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Editorial

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The recent crisis in transatlantic relations not only opened a rift between the United States and some parts of Europe but also among European states. Although it would be unrealistic to assume that transatlantic relations can return to the status quo that existed before the war on Iraq, a new transatlantic paradigm began to emerge in the 2004 Istanbul summit. This, in turn, has opened the way for more improvement in the relationship between the two sides of the Atlantic based on the reality of common security interests and an implementable framework for conflict prevention.

Indeed, consensuses and division of labor might be a keyword here as a strategy for security and the promotion of security. The US President is capable of putting any issue onto the international agenda and of influencing the discourse within the Middle East. The Greater Middle East Initiative, for example, was high on the agenda of the last G8 summit. In addition, there was a debate about reform in the Arab world after the first Arab Human Development Report 2002 was issued. Yet, this debate broke down with the war on Iraq, a decision taken by the US President. Since early 2004, this debate was revived as the US President raised the issue of reform in the Middle East. The EU, on the other hand, seems to have more staying power, experience, and more "hands-on-experience". But there is a need for more than that: a set of trilateral working groups or networks, made up by American, European and Arab partners, should be established to deal with problems within the region and between the Arab world, Europe and the US.

The following two articles are about transatlantic debate and its continued role in conflict prevention in the MENA region. Riccardo Alcaro's article "Defining the Differences: A European point of view on Transatlantic Efforts to Prevent Conflicts in the Middle East" illustrates that the transatlantic partners do not necessarily have exactly the same interests. On the other hand, Michael Friend, in his article "Conflict Prevention in the Middle East: the New Focal Point for Transatlantic Relations", argues for a consensus trend. Recognizing the new focus of transatlantic security is 'relations with the Islamic world', he underlines the fact that the partners have no choice but to find common ground. Moreover, in "A New Report on EU Crisis Response Capabilities", Roberto Aliboni's article assesses recent developments concerning the EU activities within the framework of crisis management, including implementation of new institutions and policies for the prevention and management of violent conflicts. The analysis leads to some interesting conclusions that enhance our understanding of the European agenda and capabilities in the field of crisis management. ■

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A NEW REPORT ON EU CRISIS RESPONSE CAPABILITIES

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In 2001 the International Crisis Group-IGC published a thorough assessment of the EU's crisis response capabilities.[1] In January 2005, it published a second assessment with a view to updating the previous one[2].

Both reports are based on an integrated concept of conflict prevention and management as responses to changing stages and time frames in a crisis cycle stemming from a coherent security policy. Because of its centaur-like communitarian-intergovernmental nature, the EU suffers from deficits in its instruments as well as lack of coordination. Therefore, its coherence is weak and uneven. Indeed, such coherence, more often than not, is also lacking when it comes to full-fledged states or international organization. Yet, coherence remains a structural and basic challenge for the EU. For this reason, the ICG's assessment has particular significance, for it provides not only a measure of EU's crisis response capabilities but also - and most important - its wider capability as an international actor.

The concern about EU's "actorness" is central in the ICG report. The report considers changes and new perspectives relating to EU crisis response capabilities and concludes that between 2001 and 2005, thanks to institutional, operative and political advances on varying grounds, the EU foreign and security policy became actually more coherent and robust. Accordingly, its capabilities to respond to crises appear significantly increased. Furthermore, taking into account the enhanced foreign policy profile the new Constitution would provide - if ratified by all members - the report points out that the Union should be enabled to combine more coherently military and civilian capabilities. More in general, it foresees that "prospects for foreign policy development in the next few years are fairly good". It warns, however, that to take advantage of this favourable trend, EU members have to be enabled to act according to a more "effective multilateralism". This expression is employed in the "European Security Strategy"[3] to allude to a world shaped by the rule of law and international cooperation. It refers, however, also to the need for more stringent political integration among the EU member states so as to become more "results oriented". The ICG report stresses the lack of European political will and points out the need to combine progresses in policies and instruments with a more distinctive political will so as to translate EU potential into concrete results.

While the EU ability to upgrading its political will depends on future developments (essentially the implementation of the European Constitution) and achievements (the success in integrating new members and establishing viable relations with neighbouring countries), the ICG report provides a detailed analysis of advancements in EU conflict prevention and management capabilities so far. Let's underscore the most important achievements.

