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A NEW POLICY
FOR OLD NEIGHBOURS?

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EUROPE AND THE MEDITERRANEAN - A NEW POLICY FOR OLD NEIGHBOURS?

Joe Borg

Malta has consistently emphasised, as the cornerstone of its foreign policy, that European security and well-being is inextricably linked with the level of stability and security in the Mediterranean. Just as Europe rose to the challenge of enlargement, leading to a win-win situation of increased stability and prosperity in both present member and acceding states, so must it now seek to enter a new relationship with its Mediterranean partners that will deliver stability, security and opportunities to both EU Member States and to its Southern neighbours.

In rising to this challenge, Europe should seek to build upon the co-operative relationship that has already been nurtured between Europe and the Mediterranean, particularly in the context of the Euromed process launched in Barcelona a decade ago.

Yet while co-operative relations between the European Union and the Mediterranean partner countries have improved over the last decade, the evolution of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership has not been as rapid as many had expected or hoped when the Partnership was first launched.

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership has struggled to maintain momentum as contrasting sub-regional dynamics in the different sectors of the Mediterranean have made it a very hard task to hammer out a progressive common agenda among the twenty-seven members. Additionally, the Euromed has long had the crisis in the Middle East hanging over it like a dark cloud, taking over the agenda and souring relations between participants. This has complicated Euro-Mediterranean Partnership proceedings, sometimes to the point of paralysis.

How are the EU's relations with Mediterranean countries to be revitalised?

I would suggest that there should be a two-pronged approach, with both prongs being complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Firstly, as part of the Euromed process itself, there should be a subtle refocusing of efforts towards the sub-regional level - not at the expense of the larger Euromed process, but as part of it and in order to enrich it. Efforts should also be made to institute simple but effective confidence-building measures that will help nourish the relationship between the two sides of the Mediterranean.

Secondly, the European Neighbourhood Policy should lead to stronger bilateral relationships with the Mediterranean countries that will give them a stake in the European project and tangible benefits, thus truly creating a 'ring of friends' that is based on shared interests and values.

Let us take these two strands of policy development one by one.

In the context of a reduced present capacity to make rapid progress in the wider framework of the Euromed process - largely due to the stifling effect that the Middle East crisis has on positive development - the EU should focus more of its diplomatic attention to encouraging sub-regional co-operation, an objective that the Barcelona Declaration of November 1995 had already envisaged. Besides delivering results at the sub-regional level, this should also ensure that, when the political climate becomes more conducive towards faster development of the Euromed partnership as a whole, the groundwork has already been laid for such development to become more achievable.

Fortunately, eight years after the start of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, this importance of promoting sub-regional patterns of interaction in the Mediterranean is being recognized. The specific commitment to supporting further sub-regional cooperation that the EU made in the April 2002 Valencia Action Plan is a welcome development that will hopefully be followed by serious political and technical support for sub-regional initiatives that have once again emerged across the Mediterranean. Malta's very positive experience in the 5 + 5, or Western

Mediterranean Forum, which brings together five West European and five North African countries, is a good example of the potential there is for positive development in this regard.

This experience clearly demonstrates that progress on thorny issues - such as illegal immigration or the fight against organised crime - can sometimes be made in a smaller, more closely-knit group, when agreement is more difficult to reach in a larger forum.

The EU should also remain cognisant of the effect that EU enlargement will have on the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership as the centre of gravity is perceived to shift further east in Europe and further away from the Mediterranean. It will further tilt the numerical balance towards Europe and the east given that the EU of twenty-five members will include several eastern European countries and also two current Euro-Mediterranean partner countries, namely Malta and Cyprus. Thus the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership will shift from a balance of 15 EU member states and 12 Mediterranean partner states to one of 25 EU member states and only 10 Mediterranean partner states. Sensitivity on the part of the EU is necessary in this respect, especially since it is likely that this imbalance will grow even more distinct when a subsequent round of enlargement, envisaged for 2007, could encompass Rumania, Bulgaria and possibly Croatia. The EU's main challenge is therefore to implement an agenda that guards against such perceptions becoming a reality, and against any dilution of the European Union's commitment towards the Mediterranean.

At this stage, therefore, it makes sense for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership countries to dedicate their diplomatic resources to defining a set of practical confidence building measures that will improve the political climate and facilitate the management and containment of 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 the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership include maritime safety, environmental pollution, narcotics trafficking, and the flow of illegal migration. Malta could play an important role in such a strategy by offering its good neighbourly offices to the other Euro-Mediterranean Partnership members, which could add a sense of continuity to the process.

Let me turn now to the second of the two complementary strands of policy development that I referred to earlier.

The EU's emerging European Neighbourhood Policy provides a new framework for relations with neighbouring countries and a good basis for developing a new range of policies towards a long list of important strategic partners to the South and the East.

The proposal, which was endorsed by the European Council in June 2003, provides a useful policy paradigm within which to anchor enhanced co-operation in areas such as trade, investment, industrial and financial standards, and scientific and technological co-operation, quite independently from the question of ultimate EU membership or otherwise, and including in cases where membership, even in the long term, is not on the cards.

