

## Malta

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To date no analysis of Malta's Strategic Culture has appeared in the academic literature, so that this chapter is a case of exploring uncharted waters. By taking a small state perspective, it may serve as a contribution to a neglected and understudied segment of the literature on strategic culture which mainly focuses on large states and big powers. This neglect of small states is understandable, given that they can hardly be considered as significant "movers and shakers" of the international system, unless their actions entangle larger powers in their conflicts or ambitions. At the same time, small states have been growing in importance and in number. In the contemporary global processes of regionalism and alliance-building small states matter a lot.

Indeed, without entering the complicated maze of how to define a small state and using a quantitative definition applied by the British Commonwealth Secretariat, designating as small states those with a population of less than 1.5 million, we find that four EU member states (Malta, Luxembourg, Cyprus, Estonia) out of 27 easily fit into this category. In the case of Malta, its strategic culture is heavily influenced by its neutral status which was entrenched in the Constitution in 1987 and plays a central role in Maltese foreign and security policy. The relevant constitutional provision reads (in abridged form): "Malta is a neutral state actively pursuing peace, security and social progress among all nations by adhering to a policy of non-alignment and refusing to participate in any military alliance. Such a status will, in particular, imply that: (a) no foreign military base will be permitted on Maltese territory; (b) no military facilities in Malta will be allowed to be used by any foreign forces except at the request of the Government of Malta, and only in the following cases: (i) in the exercise of the inherent right of self-defence [...]; or (ii) whenever there exists a threat to the sovereignty, independence, neutrality, unity or territorial integrity of [...] Malta; [...]; (e) the shipyards of the Republic of Malta will be used for civil commercial purposes, but may also be used, within reasonable limits of time and quantity, for the repair of military vessels which have been put in a state of non-combat or for the construction of vessels; and in accordance with the principles of non-alignment the said shipyards will be denied to the military vessels of the two superpowers." (Constitution of Malta: Chapter 1, Article 1 [3])

Nowadays, there is cross-party agreement that the definition of neutrality in the Maltese Constitution needs to be revised in order to better reflect present day realities. Yet, until now, the political parties have been unable to propose, let alone enact any changes and the debate on the need to amend the

Constitution surfaces from time to time and then fizzles out just as suddenly as it starts.

Generally, Malta's strategic culture cannot be fully understood without reference to the domestic political context and the main political parties which have helped to shape it. The world view of these political parties is moulded by a mixture of historic facts and myths linked to the island's history, insularity and geographic position at the centre of the Mediterranean between the southern shores of continental Europe and the North African coast. The dominant Historic myths which colour the Maltese self-perception include the arrival of Christianity in 60 AD brought by the Apostle Paul; the "deliverance" of the islands from the Arabs by a band of Norman adventurers in 1090 (depicted as a return to Christianity after 200 years of Arab Muslim rule); the repulsion of the Ottoman attempt to seize the islands in the Great Siege of 1565, and the successful resistance to the Italo-German aerial bombardments of World War II (WWII), for which the islands were awarded the George Cross which is inscribed on the national flag.<sup>1</sup> In popular mythology, WWII is depicted as the "second great siege". Both sieges are commemorated on the 8 September. The historical narrative provides a sense of "a capacity to overcome against great odds", but successive foreign occupations to which Malta has been subjected, instils a sense of vulnerability. This perhaps explains why, in fact, in the security domain, the Maltese want to be masters of their own defence but at the same time believe that they can only achieve security with the help of others.

## Level of Ambition

Consisting of three inhabited islands with a total population of 420,000, a land area of 316 km<sup>2</sup>, and surrounded by much more powerful neighbours, Malta's self-perception is one of vulnerability – but without a sense of resignation. Malta has instead actively pursued policies to address this vulnerability and strengthen its resilience in three inter-dependent ways: self-help, reliance on outside powers and the energetic pursuit of multilateralism. Since independence from Britain in 1964, Malta has neither been indifferent to international security issues, nor has it pretended to be a world leader. On occasions it has also shown a readiness to forestall future security threats. It has focused its attention on its immediate surroundings, the Mediterranean region. Last but not least, it has adopted a broad meaning of security which, besides the more traditional concerns of defending its territorial integrity and

