnson, Washington 3.10.1968, and encl. "Nixon on Foreign Policy".

between those allies and their partners gradually emerging from decolonisation. Of course, the Mediterranean was a real border only for some of the countries involved in this changing partnership at the end of the imperial era, but it conceptually worked as a frontier between the Six members of the European Community, on one side, and Africa and the Middle East on the other. The different approach to Mediterranean issues, therefore, both in the defence and trade fields, was an important section in the more general context of US-European relations.

From the American point of view, one should emphasise two important constants in the equation. First of all, the expectations connected to the burden-sharing concept, proposed to the Allies in the wider setting of the call for economic and commercial interdependence summed with joint military and political responsibility in the West. That was a call which – typically for that period and that specific phase of bipolar confrontation – did not affect the dogma of American global hegemony and final decision-power, as the MLF issue clearly demonstrated, since burden-sharing and nuclear-sharing were quite different matters. Secondly, the link between the burden-sharing pattern of Atlantic negotiations and the development of formerly-dependent countries, also typical of that period, during which Cold War also meant a competition between different examples and models of development.³

³ On the US foreign policy in those years see, for example, T.G. Paterson (ed.), *Kennedy's Quest for Victory. American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989; G. Valdevit, *Gli Stati Uniti e il Mediterraneo da Truman a Reagan*, Milano, Angeli, 1992; D.B. Kunz (ed.), *The Diplomacy of the Crucial Decade. American Foreign Relations During the 1960s*, New York, Columbia University, 1994; W.I. Cohen and N. Bernkopf Tucker (eds), *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World. American Foreign Policy, 1963-1968*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994; H.W. Brands, *The Wages of Globalism. Lyndon Johnson and the Limits of American Power*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995; and D.W. Ellwood, *L'integrazione europea e gli Stati Uniti (1957-1990)*, in R.H. Rainero (ed.), *Storia dell'integrazione europea*, Vol. 2, Roma, Marzorati, 1997, pp. 523-571, esp. pp. 532-546. For an overview of the Johnson administration, see among others R.A. Divine (ed.), *The Johnson Years*, Vol. 1, *Foreign Policy, the Great Society, and the White House*, Vol. 2, *Vietnam, the Environment, and Science*, Lawrence (Kansas), University Press of Kansas, 1987; Vol. 3, *LBJ at Home and Abroad*, Lawrence (Kansas), University Press of Kansas, 1994; R. Dallek, *Flawed Giant. Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998.

Just referring to those two constants we may state that the American action during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations was generally consistent with the logical bases of US global approach to international issues in the Sixties. That approach was characterised, among other factors, by the quest for world leadership and a specific attitude towards developing countries – not so different from the relation with weaker allies as Italy – based on the following couple of concepts: a variable threshold of tolerance *vis-à-vis* governments not perfectly aligned with the American model, provided that their efforts of modernisation might help it, entangled in a zero-sum game with the recurrent need for choices more directly linked with the prevention and containment of Soviet influence or hegemony. In that situation, the US looked for junior partners who might favour its hegemonic role with minimal loss of energy, which implied avoiding crises whenever possible.

In the Mediterranean, the main causes of crisis were obviously connected to the Arab-Israeli tension, but one should not forget, from a broader point of view, the economic and demographic disequilibrium between the richer industrialised world on the North bank and the developing countries in the South. The East-West confrontation in the theatre, therefore, implied the need for a well-knit Atlantic network (in which context paramount importance was to be given to the nuclear-sharing issue, using the MLF or other solutions) controlling inter-Allied dissent, especially on the French side; and, more specifically, meant managing the balance of power in the Middle East, that is, in the strategic field more open to possible changes favourable to the Soviets.

The Kennedy Administration had generally tried to foster a regional balance, without plainly favouring one side in the Arab-Israeli conflict, except for circumstances of particular hazard, such as in Yemen, after the pro-Nasserist military coup in September 1962. This policy was similar to the one adopted by Washington towards developing countries. Washington had focused its efforts and expectations on the political and economic modernisation of the partners, calculating that to be the best way to keep those countries away from Soviet influence. Where possible, then, the US had tried to maintain good relations both with Tel Aviv and Cairo till 1963. On the contrary, during the Johnson

Administration that approach gradually changed. Why? Not only in parallel with the step-by-step worsening of the regional conflict, but also – with particular importance for our analysis – following the trend of the inter-allied situation, heavily marked by the French withdrawal and the need for coping with security lacunae opened by de Gaulle's disengagement in the control of the Mediterranean theatre.

