MALTA’S FOREIGN POLICY AND EUROPEAN UNION MEMBERSHIP

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European Union membership has certainly resulted in a qualitative change in Malta’s foreign policy objectives. Among other issues, Malta has had to ensure that it is not perceived by other non-member Mediterranean states as supporting common European foreign and security initiatives too enthusiastically.

The inclusion of another Mediterranean country into the EU however also offers Malta the possibility of ensuring that Mediterranean security initiatives gain more prominence within the framework of the EU’s evolving common foreign and security policy. As part of Europe, Malta is well placed to actively promote the notion of Mediterranean solidarity. This in fact has become the hallmark of Malta’s domestic and foreign policy in the post-Cold War world.

As a place of stability and political neutrality in the centre of the Mediterranean, Malta is ideally located to offer political and economic opportunities that will enhance sub-regional co-operation in its immediate vicinity.

Given the very close relations that exist between Malta and Libya and Malta and Tunisia, Malta’s foreign policy towards Libya and Tunisia has focused on enhancing existing political and economic ties so as to provide mutually beneficial returns to all the countries concerned.

This analysis will identify the following important foreign policy strategic objectives for Malta in a post EU membership context:

- First, what are the nation’s primary foreign policy goals as a member of the European Union?

- Second, what main foreign policy achievements have been registered since accession to the European Union?

- Third, what foreign policy strategy should be pursued to maximise further Malta’s foreign policy interests in the next ten to twenty years?

Since the end of the Cold War, Malta’s external relations have become more determined by its geo-political and geographical dimensions. The heart of Malta’s foreign policy agenda has centred on ensuring that its foreign policy is adapted to the more fluid and global international system of states. Malta’s membership of the EU and its commitment to participate in a common foreign and security policy within the framework of the European Union is not an abandonment of its Mediterranean security dimension but an extension of this philosophy.

Malta’s challenge in contemporary international relations is to integrate itself into the global political economy. When all the rhetoric surrounding European Union membership is done away with this is what becoming a member of the EU is all about. EU membership is a vehicle through which Malta can harness the opportunities that the process of regional integration offers.

The fluid nature of international relations since the end of the Cold War has resulted in a significant change in the diffusion of power throughout the international system. The Cold War bipolar system of states has been replaced by a more flexible pattern of relationships, with the only superpower, the United States of America, adopting a selective engagement foreign policy approach.

Throughout the first two decades of the post-Cold War era relations across the Euro-Mediterranean area have shifted from a co-operative dominant type of trend to more indifferent relationships within and between the sub-regions of the Mediterranean. The collapse of the Middle East Peace Process towards the end of the millennium cast a dark shadow over Euro-Mediterranean relations in general and resulted in a perceptual divide gradually taking shape across cultural lines.
What impact will this tension and clash between different actors in international relations have on the future international context within which regional relations take place? What consequences will the current wave of fluctuations have on the state system? Will the end of the east-west divide give way to a north-south divide? Will regional fault-lines separating different cultures and civilisations become a permanent feature of the emerging geo-political landscape?

The answers to the above questions will determine the nature of Euro-Mediterranean relations in the twenty-first century. Although it is too early to identify the contours of the international system, and by extension regional relations, that are emerging, it is clear that a reordering of the international system is taking place. It is also clear that those countries that seize the opportunities that are unfolding and navigate accordingly will be the winners in the system that emerges. The countries that do not act decisively will fall further behind and could become failed states in the not too distant future.¹

Every country’s challenge is to ensure that its foreign policy goals are consistent with its internal policies. The effects of a country’s internal and external policies must aim in the same direction. This is especially the case in the rapidly changing contemporary security environment. Mobilising and deploying a country’s diplomatic resources on a consistent basis is essential if improving coherence between internal and external security is to be achieved.

Given the rapid sea-change underway in international relations where does this leave the Mediterranean island of Malta? Which strategic foreign policy vision is Malta currently implementing to maximise its national interests? In the new world order that is emerging it is likely that failure to take action in one direction or another will result in someone else or circumstance designing your future for you. Given the direct bearing that foreign policy has on domestic policy, mapping out and implementing a strategic foreign policy agenda is Malta’s current main challenge, particularly as a member of the European Union.

