



12^{èmes} Conférences stratégiques annuelle

La France, la communauté internationale et la paix au Proche-Orient

(6 et 7 mars 2007 - Maison de la Chimie, Paris)

Discours de

Volker Perthes, Directeur, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

Reviving the Quartet: it's a start, but it's not sufficient

The so-called Middle East Quartet, consisting of the European Union, Russia, the United Nations, and the United States has been revived since the beginning of 2007. The goal was to restart the peace process between Israel and its neighbours. In effect, there had not been such a process since 2000, at least if one defines a peace process as an undertaking that involves negotiations between the parties to the conflict: both Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Palestinian talks had ended that year. Ever since then, the region has witnessed a policy of unilateral steps, some of these can be seen as attempts at constructive unilateralism: Consider Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 and from the Gaza Strip in 2005 or Hamas' one year long equally unilateral ceasefire. While positive in their aims, these steps were taken without consulting the opposite side and entrenched the perception that there was indeed no partner to talk to. By the summer of 2006 at the latest, with the Lebanon war and Israel's reoccupation of the Gaza strip, unilateralism had proved failure. Today it is clear that only a political process that takes each party's legitimate national interests into account, can reduce the risk of renewed violent conflict in the Middle East. A new peace process for the Middle East should focus on the conflict between Israel and those of its neighbours with whom it has not yet signed peace agreements, i.e. the Palestinians, Lebanon, and Syria.

A "goal map" for the Middle East

In order to get a political process moving, four steps are needed. The first one, the revival of the Quartet, has already been taken. This grouping remains the most appropriate format to address the conflicting parties. In principle, it allows to combine European ideas and good services with UN legitimacy and U.S. leadership. It binds Russia and does not include too many participants for quick decisions if need be. However, aside from its near revival, the Quartet should also widen its mandate so as to deal not only with the Israeli-Palestinian problem but also with the Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Lebanese conflicts. This does not preclude individual initiatives in the Israeli-Palestinian arena on the part of the U.S. administration. Currently, the U.S. refusal to negotiate directly with Syria, or to encourage Israel to talk with Syria, prevents such a widening of the Quartet's mandate. Syria, however, is a potential veto player and capable of supporting or undermining attempts at making progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track or stabilising Lebanon. Syria's behaviour is closely related to whether or not it is given a perspective of recovering its own occupied territory - the Golan Heights. Damascus is clearly interested in a new peace process with Israel to achieve this national goal.

Secondly, a "goal map" should be developed to replace the so-called road map that has become largely outdated by events. This goal map should set out the basic legitimate interests of the parties to the conflict. This will reveal that these interests are not mutually exclusive. Quite on the contrary: Their realisation would provide the fundamentals of, and stabilize, a comprehensive settlement. Somewhat simplified, these interests can be summarised as the "3 S and the I": Israel's security, Palestinian statehood, the sovereignty of Lebanon and Syria's territorial integrity. The Quartet could send a representative to the region to further specify these basic interests by consulting with the individual parties. What does Israel's security actually mean and require, how can Palestinian statehood be preserved, which guarantees are nee-

ded to safeguard Lebanon's sovereignty?

Third, and mainly as a responsibility for the Europeans, there is the need to (re?)establish the ability and preparedness for dialogue. This may well be the most difficult task. Again, the relationship between Syria and Israel is crucial in this respect. The Israeli government needs to be convinced that a resumption of peace talks is useful and could lead to a more constructive Syrian behaviour vis-à-vis Lebanon and the Israel-Palestinian process. The Syrian government itself has realised that demonstrating its willingness for dialogue is a must: It has offered Israel unconditional negotiation, received the Iraqi and the Palestinian president for talks in Damascus, and it has supported intra-Palestinian dialogue. What it so far has failed to do is to send convincing and reassuring signals towards Lebanon. There, in Lebanon itself, a serious internal dialogue about the country's future has yet to restart. External actors such as the EU or individual EU states can offer their support and act as facilitators in talks about political and constitutional reforms. They should also make clear that no regional deal can be made at the expense of Lebanon's sovereignty. Therefore it is crucial to define the Lebanese "S" just as clearly as the Syrian "I".

With regard to the Palestinians, dialogue capacity of a different kind is needed. Ever since the Palestinian parliamentary elections of January 2006, the international community has been communicating with president Mahmoud Abbas, but has imposed a boycott on talks with the Hams-led government. Isolating the Palestinian government, however, has significantly heightened the chaos in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and has effectively contributed to a deconstruction of statehood. Provided the EU wants to continue its state-building efforts in Palestine and contribute to a peaceful settlement, it will have to find ways of talking to such crucial actors as the parliamentary majority and an elected government. The formation of a Palestinian national unity government provides a chance to the EU and its partners to resume cooperation with the Palestinian authorities without a loss of face. Based on the Saudi-sponsored agreement between Fatah and Hamas, the unity government does indeed meet the demand of the EU Council that a legitimate Palestinian government "adopts a platform reflecting the Quartet principles." According to its programme, the government will respect all agreements signed by the PLO. Implicitly, this includes the recognition of Israel and the obligation to not only refrain from but actually fight acts of terrorism. The EU may well avoid contacts with individual Palestinian ministers who violate these commitments, but it must not ostracise the entire Palestinian administration.

A fourth step, albeit somewhat in the future, is an international conference with all relevant parties. The aim of such a meeting would be to have regional parties adopt the "goal map", and to subsequently commence bilateral negotiations on this basis. Organising different bilateral meetings in parallel would enhance the actors' interest in seeing the entire process through to a successful finish. Meticulous preparation of such a conference is more important than convening it quickly; initiatives on the part of individual states that wish to press ahead could undermine the EU's and Quartet's effort. Naturally, as the most important actor within the Quartet, the U.S. will have to be part of these efforts. The current EU presidency was able to convince the U.S. administration that a revival of the Quartet could be useful. However, it is clear that the Bush administration's priority in the region is Iraq, not the Israeli-Palestinian arena. As in the past, therefore, it will be up to the EU to feed ideas into the Quartet. As the diplomatic activities of the Quartet should ultimately lead to realising president Bush's "vision" of 2002 of "two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security," the Europeans and the other Quartet partners may actually help him to secure a legacy with regard to the Middle East that he wants to be remembered for. There is no fault in that. The EU must not, however, let U.S. or Israeli lack of support thwart its efforts to devise a goal map that would be acceptable to all regional parties, or to push Syria onto a more constructive course by engaging it.