



The World in Sixty Lines

No Longer a Black Panther

EDITOR'S
NOTE
April 11,
1991

From all sides, praise has been lauded on the Israeli government for its moderation in not responding to the missile attacks with which Baghdad tried to drag the Jewish state into the war, in the hope of making it impossible for the moderate Arab states to stay in the US-led alliance. Without denying the fact that such moderation was praise-worthy—especially from the point of view of the “transnational peace party” and other “progressives”—this episode also seems to lend itself to considerations of another nature: considerations that relate to the very position of Israel in the international system.

It is no secret at all that the position of the Jewish state in the international system since the historical UN decision of 1947 had until now been quite fragile. For all the legal legitimacy that stemmed from that decision and from its recognition by a large number of countries, Israel lacked regional acceptance. Its most immediate geographical neighbours more or less openly refused its presence in the Middle East, and actually considered it as an extraneous body within the flesh of the Arab world. And even the governments that were realistic enough to bow to the force of events had to comply with extreme care, as the overwhelming majority of their respective public opinions remained not only hostile, but convinced that sooner or later the state of Israel was bound to disappear. The idea that Lebanon would be the second

Arab country to recognise Israel, and that its problem was that there was not another Arab country to be the first one, was more than just a joke, and reflected the reality that was confirmed in the semi-isolation in which Egypt found itself after Camp David, in spite of having paid for that agreement with President Sadat's life.

In this hostile regional environment, Israel found itself in a position similar to that of Napoleon's empire in Europe, when all the kingdoms and empires of the Old Continent had been obliged to bow to the military, technological and administrative supremacy of the state born of the French Revolution. The instinctive rejection of the other European nations deprived France of all the legitimacy that an endless number of treaties, coronation ceremonies and even the marriage of a daughter to the emperor of Austria were intended to secure. And indeed the Napoleonic Empire was obliged to fight war after war, and win battle after battle. But no victory could ever stabilise the situation, while a single defeat could—as in the end happened—mark the collapse of this gigantic pan-European construction. The nature of psychological refusal was such that it could not be countered by the force of weaponry.

For the present case, not only after the proclamation of the Jewish state, but indeed before this event, Israel had to fight and win battle after battle, with no victory capable of attaining acceptance by its neighbours. And indeed, as in Napoleon's case, one single defeat would have sufficed to bring about the disappearance of the Jewish state. Of this situation the Israelis were painfully aware, and this awareness was at the origin of their tendency to strike preventive wars when a serious military danger appeared on the horizon. In a way, Israel could be compared to the black panther (the wild animal and not the American political

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movement), that because of the colour of its fur, cannot escape danger just by hiding in the foliage, and is therefore obliged to attack whatever creature it considers potentially dangerous. Like the black panther, Israel was too different from its environment to take cover in a moment of danger.

Now, taking cover is exactly what Israel has done on this occasion. Targeted by Iraqi Scud missiles, Israel's reaction was in a way comparable to the dismissing attitude that Italy had when Gheddafi fired two Scuds at the Italian island of Pantelleria. Nobody was surprised that Italy did not take seriously the Libyan attack, for the obvious reason that neither Libya nor the entire Arab world could ever dream of denying the legitimacy of an Italian state. It appeared evident that Gheddafi's move was just an outburst of impotent rage following the American bombing of Tripoli.

A few years ago, had Israel been the object of a similar attack, it could not have afforded such a disdainful reaction, because the political meaning of the attack would have been more serious. If it can react with so much moderation now, it is because for the first time, an Arab attack on Israel was not an actual threat to its existence, but had all the features of one such impotent outburst of rage. Iraq was trapped in the consequences of its crazy challenge to the established world order, was clearly destined to be ground into the earth, and was desperately trying to convert the war into a traditional Arab-Israeli confrontation.

It failed. But it did not fail due to Israel's moderation alone. Actually, Israel was able to choose moderation because for the first time in memory, the psychological refusal of Israel had become of lesser significance than the level of inter-Arab hostility. The differences between Israel's interests and those of Syria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia had become small enough

to allow the Jewish state to melt into the environment. In this war, for the first time ever, Israel was no longer a black panther.

Since the end of the war, different equilibria have appeared in the region, and different relationships and alliances between the Middle Eastern countries and the rest of the world. Thus also the "Napoleonic" features of the Jewish state are vanishing. It has become part of a stable system. No longer is it constrained to be fighting eternally on the front line. Like Achilles in the Trojan War, it can afford when it so desires to retire into its tent, without its throne and its kingdom being placed in danger.

Scuds & Patriots

EDITOR'S
NOTE
March, 4
1991

"While a unified Europe may sometime in the next century act as a single power, its initial disarray and disjoined national responses to the crisis in the Persian Gulf again illustrates that 'Europe' does not qualify even as a player on the world stage". This sharp judgement, to be read in the pages of an authoritative and responsible publication such as Foreign Affairs, provides a fair idea of how, after the Gulf crisis, Europe's position in the world is perceived from the outside, and sometimes by the Europeans themselves. A cool and dispassionate evaluation of Europe's behaviour, as a single actor, during the Gulf War could hardly lead to denying that in this crisis all organised political cooperation among the Twelve proved dramatically ineffective. The EC's absence of several weeks from the political and military forefront, and its inability to shape even the slightest role for itself are clear to everyone. This is evident and indisputable.