At the start of the twenty-first century this is the scenario that Malta finds itself in. Membership of the EU in 2004 must be regarded as a defining moment in Malta’s history as the decision to join the European Union will determine Malta’s future domestic and foreign policies for decades to come.²

Malta’s track record since becoming independent has illustrated its ability to contribute to security initiatives in the Euro-Mediterranean area. As a member of the United Nations and the OSCE, Malta has confirmed its competence to contribute constructively to the international security debate. Malta has also been playing a proactive diplomatic role in the Euro-Mediterranean Process since it was launched in Barcelona in 1995. In addition to hosting the second Euro-Mediterranean ministerial meeting in April 1997, Malta is also actively promoting the idea of a Charter for Peace and Stability for the Mediterranean.

This foreign policy agenda is best regarded as a continuation of the constant support Malta has given to a succession of trans-Mediterranean security initiatives over the years. As an advocate of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in the Mediterranean (CSCM), a proponent of a Council of the Mediterranean and a member of the Mediterranean Forum, Malta has certified its continued effort to stabilise relations in the Mediterranean.³

By adopting a ‘Euro-Med’ balanced foreign policy agenda, Malta has found a way of maximising its position in international relations. The drive to become an EU member state serves as a new incentive to adapt to the rapidly changing international system. As an EU member state Malta is aligning its economy with the EU aquis, including those of economic and monetary union. The main aim of this exercise is to anchor Malta to the political stability and economic affluence that the EU offers.

As an EU member state Malta joined the other EU neutrals (Austria, Finland, Sweden and Ireland) that were already playing a constructive role in the evolution of the CFSP. Since the end of the Cold War Malta has been executing a foreign policy that can be best described as that of an active neutral. Given the fundamental shift in international relations with the fall of the Berlin Wall, Malta has been playing a much more active regional and global role than in the past. This has included participating in the debate on the Future of Europe and continuing to champion Mediterranean issues of concern.

In the first five years of EU membership Malta has been executing the provisions of the CFSP in such a manner that it is complementing the co-operative security role Malta was already playing as a member of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership process. Malta’s neutrality is location-specific in that it prohibits Malta from hosting operations of a military nature. If Malta is to entertain the notion of participating in a more elaborate European defence policy that to date does not exist, it would have to seek amendments to its constitution. Given its geo-strategic location and geo-political credentials, Malta has also convincingly been claiming that its trans-Mediterranean security relations are conducive to the EU’s long-term objective of integrating further the European, North African and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

**Voicing Regional and Global Affairs**

Since becoming a member of the European Union Malta has continued to implement a foreign policy strategy at both a global and regional level that focuses on raising awareness of the main security challenges in the Mediterranean area. The principal strategy adopted has been that of amplifying Malta’s voice at a regional and global level by articulating clearly defined Euro-Mediterranean concerns.

As a member of the European Union, Malta has systematically navigated through the evolving Euro-Mediterranean international relations climate in such a manner that Malta’s interests and those of the region have been sought. Malta’s active bilateral and multilateral diplomacy has continued to build on the objective of contributing to peace and prosperity across the Euro-Mediterranean area. Malta’s participation in numerous international organizations with a focus on Euro-Mediterranean relations has continued to highlight Malta’s region state credentials, namely that of an actor that champions its region’s interests on the global stage.

During Malta’s Presidency of the Five Plus Five in 2005 a specific effort was made to further strengthen southern European relations with our counterparts in the Maghreb, namely Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania. This sub-regional Mediterranean initiative is already achieving tangible results with the Five Plus Five members focusing more specifically on such issues as illegal immigration in 2006.

During meetings throughout 2005 that focused on the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership’s 10th anniversary, Malta contributed to the formulation of the Five Year Work programme (2006-2010) that was agreed upon at the summit in Barcelona at the end of November 2005. Malta also put forward a specific proposal on sustainable development in the Mediterranean with a focus on the maritime dimension

Throughout the first five years of EU membership Malta has also implemented a consistent and continuous campaign to raise awareness of the plight of illegal immigration at an international level. During a keynote address by the Foreign Minister at the UN General Assembly in 2005, during interventions at the EU General Affairs and External Relations Council of Ministers, and during meetings with counterparts in capitals throughout Europe and the Mediterranean, Malta has succeeded in focusing the international limelight on the issue of human trafficking. As a result, tentative steps have already been taken by the international community to start addressing the issue of illegal immigration in a more serious manner to avoid the further development of a humanitarian catastrophe, including the EU’s adoption of the Migration Pact in 2008.

