

## Malta's external security

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**Abstract:** For a small country whose main relevance to the outside world has always been its strategic location and whose known history has been moulded by that fact, security has been remarkably low on the list of priorities on Malta's national agenda since independence. In recent years, security has become an issue of keen political debate, although security per se may not be the real reason why the subject has been brought out into the limelight by both government and opposition. More than just an issue in its own right, security began featuring rather more as a function of the main direction of Malta's foreign policy, which during the past decade has been focused on relations with the European Union.

It is an indication of the bond between the history of Malta and that of the Mediterranean that since antiquity the Maltese islands have consistently belonged to the ascendant imperial power in the Mediterranean. Small, arid and costly to defend though it might be, its central position between north and south and east and west, enhanced by its possession of excellent harbours, has accorded to it a unique strategic location that no power intent upon the domination or control of the Mediterranean could afford to leave in someone else's hands. From the point of view of the respective imperial powers therefore, the possession of Malta has been a means to an end, not an end in itself. No territorial value, population numbers, natural resources, markets or prestige was entailed: only a unique location. Until the onset of early modern history, Malta's strategic value was generally speaking negative. Thus, under the Spanish Habsburgs, and until the arrival in Malta of the crusading Order of St. John, control of Malta was imperative to deny the Muslim Ottomans a foothold in the western, Christian, hemisphere in what was essentially an east-west Mediterranean cold war. Then in 1530, the Knights of St. John were sub-contracted to take care of the island's security and Malta was transformed into a highly fortified frontier fortress actively involved in the defence of western Christendom, as well as a naval base for waging a holy war of attrition against Muslims. At the end of the eighteenth century, after a brief and abortive Napoleonic occupation (1798–1800), Malta passed into British hands, there to remain until independence in 1964, or until the final departure of the British

services in 1979. Keen internal political disagreement as to which of the two dates represented the true end of Malta's colonial history is itself a measure of the centrality in Maltese history of the island's strategic function.

The incorporation of Malta into the British empire, effectively in 1800 and formally in 1813, took place about a century after the British occupation of Gibraltar of 1704. Britain can be said to have been the first non-Mediterranean imperial power to regard the Mediterranean as a single geostrategic region. This approach is borne out by the fact that, for most of the two and a half centuries during which it enjoyed mastery of the sea, Britain showed little interest in building a Mediterranean empire and, until quite late in the nineteenth century, was mainly interested in possessing or controlling only strategic islands and channels in the Mediterranean. From such positions and through such control, Britain was in a position to pursue effectively its interests both as an imperial and as a European power (Fenech 1, 1993). As the nineteenth century progressed, and as Mediterranean affairs increasingly became the focus of British foreign policy, normally directed at French and Russian competition, Malta was transformed into Britain's Mediterranean naval headquarters. On top of the already formidable military infrastructure bequeathed by the Knights of St. John, the British built Malta into a state-of-the-art fortress and naval base, complete with several dry docks and every other facility required to service a world class fleet. Malta became effectively Britain's home port in the Mediterranean (Lee, 1972).

It followed naturally that under two lengthy foreign dominations, between them spanning four and a half centuries, first under the Knights of St. John and later under the British, and both exclusively concerned with supporting a much greater security plan, the fortunes of Malta and its people became inexorably bound with those of their rulers. That is to say, not merely their security from an outside threat, but even more especially their livelihood, became dependent on the amount of foreign money spent on defence. As the foreign rulers sank more and more capital building the defensive and offensive capability of their possession, military spending became the linchpin of the economy itself (Bowen-Jones, 1961: 115–125; 165–175). In the long run, the economic survival of the Maltese population became excessively dependent upon the security needs of their foreign rulers. This phenomenon became reflected in the very relations between the Maltese people and their rulers, which generally speaking were friendly when spending was high, and antagonistic only when spending was low. Indeed, for the Maltese the issue of their national security came to be taken for granted – they were *contributing* to the security of a power much greater than them, and incidentally their own security was taken care of – the only consciously relevant issue being the economic spin-off. This period straddling the entire length of Maltese modern history thus represented two salient and connected features. The first was the transformation of Malta from a highly insecure rock to an unbeatable fortress. The second was the transformation of Malta's economy from one of self-sufficient subsistence to a more affluent one inordinately dependent of the security needs of others. It is small wonder therefore that by and large the issue of national security has kept a low profile in public debate since independence, in favour of the central challenge of how to reconstruct the island's economy from one bound to another country's defence spending into a truly independent civilian economy. In the process of meeting that challenge then, Maltese governments aimed to trade the island's strategic value for cash, in so doing focusing still more on the security requirements of others than its own.