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1 The George Cross is the highest UK Civil decoration. It is included in the Maltese flag by virtue of Article 3 of the Maltese Constitution.

sovereignty, also looks at the newer challenges such as terrorism, climate change and irregular migration. When Malta acquired statehood in 1964, it also had to assume responsibility for its own territory, including its territorial sea which at around 3,000 km<sup>2</sup> is roughly 10 times the islands' land area, and the Exclusive Fishing Zone (EFZ) which was declared in 1971 in accordance with the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea and which was the first of its kind in the Mediterranean region (Laws of Malta 1971). This is an area around Malta measured at 25 nautical miles from the coastal base lines. In addition, Malta is responsible for a Search and Rescue Area (SAR) of the size of the United Kingdom, which stretches from the coasts of Tunisia to Crete. It is a relic of its colonial past and nowadays a cause of friction with Italy over responsibility for irregular immigrants located or rescued within it. Italy has been pressurizing Malta to relinquish large parts of it, though, for reasons of national pride, Malta has resisted this.

The *Strategic Objectives* published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reveal little information on the concrete Maltese security objectives, apart from a few familiar statements that have survived intact with varying intensity throughout the post-independence period, namely that European and Mediterranean security are firmly connected, that the United Nations Organisation and its institutions and agencies must be the foundation of world peace and stability and that effective multilateralism, sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council, is necessary to ensure legitimisation of international action and the coordination of efforts towards peace, prosperity and stability in the world today (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012). However, the Strategic Objectives place particular emphasis on the Malta's EU membership on the grounds that this increases the island's international relevance. In fact, the underlying assumption seems to be that Malta's foreign policy ought to seek ways and means of operating through the EU structures, aims and objectives. It is further stated that: "[A]s a small country and a historic meeting place for reconciliation and dialogue, Malta seeks to project the European Union's friendly face towards its neighbours to the South of the Mediterranean. Inversely, as a country with a closeness and understanding of its southern neighbours and the Arab World, Malta seeks to be a trusted interlocutor, and a voice sensitive to their realities within the European Union. In the context of the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy Malta's characteristics are particularly valuable to enhance understanding and stability in a region that remains potentially turbulent." (ibid.)

The strategic aims of the Armed Force of Malta (AFM) are even less revealing. Apart from defending Malta's territorial integrity, including the airspace even though it has no fighter aircraft, the AFM's main priorities are stated in very general terms as combating terrorism, fighting illicit drug traf-

ficking, conducting anti-illegal immigrant and anti-illegal fishing operations, operating Search and Rescue (SAR) services, and physical/electronic security/surveillance of sensitive locations.”<sup>2</sup> At the same time the AFM also provides backup support to the Malta Police Force and other Government Departments/Agencies and is prepared to intervene in national emergencies such as natural disasters, internal security and bomb disposal. Notwithstanding these tasks as well as the new territorial responsibilities assumed on independence, and doubtlessly due to continued presence of UK military bases, Malta took some time to set up its own army. Today, the AFM consists of five major units: three land regiments, an air wing and a maritime squadron employing around 2,174 persons in 2010.

Given its small size and lack of military means, Malta’s tendency is to avoid unilateral action and to participate in multilateral initiatives. In recent history there was one instance of unilateral action by Malta which happened in 2010 when it pulled out of FRONTEX operations repulsing irregular immigration in the central Mediterranean. Malta disagreed with the rules of engagement which implied that it would have to give shelter to irregular immigrants rescued in its SAR operations. Malta always insisted that these should be taken to the nearest port of call. Malta has the highest population density in the EU estimated at around 1,272 persons per km<sup>2</sup> and has been insisting on responsibility sharing for the accommodation of the Mediterranean boat people arriving on its shores.

Malta does not say how many military personnel and assets it is ready to deploy in peacekeeping missions overseas, but since joining the EU it has done so on several occasions and figures provided by the European Defence Agency (EDA) show an increasing trend in commitments though in raw terms this remains negligible compared to the overall EU commitments. According to EDA data, in 2010, Malta’s total deployable forces amounted to 159, troops actually deployed 18 and sustainable land forces 30 (see table below).

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2 A note on the Armed Forces of Malta on the Prime Minister’s: <http://www.secure2.gov.mt/OPM/forzi-armati-malta>; last accessed 01.05.2012.