The CHOGM summit in November 2005 not only generated international headlines but demonstrated Malta’s good neighbourly credentials by being able to create a conducive environment where international issues such as those concerning the Millennium Development Goals of Trade and Development could be discussed.
Malta’s foreign policy agenda has been further strengthened by the extremely effective and active role that the Standing Parliamentary Committee on Foreign and European Affairs has been providing on a regular basis. In addition, Malta’s five MEPs in Brussels and Malta’s Permanent Mission in Brussels have been providing a sterling service to Malta since membership of the EU enabled us to take advantage of this avenue of international diplomacy.

Having succeeded in implementing such a successful foreign policy agenda, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is aware that maintaining a premier league status at an international level in post-Cold war relations will require a clearly defined strategic road map that will serve as a framework for further maximizing opportunities at a regional and global level that is essential to further peace and prosperity across the Euro-Mediterranean region. Publication of the Strategic Objectives document in February 2006 spelt out Malta’s foreign policy agenda and further strengthened Malta’s region state foreign policy credentials.4

Since joining the European Union five years ago Malta has consistently demonstrated the enhanced geopolitical clout it brings to international relations by promoting stability in the Mediterranean and peace in the Middle East. As an active and ardent proponent of peace in the Middle East, Malta has long been a supporter of a two-state solution to the Middle East conflict between Israel and Palestine. As an EU member and thus party to the Quartet (European Union, United States, United Nations, Russia) that supports the Middle East Road Map peace proposal, Malta is continuously seeking to advance the quest for peace in the Middle East through its foreign policy agenda.

Malta continued to be an active proponent of peace in the Middle East seeking a solution of two viable and contiguous states living side by side in peace and security in full respect of international law. Malta has also consistently emphasized the importance for the democratic process in the Middle East to proceed despite difficulties, including elections in Palestine, and is seeking to further strengthen its expertise in the field of election monitoring.

The fluid nature of contemporary international relations in the Middle East certainly offers the European Union an opportunity to upgrade its influence in this geo-strategically proximate region. Malta has regularly insisted that the EU must spearhead the Middle East peace initiative and adopt an avant-garde policy in the Middle East together with the United States if progress in peace talks is to be registered any time soon. The European Union must also formulate an external affairs strategy towards the Middle East that does not appear to be duplicating Washington’s endeavours to broker a peace settlement in the region. Failure to adopt such a policy will only result in a wastage of already scarce resources and could also lead to a situation where the European involvement in the Middle East is regarded more through a competitive lens than a complementary one.

Only by creating an atmosphere that is conducive to peace in the Middle East can constructive steps be taken towards settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By contributing to the creation of such a context Malta is seeking to facilitate the task of moving towards implementing final status resolution to the conflict. In the months ahead further acts of decisive diplomacy by the international community will hopefully follow in the Middle East so that the seeds of a permanent peace settlement are sown in the region.

The time has come for the European Union to do more than simply accept its subordinate role in the region – it is a major economic player in the Middle East and should seek to play as important a political role. Given the direct bearing that Middle East regional relations are already having on the evolution of the Euro-Mediterranean co-operation, it certainly seems a logical course of action for the Europeans to consider at the start of the twenty-first century.

Malta’s decisive foreign policy towards the Middle East through its bilateral and multilateral channels of diplomacy must thus be seen as an effort to secure peace in the region. Since the start of November 2004, a window of opportunity has started to open in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as regional dynamics in this part of the world experience a profound change. Malta believes that all interested parties in the Middle East should take advantage of this opportunity by strengthening efforts of the Quartet to achieve the objective of

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4 Strategic Objectives of Malta’s Foreign Policy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Valletta, February 2006.
the creation of a democratic Palestinian state living in peace and security with Israel. It is only by working together through Euro-Mediterranean diplomatic initiatives such as the Barcelona Process, the Five plus Five Forum, and the EU’s Neighbourhood Policy, that a permanent settlement to the Middle East conflict will be achieved.