When considering the subject of security, the single most important feature about Malta is its minuscule size. This, combined with its necessarily small population makes Malta impossible to defend against a determined aggressor without outside help. If the average Maltese today worries little about the prospect of a new foreign occupation or military aggression, that is only because in the current international culture, at least in this hemisphere of the world, one tends to take for granted the non-aggressiveness of states. It is also because it is difficult to identify any specific threat. Such a perception may appear foolhardy, considering that besides being European, Malta is equally close to the Arab world,

where warfare has been going on intermittently not too far away from its shores, among its southern neighbours. That may well be due to the fact that for many Maltese it is unthinkable that a European state, however peripheral to the continent, can be subjected to an external attack and left in the lurch by its northern neighbours. Aggression from a European state is even more unthinkable. A review of Malta's security arrangements in the years since independence shows that some provision was made for Malta's defence, but that national security by and large has been allowed to depend more on the good will of others than on solid guarantees. This attitude is perhaps best borne out by Malta's unilateral declaration of neutrality, informally at first but eventually underwritten by Italy and ultimately entrenched in the country's constitution in 1987.

One can say therefore that in contemporary times Malta enjoys a *sense* of security, rather than a state of security. That may be regarded as the synthesis of two previous phases in the history of the island's security. During the first phase, which lasted until 1530, Malta was effectively indefensible. It could be and was taken by whichever regional power had the strength and wish to do so. Indeed, the possibility of sovereignty, as opposed to nationhood, escaped Maltese leaders until well into the twentieth century. Malta not only belonged to an imperial power, in this case Spain, but it was a *part of* Sicily. Its long term security was more dependent on the strength of the imperial power that possessed it – that is on its non-sovereignty – than any ability of the island's garrison and fortifications to keep away an invader. In the short term it was completely exposed, especially to marauding corsairs whose aim was not to occupy, but to plunder, and who therefore were not deterred by fear of the metropolitan power. Settlements clustered around the central heights of the island, a passive defence strategy to keep the maximum distance from the exposed coastline. The mission of the crusading Knights of St. John introduced the second phase in the history of Malta's security. As an outpost for the Christian west in the Mediterranean east-west contest, Malta was rendered capable of defending itself and transforming its insularity from a liability into an asset. The Great Siege of 1565, where Malta held out against the Turkish attempt to capture the island, demonstrated the logistic difficulties for an overseas enemy faced with an enduring resistance and the likelihood of external relief, however belated. A look at Malta's physical appearance immediately reveals an island fortress in the literal sense of the word. The harbours are surrounded by staggering bastions and the coastline is littered with observation posts, all relics of a past when the island had to be capable of holding out against an aggressor, possibly for a long period of time, until outside assistance could be obtained. Defence strategy became an active one, settling in and fortifying the harbours to meet

the enemy preferably before landing and even to be ready to sail and seek him out. This pattern was consolidated under the British, who not only patrolled the Mediterranean sea anyway and therefore the approaches to Malta, but maintained a peacetime garrison large enough to defend the island at all times. Only once was Malta's security seriously threatened, during the Second World War, and that chiefly because air power rendered obsolete most of the traditional premises of defence.

Advances in military technology, though highly relevant, were not alone in changing the security role of Malta in the Second World War and its aftermath. Whereas the triumphant resistance of the island in the first instance appeared to have provided the ultimate proof of the island's invincibility as well as its indispensability, rapid changes in the broader international scene before long altered the parameters of Malta's usefulness to the security of others. The onset of the new, this time global, east-west contest, coupled with Britain's decline as a great power and world empire, necessitated a revision of Malta's security function, if not needs.

