# A European Strategy for Democracy, Development and Security for the Mediterranean

## Stefano Silvestri

**Abstract**

The European Union urgently has to work out a new strategy towards the Mediterranean and the Middle East. It has to back the democratic transformations of Arab societies, but also assert the need for new cooperation in the field of security so that the inevitable changes do not produce new international crises and do not generate new threats. The EU can take advantage of a favourable situation which, however, may not last long. This is a crucial test for the Union's common foreign and security policy after Lisbon.

**Keywords**: *European Union / Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) / Mediterranean / Multilateral cooperation / 5+5 initiative / Gulf Cooperation Council*

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by Stefano Silvestri[*]

## 1. Prologue

In 2003, the war in Iraq created profound divsions among the Europeans. There was talk of 'new' and 'old' Europe and jokes circulated about the possibility of the EU ever managing to come up with a common foreign and security policy. Instead, at the end of that year, on the initiative of the High Representative, Javier Solana, the Thessaloniki European Council approved a strategic document of great political impact: "**A secure Europe in a better world**". That success paved the way for further progress on the common foreign and security policy (CFSP) and European security and defence policy (ESDP) and ultimately for the Lisbon Treaty.

The current situation brings to mind 2003. Today, Europe is again uncertain and divided. Even though the United States has not pursued the same divisive policy it did then, in reality its political message to the Arab and Islamic world has only made Europe's delay in working out a position more evident. The ability to leave the divisions behind and approve a new and profound strategic synthesis has been lacking.

## 2. The guidelines of the strategy

The problem is to devise a new European policy towards the Middle East and the Mediterranean the can support the process of democratization of the Arab countries. This means forgetting about trying to defend stability for stability sake and opening up more to the culture and politics of the region. Europe needs a new common long-term vision that combines **change and security**.

Real and full democratization of Middle Eastern and North African countries is still uncertain and a long way off, but it will require a step by step process of **modernization** of the Arab countries that will involve finding Islamic models that are compatible with it. Modernization is not a guarantee of democracy, but it is an essential prerequisite. Achieving the final objective will call for stages of economic, social and cultural transformations that have only just begun.

Nothing will be possible without an adequate rate of **economic development**, able to offer the huge numbers of young people credible prospects for growth and the

satisfaction of their needs. This will also call for a better income redistribution and greater individual and collective freedom of initiative: these will have to be among the premises for democracy and the aims of the modernization of the state.

It would be futile, however, to think that Europe can assist these transformations and give up defending stability per se if it does not deal with the problem of an adequate **overall regional security framework**, that is, unless these countries enter into a number of concrete security initiatives with the EU for the defence of reciprocal fundamental interests.

In doing so, the EU will have to accept the presence of **other actors**, external to the Mediterranean. The extent of globalization makes it imperative that political consultation be open to other powers, above all the United States, but also China and other emerging powers.

Such a **dialogue** will have to be global and multilateral, but in order to avoid criss-crossed vetoes and to take account of the varying levels of political development of the different countries, it may have to proceed bilaterally, with the countries most interested and reactive. It will in any case have to be backed by closer relations between the European Union and other multilateral entities such as the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the African Union, the Islamic Conference, etc. Important progress could also be achieved by making the 5+5 initiative more comprehensive (that is by enlarging it to Greece, Egypt and Turkey) and through closer partnership with the GCC.

## 3. Where to start: shattered illusions

The Europeans were convinced that with the end of the Cold War, the Mediterranean had become a family affair. The shared political framework of the **Euro-Mediterranean Partnership** (EMP) is a reflection of this conviction. They thought that the EMP would contribute to resolving regional conflicts, including the Arab-Israeli conflict. But they were wrong: the EMP did not achieve the expected results, while changes took place that put the Barcelona Process itself into question.

The Barcelona Process did not succeed in contributing to the resolution of the Israelo-Palestinian conflict, even if the growing perception in Europe of the threat posed by Islamic extremism brought the security objectives of the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean closer together. The countries of the south made it possible, among other things, to contain immigration towards EU countries. In return, however, the EMP's objectives of democratization were set aside, and the policy of unconditional support for the stability of the Arab regimes, however authoritarian, prevailed.

