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Author(s): Joseph S. Roucek

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The Geopolitics of the Mediterranean, I

By JOSEPH S. ROUCEK

WHEN ONE THINKS of the Mediterranean, one thinks of Athens, Rome, Alexandria, Constantinople; of Phoenician voyages to Spain and Britain, of the lately discovered sculpture of ancient Egypt, of the temples and philosophies and colonies of Greece, of the Etruscans, Carthage and the conquests of Rome, of the incursions of Saracens and Vikings, of the Italian Renaissance; of the incredibly rich and abundant remains (and only remains) of races and cultures which have flourished for a time under the blue Mediterranean skies and then faded away, leaving behind them a heritage of intellectual, artistic and social achievement which has ever since formed the foundation of Western civilization. One thinks also of the ships of trade and of war that have traversed the waters of the Mediterranean through thirty centuries, carrying successive civilizations to remote shores, mingling races and cultures, transporting the treasures of the Orient to European ports, struggling for economic and political dominion. One thinks, finally, of the British fleet, with its main base at Malta, which for more than two centuries has held almost without interruption the command of the Mediterranean.

For the Mediterranean has been probably the most important highway in history, the route where Orient and Occident and Europe and Africa met in a commerce of goods and culture and in military rivalry. It is still a highway between East and West. For Britain it is a vital link of empire, the line of communication with Asia and the Pacific Dominions, and hence one of the chief considerations of British foreign and defense policy. It was to protect this route to the East that Britain acquired Gibraltar, the control of Suez, Malta, Cyprus, the protectorate over Egypt, the mandate over Palestine. It was for this purpose that Britain maintained there, before World War II, a fleet as great as that which guarded the British Isles.

The importance of the Mediterranean Sea and the lands which border it has been analyzed in the past in terms of the single geographical unit it comprises.

The Belgian scholar Henri Pirenne has painstakingly traced the relationship of seapower in the famous inland sea to commercial links of Europe and Asia and to the life of empires established in Rome and Con-

stantinople. Many students have charted the rise of Imperial Britain in Mediterranean terms. William Reitzel, *The Mediterranean: Its Role in America's Foreign Policy* (New York, Harcourt Brace, 1948), is a profound analysis of the importance of the Mediterranean to the United States. Reitzel's conclusions are that at this moment of history American policy is inextricably linked with British policy requirements, but that care must be taken to pursue those interests most important to America's own national interests.

It is an area where imperial interests have always met—especially in the backward Middle East and its peripheries. Britain for years sought to prevent a vacuum from forming in that turbulent region because such a vacuum would suck in another imperial power. At one time Italy was such a power. More recently it has been the Soviet Union. It is in American as well as British interests to prevent the creation of such a vacuum. This is especially true when it is realized that the Middle East represents the only land path along which the USSR could expand if it ever gained complete control of the Eurasian land mass.

There are three main aspects to the geopolitics of the Mediterranean: the historical, the economic, and the strategic. Naturally, they are hard to keep separate, for they are approaches to a single reality.¹

The Historical Geopolitical Aspects

ANYONE WHO WANTS TO KNOW about the grand strategy of the world's empires cannot do better than study closely the Mediterranean Sea. Pre-historically the Mediterranean was closed at both ends and covered all southern Europe and Asia Minor. For most of recorded time it has been open only at one end—Gibraltar, known to the ancients as the Pillars of Hercules.

The galleys of Greece sailed to the destruction of Troy. The Semitic Phoenicians brought back all the goods from the ancient world to Tyre on the Syrian coast. The armadas and armies of Alexander the Great swept the Persians off the water. The born sailors of Carthage on the North African coast fought and lost to the landlubbers of Rome. As the West grew civilized, it entered on a long, fluctuating war with the Saracens on the East. The merchant fleets of Genoa and Venice carried the Crusaders to Palestine. The Moors crossed by Gibraltar in Spain. The Portuguese invaded Africa and perished there. The Turks swarmed up the

¹ Andre Siegfried, *The Mediterranean* (New York, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1948), is a good popular survey.

Balkans to Vienna. They might have conquered all Europe had they won the little remembered Mediterranean battle of Lepanto. By the seventeenth century a nation far to the north had begun to rule the sea. The English men-of-war did not neglect the Mediterranean. But the Mediterranean did not become vital to them until the French dug the Suez Canal in 1869, opening up both ends of the great sea and offering a short cut to British India. Britain soon had both ends and the middle sewed up. At the bottleneck between Italian Sicily and French Tunisia it built up the little fortified island of Malta.