At first, there seemed to be no question of a change of function. Even after the decision to grant Indian independence in 1947 and the handing over of responsibility for Greece and Turkey to the United States in the same year, Britain for another decade at least remained determined to maintain control over its possessions in the Mediterranean. And although Britain's security objectives were to an increasing extent subsumed into the security objectives of the western alliance, there were no concrete signs before 1956 that Britain had any intention of relinquishing Malta. Indeed, during the Suez War, in which Malta resumed its traditional role of forward base for the British operation, the British Government was seriously entertaining a Maltese plan for full integration with Britain. The plan collapsed largely because Harold Macmillan's Government immediately after Suez embarked on large scale cuts in overseas defence, signalling Britain's acceptance of its reduced international status and consequently a declining interest in maintaining its costly overseas security infrastructure.

By this time, the Maltese were well accustomed to articulating their country's strategic function in terms of economic value. To be sure, as has been already outlined, they had been regarding it as such for centuries, given the centrality of foreign defence spending to their livelihood. The difference now was that the central role of the imperial power's defence spending in the economy could no longer be taken for granted. This was not only because British defence spending was set to decline. It was also and chiefly because the Maltese after the war looked forward to a more equitable relationship with the British, in which the latter would contribute responsibly to the construction of a new diversified

economy that would cease to depend too much on the whims of a sector that in its turn depended upon fluctuations in international relations, upon which the Maltese could exert no control. The Maltese argument, fortified by recollections of the ordeal suffered during the war in the service of Britain and its allies, focused on the long record of service to the security of the British empire, and hence on the responsibility of the latter to improve the people's living standards. It stressed the point that, having given more than its fair share in the war to liberate Europe, Malta deserved to be included in the plan for the reconstruction of Europe. As early as 1949 the first Maltese Labour Government insisted with Britain that since Malta was not a sovereign state and therefore did not qualify for American Marshall Aid, Britain should allocate to Malta a proportion of its own share. In the first official Maltese document placing a cash value on the island's strategic properties, an ultimatum was handed to the British Government to the effect that if Britain was unwilling to pass on to Malta its due allocation, Malta would offer itself as a military and naval base to the United States for an adequate price.<sup>1</sup>

Britain's rejection of the Maltese demand brought Dom Mintoff, the original instigator of the ultimatum, to the leadership of the Maltese Labour Party. Mintoff, who was to dominate the Maltese political scene for many years hence, made the realisation of the financial value of Malta's strategic properties the pivot of his relations with Britain and the western powers until he got his way, much later, in the 1970s. In the course of his endeavours, and after several frustrations, he sought to capitalise on the negative strategic value of Malta, dropping hints that if Britain and the west no longer appreciated the value of the island, their adversaries might. These adversaries might be either the Soviets (remotely) or radical Arab states (approximately) (see Howard Wriggins, 1975). Non alignment and neutrality, with a strong emphasis on the Mediterranean vocation of foreign policy, ultimately emerged as the synthesis, shunning both alignment with west or east, and identification with either north or south.

While haggling over economic matters became the hallmark of Anglo-Maltese relations for more than a generation, the island's security continued to be a matter of slight relevance to the Maltese, underlined by the understanding that Britain would defend Malta anyway because it was in the former's interest to do so. The aftermath of the 'Marshall Aid' crisis of 1949 was five years of unstable and ineffective coalition or minority government presided over by the (conservative) Nationalist Party. Little was achieved in the way of economic restructuring, whereas the future of British defence spending levels was ever more dubious. When Mintoff's Labour Party returned to power in 1955 his recipe for economic rescue was integration with Britain, which if accepted entailed

an assumption of responsibility by the latter for Malta's economic restructuring. Anthony Eden's Conservative Government welcomed the proposal for imperialist reasons. But when British imperialism was shattered soon after in the Suez War, the British lost interest and gave plenty of signs that their chief concern was to disengage from their responsibilities. Joined by the Nationalist Opposition, Mintoff shifted his demand to independence and resigned in 1958.

During the next four years, in which Malta reverted to direct colonial rule while the British accepted the principle of independence, the debate centred on the *form* that independence would assume. Once parliamentary government was restored, returning the Nationalist Party to power, in 1962, the chief disagreement in the negotiations for independence was the future of security relations between Britain and Malta. The ensuing Treaty of Mutual Defence and Assistance gave Britain the right to retain a garrison and base in Malta for ten years for the purpose of mutual defence, while committing Britain to awarding modest loans and grants (Keesing's, 1964: 20108). The package was accepted by George Borg Olivier's Nationalist Government and rejected by Mintoff, who denounced it as a sham independence in which the British abdicated all responsibility for Malta's future while retaining the only feature that ever interested them for a bargain price.