First the war in Iraq and then Iran's nuclear ambitions, combined with the unresolved situation in Afghanistan and the risk of crisis in Pakistan **shifted the attention to** the southern shores eastward, to regions in which Europe has much less influence. The massive arrival of China and the United States in Africa opened another door to the sea that is no longer *nostrum* - all the more so because China, India and Japan are among the biggest buyers of Gulf (including Iran) and African oil and gas. While the

piracy linked to the Somali crisis has reduced traffic through the Suez Channel, the traffic from the Atlantic via Morocco and the new port of Tangiers has increased enormously. Finally, French and German opposition, along with divisions over the Cyprus question, have delayed and perhaps blocked **Turkey**'s EU adhesion process for good, increasing the distance between the European Union and the Islamic world and the Middle East.

In the second half of the 2000s, the Europeans let the Barcelona Process wane and become distorted. But the stability in which they thought they could continue to live undisturbed has been overwhelmed by the dramatic and unexpected political awakening of the Arab peoples. Many European governments initially saw it as a threat. When that position became untenable, with a sudden turnaround, they embraced the revolution in Libya to the point of military engagement.

Yet, this choice merely reflects the initial confusion: it was the result of **improvisation**. It does not herald a new common European strategy (many do not agree with the intervention), but was simply an attempt to make up for previous errors with a *beau geste*.

Europe's first unitary reaction was to hold an extraordinary EU summit on March 11. It discussed a confused and underfinanced '**Partnership for democracy and shared prosperity**', which sealed the death of the old Euro-Mediterranean policy and the Union for the Mediterranean, but did not set out any clear strategic ambition. The idea seems to be to extend the bilateral approach of the Neighbourhood Policy to the Mediterranean and the Middle East, adding a dash of democratic rhetoric. If that is the case, Europe - even though it has the most to lose - is destined to be dragged along by the initiatives of others.

It is sad to think that these quasi-decisions are the outcome of the first major test of **Europe's External Action Service**, the new decision-making mechanism for foreign, security and defence policy. The crises have been dealt with through unilateral initiatives and special contact groups, shortcircuiting the European multilateral mechanism. Even in the field of security and defence, there has been uncoordinated and polemic management of the refugee and immigrant question, as well as the re-emergence of the idea of an even smaller 'directoire' on defence, mitigated (but not eliminated) only by the fact that NATO was entrusted with command of the operations in Libya.

## 4. Where are we: new coalitions and new political spaces

The crisis of the Arab regimes opens up new prospects. New governments could enjoy more legitimacy than the old regimes. The popular protests in Tunisia and Egypt have dealt a heavy blow to the idea that all opposition to the old regimes comes necessarily from radical Islamic fundamentalists. On the contrary, these mass mobilizations have been motivated by economic and social factors as well as the search for individual freedoms.

A **new class of young, educated people** exists, who are integrated into the global reality through information and communication technologies. The aspirations of these young people are of the democratic and 'western' type. Even if they follow Islam, it is a moderate and modern Islam that has nothing to do with the maximalist caricatures of terrorists and taliban (or with the closed traditionalism of the Saudis).

The killing of Osama Bin Laden marks this phase of **weakening of the Salafite terrorist movement**, which has not been able to become the real engine of change in the Arab and Islamic world. Nevertheless, various authoritarian governments, from Syria to Algeria, are still using this threat to justify the repression of civil liberties and political freedoms, offering the terrorists new material for propaganda.

Yet, these changes have also brought **risks** with them. Two should be pointed out. The first is the political evolution in Egypt and perhaps even Jordan. It could change the foreign policy of these countries, in particular with regard to Israel and the Palestinians. The second is that religious and fundamentalist political movements played a more marked role in the protests in the Mashreq. This could negatively affect the overall picture, even if the flexible and empirical approach shown by the majority of the Muslim Brothers has led them to support the democratization process to date.

The conflict in Libya has brought **new political prospects** to the fore. Among those who presented Resolution 1973 authorizing the intervention in Libya was the Lebanese government. The intervention was supported by both the GCC and the Arab League. The Gulf Cooperation Council voted in favour unanimously; in the League, only Syria and Algeria abstained. The resolution also received the support of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, thus of the Muslims in general, not only Arabs.