The report illustrates the improvements that are taking place in the structures and organisation of the Commission and the Council.

The Commission has initiated a "deconcentration" of its activities to its Delegations abroad, which is expected to improve effectiveness. It has strengthened its specialised units bound to respond to crises: first of all, the Conflict Prevention and Crisis Management Unit; then, the European Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) which is in charge of dispensing EU humanitarian aid, and, finally, Europe Aid, the agency for the implementation of projects relating to EU external relations and development. Furthermore, the Commission has improved and refined its policies of international peace-building through its own enlargement and, with respect to external countries, thanks to the new European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). As far as the Mediterranean and the Middle East are concerned, the ENP aims at reinforcing the policies already carried out within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (without replacing it). While the report does not dwell on this development, what it is worth recalling here is that the policies planned by the ENP, in particular the Action Plans, will combine political and economic cooperative endeavours and will be of the utmost significance for long-term peace building, especially in terms of conflict prevention capabilities.

The reports illustrate improvements in the Council's structure as well. In a sense, these improvements are more impressive than those of the Commission, because in the beginning of the 2000s, when the EU started to acquire crisis response capabilities, the structures of the Council, including the Secretary-General and High Representative for Foreign Policy, were almost non-existent. A full-fledged Policy Planning and Early Warning Unit assists the High Representative today. Furthermore, the EU governments set up in the existing intergovernmental structure of the Council a Political and Security Committee as well as a EU Military Committee and a Committee for Civilian Aspects of Crisis Management. A Joint Situation Centre assists these Committees and the High Representative.

(1) EU Crisis Response Capability: Institutions and Processes for Conflict Prevention and Management, Issues report No. 2, 26 June 2001.
(2) EU Crisis Response Capability Revisited, Europe Report No. 160, 17 January 2005. The ICG's website is: www.crisisgroup.org.
(3) EU Secretary-General and High Representative for Foreign Policy, A secure Europe in a better world: European Security Strategy, 12-13 December 2003.

Beside the High Representative's political capabilities, in the last five years the EU has also developed an intergovernmental common military force intended to deal with preventing and managing crisis within the framework and at the service of international legality. As of today, this force, although it has to be completed in many respects, is available and, in fact, it has already implemented a few interventions abroad. This force is a most significant accomplishment with respect to the task of upgrading EU crisis response capabilities. When coming to illustrate progresses in EU capabilities, the report talks at length of this military force. In fact, a military force is an essential factor in the perspective of building a crisis response capability, beginning with the need to protect aid, personnel and other civilian endeavours on the ground. It provides the EU short-term capabilities to be combined with existing long-term economic capabilities.

From the report one understands that coordination between the Commission and the Council and their respective instruments has also improved since the beginning of the 2000s (when it was not present and instead competition prevailed). Cooperation, as the report notes, has been prevailing due to the personal cooperation between the then Commissioner for External Relations, Mr. Chris Patten, and the High Representative, Mr. Javier Solana, although the inclusion of both of them in the same institution, the new presidential troika, must have not been foreign to that cooperation. However, the report also notes that a more effective cooperation will be possible only with the implementation of the Constitution, when there will be a Union's Foreign Minister combining powers and instruments as of today unevenly divided between the Commission and the Council.

To sum up, according to the ICG report, in 2001-05 the EU definitely improved its crisis response capabilities. It has strengthened its institutions and policies and has successfully developed its military force to deal with conflict prevention and crisis management. It also enjoys a good degree of coordination and prospects for further improvements are good. The report gives a detailed account for all these changes and prospects. It deserves to be circulated abroad, in particular in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, where EU policies dealing with conflict prevention and crisis management are either poorly known or decidedly misunderstood. ■

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CONFLICT PREVENTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE NEW FOCAL POINT FOR TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

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For nearly five decades after the end of the Second World War, the threat to Europe's security posed by the Soviet Union was the focal point of Euro-American relations. All other issues were ultimately secondary, and the numerous transatlantic disagreements over tactics in managing the security relationship, along with economic issues, never threatened the partners' fundamental solidarity. During the 1990s, the central issue was how to manage the tumultuous transition from Cold War divisions to a united Europe. In both cases, however, the focus was on internal European security.