**Table 4: Malta: Deployed, Deployable and Sustainable Forces 2005–2010**

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Number of Military Personnel	1,588	2,226	2,121	2,120	2,120	2,174
Troops Deployed <sup>1</sup>	0	0	0	3	3	18
Percentage of Troops Deployed <sup>2</sup>	-	-	-	0.14	0.14	0.83
Deployable Forces <sup>3</sup>	159	149	159	159	159	159
Sustainable Forces <sup>4</sup>	30	30	30	30	30	30

Source: European Defence Agency, Defence Data Portal at <http://www.eda.europa.eu/DefenceData/>

<sup>1</sup> Average number of troops deployed throughout the year. <sup>2</sup> Average number of troops deployed as a percentage of total military personnel. <sup>3</sup> (Land) Forces troops prepared for deployed operations (NATO's 50 percent target). <sup>4</sup> (Land) Forces troops undertaking or planned for sustained operations (NATO's 10 percent target).

It is evident that the priorities of the AFM are vastly more focused on territorial defence and security than in participating in external missions. The numbers show this clearly. This is understandable given the small size of the army, its limited assets and the vast responsibilities it has, particularly guarding Maltese territorial waters or areas of responsibility against illegal activities such as terrorism, illicit trafficking in arms, drugs and migrants and illegal fishing. Increased migration in the central Mediterranean has certainly stretched the Maltese armed forces to their limits.

## Foreign Policy Orientation

Given its negligible military power, Malta has traditionally sought external military guarantees to fill the shortfall: between 1964 and 1979, it achieved this by two fundamentally different defence pacts with Britain signed respectively in 1964 and 1972. In 1971, it adopted non-alignment and then neutrality from 1979 after the closure of the UK military facilities. However, following a dispute with Libya on oil prospecting in disputed territorial waters, Malta sought and obtained treaty-based security guarantees from Italy (1980), the USSR (1981) and subsequently also from Libya (1984). The Treaty of Neutrality with Italy is still *in vigore*, while as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union the 1981 neutrality treaty reverted to the Russian Federation by mutual accord. In 1987 Malta ended the military components and secret codicils in the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed with Libya in 1984 when relations between the two countries were normalized. This Treaty was

eventually amended in 1990 bringing to an end the provisions requiring a continuous exchange of information between the two sides on military matters, and which bound Libya to supply arms and training to the Maltese armed forces. (Laws of Malta 1990) Usually, the training of AFM officers takes place in Italy, Britain and the United States while personnel involved in overseas EU missions normally train in the countries with whose personnel they are to be deployed (e.g. in the Netherlands in the case of Somalia – Atalanta).

In 1973, an Italian military mission financed by the Italian government, was established in Malta to assist in infrastructural projects and help the AFM in various military tasks, including military training. The mission's role in civilian infrastructural projects was later discontinued. From 2011 the mission became known as *La Missione Italiana di Collaborazione nel Campo della Difesa (MICCD)* and its Headquarters is based in Luqa close to the AFM's Headquarters. The Mission participates jointly with the AFM in search and rescue operations, advises the Maltese armed forces on all military matters and provides training both in Malta and in Italy. Under various Italo-Maltese protocols Italy also supplied Malta with military equipment and financial aid to acquire assets such as helicopters. (Italian Embassy 2012)

Malta has no intention of joining NATO and this was made clear when it joined the Alliance's Partnership for Peace (PfP). This is prompted by several factors: the constitutional impediment in the form of the neutrality clause and lack of support among the public and political elites alike. Historically, after the door was slammed in Malta's face in the early sixties when it put out its feelers about the possibility of joining the Alliance, the membership issue disappeared from the political radar screen. Subsequently, when Malta assumed the status of neutrality it took a pacifist approach shunning any initiative of a military nature – in addition to forbidding the stationing of foreign military forces on Maltese soil. Malta's PfP membership is itself a saga worth analysing because it shows most clearly the divisions and apprehensions that exist among political elites. Malta joined PfP in 1995, withdrew in 1996 (at the same time as it froze the EU membership application when the Labour Party was briefly in government) and rejoined in 2008. PfP membership has been politically controversial, and resurfaces from time to time in the domestic political debate notwithstanding that the political parties' positions have converged. Participation of the AFM in any collective defence and peace-enforcement operation is emphatically excluded. Membership of the PfP became important for a pragmatic reason in 2004 when Malta joined the EU – to enable it to participate fully in the Berlin Plus arrangement where Malta had everything to gain from NATO-originating security information, particularly where relevant to the situation in the Mediterranean region. While the

Nationalist Party was keen on joining, the Labour Party opposed this move tooth and nail. Turkey, which wanted to block Cyprus from participating in the programme, opposed Malta's participation as well. Only in 2008, was Malta able to rejoin the Partnership. Although party consensus has now been achieved on PfP membership, the issue remains a very sensitive and divisive one in Maltese politics.