This is not the first time that Arab countries have participated in peace missions led by the west. But the other crises were not in Arab countries: sub-Saharan Africa, the Balkans and elsewhere. Only in the case of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991 did a large multilateral Arab-western coalition led by the United States intervene against an Arab country. But that was in reaction to the invasion of an Arab country by another Arab country, while in Libya the mission is to fight an Arab government suppressing an internal revolt: a much more sensitive political issue.

It is likely that the Arab interventionism against Qadhafi was determined by the apparently uncontrollable dynamic of the regional crises. The Arab regimes are facing **crises of legitimacy**, often but not always aggravated by serious socio-economic difficulties, which translate into a pressing demand for freedom. It is this crisis of legitimacy that pushes Arab governments to unite with the west, exactly as happened in 1991.

In 1991, the threat of internal legitimacy crises drove the Arab regimes to participate in both the coalition against Iraq and in the Madrid Conference on the Middle East. In other words, they integrated into the western sphere to avoid the domestic repercussions of their international weakening. Today, the regimes have to deal with a much more direct and serious internal legitimacy crisis. The possibility of cooperating with the west offered by the Libya intervention allows them to broaden their room for manoeuvre. In the future it will be more difficult to deny support to the regimes that are

now cooperating with the west against Qadhafi. In the same way, it will be easier for these regimes to negotiate reforms with the west. This is the basic logic behind Arab convergence with the west in this crisis.

The Arab-western coalition that has formed against Libya therefore offers a **platform for cooperation** that could serve to channel the chaotic developments underway towards agreed and sustainable solutions. For the Arab regimes, it is a matter of recovering credibility in the eyes of the west, even at the price of reforms that have been rejected until now. For western countries, on the other hand, it is a matter of coming up with reasonable solutions to the dilemmas that situations like the one in Bahrein pose.


## 5. Where to go: democratization in security

European policy has often put the dogma of 'stability' as its center. Faced with new developments, it has become obvious that it is impossible to reconcile stability with change. The modernization of Arab states and societies will inevitably pass through a phase of more or less accentuated instability. Opposing that change would mean opening up to new strategic errors and missing the opportunity to build a new relationship in the long run.

The question is whether it is possible to favour the necessary **change** while maintaining an acceptable level of **security** without incrementing the threats that worry Europe.

A **global strategy** should be directed contemporaneously at all interlocutors, none excluded. Only such a broad political and strategic approach, backed up by the necessary economic resources and a generous trade approach can ensure a primary role for the European Union in this region.

The EU should propose an open dialogue that emphasizes its interest in assisting the modernization and democratization process, to the point of pursuing **policies that discriminate positively** in favour of those countries that take the most significant steps. At the same time, a security strategy will have to be drawn up that includes items that are very different from one another:

a. the fight against nuclear **proliferation** and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, with the prospect of regional agreements on transparency, confidence building, arms control and disarmament;

b. the fight against **terrorism** and the management of complex regional crises like the one in Somalia, Yemen and the terrorist threat in the Sahara;

c. the fight against **organized crime** and its transnational networks, including piracy, drug trafficking and money laundering;

d. the problem of legal and illegal **migration**, involving control and management above and beyond simply blocking it, both bilaterally and multilaterally;

e. containment of **Iran**'s regional designs and dissuasion of its nuclear ambitions, while encouraging Iranian civil society; but also building a regional security system able to deal with problems of common interest (such as the fight against drug trafficking or Afghanistan);

f.    a return to the Arab-Israeli **peace process** and the complex Palestinian question;
g.    ensuring **energy security**, from the point of view of both continuity of oil and natural gas exports and price stability in the face of financial speculation;
h.    the **question of water** and its availability to satisfy the needs of the population and of economic development.

It is important to present these items together to give the new security strategy a sense of completeness. However, the various items can be developed sectorally afterwards, depending on the willingness of the individual countries and the opportunities that come up.