One should also not underestimate the fact that in 1964 the region was strongly disturbed by another kind of inter-allied tension, that is, the conflict between Greeks and Turks linked to the events in Cyprus. In 1964, too, relations with Nasser worsened. The problem was not new at all – containing both the *raïs* and Nasserism, but avoiding to push Egypt into Moscow's covetous arms. But in November the Cairo riots against the USIA library triggered the worsening of the interaction with Nasser, bound to gradually foster the reassessment of US policy towards the Middle East. On this very interesting topic we have now available volume 18 of the FRUS, 1964-68, not to mention previous excellent contributions, among others, by Douglas Little, Warren Cohen, and Bill Brands. Along this trend, Washington would later take clearer choices in favour of clearly pro-Western regimes in the region, eventually making Israel the most important local partner for the US.

But let us add some more remarks from a broader point of view. In the Sixties, the Mediterranean almost completed its metamorphosis from being a segment of British and French imperial communications to becoming an external European border, real North-South rim. This transformation made it a weaker system, which Moscow tried to break open, taking advantage of any possible gap and consequently forcing Washington to assume more and more responsibilities –up to 1973, when US essential role in the post-Kippur War negotiations almost completed the metamorphosis of the sea into an 'American lake'. Considering the whole curve, for a general assessment, it is obvious to observe that it was just the Atlantic Alliance that enabled the US to insert bilateral relations with single allies, especially the Mediterranean ones, in a multilateral framework. The Soviet pressure and the inner tensions of the Alliance combined to the effect that some lines of the general American security system

of that period were confirmed also in the Mediterranean – burden-sharing, joint responsibility and low delegation of real decision-power to the allies. In particular, the Suez crisis had undermined any temptation of effective decision-sharing with the allies in the theatre.

Also from the economic and commercial point of view, as we have already pointed out, some important aspects of US-European relations in that period were at stake in the Mediterranean: burden-sharing, of course, which in this setting meant that Washington tried to involve the Europeans in a common assumption of responsibility towards the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development countries; and also meant American worries about the European Community association policy, not so much *vis-à-vis* Greece, Turkey or (differently) Spain, but rather towards the Maghreb and above all the colonial and ex-colonial countries. Those worries included the suspicion that the EEC Convention with overseas territories, and later the first Yaoundé Agreement, would create preferential areas hiding neo-colonial, not just post-colonial metamorphoses of the European control.

The two frameworks – burden-sharing and relations with developing countries – were also interlaced since one of the main causes of the American balance of payment deficit (a source of uneasiness in transatlantic relations *per se*) was just development aid, strongly emphasised by Kennedy's and later Johnson's international action. Washington feared that the European Community might become a closed market, protected by a high external tariff, and that Europe could make Africa *its* hemisphere better than the US could in Latin America through the *Alianza para el progreso*, an approach that showed its weakness more and more in the second half of the Sixties. These worries we are talking about are quite apparent in the FRUS series, both in the volume on multilateral relations with Europe (no. 13) and the one on Africa (no. 24).

This general background may explain the optimistic hypothesis conceived by the Kennedy Administration for a general trade liberalisation through the Trade Expansion Act of January 25, 1962, also meant to counterbalance the general deficit by a huge

increase in the trade surplus. It may explain the Declaration of Interdependence proclaimed by Kennedy in Philadelphia on July 4 of the same year. And it may also explain the recurrent exhortation to allies to have “rich Europe” substantially contribute in development aid.

Johnson followed the track. In 1964-67 the Kennedy Round GATT negotiations were completed. The US did not reach all its objectives but Washington clearly showed that the US wanted to push the Europeans out of their pampered position within the American hegemonic system, forcing them to carry their own burden of global responsibility linked to the impressive economic and commercial growth that had made them, together with the Japanese, formidable rivals of the US. The Kennedy Round and its results, therefore, should be evaluated not absolutely but in relation to a broad attempt to restore the US political and economic hegemony, as a constructive reaction to the commercial challenge launched by the Six EEC partners, in the Mediterranean and elsewhere.

A basic intuition supported this approach, that is, if the US wished to get the final triumph of the free economy and to maintain the leadership in it, basing that leadership on its military paramountcy and its central position in the world monetary and trade system, a real and effective policy of interdependence towards the European Community was required. The cohesion among European allies and the gradual implementation of their integration pattern were indispensable for confronting the Soviet challenge – no room, therefore, for *divide et impera* temptations.