The overall goal of the European Neighbourhood Policy should be: to work with the partners to reduce poverty and create an area of shared prosperity and values based on free trade, deeper economic integration, intensified political and cultural relations, enhanced cross-border co-operation and shared responsibility for conflict prevention and conflict resolution; and to anchor the EU's offer of concrete benefits and preferential relations within a differentiated framework which responds to progress made by the partner countries in defined areas, in particular political and economic reform as well as in the field of JHA.

The EU's approach will therefore be based on a number of incentives that include more effective political dialogue and co-operation, intensified co-operation to prevent and combat common security threats, greater co-operation in conflict prevention and crisis management, the possibility of participating progressively in the EU's Internal Market and its regulatory structures and preferential trading relations and further market opening in accordance with WTO principles.

If the European Neighbourhood Policy is to deliver the desired results it must be built around two principles, that of inclusivity with regard to the final objective, and that of differentiation with regard to the pace to be adopted.

The Policy must seek to be inclusive both as regards its geographical reach and in terms of its content. In terms of geographical reach it must encompass - though progressing at differing paces suited to individual partners - all neighbouring states, including all North Africa and the Middle East. The removal of sanctions against Libya, and the recent re-orienting of that country's policy, creates the potential for rapid development of the EU's relations with that country. Similarly, both Israel and the Palestinian Authority should be an important focus, giving the Union stronger leverage that it may usefully use to positively affect developments in that region.

In terms of content, inclusivity implies that the ultimate goal for all partner countries, once all criteria have been satisfied, should be integration to the fullest possible degree - 'everything but institutions'. This includes participation in the Single Market, an objective that, once reached, should deliver very significant benefits for the countries involved, virtually on a par with the benefits accrued by present members of the European Economic Area.

A stake in the Internal Market by our neighbours is an important long-term objective for countries willing to take up the challenge.

The second principle - that of differentiation with regard to the pace adopted with each individual state - is just as central to the success of the venture. Full account must be taken of the specificities of each partner country and the rate of progress should be tailored to each individual case. The evolving relationship with each of Europe's neighbours should continue to reflect the extent to which we share values, the state of political and economic reform, as well as our mutual interests.

The next step in the unfolding of the European Neighbourhood Policy is the progressive drawing up of Action Plans for the partner countries. These will become key policy instruments of the EU, and should be political documents that build on existing agreements and set out clearly the over-arching strategic policy targets, common objectives, political and economic benchmarks used to evaluate progress in key areas, and timetables for their attainment. They should be concise and complemented where necessary by more detailed plans for sector-specific co-operation.

A revitalised Euromed Process in combination with the European Neighbourhood Policy - I repeat, as two complementary, mutually reinforcing, and potentially convergent policy processes – offers a real opportunity to create an enlarged area of peace and security that extends far beyond the European continent to the advantage of all.

Where does Malta stand in all of this?

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 contributed constructively to the international security debate. Malta has also been playing a proactive diplomatic role in the Euro-Mediterranean process since its launching in Barcelona in 1995.

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 an active member of the 5 + 5 and the Mediterranean Forum, Malta has been consistent and untiring in its efforts to stabilise relations in the Mediterranean.

Malta, then, is ideally placed to assist in realising the overriding objective of both the Euro-Mediterranean Process and the Mediterranean aspect of the European Neighbourhood Policy - that of increasing stability and promoting prosperity in our region.

With regard to the Euromed process it can do so through its sustained contribution in all three clusters of activity of the Euromed process: that of establishing a common area of peace and stability by institutionalising a political and security partnership; that of creating an area of shared prosperity by enhancing economic and financial interaction between Europe and the Mediterranean; and that of promoting exchanges between civil societies by developing a partnership in social, cultural, and human affairs. Malta will continue to devote considerable resources to making the Euromed Process work, and will certainly be at the forefront of those devising ways of reinvigorating the process as outlined above.

With regard to the European Neighbourhood Policy, Malta is involved at a stage when the policy is being moulded and developed. It will bring to the process a wealth of regional knowledge that will be invaluable in framing the policy, its good name in the Mediterranean as a country that has always worked to further Mediterranean interests; and an energy and engagement in the process that will - as so often is the case - be out of all proportion to our size.

The more Malta cultivates and interlinks its European and Mediterranean foreign policy dimensions, the more valuable will be its contribution towards establishing a safer and more prosperous society of states both in Europe and the Mediterranean. This is the most constructive foreign policy 'value-added' that Malta can contribute to contemporary international relations.

Nobody has a greater stake than Malta in the success of the Euromed Process and the European Neighbourhood Policy.

It is a simple, observable fact that our fortunes fluctuate with the levels of stability and security in the region. If this new phase in Euro-Mediterranean relations is to be a successful one, it will require the full commitment and active participation of all the Partner States.

The full commitment and active participation of Malta can certainly be counted on.

The Jean Monnet Seminars

The Jean Monnet Seminars are an initiative of the Jean Monnet Chair and the Malta European Studies Association. They are an intrinsic part of the fabric of European Studies development at the University of Malta, bringing together scholars in the field for the purpose of constructive debate and thinking on the main issues in European Integration. The assistance of the European Commission is gratefully acknowledged.

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