The AFM's C-Company, a rapid reaction force which is responsible for high risk operations at home, is charged with participating in EU-led overseas missions. AFM officers are stationed in Brussels to participate in the EU military committees. Since September 2008, the AFM has been deploying two monitors to Georgia in support of EUMM Georgia. The Maltese monitors were based in Gori to monitor, together with 250 other observers from 26 of the 27 EU member states, the boundary line which separates Georgia from the breakaway region of South Ossetia. From November 2008, the AFM sent an officer to the EU's anti-piracy mission's operational headquarters in the United Kingdom. Malta also participated in Operation Atalanta by deploying a 12-man detachment to the Gulf of Aden, on board of Dutch naval vessels.

Since NATO membership remains out of the question, the dichotomy between NATO/CSDP does not arise for Malta – more than that, the EU's CFSP-CSDP seem the only route available for Malta in dealing with its security, because it opens avenues to join a "security community" that could eventually underwrite Maltese national security and help it free itself from riskier bilateral arrangements, which, much more likely, might expose Malta to the danger of falling under the hegemony of a single country again. Hence, Malta is likely to remain a supporter of CFSP and CSDP, including the participation in its structures, but unlikely to be a very keen supporter of military action outside the EU-framework and borders, unless this is specifically sanctioned by the UN Security Council or is an act of self-defence, as specified in the Maltese Constitution. Malta's participation in the Libyan crisis epitomizes this: It did not join the military campaign nor did it allow Malta's airfield to be used for military operations by NATO forces. It impounded two Libyan fighter jets which defected to Malta at the height of the crisis and held them until the crisis was over. At the same time Malta showed its readiness to participate in a proposed EU humanitarian mission to be sent to Libya after the end of the fighting, EUFOR-LIBYA, and to act as a humanitarian base for the evacuation of foreign nationals from Libya while the fighting was taking place. Malta also served as a base for sending humanitarian aid to Libya, particularly to help refugees gathered on the Libyan-Tunisian border.

Membership of the EU also gives Malta the possibility of participating in other EU policies besides the foreign, security and defence policy, such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership/Union for the Mediterranean and the Neigh-

bourhood Policy, which are intended to promote stability and security on the EU borders, particularly in the sensitive Mediterranean region. The enhanced international status that Malta has acquired as a result of EU membership strengthens its role as an interlocutor, capable of transmitting the region's concerns to the European Council and other EU institutions. Membership also strengthens Malta's role in informal security dialogues such as the "5 + 5" in the western Mediterranean.<sup>3</sup> Further, Malta's EU membership partially redresses the internal balance of the Union towards the Mediterranean.

### **Scope of Action for the Executive**

The defence portfolio is in the hands of the Prime Minister, responsible to the Cabinet. A unit dealing with defence matters has been established at the Office of the Prime Minister in Valletta, which acts as a liaison between the Prime Minister and the head of the armed forces.

Participation in CFSP/CSDP missions and the PfP encountered political resistance within Parliament, leading to some controversial decisions. For example, Malta joined EDA before the House of Representatives was informed of this step. Indeed, when the House was eventually informed on 19 July 2004, the Labour Party which is in opposition, insisted that EDA membership was not only uncalled for but went "contrary to the spirit of the Constitution and the Labour Party's policy on neutrality" (House of Representatives 2004: 1). The government pledged that it would remain vigilant for any development within the agency which could in some way compromise Malta's neutrality (*ibid.*: 4). When Malta reactivated its membership of PfP in 2008, the government used the same tactic when dealing with Parliament.