Today it is clear that the central issue for transatlantic relations in the early 21st century is essentially not about Europe at all, but rather about how to manage relations with the Islamic world. There are currently three main focal points in this debate: Israel, Iraq, and Iran. These three "I's" all bear on the central question for the U.S. and its European allies which can be summed up to one "I": how best to deal with the threat of Islamist terror. At first, in the early days following the events of September 11, 2001, many Europeans were tempted to believe that this wasn't really their fight. Events in Spain and the Netherlands and broader socio-demographic trends in countries like France have since brought home the reality that Europe and America do indeed face a common problem. Unfortunately, none of the institutions that support the transatlantic relationship were constructed to face these challenges.

Thus there is, on a broad level at least, a common understanding that relations with the Islamic world are critical now and not as before i.e. simply because of oil, but because of the threat posed by Islamist terror. But the threat cuts different ways. Here the notion of "conflict prevention" itself becomes problematic, presupposing as it does that prevention of conflict is the ultimate good, when some level of conflict may in fact sometimes be necessary to avert more serious consequences. Europe, with its significant Muslim minorities at home and immigration problem is naturally concerned by the risk of radicalization. This translates into two broad policy prescriptions: One, the necessity for more active measures to resolve the Palestinian problem and two, the necessity of supporting undemocratic regimes in the region, stemming from the long-standing belief - until 9/11 shared by the US as well -- that instability in the region is the greatest source of threat. Post September 11 2001, the Bush Administration view has been that it is no longer possible to ignore the reality that it is nationals of the "stable" Arab countries who have become the intellectual leaders of Islamic fundamentalist terror. Diagnosing the problem as one of a democratic deficit in the Arab world, the Bush Administration's prescription has been to call for spreading democracy actively, yet at the same time without upsetting the established order in the Arab world too precipitately; oil price stability being an ever-present competing factor in calculations about policy for the region.

The decision to overthrow Saddam Hussein and establish a democratic Iraq can thus be seen as an attempt at a judicious mix of these competing imperatives: on the one hand, visionary Wilsonianism, on the other, a more practical assessment that the invasion was necessary to get US troops out of Saudi Arabia, and at the same time bring the world's second largest oil reserves back on line while also removing the irritant of US forces on Muslim holy ground. This more pragmatic side of the issue has certainly been obscured and its compelling logic devalued by the difficulties encountered in stabilizing Iraq, as well as the increased rhetorical emphasis the Bush administration has recently given to democracy promotion, most notably, in Bush's second inaugural, with the announcement of a new doctrine asserting that the advancement of liberty and freedom around the world were vital to US national security. This speech, with its ringing call for what sounds like renewed Wilsonian activism, has certainly not calmed European nerves. Yet Administration spokesmen hastened to qualify it, and Bush himself afterwards called the effort a "work in progress," adding, "There won't be instant democracy."[1] It is also noteworthy that the President also stated that this lofty goal won't be accomplished "primarily through the force of arms." Thus while the rhetoric may be Wilsonian, actual American diplomacy in Bush's second term may well be more pragmatic. But will that be a sufficient basis for transatlantic concord on Middle East policy?

The transatlantic debate over Middle East policy mirrors in certain ways the dynamic of the Cold War period when Europeans fretted that US measures to contain and deter the Soviets would provoke the very thing they intended to prevent - a war on European soil. These same tensions play out today, as US declarations that only democracy and economic liberalization can cure the Arab despair and rage that manifests itself in the fever of Islamist terror, along with military action ostensibly intended to hasten the process either directly as in Iraq, or indirectly, by example to others, are met with European concern that these words and actions will only make matters much worse. Just as during the Cold War, Europeans saw a

(1) Quoted in "Bush calls election 'a grand moment' in Iraq," International Herald Tribune, 26 January 2005. See also President Bush's Inaugural Address, http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/01/20050120-1.html

geographically distant US failing to appreciate the sensitivity of their proximity to the threat, today many European countries with substantial Muslim populations fault the U.S. for failing to take their circumstances into account.