3. Strategic nexus: Multilateral security in the Mediterranean

These remarks may be suitably confirmed by a fast analysis of some crucial moments of the US-European contacts in the Sixties, drawing now our attention to the diplomatic and security domain. Obviously, we do not mean just to single out specific sentences and details from particular episodes or documents, in order to confirm our theses. What matters here is checking the continuity of the Mediterranean themes also throughout contexts not directly linked to that particular theatre. Studying the American attitude

towards European integration I followed these issues in the essay mentioned at the beginning of this presentation (in which one may find, I hope, some more ideas and useful bibliographical hints).⁴ For a broader analysis of the data I am going now to submit to your attention, I take the liberty of referring also to my book focusing on US-European relations in the Johnson years.⁵

Just to give a first sample, let us go back to a document drawn in 1964, showing how the American perception of the need for deeper European engagement in the Alliance obviously became more acute because of the gradual worsening of the French attack against NATO integrated structures. On April 27, 1964, Admiral Noguét – then French Military Representative to the Standing Group – announced that French naval officers would “no longer serve on NATO naval headquarters or in units under non-French naval command”. Paris had already disengaged its Mediterranean units from NATO commitment in 1959 and, since January 1964, also the Atlantic units, except for five submarines. From the military point of view, the new move did not create an intolerable situation, also because it seemed likely that the French meant to conclude some kind of informal agreement for co-operation in wartime between their naval units and units engaged in NATO, to continue bilateral agreements for joint manoeuvres of their Mediterranean squadron and the US Sixth Fleet in peacetime, and maybe to add similar bilateral arrangements with the Supreme Allied Commander, Atlantic (SACLANT).

The French decision, however, stroke “at heart of NATO defense system”, as Secretary of State Dean Rusk remarked in a circular telegram sent to the posts in the NATO capitals: after years of strong efforts to build an effective structure without destroying the integrity of national forces, working on the concept of “strength through unity”, France was now trying to kill the structure and the concept, since both limited her total liberty of action. Fortunately enough, concluded Rusk, the French were not going to take new

⁴ Massimiliano Guderzo, *The Mediterranean, the US, and European Integration, at the Beginning of the Johnson Years*, in Luciano Tosi (ed.), *Europe, Its Borders and The Others*, Napoli, pp. 279-296.

⁵ Id., *Interesse nazionale e responsabilità globale. Gli Stati Uniti, l'Alleanza atlantica e l'integrazione europea negli anni di Johnson, 1963-69*, Firenze, Aida, 2000. For sources and bibliography see esp. pp. 571-589.

drastic actions “in their cat-and-mouse game with NATO”, like the withdrawal of their ground or air forces from NATO commitment, or the withdrawal of French personnel from NATO headquarters.⁶

During the NATO Ministerial Meeting organised in Brussels in December 1964, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara emphasised that the US would duly react to all attacks against the Alliance flanks and also against any exaggerated increase of Soviet military intrusiveness into the Mediterranean. In that case, McNamara used those remarks to underline once more the advantage of using conventional weapons to prevent or graduate the escalation towards general war, along a pattern that might consider the nuclear option of theatre weapons, but without any illusion about the possibility that a nuclear confrontation, once begun, could be easily taken under control.⁷

In March 1966, de Gaulle made his main move of disengagement from the NATO framework. This paper, for obvious reasons of time and focus, will not examine that particular moment and the first counter-moves of the Fourteen. We shall directly jump to the following turning-point, which came with 1967-68, a period featured by the strong reaction of the Alliance against the French defection and by the reassessment of the Mediterranean theatre in the complex of American and Atlantic strategy.

The beginning of the Six-Day War, on June 5, 1967, provided a unique chance to test the new mechanisms of NATO internal consultation elaborated after the French withdrawal. Preparing the Ministerial Meeting organised in Luxembourg for mid-June, the Department of State urged Harlan Cleveland, then US Permanent Representative to NATO, to debate with the allies common interests in the Middle East and to examine the perspectives of long-term stability in the area. Cleveland should emphasise the geographical proximity of the region to the NATO area and the

⁶ FRUS, *1964-68*, XIII, doc. 22, tel. 2057, D. Rusk to the Posts in the NATO Capitals, Washington 4.5.1964, cr., sr.

⁷ LBJL, NSF, IMTF, box 34, “NATO Ministerial Meeting, Dec.1964”, nos. 33a-33b, memo, “Comments by Secretary McNamara on Issues and Questions Raised by the Progress Report of the Defense Planning Committee”, R. McNamara, Washington 16.12.1964, tsr.

consequent “vital European and North American interest in peace, stability and regional development in the Middle East”, also considering obvious strategic elements: overflight privileges, sea communications, and oil resources. Since the Mediterranean was particularly important for the Alliance, the US and its partners should agree upon army supplies, in order to avoid risky competitive build-ups. This did not imply that NATO should play an official role vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict, since that would affect East-West relations, responsibilities committed to other bodies, especially the UN, and above all the whole attitude of Arab and ‘Third-World’ countries towards NATO and its members. Cleveland should try to create an intensive consultation machinery within the organisation, trying to achieve maximal secrecy, probably in the framework of the Permanent Council, with open-ended participation, that is, a procedure allowing participants to work even in the absence of partners that rejected direct participation in the process.⁸

