

A little clarification, please, on the ‘Union of the Mediterranean’

CEPS Commentary

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President Sarkozy’s proposal for a Union of the Mediterranean has attracted some interest, but independent observers, such as ourselves, are puzzled as to what he has in mind. A basic question is how this Union would relate to the EU’s present policies in the region, which is based on the 12-year old Barcelona process, onto which has been rather clumsily grafted the Southern branch of the two-year old European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

Taking Nicholas Sarkozy’s few words on the subject at their face value, all Mediterranean coastal states of the North and South would form a ‘Union’, which would have important political, economic and security functions. It would aspire to be more effective than the EU’s Barcelona process, which indeed has not resulted in the transformation of the Arab states, as had been hoped for. Would this new Mediterranean Union ‘take over’ from Barcelona? Such an evolution is hard to imagine, since the main instruments of trade, aid, border management, visa/immigration, crisis management are already entrenched in the competences of the EU. Would additional policy instruments be provided by the members of the Med Union alone? And if so, which would they be, and what would be their value-added? So we dismiss this theoretical ‘takeover’ option as too implausible to be taken seriously. Yet it is still surprising that the French President has chosen to speak about his new Union without mentioning its relationship to our old Union.

A less ambitious idea might call for the coastal Mediterranean states to embark upon an expanded version of the so-called ‘5+5’ West Mediterranean Forum. This was a French initiative of 1990, which originally grouped five Northern Mediterranean states (EU members France, Italy, Portugal and Spain plus candidate Malta) with five Southern Mediterranean states (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia). This forum met occasionally, but it has never been operationally significant nor has it replaced or challenged the EU’s Barcelona process. Would the idea be to add now Greece and Cyprus from the EU together with Egypt, Libya, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian Territories and Turkey to assemble all the Mediterranean? This new ‘Club Med’ of 20 members might function as a supplementary forum of political dialogue, but it would certainly also create extra confusion and duplication in relation to the EU’s

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processes. And it would hardly merit the name of 'Union of the Mediterranean'. The multilateral dialogue aspects of the Barcelona Process have been complicated and at times stalled by the unsolved Arab-Israeli conflict. With the escalating hub of conflict in Israel-Palestine-Lebanon-Syria, how would the Mediterranean Union resolve the diplomatic impasse that has bedeviled the Barcelona process?

A more plausible idea would be to take this opportunity to reshape the architecture of the Barcelona process and the ENP. The Southern and Eastern branches of the ENP could be formally separated, and each given space to develop its own identity and operational specificity. From the very beginning, it was never such a brilliant idea to have a single ENP for South and East, given the fundamental differences between the Arab Mediterranean world and European post-Soviet space in their domestic politics and European aspirations, which makes the unity of the ENP highly artificial. The two were put together only because some Mediterranean member states feared that an ENP devoted only to the new Eastern neighbours might mean a new relative disadvantage for the South. Neither the Eastern nor Southern ENP partner states, however, have appreciated being pushed into the same ENP boat. So maybe the time has come to arrange an amicable divorce between the South and East ENP, over which nobody will shed a tear.

Under these conditions, the proposition of a 'Union of the Mediterranean' could be useful. It would announce that for the South the Barcelona process and extra mechanisms of the ENP would be merged and reformed, and existing policies and procedures reconsidered. How could the policies of the EU and its member states towards the Mediterranean be upgraded in effectiveness? There is an important agenda to consider. The desiderata of the Southern partners are well known: better market access for agricultural exports, more effective development aid, visa facilitation and less restrictive migration policies, and more resolute EU policies for resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. On which of these would France be prepared to move? On the EU side, there are concerns over the widespread combination of stubbornly autocratic regimes and tendencies either towards the radicalisation of Muslim democrat movements if these are excluded from the political process, or for the emergence of jihadist terrorist groups if mass Islamic movements are weakened and fragmented. Most independent observers argue that the EU and its member states have been mistaken to refuse political dialogue with all democratic tendencies in Southern Mediterranean states, ceding to the diplomatic pressures of authoritarian leaders.

Would the 'Union of the Mediterranean' see a redistribution of roles between the EU and its member states, with a greater role in particular allocated to the EU's Southern member states? Indeed the plenary gatherings of the Barcelona process with all member states are heavy and clumsy. The EU troika is a device to overcome this problem. Could there be some variant of the normal troika to give special representation to most interested member states? Perhaps there are innovations of this type to be considered, as a variant on the procedures for 'reinforced cooperation'. If there were an initiative towards the South, there could be similar initiatives in the Eastern neighbourhood, where the current German Presidency has already been reviving the term *Ostpolitik*.

A constructive version of the 'Union of the Mediterranean' could thus translate into a restructuring of the ENP, a reconsideration of the policy content of the present Barcelona+ENP and some reconfiguration of the role of 'most interested member states'.

In addition, the Union of the Mediterranean would need to factor in another non-geographical division within the ENP, namely a distinction between countries that are willing to have closer ties with the EU and accept the conditionality that comes with it and those that are reluctant to do so. This is a divide that cuts across the east-south division, but which the Med Union would have to deal with. More specifically, it would need to devise and present an array of possible EU benefits and accompanying obligations for the different countries of the club with their different aspirations vis-à-vis the EU. The timing of the Sarkhozy idea is also pertinent in that the German Presidency is currently trying to draw conclusions before the end of June on strengthening the ENP. It looks as if more time is going to be needed under the Portuguese Presidency.

Two other interpretations have been offered in the press. One is that Sarkhozy's proposal is just a Turkey gambit. "Dear Turkey, I do not want you in the European Union, but why not instead join us as a major player in the Mediterranean Union?" Another is that the proposal was just an intuitive remark about wanting to do something 'better than Barcelona' in the Mediterranean. While the second motive could lead to the prospect of a constructive development of the idea, the first would most likely lead to a vanishing of the grand idea of the Union of the Mediterranean as quickly as it was born, given Turkey's resounding 'no' to the new role it would be offered.

Whichever the motive, however, it is possible that the idea was launched without having been seriously prepared either for its substance or its implications for the EU. If this suspicion is correct, there remains the question of how French diplomacy will follow through, given that the idea has been publicized as the new president's first major foreign policy initiative? In that case, our 'constructive version' above may be relevant, and we commend it to M. Sarkozy for his consideration.

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