Unlike the Cold War period, however, it is not clear that there is the same kind of fundamental agreement on the underlying assumptions. To the extent that the Europeans have become involved in Iraq, with the exception of the British, they appear to have done so out of a rather Cold War impulse to curry favor with the US as guarantor of NATO. This is most obvious in the new members from the former Warsaw Pact. Few of these countries' leaders, and none of their publics, appear to share the US view that the war in Iraq is the vital heart of the struggle against Islamist terror. A number of these, moreover, have now announced their withdrawal. Indeed, looking only at the situation in Iraq as of this writing, it is difficult to disagree with the European point of view. The relatively successful outcome of the recent elections in Iraq, may, however, permit a rapprochement between the US and its European partners on pragmatic grounds. It also appears that the elections have begun facilitate decisions already taken in European capitals to be somewhat more accommodating to Washington. An early sign of this was the offer by Belgium to help Iraq draft its constitution; along with the European resolution of their own internal differences about how best to provide training.[2] More recently, NATO countries indicated their readiness to assist in more intensive training of Iraqi security forces[3]. Regardless, however, of the outcome of the political process that began with the elections of 30 January 2005, the very difficulty of the situation in Iraq, combined with the domestic political concerns and the geopolitical aims of both Europeans and Americans, they have come together in curious ways to produce potentially promising results elsewhere.

The centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian question has until recently not been equally shared by the transatlantic partners, with Europeans taking the view by and large that the problem of Islamic terror cannot be solved until there is considerable progress there, if not a total solution to the conflict. This has generally been understood to mean that the US must put heavy pressure on Israel to return to the negotiating table without setting preconditions on Palestinian terrorism, along with a number of other considerable concessions that would not be easy for any Israeli government to offer without major demonstrable change on the Palestinian side. The US, by contrast, has maintained a view that saw the Israeli-Palestinian problem as in many respects separate from or at any rate only weakly linked to the question of Islamic terror. US officials often point to the fact that Osama bin Laden's animus against the US appears originally to have been motivated less by concern for the plight of the Palestinian people than by the US military presence in Saudi Arabia and its support of the Saudi monarchy and the Mubarak regime in Egypt, along with other Arab autocracies deemed insufficiently pure from the Islamist perspective. It is also noted that such al Qaeda attacks as the bombing of US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in August 1998 and the bombing of the USS Cole in October 2000 took place despite Pres. Clinton's considerable efforts at producing a peace deal in the Middle East. The differences in viewpoint might be concisely expressed thus: For Europeans, there can be no democracy without peace, while for America; there can be no peace without democracy. Finally, the European view has until recently had little weight: from the American point of view, the transatlantic security debate and questions of Middle East conflict prevention/resolution were unrelated issues.

Two events have changed or may be changing this standoff. One is the ongoing debacle in Iraq. The other is the death of Arafat and election of Mahmoud Abbas as President of the PA. The US cannot any longer credibly argue that there is no Palestinian partner for peace, at the same time as the unexpectedly vigorous insurgency in Iraq has made it much more difficult to resist the calls from the most influential European in Washington's eyes, Tony Blair, for an active US reengagement to promote the so-called "road map" to peace. For lack of any real evidence that those in the Bush Administration who argued that "the road to Jerusalem leads through Baghdad" (Middle East peace would become possible once the Iraqi threat to Israel was removed) were correct, the US has been compelled to accept that it might actually be that the road to Jerusalem begins and ends there. And even that the reverse is true - to the extent that the Iraqi adventure is about spreading democracy in the Middle East, and thus, theoretically, reducing the underlying causes of fundamentalism, a functioning democratic Palestine, coexisting with Israel, born with full US support, could be a far more powerful catalyst for democratic change in the region than anything likely to emerge in Iraq. But for that to occur, the mere fact of Abbas' election is insufficient. It must be seen to lead to real change in the region. The chances are slim, but there is a real possibility.

While President Bush is now on record as having promised to put his full weight behind efforts to achieve a solution, there is little reason to think that the US and the Europeans are now in full accord on the means to achieve it, and many reasons to think that the opportunity could vanish after the next round of violence from Israeli settlers and/or Palestinian extremists. Nevertheless, the fact that the Bush administration has carefully set its new commitment to working for a two-state solution in the context of efforts for a rapprochement with European allies is significant.[4]

(2) "EU to Offer Bush Iraq Training Deal," Financial Times, 27.01.05

(3) See Steven R. Weisman and Eric Schmitt, "Rice, at NATO, sees unity on training" The New York Times, 10 February 2005.