The crisis in the Mediterranean also left some room for specific ambitions of US regional Allies, such as Italy, ready to criticise the French disengagement and to take advantage of the situation for strengthening a kind of special relationship with Washington. During a visit in September 1967, President of the Republic Giuseppe Saragat strongly praised the US and the Atlantic Alliance in a meeting with Johnson, remarking that nobody should undervalue Soviet real intentions, since Moscow had possibly changed means but not its aims of expansion in the Balkan and towards the Mediterranean. This was widely demonstrated by Soviet moral and financial support to the Italian and French Communist Parties, and the fact that the Soviets showed no real

⁸ FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 256, tel. 209519, D. Rusk to H. Cleveland, Washington 8.6.1967, cr., sr. Cf. DOUGLAS LITTLE, *Nasser Delenda Est: Lyndon Johnson, the Arabs, and the 1967 Six-Day War*, in H.W. BRANDS (ed.), *The Foreign Policies of Lyndon Johnson. Beyond Vietnam*, College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 1999, pp. 145-167; ID., *A Fool's Errand: America and the Middle East, 1961-1969*, in *The Diplomacy of the Crucial Decade*, pp. 251-282; ID., *Choosing Sides: Lyndon Johnson and the Middle East*, in *The Johnson Years*, vol. 3, pp. 150-197; WARREN I. COHEN, *Balancing American Interests in the Middle East: Lyndon Baines Johnson vs. Gamal Abdul Nasser*, in *Lyndon Johnson Confronts*, pp. 279-309; BRANDS, *The Wages*, pp. 183-218. See also LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON, *The Vantage Point. Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971, pp. 287-304.

inclination in favour of German reunification. Italy, stated Saragat, could not forget that the US had allowed her to regain her freedom – and de Gaulle’s France, and other European countries, too, should better express their due gratitude. Just because this great friendship, concluded Saragat, Italy had decided to sign the NPT.⁹

The Italian President had a good hand in criticising the French, whose behaviour remained suspect – and quite annoying – for the Americans. According to a CIA report, two weeks later, Paris was still keeping its official position stated in March 1966 towards NATO, but could easily abandon all remaining obligations *vis-à-vis* the Allies as soon as de Gaulle calculated that the world situation might make advantageous France’s final disengagement from the Western bloc.¹⁰

De Gaulle’s attack had obviously provided an effective catalyst to all Atlantic forces interested in relaunching the Alliance on new stronger organisational bases. From the military and strategic point of view, the most relevant development had been the implementation through the Nuclear Planning Group of the pattern begun by McNamara’s Special Committee of the Ministers of Defense. In the political sector, French criticism that NATO was an obstacle for improving East-West relations had paved the way to the Belgian reaction, which carried the proposal of the Harmel Study on the future of the alliance. As it is well known, the project should work according to the hierarchic structure of the organisation: formal top, the Atlantic Council; intermediate level, a special Working Group, made up by Permanent Representatives and national senior officers; for the basic and essential elaboration of the subject, four sub-groups, one responsible for East-West relations, one for inter-allied relations, one for defence policy; and finally one for out-of-area developments.

⁹ FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 265, memo (G. Saragat, A. Fanfani; L.B. Johnson, D. Rusk, W.W. Rostow, N. Seidenman), N. Seidenman, Washington 18.9.1967, sr.; LBJL, President's Appointment File, box 76, “Sep. 18-19, 1967. Visit of President Saragat of Italy”.

¹⁰ LBJL, NSF, CF, France, box 174, vol. 14 (memos), no. 157, CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “France and the Atlantic Alliance”, Washington 6.10.1967.

The crisis in the Middle East allowed the sub-groups to calibrate their documents also with reference to the particular stand taken by France. According to the CIA, de Gaulle had chosen a line quite unpopular even for important sections of his government and the French public. Calculating that “the Israelis were not militarily capable of defeating the well-armed and numerically superior Arab forces” and that Paris should exploit the crisis for “a renewal of the extensive influence France once had in Moslem countries bordering on the Mediterranean”, de Gaulle was supported “by only a few stalwarts” such as Minister of Foreign Affairs Maurice Couve de Murville, while the majority of government members and the Gaullist parliamentary grouping itself had remained pro-Israeli. This had had an important consequence: “Many of the former unconditional Gaullists have come to the realization that their leader can make mistakes and is therefore mortal (...) and for the first time there is serious discussion within the Gaullist camp of ‘post-de Gaulle France’”. Important political consequences, therefore, were in sight, given also the crisis which affected the Communist Party: during the difficult meeting that had paved the way to the pro-Arab stand, many dissenting voices had been heard.¹¹