The Geo-economic Aspects

THE MEDITERRANEAN is an almost tideless sea, stretching for 2,300 miles east from Gibraltar to Syria. Its average width from north to south is 300 miles, but varies greatly. The sea can be entered or cleared only through three narrow bottlenecks—through Gibraltar and the Suez Canal, at the eastern and western ends, and through the Dardanelles or from the “blind alley” of the Black Sea, to the northeast. As a body of water, the Mediterranean is famous for the calm, mild climate, for its bright blue colors, its sponges, coral formations, and some four hundred species of fish. Its waters wash the shores of three continents—Europe, Africa and Asia.

Curiously enough, the Mediterranean and its shores have not changed greatly in comparison to northern Europe in the past 2,000 years. Heavy industry has almost passed the area; its chief products are still the corn, wine, and oil of the Bible.

Because the Mediterranean is smaller and shallower, with few fresh-water tributaries, it loses more water by evaporation and has a higher salt content than does the Atlantic, especially in the eastern basin. Currents curling through the Sicilian Channel pour salty floods into cement reservoirs along Sicily's coast. As the sea water evaporates, the salt is collected and refined in mills powered by wind.

Economically, the Mediterranean region is surprisingly poor. A splendor of historical remains, the art treasures heaped up in commercial cities, the semi-tropical luxuriance of a few gardens, create a false impression. The encircling mountains at many points reach the shore. The rainfall, where it would be sufficient, is ill distributed. Coal, iron, oil, are scarce. A teeming population is a dubious asset. If the Mediterraneans are good craftsmen, it is not certain that they are gifted as industrial workers. This lovely region is not self-supporting; it is in constant danger of becoming a pauper. At best, hard work and abstemiousness stave off outright

famine; and the sun imparts a magic to what, in Northern climes, would be squalor. Perhaps the best chance of the Mediterranean is to become, increasingly, one of the world's enchanted playgrounds. But when will the world go back to playing?

In general, the economics of the Mediterranean are based upon two principal facts: a generally poor soil and the absence of coal and iron deposits. The first requires terracing, irrigation and unremitting labor to grow the olives, grapes and fruit the climate makes possible. Recently mass production agricultural methods have been introduced in certain regions of France and North Africa, but they are still the exception. The Mediterranean peoples cannot feed themselves and must import grains and the little meat they can afford to eat.

The lack of coal and iron means no heavy industry. Business is trade and commerce, but not production. So industrial power and its corollary in the modern world, war power, are not for the Mediterranean.²

The Strategic Aspects

INTERNAL AS WELL AS INTERNATIONAL POLITICS of the Mediterranean reflect the problems of passage, since the region has always been the route to somewhere, or the string which, when pulled, showed that its other end is India, Vladivostok, the Danube, or Mosul. While half a dozen, and as many small States are interested in the sea, that sea was chiefly dominated by three powers before World War II—Great Britain, France, and Italy—and is now dominated only by the United States and Britain.

In fact, in terms of most recent history, we must think of the Mediterranean in terms of the English as well as the American position; the necessity of protecting the life line of the Empire, the road to India—and its negative aspect—the need to prevent Soviet Russia from breaking into the Mediterranean either by way of Constantinople or Salonika. It is true, however, that in both wars, England, without abandoning the Mediterranean, reverted to the Atlantic-Cape of Good Hope route. But the sudden invasion of the Mediterranean by the American forces during World War II, the perennial desire of Russia for an outlet on the Mediterranean and the insistence for a share in the control of the Straits, have resulted in making the Mediterranean the United States' *Mare Nostrum*.

Before considering, however, the present situation, let us note the historical roots of the changing strategic aspects of the region.

² The picture would be incomplete without noticing also traditional methods of land holding, shipping routes, mineral resources (such as they are), the endemic malaria that is widespread and often in close proximity to regions noted as winter and health resorts, and the prevailing indifference to hygiene.

The Roots of British Domination

UNTIL THE END of the fifteenth century the Mediterranean was the center of the European world. The ships which traversed it and followed the western shores of Europe to England, Flanders and Germany were mostly oared galleys that could not face the open Atlantic. With the discovery of America and of the route to India around the Cape of Good Hope, new types of ships were needed, and the contest for sea power shifted to France, Spain and England. The British won.