(4) "I believe we've got a great chance to establish a Palestinian state, and I intend to use the next four years to spend the capital of the United States on such a state," Bush said in an East Room news conference with Blair, his closest ally. "I believe it is in the interest of the world that a truly free state develops." Quoted in "Bush Goal: Palestinian State by 2009," Washington Post, November 13, 2004

Given the disappearance of Arafat, effective pressure from Tony Blair, and conscious of the need for better relations with Europe in order to deal with numerous other challenges, the Bush Administration appears, on a rhetorical level at least, to have retreated from its position granting Ariel Sharon practical carte blanche in dealing with the Palestinians. At the same time, internal American political factors, most notably the intense opposition from key Bush constituencies such as right-wing Christian fundamentalists to any pressure on Israel to relinquish "Judea and Samaria," will make it difficult for the Bush Administration to deliver on these promises. Nor are attempts by the Europeans to jumpstart the process or to take the lead likely to meet with any favor in Washington, if the rather cool reception given to Blair's proposal for a Palestinian reform conference in 2005 is any indication.

The third, and in many ways most troubling "I" is Iran: Despite the Bush Administration's inborn dislike of international organizations and treaty-based approaches to international security, the all-consuming reality of operations in Iraq, along with a strong European desire to demonstrate the value of multilateral diplomacy, has resulted in the US acquiescing to letting the EU three (UK, France and Germany) take the lead in dealing with the problem of Iran's nuclear ambitions. For now the US has contented itself with little more than playing bad cop while allowing successive IAEA meetings to avoid the issue of sanctions. At some point, however, Iran's unwillingness to renounce the sensitive aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle will force the Europeans and the US to resolve the issue in one of two ways: a) apply tough sanctions or even, ultimately, use force; or b) enter into serious negotiations with Iran. At present there is no transatlantic consensus on either of these approaches. The US is highly skeptical that negotiations will produce results and hopes that the EU three will come to see that there is no alternative to tough economic sanctions at least, while the Europeans argue that negotiations without a real US commitment to offer credible carrots as well as sticks has little chance of long-term success.

Reports that Washington is now turning to active consideration of the use of force against Iran were swiftly denied, but there is clearly a faction that is arguing for the use of force.[5] Not entirely coincidentally, the EU-3 has now reportedly taken a firmer line with Teheran, setting its position clearly that nothing less than cessation of enrichment activities will be acceptable.[6] Whether this represents a real firming of the EU-3's position vis-à-vis Teheran, or whether it was leaked in an attempt to respond indirectly to comments such as those of Vice President Cheney placing Iran at the top of the list of danger spots and hinting a military option is unclear. Nevertheless, the real constraints on any US military action, along with the lack of any economic pressure that the US might be able to wield against Iran without international agreement, will likely mean that Washington will continue to stand aside while offering little support for the European approach. Sooner or later, however, the European approach must be seen to bear fruit, or the forces in Washington advocating stronger action will gain the ascendancy. The Europeans, with a much greater economic interest in improving relations with Teheran and no appetite for a replay of the run-up to the Iraq war, will be caught between competing diplomatic and economic imperatives. Navigating between the avoidance of another dangerous conflict in the Middle East, the likely dangers of permitting the emergence of another nuclear power, and the dismal prospect of renewed diplomatic conflict with Washington will take enormous skill on the part of the EU-3. It remains to be seen whether Washington will place equal weight on engaging its partners in return.

In sum, despite concerns about for the future of the transatlantic relationship, today we see signs that a genuine transatlantic rapprochement is taking place and that it can bear fruit in the context of conflict resolution in the Middle East. The second Bush Administration opened with real signals that it wants to get beyond the acrimony of the quarrel over Iraq. This positive mood was strengthened when the unexpectedly successful election in Iraq gave President Bush the opportunity to offer a rhetorical olive branch in crediting the EU and UN for their assistance.[7] Further rhetorical evidence that the new Bush Administration may be serious about mending relations with its European partners was demonstrated by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's consistent references to working with "Europe" rather than to individual European states during her trip in February 2005.[8] Whether this is anything more than lip service or actually betokens Washington's abandoning divide and rule tactics in dealing with Europe remains to be seen.