There was a diffuse perception that 1966 had really been a breakthrough for the West: turning-points in the European integration process, such as the Luxembourg Compromise and the relaunch of Britain’s bid for entry; French disengagement from NATO and reconstruction of Atlantic relations; changing of the guard in Bonn and first signals of Brandt’s *Ostpolitik*. Fully aware of the implications of these events and international processes, John McCloy – former High Commissioner for Germany and US Representative to the crucial trilateral offset negotiations – wrote President’s Special Assistant Walt Rostow a letter full of suggestions for Johnson, on August 11, 1967. Here is an interesting quotation that might deserve our attention:

“A new phenomenon has entered into the picture in the form of the emergence of the Soviet Union in the Middle East and the

¹¹ LBJL, NSF, MP, WR, box 17, vol. 31, nos. 69-69a, ap., W.W. Rostow to L.B. Johnson, Washington 16.6.1967, sr., and encl. CIA Intelligence Information Cable. Cf. MAURICE VAÏSSE, *La grandeur. Politique étrangère du général de Gaulle, 1958-1969*, Paris, Fayard, 1998, pp. 615-647.

Mediterranean as an aggressive political force there. It is clear that the Soviets intend to expand their position there if only to remove the sting of their miscalculation of the Israeli capacities. They intend to gain a position, if possible, which will enable them to influence the flow of oil from the area. They have seen the long-range potentialities of new pro-Soviet forces on the southern flank of NATO and astride the strategic nexus which the Mediterranean represents between the East and the West and between Europe and Africa. This only accentuates the pressing need for the Germans and the Americans to understand each other's objectives very clearly at this critical period in the history of the Alliance. The Soviets have not become benign merely because they seek to avoid a nuclear exchange. Their action in the Middle East clearly demonstrate this".

In the light of these remarks, McCloy concluded that the US should exploit the decline of de Gaulle's prestige to lay a base "for a more meaningful discussion of our relations with Germany and Western Europe than we have had for some time (...) If we can show Europe that in spite of our domestic problems and with Viet Nam we are prepared to think seriously of our future relations with Europe, this will be impressive. At the same time we ask that they be aware of our problems and relations with the rest of the world". And the final sentence: "Neither Europe nor we can afford these days to be provincial in our thinking".¹²

But, as Counselor of the Department of State Robert Bowie wrote in October, contributing in the delicate transition phase from the reports written by the four sub-groups in the Harmel Study and the final draft for the Special Group, Washington's European partners were "extremely reluctant to involve themselves outside the NATO areas, partly due to the sense of impotence in influencing the US in such fields".¹³

Taking a somewhat more nuanced stand, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Gene Rostow remarked a few days later that the Arab-Israeli conflict had at least produced the following

¹² LBJL, NSF, AF, NATO, General, box 36, vol. 5, no. 8a, lett., J.J. McCloy to W.W. Rostow, New York 11.8.1967.

¹³ FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 270, memo, R.R. Bowie to D. Rusk, Washington 16.10.1967, cn.

favourable effect: European partners had understood how feeble their voice had been during the crisis and had proved, from then on, more inclined to accept the hypothesis of multilateral consultations on Mediterranean and Middle Eastern problems, possibly to be continued after the Harmel Exercise through an open-ended group “at a level of political responsibility”, since Rostow thought that “the Middle East and North Africa were the obvious subjects with which to start the process of evolution within NATO”.¹⁴

The Special Group meeting in Brussels on November 7-8 allowed to reach agreement among the Fourteen on the most important substantive and procedural issues of the Harmel Study. The French remained in isolation and accepted *ob torto collo* to go on along the lines traced by the partners. With respect to the official stand taken within the Special Group, however, French Representative Roger Seydoux privately seemed less rigid to US officials, declaring that the French might even accept the work proposals made in some of the four reports, even “perhaps the proposal for a Mediterranean study”, provided the final draft did not embarrass Couve during the impending Ministerial Meeting. France, as it seemed clear to the Bureau of Intelligence and Research in the Department of State, kept her tendency to hinder decisions taken by the partners, but if the Fourteen maintained their solidarity on the consensus reached on November 7, in 1968 NATO would probably strengthen its role both in the East-West détente process and the disarmament and arms control issues.¹⁵

As forecast, strong discussion featured the Ministerial Meeting in December, even if the results were significantly overshadowed by the Greek crisis (a matter which will obviously deserve more attention on our side in a future discussion on Mediterranean

¹⁴ FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 271, “Record of Discussion at the 23rd Meeting of the Senior Interdepartmental Group” (Under Secretary of State, Deputy Secretary of Defense, Chairman of JCS, Director of Central Intelligence, Director of USIA, Administrator of AID, Under Secretary of Agriculture, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, R.R. Bowie, A.A. Hartman; J.M. Leddy, H. Cleveland, Mr. Wyle, Gen. Orwat), A.A. Hartman, Washington 19.10.1967, sr.