Since the time of Henry VIII the English had maintained a powerful navy. It was Robert Blake, commander of the navy under the Commonwealth, who consolidated the new position of the British fleet. After fighting the great Civil War, he pursued the Cavalier fleet to the Mediterranean in 1650 and there destroyed it. The exploit amazed the French, Spanish and Italians. For it meant the extension of British sea power to the Mediterranean, where it has ever since remained an important—and for the most of the time a dominant—influence.

But it was the work of the fleet during Marlborough's wars and the acquisition in 1704 of the Rock of Gibraltar at the western entrance to this inland sea which established British naval supremacy in the Mediterranean. A century later this supremacy had to be defended against Napoleon—the defense was completed by Nelson in the Battle of Trafalgar. Then it was that British annexed Malta, her subsequent base of her Mediterranean fleet. Disraeli's purchase of the Khedive's shares in the Suez Canal Company gave Britain control of the eastern as well as the western entrance of the Mediterranean; and it was Britain's concern for the safety of Suez which led her, seven years later (1882), to bombard Alexandria and to establish herself in Egypt. This action infuriated the French, who had previously shared Britain's supervision of Egypt, but declined to join her in restoring the Khedive. But France and Britain were brought to an understanding as a result of the clash of Kitchener and Major Marchang at Fashoda in the Sudan in 1898. The French gave up Fashoda and the entente between the two powers was the result.

British Interests

WHILE THE BRITISH had, before World War II, the impressive sum of \$1,600,000,000 invested in the Eastern Mediterranean (chiefly in Greece and Egypt), they look upon that sea primarily as a roadway—the shortest sea route between themselves and their far-flung eastern holdings (even if they lost a number of them after World War II): British East Africa, the oil fields of the Persian Gulf, India, Burma, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and

Australia. Just before the war, on an average day in normal times, there were about 140 British ships moving through the Mediterranean, and about 45 loading and unloading at Mediterranean ports. Some were bound for England with oil from Iraq and Iran, with Egyptian and Indian cotton, with oranges from Palestine, iron ore and fertilizers from North Africa, and wool, tin ore, rubber, and quinine from the eastern islands beyond India. Eastbound ships were carrying British cotton cloth, machinery, bunker coal, tools, and other manufactured goods to all parts of the east.

The Mediterranean route via Gibraltar and Suez was so important that it was often called Britain's "life line" of empire. It was guarded within the sea at four points, at the fortress of Gibraltar, at the west end; at the fortified island of Malta, where Italy almost touched the North African coast; at the large island of Cyprus, on the Syrian coast; and in Palestine, where Britain kept an army for the purpose of defending the Suez Canal.

But the term "life line" was apt to be also misleading. In the first place, only half the British ships which passed Gibraltar bound west carried goods which originated *inside* the Mediterranean, and Britain was not dependent upon these. For ships coming from beyond Suez, there was an alternate route, around Africa past the Cape of Good Hope—as World War II showed. The African route is longer than the Suez route, but the increase in distance varies. Use of the Cape of Good Hope route from British ports lengthens the journey to the Persian Gulf by 80 per cent, to Calcutta by 51 per cent, to Singapore by 44 per cent, and to Australia by 10 per cent.

Britain's naval footholds run lengthwise of the 1,927-mile-long sea—Gibraltar at the Atlantic entrance, Malta about half-way eastward, and Cyprus, Haifa, Alexandria and Port Said at the eastern end.

Malta—The Bulwark of Christendom

NO SPOT IN THE WIDE WORLD took such sustained and savage bombing as Malta during World War II. Sixty miles from Sicily, the island was a constant menace to Axis supply routes in the Mediterranean. It was a base for British submarines. For deeper than practical reasons, Malta became Britain's symbol of resistance, as Stalingrad and Bataan became symbols of valor to Britain's allies.

Largest of the five diminutive islands which cluster near the Sicilian channel, flounder-shaped Malta is about seventeen miles long, little more than nine miles wide. Steep cliffs rise out of the surf on her south shore; on her north, rocky boulders tumble into the sea. Beautiful but arid, it has a strange attraction; almost every dominant power in the history of

the world has, at one time or another, possessed her. The Phoenicians first landed about 1450 B. C. For two centuries she was under Greek domination. Later she fell into the hands of Carthage. For some 200 years she was part of the empire of conquering Rome. After the decline of Rome, army after army crossed Malta, leaving their marks. Its gateway was scuffed by the feet of the world—Arabs, Normans, Sicilians, Germans, French, Spaniards.

Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, ceded Malta to the pious, wandering Knights of St. John of Jerusalem. The Maltese Knights held it against the Turks. It became the bulwark of Christendom against the Infidel, grew to be an even stouter bulwark when Grand Master Jean de la Valette Parisot built the fortress city which was named after him and which stands today on the north shore like an amber rock pile in the Mediterranean's sapphire sea.

In 1798 Napoleon arrived to loot the ancient rococo palaces and churches before he rushed on into Egypt. The French garrison held until 1800, when the English fleet hove into view, anchored in Malta's deep harbors and took over the island. For the British, Malta was a naval base, a handy coaling station and therefore a bright military jewel which, with Gibraltar and Suez, gave the empire control of the Mediterranean.

The city Maltese, largely descendants of the retinues of the Knights, fervent Roman Catholics, clever and temperamental, felt uneasy under this new and beefy rule. In 1921, England's Majesty granted them self-rule (within limits). On June 11, 1940, came the first air raid, showing that Benito Mussolini was in the war. Then the Germans came. In September, 1942, on behalf of his King, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Lord Gort, presented the Maltese with the George Cross. The citation: for gallant endurance.

In 1949, Britain invited the United States Navy to base its Mediterranean operations at Malta, which has extensive harbor facilities. It would solve an economic headache, since the Maltese, who lived by serving the Royal Navy, faced hard times now that British activity was reduced. The British also drew up, in 1949, long-range plans to make Cyprus an important military base as the northern pivot in Britain's East Mediterranean-Middle East defense scheme. Long-standing Greek claims to incorporate Greek-populated Cyprus were shelved.

Cyprus as a British Near-East Bastion

FOR MORE THAN THIRTY CENTURIES, Cyprus, the third largest Mediterranean island, off the coast of Asia Minor, has periodically played a sig-

nificant role in world events. Geography has placed it in a key position along routes to the Middle East—as strategic today as when the Pharaohs ruled Egypt and when the Crusaders pushed eastward from Europe to the Holy Land. The island's barren mountains rise from the Mediterranean little more than 40 miles from the southern shores of Turkey. Syria and Palestine are respectively only 65 and 140 miles away, blunting the Mediterranean's eastern extremity. Cyprus is roughly shaped like a gauntleted fist, its index finger pointing toward the sea's northeast corner where Turkey meets Syria. When British forces left Palestine, the Cyprus Crown Colony became the nearest British-held territory to the entrance of the Suez Canal. This vital gateway to the Orient is about 230 miles south of Cyprus.

Cyprus has been called the Isle of Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty. From the plains of its broad central lowland, shimmering in the heat, cool green hills rise into rugged mountain ranges. Their peaks are shrouded with purple haze or painted with tints of sun and sky. When the rains come, between October and March, wild flowers spread bright carpets amid the greens of vineyards, olive groves, grain fields and woods. But Cyprus, like most Mediterranean lands, is usually a thirsty spot. Much of its water supply is obtained by windmills, and by blindfolded mules hauling bucket after bucket from deep wells with primitive machinery.

The overwhelming majority of the Cypriotes are Greeks, descendants of colonists who came to the island in ancient times. In the total population of more than 450,000, there is a sizable Turkish minority. Armenians, Syrians, Egyptians, and Arabs form smaller groups; in recent years, a number of European refugees barred from Palestine have been sent to detention camps here. Street scenes in the island's inland capital, Nicosia, and in Famagusta, the east-end port, are a medley of Eastern and European life.

Most of the people of Cyprus live by fishing or farming. Mining for copper, chromium, and other ores on a small scale provides a living for a few. On the south coast, sponge fisheries and salt works add their products to locally quarried gypsum and home-grown mules on the export lists.

British administration of the island began in 1878, when England leased Cyprus from Turkey to guard the new Suez Canal route. On the outbreak of World War I, the island was annexed by London. In World War II, Cyprus was the first of Britain's overseas possessions to send troops—the Cyprus Muleteer corps—to the European front.

University of Bridgeport

(Continued)