These two episodes show that parliamentary control is very weak notwithstanding that defence is occasionally debated in the House. Whichever government is in place assumes that it has the mandate to execute its political programme and to justify this by referring to the vague commitments made in its electoral manifesto. The discussion above has shown that, on "sensitive" issues involving defence and security, it is evident that parliamentary involvement often occurs only after the respective event, initially but not always within the Parliamentary Committee on EU and Foreign Affairs, which is rather weak due to the deluge of EU legislation it has to deal with. This practice in security and defence matters is contrary to the one used in the case of EU legislative proposals, the so called pipeline *acquis*, when the Com-

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3 The participating states are Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania as well as Spain, France, Italy, Portugal and Malta.



mittee usually discusses the legislation while these proposals are still under deliberation in EU Institutions.

## Willingness to Use Military Force

Maltese military expenditure is traditionally subdued, amounting to just 0.7 percent of GDP and 1.62 percent of Government spending in 2010. Therefore, throughout the years, Malta has relied on external military aid to fill the gap. For example, the Armed Forces of Malta operate two Hawker Beech King Air B200 maritime patrol aircraft costing around € 19.4 million, co-financed by the European Union's External Borders Fund. In 2009, Malta received four new in-shore patrol boats to replace older ones, operated by the AFM at a cost of € 9.3 million which were also partially financed by the EU. In 2011, the Pentagon gave \$ 4.7 million in aid in the form of boats, night-vision equipment, computers and maritime training for the AFM's personnel. The AFM's maritime squadron already operated two Protector Class patrol boats supplied by the United States under a previous military assistance programme. Following EU membership, the Maltese armed forces further benefited from EU direct financial aid to partly offset the financial burden of participation in FRONTEX operations in the central Mediterranean.<sup>4</sup>

Malta is a very reluctant supporter of the use of force in resolving political issues for many reasons: because of its neutralist, pacifist approach enshrined in the Constitution; and because as a small state with limited military resources it is aware that if military strength becomes the norm when dealing with global political issues, small states are most likely to be the losers. Add to this her historical experience displaying that war brings nothing but hardships and foreign occupation.

The Constitution does not refer to the participation of Maltese military personnel in international operations. It simply says that should the government allow the use of Malta's military facilities for any operations outside Malta, such actions must be decided by the UN Security Council. Throughout the period of its independence, Malta never participated in any military operations beyond its shores, not even in peacekeeping missions approved by the UN and it was only after EU membership that it began to participate in EU-led missions.

With regard to extremism and terrorism, Malta supports international efforts to eradicate it. However, Malta holds that defeating terrorism cannot be achieved by military means alone (although the use of force is not speci-

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4 It is estimated that since 2007 Malta received around € 50 million from FRONTEX to strengthen the AFM's capabilities.

fically excluded) given “that the root of the problem also lies in extremism and extremist organizations that have gained popular support by substituting the State where the State has been unable to provide an adequate social security safety net to its people”. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012)

## Conclusion

EU membership put an end to the uncertain politics and alliances of the previous two decades. The fall of communism soon rendered Malta’s constitutionally entrenched definition of neutrality inoperable in many ways. In the rough road to EU membership, not only was Maltese society divided on membership, but also on the interpretation of neutrality. The Labour Party depicted EU membership as a threat to neutrality, although a number of neutral countries had already joined the Union. When the membership issue was finally decided in a referendum and a general election held in 2003, and notwithstanding that the Labour Party by 2004 had to accept membership, the Labour and the Nationalist Party continued to disagree on the security and defence issues namely how far should the country participate in the EU’s CFSP/CSDP structures and whether Malta should join NATO’s PfP.

However, there has been a convergence of views of sorts between the two major parties. The Nationalists have accepted neutrality as part of the 1987 constitutional package, while stressing that that its *sui generis* definition does not prevent Malta from participating in the EU’s military structure or constrain it to remain neutral in the struggle between democracy and totalitarianism. In contrast, neutrality has political and symbolic value for the opposing Labour Party: On 31 March of each year, the closure of UK military bases is celebrated as “Freedom Day”, both as a party event and as a national public holiday, while the Nationalist Party, claims to be “the party of independence”. Meanwhile, the Labour Party has also shifted its policy on the PfP and on the EDA. Altogether, Malta’s strategic culture has shown a propensity to evolve but its central characteristic, mostly influenced by neutrality, remains in place.

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