At the same time, and to the extent that this initial success of the Iraqi elections is confirmed by real improvements in the situation in Iraq, the Europeans will be compelled to be more forthcoming in providing assistance, which in turn may help improve the transition to a functioning Iraq. With regard to the Israeli-Palestinian question, initial indications are more positive than might have been expected, and the desire for US-European rapprochement appears to be playing a significant role in Washington's calculations. Finally, despite its real misgivings over Iran, the U.S. continues to be willing to give the EU the lead, even if there is serious concern in the medium to long term that negotiations can resolve the problem. For all their differences, the two sides have a compelling interest to work together on the three "I's." Recognizing that the new focus of transatlantic security is relations with the Islamic world signifies that the partners have no choice but to find common ground. ■

(5) See Seymour M. Hersh, "The Coming Wars," New Yorker Jan 27 2005
(6) See "Summary of latest round of EU-Iran nuclear talks," Reuters, 26 Jan 2005
(7) "Bush calls elections a 'resounding success'" International Herald Tribune, 31.1.05
(8) U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Remarks at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, February 8, 2005. http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/41973.htm

DEFINING THE DIFFERENCES: A EUROPEAN POINT OF VIEW ON TRANSATLANTIC EFFORTS TO PREVENT CONFLICTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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It is often assumed that the United States and Europe share the same basic interests in the Middle East. Hence, transatlanticists on both sides of the ocean urge their governments to improve efforts to promote joint initiatives and coordinated actions. In their view, the main problems affecting transatlantic relations on Middle Eastern issues originate in the inability to forge a common strategy that will be able to serve the interests of both Europe and the US. Nebulous notions such as the promotion of stability, prosperity and democracy, as well as much more concrete issues like solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or preventing Iran from acquiring military nuclear capabilities are often mentioned as shared European and American priorities.

Although it is highly desirable for the transatlantic partners to cooperate effectively so that the various challenges arising from the region can be addressed better, it does not necessarily mean that they have exactly the same interests. In fact, the structural factors underlying European and US attitudes toward the Middle East partly differ, to the extent that a well-functioning partnership relies on a clear definition of the role the partners have to play with similarities and differences taken into account.

What the United States seeks in the Middle East is direct, durable and secure access to oil. Hence, traditional US policy toward the region has focused on efforts to establish a regional environment able to guarantee oil supplies at the best available price. Oil is by far the first priority of the US, but it should not be seen as an isolated and all-dominant imperative. Strategic and political factors also matter, the most relevant being the legacy of the Cold War and the special relationship with Israel.

During the Cold War, the Middle East was one of the axis around which the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union revolved. Because of its oil capacities and its geographic position, the Middle East was of fundamental strategic relevance. Thus the American need for access to energy resources was not isolated from geopolitical considerations, such as the attitude of regional governments toward the Soviet Union. Current amities linking the United States to some Middle Eastern countries, as well as US antagonism with other regional actors, still depend on which side - American or Soviet - past governments took.

Israel also played a part in the US' containment of the Soviet influence in the Middle East. Yet, US support for Israel has never been based solely on the strategic advantages that a friendly government in Tel Aviv could provide. Cultural linkages and political trends within the US opinion- and policy-making environment have forged a deep-rooted relationship that cannot be simplified to geopolitical convenience. Therefore, significant strategically motivated changes in the general direction of US policy toward Israel are not to be expected.

In the early nineties, the end of the Cold War gave the United States a chance to increase its presence and influence in the Middle East and the Gulf region. The Bush Sr. administration saw the possibility of developing the traditional policy of exploiting regional rivalries into a more comprehensive approach. The aim was to maintain regional stability by providing support to Arab governments and diverging their political priorities away from the Palestinian cause. From an American point of view, the 1991 war against Iraq, waged by an international coalition joined by several Arab countries, contributed to building political legitimacy for further US intervention in the area. On the other hand, the Middle East peace process, started by Bush Sr. and continued by Clinton, involved the creation of the Palestinian Authority, further contributing to circumscribing the conflict to the Palestinians. For the Americans, this could be regarded as an important success on the way to framing and establishing a stabilised and controlled regional context.