**Malta’s Main Security Concern: Illegal Migration**

As sources of insecurity across the Euro-Mediterranean area, and indeed, the international community continue to increase, Malta believes it seems more logical for all Euro-Mediterranean countries to dedicate their diplomatic resources to defining a set of practical confidence building measures that would create the necessary atmosphere within which a more elaborate mechanism, such as a security charter can be fleshed out. Malta is prepared to play an important role in such a strategy by offering its good neighbourly offices to the other EMP members.

When it comes to the direct tangible endeavours that the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership should seek to realise in the short term, the thirty-five partner countries and observer states such as Libya, should introduce a basic type of confidence building measure network that will enable them to manage and contain the large number of security challenges that risk upsetting stability across the Euro-Med area. The long list of “soft” security issues that could derail peaceful relations across the Mediterranean includes illegal migration, maritime safety, environmental pollution, and narcotics trafficking.

In the past few years a dramatic increase of illegal immigration activity across the Mediterranean has taken place. All indicators point towards a future of even more migratory flows from north to south in the decade ahead. Such an increase in human trafficking is already having a major negative impact on the countries of origin, transit and destination of such activity.

Located in the centre of the Mediterranean, Malta finds itself in the precarious position of largely being a country of transit in the ever-increasing flow of human beings moving from the southern shores of the Mediterranean to Europe. Illegal migrants are arriving on the shores of Malta on practically a daily basis placing an incredible strain on the security resources at our disposal.

Realising that such a dramatic increase in illegal immigration is quickly becoming a major source of instability in international relations, Malta is implementing a comprehensive foreign policy strategy to raise awareness of this humanitarian catastrophe. Unless the international community takes the necessary action to deal more effectively with this new form of human slavery that dominates contemporary Euro-Mediterranean relations, millions of lives risk being uprooted by this type of flourishing organised crime.

During its first five years of EU membership Malta has continuously appealed to European Union counterparts to provide more aid and understanding in light of the particular difficulties Malta is facing with regards the issue of illegal immigration.

Malta’s enhanced foreign policy strategy concerning illegal immigration is evident from the 17 point document that Malta’s Foreign Minister, Dr. Michael Frendo, presented to all EU ambassadors accredited to Malta in early July 2005. The detailed document illustrates clearly the “unique and critical dimension faced by Malta in dealing with the phenomenon of illegal immigration” given that Malta is the smallest and most densely populated country in the EU and the second most densely populated country in the world.

The policy document also highlights the current severe strains that the arrival of as many as eight thousand illegal migrants since 2002 is having on Malta’s health, employment and social services, and its internal security and public order. The document also makes it perfectly clear that Malta has been one of the most generous, just and humane actors in this regard, accepting the highest rate of refugee and protected humanitarian status illegal immigrants in the entire EU.

Looking ahead, Malta believes that in accordance with the principles of solidarity and burden sharing which lie at the heart of the EU, a more concerted effort needs to take place by Euro-Mediterranean countries to manage the growing threat of human trafficking. As part of its awareness campaign Malta has put forward a number of specific recommendations of action to start addressing this issue in a more constructive manner.
These include support for repatriation in those cases which have been rejected by Malta’s Commissioner or Refugees through the sharing in arrangements to return illegal immigrants to their countries of origin, support in the resettlement of those who have been given asylum or protected humanitarian status, and assistance to provide adequate logistical and other facilities for the reception and efficient administration of illegal immigrants. Malta also supports strengthening cooperation in maritime security through an enhanced naval presence along the EU’s southern borders.

When it comes to maritime safety in the Mediterranean at the moment there are no elaborate security mechanisms to contend with security crises such as an accidental collision at sea between transport tankers crossing through the Straits of Sicily, or the alarming rate of degradation which is currently taking place in the environmental sector. One must also mention the proliferation of drug consignments which are reaching ever deeper into the civil societies of the Mediterranean which together with the accentuation of illegal migratory flows from south to north risks destabilising the legal structures of the state. Given Malta’s geographical location in the centre of the Mediterranean, it is in Malta’s interest to promote security initiatives that seek to manage such security risks so as to prevent such from escalating.