¹⁵ FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 275, “Intelligence Note No. 904”, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, T.L. Hughes to D. Rusk, Washington 9.11.1967, sr.

themes in the Sixties and Seventies, both from the bilateral and multilateral point of view, through a wider examination beginning in 1966-67 and working through the Nixon Administration). The Defense Planning Committee session permitted to define substantial agreement in order “to tie together nuclear and conventional strategy, force planning and available resources” – “without any significant loss to US objectives”, remarked Rusk in a telegram sent from Brussels to the Department of State and repeated to all NATO capitals and Madrid. Some ministers duly stressed the issue of Mediterranean security and there was broad support for the establishment of a standing naval force under SACLANF, in the form of a multinational destroyer force. The North Atlantic Council reached full agreement on the Harmel Study. Now, Rusk remarked, it was time for action, defining methods, timing and order of priorities.¹⁶ But in 1968 the new terms of the Viet Nam conflict and the consequences of the Czech crisis on the American and European perception of the limits of détente would impose different rhythms from the picture the Ministers had outlined in Brussels.

4. Reykjavik and Prague

Despite Nixon’s criticism we described above, in March 1968 the NATO situation was not so bad as the future President tried to describe it during the election year.¹⁷ Two years before, as remarked by the Department of State in a document for internal circulation, “there was a widespread illusion that Europe’s comparative security meant the NATO defense system could be scrapped”. Now, all allies had agreed that negotiations with Moscow and its allies should be carried on from strength. The Soviet, “frustrated by the stalemate in Central Europe [were] now trying hard to outflank NATO by building up their naval presence in the Mediterranean and using military aid to penetrate the Arab states in the Middle East and North Africa”, hoping that the US would retire from Europe and the Mediterranean. This assessment, however, did not imply that American forces should be kept in

¹⁶ FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 281, tel. 1056, D. Rusk to DS, Bruxelles 14.12.1967, sr.

¹⁷ FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 297, memo, W.W. Rostow to L.B. Johnson, Washington 22.3.1968, sr.

Europe forever, as current redeployment agreements with the European partners clearly showed, nor that plans of balanced reductions of Eastern and Western forces in Europe should be discarded, the document remarked.¹⁸

One should note, however, that while in January 1968, soon after the December Ministerial Meeting, the MFR project went under examination, scarce results came from the first discussion on the Mediterranean issue, also due to the fact that the Italian Permanent Representative, Carlo de Ferrariis, “without instructions, rehashed trepidations about impinging on UN prerogatives *vis-à-vis* Middle East”, Cleveland remarked, and because of Seydoux’ scarcely co-operative attitude, too. The debate was then postponed.¹⁹

In a round of summit meetings in Washington organised in February, Secretary General Manlio Brosio showed a strong inclination “for a vigorous pursuit of the Mediterranean study”, defining as an important possible outcome the idea of a standing naval force including, at least, Italy, the UK and the US. That would suitably give strategic status to Italy, which the Secretary gently did not mention, but also commit the British West of Suez, counterbalancing their gradual withdrawal from the Far East.²⁰

The French attitude towards both the MFR and the Mediterranean studies, however, kept on worrying the Allies. Paris might influence other Members, that tended sometimes to water-down their positions in the hope of discovering contact-points with the French, as remarked in June by William Cargo, Cleveland’s Deputy.²¹

Preparing documents for the Reykjavik Ministerial Meeting of June 24-25, the Department of State examined the US position

¹⁸ LBJL, NSF, AF, NATO, General, box 37, vol. 6, no. 17b, memo, “The Future of NATO”, s.l. s.d.

¹⁹ FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 285, tel. 1375, H. Cleveland to DS, Bruxelles 17.1.1968, cn.

²⁰ FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 291, tel. 119536, N. deB. Katzenbach to the Mission to the NATO (for Cargo from Ambassador Cleveland), Washington 22.2.1968, sr.

²¹ FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 310, tel. 3403, W.I. Cargo to DS, Bruxelles 8.6.1968, sr.

regarding the Mediterranean issue and calculated that the Soviet threat was “primarily political”. The NATO reaction recommended by Washington, then, should be “modest, non-provocative political-military responses”.²² The CIA remarked that the Allies tended to take a low-profile attitude, mainly fearing Arab resentment or inopportune strategic consequences:

“Concern within NATO over the security situation in the Mediterranean has grown rapidly over the past six months, but the members have had difficulty in writing an agreed assessment of the Soviet threat. Some NATO nations – notably Greece and Turkey – are highly agitated and fear Soviet control of the Turkish Straits. Other members do not wish to alienate the oil-rich Arabs and seek to convey the impression of a limited NATO interest in Mediterranean developments”.