The emergence of the terrorist threat undermined the fundaments of the strategic concept envisaged by Bush Sr. It revealed that supporting authoritarian and often unpopular governments may not be the best way to achieve regional stability: public dissatisfaction with political leaders can give rise to organized fringe groups of extremists, fatally radicalising the political debate. These considerations led the Bush Jr. administration to adopt a more intrusive approach, partly based on different strategic objectives.

While the need for oil sources remains the essential rationale for any US policy in the Middle East, priorities toward the area now also involve security concerns. The paradigm under which a government in the area is seen as a trustworthy partner seems to have changed: not only should it provide privileged access to oil or be capable of preserving regional stability (or both), but it should also cooperate in counter-terrorism activities.

In the eyes of the current US administration, these three basic objectives can be achieved better and faster through the elimination of hostile regimes. This could imply either armed intervention (Iraq) or exerting economic and

diplomatic pressure (Syria) or adopting a confrontational stance (Iran) in order to gain time without giving the wrong impression of willingness to accommodate or appease. Since the White House has increasingly linked its interventionism with the rhetoric of democratisation, even much friendlier governments have been put under some pressure, at least formally. In addition, in 2004 the US government launched several initiatives to deepen cooperation and assistance in a range of fields, including security, trade, human development, etc.

In the end, a changed regional environment, including the rising of 'jihadist' terrorism, has prompted the United States to transform itself into a revolutionary force. Here lies the source of the substantial disagreement with Europeans.

Europe's need for an uninterrupted oil flow from the Middle East is even more urgent than that of the United States because Europe, which is the world's largest oil importer, has no significant internal reserves. The regional arrangement established by the United States in the aftermath of the 1991 Iraq war was in line with European energy interests. Aimed at maintaining regional stability, it secured and strengthened the well-established Middle Eastern channels of oil supply.

The European integration process, which experienced a surge in the early nineties, prompted European governments to try to give the European Union a high-level profile in foreign policy issues, especially in its "near abroad". The shaping of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), which includes several Middle Eastern countries, was in line with EU's ambition of taking on a more prominent role as a regional actor. As a comprehensive political arrangement, aimed at fostering economic and security cooperation and promoting cultural dialogue, the EMP attempts to reproduce to some extent the achievements resulting from the positive integration dynamics of the EU member states.

In the eyes of many EU governments, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership corresponded to their need for a stable Middle Eastern environment, favouring gradual reform processes through deeper economic integration and closer diplomatic relations. The EMP's rationale also reveals the specificity of European security priorities. Unlike the United States, EU members face the enormous challenge of managing the increasing migration flows coming from the southern and south-eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Immigration, especially from Muslim countries, has a strong impact on European societies' perceptions. It feeds widespread anxiety about possible negative effects on jobs, crime, 'cultural identity', etc. Instability in the Middle East has greater implications in Europe than in the United States, because it not only impacts on foreign policy objectives, but directly involves domestic issues, which are crucial for creating political consent for governments in power. The EMP was also aimed at preventing an uncontrolled flow of migrants from flooding into the EU.

Favouring the status quo in the Middle East for security reasons, Europe fears that the US's transformation into a revolutionary force will increase risks of spill-over effects. Above all, Europeans fear the infiltration of terrorist cells in their large Muslim communities. Therefore, even among those countries which joined the 2003 US intervention in Iraq, regime change policies are not generally favoured.

The EU approach toward Iran's proliferation crisis exemplifies this moderate attitude. For the European negotiators, Britain included, the main goal is to avoid the spread of nuclear weapons in so critical a region as the Middle East. If the Europeans were able to offer what Iran desperately seeks, that is, a security assurance, the proliferation crisis would already be over. In their view, regime change, though desirable, is not a rational option in the current context. The United States, on the contrary, has publicly confirmed that the option of regime change in Iran is "on the table", as President Bush stated last February during his visit to Europe.

In the end, the United States and European countries have converging energy interests and diverging security priorities in the broader Middle East region.

Europe's scramble for oil is theoretically in competition with American needs, but the EU does not exert a political influence able to contend with that of the US. Alignment with US priorities on energy matters is by far the best option for the majority of EU countries. This dependence on American political influence has to be taken into account in considering European policies toward the Middle East and the Gulf region. It affects Europe's compactness because some European countries have a larger stake in the system of supplying oil than others and have no strategic interest in reducing cooperation with US government and firms in the energy field.