Creating a Euro-Mediterranean economic area of shared prosperity is an ambitious objective given the fact that the average income per capita in Europe is currently about ten times the average income per head in the Mediterranean partner countries. Halving this income gap will take more than forty years even under an optimistic scenario of an annual per capita growth performance of five per cent in the Mediterranean and a modest one per cent in Europe. Achieving higher growth rates, especially in view of unemployment rates typically between twenty and twenty-five per cent in many Mediterranean partner states, is therefore a condition sine qua non.

By enhancing Euro-Mediterranean channels of communication through its role as a facilitator, Malta can help to eliminate Euro-Mediterranean misperceptions and assist in fostering closer co-operation at all levels. Given its geographical proximity to so many European and Mediterranean countries it is in Malta’s national interest to continue to advocate closer relations between the Euro-Mediterranean countries.

Malta’s cross-cultural Euro-Mediterranean credentials are also an asset which equips it with the necessary diplomatic resources to effectively contribute to efforts which seek to remove the misperceptions and prejudice which still exist in the region. Unless the principles of respect and understanding are further developed and allowed to evolve, the Euro-Mediterranean process is likely to prove difficult to sustain in the long-term.

Malta’s foreign policy priority of promoting a more enhanced structured dialogue between the European Union and the League of Arab States and its member states is essential if closer Euro-Arab relations in the age of global instantaneous information is to be achieved. The Euro-Arab League summit in February 2008 in Malta set the stage for such a process to develop in earnest. The decision to establish an EU-Arab League Liaison Office in Malta in 2008 offers the opportunity to further strengthen Euro-Arab relations.

A better structured EU/Arab political dialogue must focus on building confidence and trust and take advantage of advanced technology to transmit such positive messages instead of the regular flow of negative political messages.

Given the diversity of opinions in the League of Arab States any effort at engaging this regional organisation must focus on adopting an à la carte strategy. Thus the EU should identify and select those Arab League member states who are most willing and able to cooperate and use the EU as a catalyst for their own reform efforts.

Future Euro-Med programmes need to ensure that people to people interaction is at the forefront, especially young people. It is essential that a much larger number of students from the Arab world are given the opportunity to study at EU universities. The Bologna process must be made functional to them. The same goes for joint EU Arab research projects. The EU must introduce a package of programmes that seeks to tap into the wealth of intelligence in the region via scholarships and seminars.
The educational field is a sector where much more needs to be done. The European Commission together with its Member States needs to trigger both public and private stakeholders to work hand in hand with a long-term perspective to attract a larger number of Arab students to their shores. This will of course require an updating of procedures for visas, making them free of charge for such a category of professionals.

Last but not least, an enhanced Euro-Arab dialogue needs to focus much more seriously on climate policy. So far very little attention has been dedicated to this issue in the Mediterranean. Malta is well positioned to take the initiative for staging an international conference, perhaps through the European Council for Renewable Energies (EREC).

At the start of a new millennium Malta finds itself functioning in an interdependent world. The challenge that lies ahead is to navigate through this complex web of relations in such a way as to preserve Malta’s independence and maintain its impressive post-independence rate of economic growth. Institutionalising and thus regulating existing international links is certainly a positive way of achieving this goal. The more Malta is able to voice its national, regional, and international concerns at a multilateral level of diplomacy, the more Malta will be able to safeguard its interests. This is the new stage of international relations that the post-Cold War system has unleashed.

Just as Malta had to cope with its new spectrum of responsibilities as an independent state after 1964, and had to navigate through superpower relations in the Cold War, the task now is to select those avenues that will best serve its national, regional and international interests. The fluid nature of post-Cold War international relations and the erratic nature of international relations in the Mediterranean provide Malta with a scenario that is full of pitfalls and opportunities. Identifying foreign policy options that will allow Malta to improve and sustain its domestic prosperity will require adopting a well thought out strategy that focuses on Malta playing on its European and Mediterranean comparative advantages. Malta’s track record during the first five years of EU membership demonstrates that Malta is successfully implementing a strategic agenda that seeks to promote more politically cooperative and economically prosperous relations across the Euro-Mediterranean area.