Brosio, continued the report, had prepared an assessment with rather weak recommendations, in order to overcome French obstructionism, but this did not prevent Paris to refuse association “with military innovations or changes in Alliance consultation procedures”. In that situation, the prospect of a possible Soviet fleet visit to Malta was not really welcome, of course, and might even affect the completion of liaison arrangements between the country and NATO.²³

Just a week before the Reykjavik Summit, in a National Security Council meeting focusing on the Atlantic issues at stake, the new Secretary of Defense, Clark Clifford, stressed that Washington should resume military aid to Greece, since the strategic importance of US “position there has increased as a result of the Soviet presence in the Mediterranean”. This sentence, now in the FRUS document, was still censored in the Johnson Library item in 1995, also because of Clifford’s final remark: “The Greeks are cooperative and will be of more value to us if Turkey makes trouble”. Undersecretary Nicolas Katzenbach, Vice President

²² FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 312, *paper*, “The Reykjavik Ministerial Meeting of NATO”, Washington s.d.

²³ LBJL, NSF, AF, NATO, General, box 37, vol. 6, no. 10, CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “The NATO Ministerial Meeting at Reykjavik”, Washington 20.6.1968. Cf. FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 293, tel. 2131, W.I. Cargo to DS, Bruxelles 13.3.1968, sr.

Hubert Humphrey and CIA Director Richard Helms fully agreed with Clifford.²⁴

From Reykjavik, last official opportunity before the Prague crisis in August, NATO Foreign Ministers sent a détente message, a ‘signal’ to the Soviet Union, encouraging Moscow to prepare for discussions on possible mutual force reductions in Europe. Honouring the new two-pillar NATO spirit – détente and defence – they also “evidenced concern over increased Soviet activities in the Mediterranean”. As remarked by a note of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research in the Department of State, however, the French partially dissociated themselves from the final statements regarding both the force cuts and the future of Mediterranean security. Most Ministers had expressed their awareness of a much stronger Soviet naval presence in the theatre but, blocked by the French, the Fifteen could only agree upon a Harmel follow-up report on the situation in the Mediterranean and the possibility of consultations on the subject within NATO in case of necessity. The Fourteen, however, agreed to speed up the activation of a NATO maritime air surveillance command for the Mediterranean. Without making the following decisions public, moreover, they instructed the Permanent Representatives “to consider other possible measures, including an expansion of allied military exercises in the area and the formation of a stand-by multi-national naval force to be available on call”. The latter decision balanced the fact that no effective support for the idea of creating a NATO standing naval force for the Mediterranean on similar terms to that established in the Atlantic had emerged from previous discussions. As a whole, the documents remarked, France had proved “a rather reluctant ally”.²⁵

As for British positions, according to US estimates in February 1968 London still kept 20 000 men in Cyprus, Malta, Gibraltar and

²⁴ FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 313, memo, “Summary of NSC Meeting on NATO”, E.R. Fried, Washington 19.6.1968, 12:00 noon, sr.; LBJL, SpF, TJ, box 3, no. 54a, tsr.; cf. NSF, NSCMF, box 2, vol. 5, tab 70, no. 3, “List of Attendees”.

²⁵ FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 316, “Intelligence Note No. 512”, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, G.C. Denney, Jr., to D. Rusk, Washington 28.6.1968, sr. See NATO Archives (<http://www.nato.int>), NAC, FC, Reykjavik 24-25.6.1968; Declaration, “Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions”, Reykjavik 24-25.6.1968.

Libya.²⁶ Defence Minister Denis Healey had announced on May 10 that withdrawals from the Far East and the Persian Gulf would enable the UK to give an immediate contribution to NATO in Europe and the Mediterranean: a mobile task force of about 20 000 men, stationed at home but available for multilateral defence, an amphibious task force in European waters, two frigates in the Mediterranean, and a squadron of reconnaissance aircraft in Malta till 1970. London would also co-operate for organising a kind of European caucus in NATO. In the Middle East, according to the US, Britain no longer had the will and strength to play an adequate regional security role. Washington would try to “use Britain’s residual political and economic influence” in the area, especially towards Arab States, in order to reach an equitable solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict and resist increasing Soviet influence.²⁷ Which meant that British decline in the Middle East was taken for granted by the US – London could help, but no longer be considered an equal partner for security aims.

Rusk summarised these remarks in the NSC meeting held on June 5, 1968, emphasising that the special relationship with the US had become less important for the British and that “the concept of Atlantic cooperation could replace” it, even if close bilateral relations would obviously continue. Clifford ruthlessly remarked that the British no longer had “the resources, the backup, or the hardware to deal with any big world problem”, nor were they “a powerful ally” any more, since they could not “afford the cost of an adequate defense effort”. In the past, stated the Secretary of Defense, “we had the closest working relations with the British. They looked after one part of the world and we looked after another part”. But their withdrawal created “real problems” for the US “in Southeast Asia, in other parts of Asia, and particularly in

²⁶ LBJL, NSF, CF, UK, box 216, Wilson 2/7-9/68 Visit Brfg. Bk., no. 17, “Visit of British Prime Minister Wilson. Background Paper: New British Defense Posture”, Washington 2.2.1968, sr.