This structural weakness prevents the Europeans from defining their specific priorities in the Middle East, which partly differ from those of the US. This ambiguity made it easier for some EU governments to join the US-led invasion of Iraq: in fact, the strategic question that they had to answer regarded their relationship with the US, and not their priorities in the Middle East.

The European Union's failure to implement its policies toward the Middle East and North Africa effectively also contributed to the divisions that occurred over Iraq. In the past ten years, Europeans succeeded in underlining the differences between their initiatives toward the Middle East and those promoted by the US. So, for instance, while the US administration tried to mend fences with France, Germany and the Arab countries in 2004 by

launching the Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI), a multi-level cooperation offer resembling the EMP in its goals and concept, Europeans emphasised the EMP's specificity as a European initiative. At that time, the EU was also developing its new European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which is meant to enhance bilateral relations) in order to achieve the EMP's goals. In addition, given that neither the EMP nor the ENP covers the Gulf region, France and Germany pushed to establish a Strategic Partnership for the Mediterranean and the Middle East for the countries of the area, Iraq included.

The GMEI has in the meantime been diluted into a much more indefinite and highly rhetorical "Broader Middle East and North Africa" initiative. The Europeans had a point in marking their differences from the US: after the division in the EU over Iraq, Europeans had to stress their autonomy to uphold their diplomatic position in cases like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or Iran's proliferation crisis. Despite this diplomatic success, however, the European Union's efforts to assume a high-level profile are likely to prove pure rhetoric unless it obtains some positive, concrete results. The EMP is widely seen as a half-failure, and few expect a better outcome from the ENP. The Strategic Partnership for the Mediterranean and the Middle East is at best ambiguous. European assistance may be decisive for the Palestinian Authority's survival, but does not make the European stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict incisive. Finally, the only way Europeans can solve Iran's proliferation crisis is by involving the US in the talks, which seems improbable (though not impossible).

Assuming that the invoked 'democratisation' of the Middle East can only take place if there is an endogenous 'democratic' actor, it would be better to have two distinct global interlocutors than only the US. Such a trilateral relationship would reduce the probability of any Middle Eastern political actor defining itself in purely pro- or anti-American terms and enable that actor to represent broader interests. To the extent that conflicts break out because of incompatibility between different interests, broader representation could reduce the need to resort to violence. Furthermore, the EU prefers to be a cooperative partner rather than replace the Soviet Union as a global rival of the US. The mechanism of exploiting rivalries, which plays an important role in producing political and social acrimony, would be limited to secondary issues.

In the end, it would be an important step forward if European countries were able to clarify their strategic interests and develop a consistent strategy, independent of - even if not opposed to - that of the United States. The probability of this occurring is rather minimal. After the 1956 Suez crisis, no European country has been able to exert decisive political leverage on the Middle East equilibrium, nor has the European Union as a whole proven successful in achieving its envisaged regional goals. Given the prominence of the United States in the area, EU member states have to frame their Middle East strategies as a part of their US strategy. As a result, there is no real transatlantic strategy for the Middle East. What there is, is a transatlantic set of initiatives set by US strategy - a very weak instrument with which to prevent the outbreak of conflict. ■

About ConflictINFOCUS:

Conflict In Focus is a bi-monthly online bulletin designed to provide busy readers in the EMP policy community and interested general public with a concise and regular update on the current state-of-affairs of the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict in the Middle East. Conflict in Focus is compiled by RCCP/IAI, drawing on multiple sources including the resources of our software (CCP).

Conflict in Focus alerts readers to situations where, in the near future, there is a particular risk of new or significantly escalated conflict. In specific, the newsletter is divided into three sections. The first section includes accounts of and comments on EU developments and policies during the previous two months in the field of conflict prevention.

In its second section, Conflict in Focus summarizes recent developments in a conflict analysis perspective, using our CCP model of analysis, where the overall situation in each case has significantly deteriorated.

The third and final section aims at providing experts and researchers from the Partnership with a forum for common work and collaboration. Toward this end, the newsletter will host, in each issue, two short articles, one by a European scholar and the other by a Middle Eastern one on conflict prevention in the Middle East, with the final aim of provoking a debate on such sensitive subject.

We welcome your feedback at info@rccp-jid.org