It is no longer the time for substantially Euro-centric Euro-Mediterranean policies, based on the illusion of being able to build a politically and economically homogeneous multilateral area dominated by the EU. The Mediterranean, like the Middle East and Africa, has been fully drawn into the process of globalization where the interests and presence of many other powers have also come into play. This calls for a high-profile political approach favouring a dialogue that respects regional realities. As much as possible, it would have to acknowledge the role of **regional organizations** like the Arab League, African Union or Islamic Conference, to the extent that they are willing to take part in a collaborative strategic approach.

Such a dialogue will also have to include **external powers** that have strategic interests in the area. This means, above all the United States, but also other powers that are once again showing interest in the Mediterranean or are discovering it, such as Russia, China, etc. Most of these security policies have a global dimension that can be dealt with better at the local level if the larger context is not overlooked.

There will have to be a careful balancing of **bilateral and multilateral instruments**. The temptation to play a game of crossed vetoes, as has happened in the past, will be high. As with cooperation and economic development policies, the fact that different countries will show different degrees of interest and engagement has to be accepted.

This strategy should accompany and support the initiatives both for economic and trade partnerships, as well as those backing the modernization and democratization processes in Arab states. The Commission already partly sketched this out at the European Council. Nevertheless, one cannot go without the other, the risk would be to lose credibility and diminish the overall impact.

**Turkey** will play a particularly important role as it will be the privileged interlocutor of the European strategy and must be fully involved in the policies that ensue. Equal attention will have to be given to **Israel**, so that the strategy does not appear to sacrifice that country's fundamental security needs.

## 6. Where to start: 5+5, GCC, Conference for security

If Europe wants to take up the initiative, it will have to move in both the bilateral and multilateral dimensions. While the bilateral dimension has already been set out to some extent by the proposals for reformulating the Neighbourhood Policy for the Middle

Eastern and North African countries, the multilateral dimension is lacking and weighed down by the dual failure of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean.

Instead of imagining a new regional multilateral scheme modelled on the Barcelona Process, **sub-regional initiatives** might be able to provide new energy and greater scope. They have already demonstrated their vitality and usefulness, for example, the 5+5 initiative and the EU-GCC dialogue. In the former there is the prospect of clear EU leadership, while in the latter the EU will have to adapt to the political initiatives and leadership of the United States.

The 5+5 initiative, launched in Rome in 1990 and finalized in Algiers in 1991, brings together five European countries (France, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain) and five North African countries (Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia). It was originally aimed at encouraging the integration of the Maghreb Union. It includes both a political as well as defence and security dialogue (that started up in 2004) and an interparliamentary dialogue. Suspended after 1991 because of UN sanctions against Libya, it returned to full operation in 2001. In 1994, a similar French-Egyptian initiative (the Mediterranean Forum for dialogue and cooperation) was set up. In 2010, a proposal was put forward to extend the 5+5 to Greece and Egypt and absorb the Forum into it, thus transforming it into a 6+6.

One key to the vitality of this initiative is that it has kept participation balanced between EU countries and Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries. Thus it has avoided what happened in other Euro-Mediterranean forums because of the progressive enlargement of the European Union, that is, a strong imbalance in the number of participants in favour of the European group. Along this line, one could imagine a **European reinforced cooperation among the current members of the 5+5** (or rather 6+6), plus European institutions on the one hand and the Arab League on the other.

Other enlargements should also be considered so as to include Germany, Jordan, the United Kingdom and Turkey in order to strengthen the initiative's political and security and defence dimension.

The Gulf Cooperation Council was set up in 1981 by Saudi Arabia, Bahrein, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar. The agreement to cooperate with the European Union dates back to 1990 when negotiations were opened for a free trade agreement that have never been concluded. In the meantime, however, the dialogue has deepened to include also the political, security and stability dimensions.

The time has come to conclude the free trade agreement positively and to launch a real **EU-GCC strategic partnership** with a much more explicit and strong political, security and defence dimension. In this case, too, it would be useful to include Turkey as the third participant.

Finally, an initiative should be launched that is open to all countries of the region and all interested external powers: a **Permanent Conference on Security and Cooperation**. This is where Europe could present its overall Mediterranean and Middle eastern

policy" and periodically verify bilateral and sub-regional progress with the objective, if possible, of furthering it multilaterally. This would not block any sectoral progress and would serve as a frame of reference for the overall cooperation and security reached.

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# Istituto Affari Internazionali

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