²⁷ LBJL, NSF, MP, WR, box 35, vol. 80, no. 53 sgg., memo, W.W. Rostow to L.B. Johnson, Washington 4.6.1968, sr. (also in NSF, NSCMF, box 2, vol. 5, tab 69, no. 4), and encl. “NSC Paper on United Kingdom”, sr.

the Mediterranean where the Soviets recently [had] become more active”.²⁸

The invasion of Czechoslovakia partly modified the situation. It was almost immediately clear that the move by the Warsaw Pact could trigger an Atlantic reaction that might help NATO cohesion and future ability of multilateral consultation. On August 29, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs John Leddy wrote Cleveland a telegram bearing the meaningful subject “Strengthening NATO in Wake of Czech Crisis”. Among other issues, Leddy remarked that the Atlantic Ministers “might direct the immediate activation of COMARAIMED, the new command which is to coordinate aerial surveillance of the Soviet fleet”. The invasion had undoubtedly shocked European opinion, concluded Leddy, creating “a new, positive atmosphere for NATO and for US leadership”. Washington should take due advantage of that.²⁹

The Warsaw Pact move had obviously modified the *status quo* in Eastern Europe, since there were larger military forces present in the theatre than at any time after the war, as remarked in a Paper prepared by the Department of State. The crisis had focused attention on NATO Central Front, but possible Soviet pressures against Romania and Yugoslavia also proposed the urgent issue of Mediterranean security.³⁰

The matter was debated among others by NATO Ministers on November 14-16. The summit gave excellent results, as Washington had hoped. Rusk remarked that “all Fifteen Allies – including France – showed unexpected cohesion on the key political issues” and seemed “willing to make the sacrifices necessary to preserve the common security”, which provided “a

²⁸ LBJL, NSF, NSCMF, box 2, vol. 5, tab 69, no. 2, “Summary Notes of 587th NSC Meeting, June 5, 1968, 12:15-12:12:45 p.m.”, B.K. Smith, Washington 5.6.1968, sr., *sensitive, for the President only*; no. 5, “List of Attendees”.

²⁹ FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 322, tel. 229956, D. Rusk (from J.M. Leddy) to H. Cleveland, Washington 29.8.1968, sr., imm.

³⁰ FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 323, “Paper Prepared in the DS”, “The United States, Europe, and the Czechoslovakia Crisis”, Washington s.d., sr.

base from which to move forward towards greater European efforts in their own defense”.³¹

5. Moscow's claims

The Kremlin remained quite reticent in its reaction to the main outcome of the Brussels meeting, that is, the agreement on increased national contributions to the Alliance's defence forces and the approval of the new NATO air surveillance command for Mediterranean operations. The latter, as remarked by the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, certainly posed “an immediate challenge to Soviet interests”, to such an extent that the ambassadors in Athens, Ankara, Rome, London, and Washington had formally defined the new unity a “premeditated and flagrant violation of international standards governing the freedom of navigation in the open seas”, thus enabling the USSR to register “in diplomatic channels for the first time its own claims to be, and to be acknowledged as, a Mediterranean power”.

In May 1968, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko had already proclaimed that thesis, linking it to the USSR geopolitical condition of Black Sea power. One may observe that, as the Atlantic allies had used the Czech crisis for NATO cohesion, Moscow was now trying to take advantage of NATO reactions in another field. According to the Department of State, the Soviets were careful “to avoid any undue exacerbation of tension in the area”. In fact, the number of their ships operating in the Mediterranean had gradually decreased from the level reached during the Six-Day war. The aim seemed clear – obtaining the registration of Moscow's point of principle that Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean was “a vital element of the USSR's global defense posture”. Which meant that Soviet ships were to remain in the Mediterranean regardless of NATO's declarations and actions.³²

³¹ FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 337, tel. 5845, D. Rusk to DS, Bruxelles 16.11.1968, sr., imm.

³² FRUS, 1964-68, XIII, doc. 338, “Research Memorandum No. RSE-175”, T.L. Hughes to D. Rusk, Washington 13.12.1968, cn.

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Here came out a complex matter that the Nixon Administration was just going to inherit. Later on, the general turning-point in international (both inter-bloc and inter-allied) relations triggered by the Yom Kippur war in 1973 and the subsequent oil shocks would fully hit the Mediterranean, making it once again one of the most important theatres of great-power confrontation.