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From long before the Gulf crisis, there have existed two schools of thought on Europe, with some observers espousing the opinion that the EC member-states will always assume autonomous stances and behaviours on the world scene, and others convinced that a new collective actor—united Europe—has foreign interests of its own, interests that in scope go beyond those of its constituent parts, and that it should be “present” and have a say on all the main regions of the international chessboard. With one sole exception, though a sizeable one (the British government, which in coincidence with the Gulf crisis has embarked in a radical correction of Mrs Thatcher’s hostility towards Europe), the two schools of thought have drawn from the events in the Gulf a lesson strictly coherent with their own convictions: the first, that the illusion of a common European stand in world affairs had definitively capsized in the Persian Gulf; the second, that the irrelevance shown in this crisis by each European country per se, proved even more evidently the urgent need to join forces.

It would be difficult not to agree with the severe judgement given by the first of these two schools of thought on Europe’s performance in the Middle East. But this is not sufficient to prove that the conclusion of the second school is wrong, i.e. that in acting on its own, each member-state could play a role of more substance and prestige. On the contrary, none of the western European countries has had, since August 2nd, any real Middle Eastern policy.

Germany, for instance, at first showed reluctance to commit itself to the line leading to a military clash, and only at the very last minute did it align itself with the coalition. Such behaviour is not difficult to explain: first in Germany’s list of priorities was—all through the Gulf crisis—the necessity of

not complicating its relations with the USSR, in a moment when the ratification of the "Four-plus-Two" treaty on German reunification was being discussed in Moscow. The main Soviet sponsor of this treaty, Gorbachev, was under heavy attack by the hard-line communists, and they had found in the Iraqi-UN clash a unique opportunity to support their argument that the Soviet President's foreign policy was a sell-out to the West.

Eventually, the firing of Shevardnadze gave them satisfaction, and probably saved the "Four-plus-Two" treaty. But there had been a very serious risk, for reunified Germany, of ending up in a legal limbo, similar to the military limbo in which it already is, being a NATO country with almost three times as many Soviet troops as American on its territory. And many Germans, unaware of, or just disregarding, the increasing irritation of the Bush Administration at the Europeans in general, were actually rather irritated with the White House for not having taken into consideration the schedule of their Soviet problem in planning Operation Desert Shield. In other words, Bonn has shown it had no direct or pre-eminent interests in the Gulf region, but rather tactical requirements and objectives subordinate to the classic goals of its foreign policy, eternally attached to Germany's unity, the security of its borders, and its relations with the Slav world.

As for Great Britain, the country which on this occasion positioned itself at the opposite end of the Community's political spectrum, there is no doubt that its political élite has given proof of strong and fast political instinct in understanding from the very beginning that Bush was going to carry his initiative to the extreme consequences, towards a head-on military collision with Irak. The British government, in appealing to its European partners to join in support of

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the US, was, however, sending clear messages that this support was necessary first of all in order to keep the Americans moored as strongly as possible to the future architecture of European security. Also the aims that John Major's Britain was pursuing through its military presence in the Gulf were therefore strictly tied to the security of the European theatre.

Whatever imperial nostalgia there might have been in sending the Queen's Desert Rats "East of Suez" again (a nostalgia that, as ever, was largely utilised for the tactical goal of strengthening domestic consensus), London did not have in the Kuwait crisis aims of its own, an autonomous line distinct from that of the US, nor one more significant than that of Europe taken as a single actor. In fact, neither Germany nor Great Britain has any real interest in the regions at the borders between the Arab and Persian world, and to an even lesser extent do they have the international power and relevance to project their influence and ambition in the various regional conflicts that the post-1989 world has inherited from the Cold War era, not even in the Middle-Eastern one, the most serious and complex of them all.

Even France, which was in the Gulf in order to prove that it still is a "puissance globale" has no other possible use of such a status, enshrined in the permanent seat at the UN Security Council except in the European framework, in order to counterbalance German economic superiority. But France, and in varying degrees the other Mediterranean EC members as well, were the only ones with permanent interests of a certain relevance in the Arab world, so that their national diplomacy could have tried to influence in favour of the coalition some countries indirectly involved in the crisis. In their case, however, failure has been even more visible, as the Maghreb countries, the Arab neighbours with which France,

Italy and Spain have the closest relationship, were among the very few ones that expressed open hostility to the UN-sponsored coalition.

In short, it is undeniable that in the Gulf crisis Europe has proved, as the Belgian Foreign Minister Mark Eyskens has cruelly said, "an economic giant, a political pygmy, and a military larva". But its collective failure is not enough to prove that, in extra-European foreign policy issues, the member-states, disregarding Community ties and acting individually, can better succeed and be more conclusive than the existing embryo of a united Europe. The comparison between the EC's short-coming performance and the hardly superior one of the European nations, allows for a more balanced and attuned judgement. European Political Cooperation did in fact resembles the likes of a Scud missile: big, fat, but in the end inconclusive. Yet the individual member-countries did not, on their own, demonstrate the effectiveness and superiority of as many little Patriots, which in a few seconds launched, identified and took out the objective. The events in the Gulf have brought into light worrying evidence of just how far off and difficult the goals of one foreign policy and a common defence still are, but what they have failed to show is an alternative direction. In particular, it has not been proven that the Nations of the Old World can find their safety—not to mention prestige and power—in purely and simply falling back on old habits from before the Second World War, on the national policies of "sacred egoism".