The defence agreement accompanying independence in 1964 meant that even after independence Malta still did not need to be concerned about its external security. The internal political disagreement rested on two points, namely, the level of financial aid and the degree of power that Britain retained by virtue of its continued military presence. The persisting decline in British defence spending and the uphill struggle to find money to build the country's infrastructure continued to be the basis of political debate where Anglo-Maltese relations were concerned. Otherwise, Malta's foreign policy firmly embedded it in the western hemisphere as a matter of course and NATO even moved its Mediterranean Command headquarters there. NATO however turned down requests by Malta to become a member, or even an observer.<sup>2</sup>

By and large, Maltese leaders of differing political persuasions were dissatisfied throughout the 1960s by Britain and the west's hesitation to commit significant funds for the economic development of Malta, persisting in the belief that the island deserved more in return for its habitual loyalty to the west and its contribution to western defence. The western alliance, which since its inception regarded the Mediterranean as Europe's southern flank, was using the island pretty much in the same way as earlier imperial powers had done, paying for such use more indirectly than directly, that is to say, by the multiplier effect that their defence spending had on the

economy. Incidentally, the arrangements with the British and the presence of NATO personnel and facilities presumed that Malta was guaranteed against any foreign aggression.

The energetic thrust of Dom Mintoff's foreign policy upon the return of the Labour Party to power in 1971 underlined further the supposition that Malta gave much more to the security of Britain and the west than it received. The tone of his foreign policy almost suggested that Malta's dependence on western defence was at best irrelevant, at worst detrimental to its own security. The rationale that came to be increasingly articulated was that Malta had nothing to fear from the adversaries of the west, whether these were the distant Soviets in the east, or the neighbouring Arabs in the south. Libya, for example, where Gaddafi had only recently come to power and closed down the American base not only was not considered a threat, but regarded the presence of a British base and of NATO in Malta as a threat to itself. In other words, rather than feeling secure on account the presence of western military forces on the island, Malta was being impeded from pursuing amicable relations with its Mediterranean neighbours. On its own, Malta had neither the potential nor the need to be aggressive. Conversely, though it did not necessarily always follow, no one had an interest to threaten the security of Malta if the island did not represent the interest of a bigger power. It was the presence of foreign forces that rendered Malta threatening to its neighbours, just as it was the role of frontier outpost for the west that might give any relevance to Malta in the eyes of the east. There was sufficient historical precedent to support the argument that imperial possession or bloc alignment might constitute an inherent threat to Malta's security.

The negotiations with Britain to revise the 1964 Treaty of Mutual Defence and Assistance dragged on for many months between the summer of 1971 and March 1972, along the way emitting clear signals that the west had no reason to take Malta's loyalty for granted. During the negotiations Mintoff's hand was strengthened considerably by Colonel Gaddafi's known readiness to replace the income lost by Malta should disagreement lead to a British decision to close down the base (Brown, 1971). The revised agreement restricted the rights and parameters of Britain's use of the Maltese base and more than tripled the rent for its use. To raise the additional money, since Britain was not prepared to do so alone, other NATO members, particularly Italy, agreed to make a contribution, even though NATO henceforth was not allowed to have anything to do with the base. Indeed, NATO had to close down its Mediterranean headquarters in Malta and moved it to Naples. NATO's and in particular Italy's concern that the negotiations with Britain must not break down was driven by the fear that a government in dire need of

financial resources might be pushed to strike a security deal with Libya. The new Defence Agreement was valid for seven years and was not renewable. In 1979 the British base closed down peacefully and all occupied lands were returned to the Maltese Government (Micallef, 1979).

Believing that Malta had nothing to fear from the adversaries of the west was only one step from believing that it had something to fear from the west itself. And in due course fear of the west did become a matter of some concern to Mintoff's government. Mintoff's new foreign policy, beginning with the tough negotiations to revise the agreement with Britain, and proceeding with the policy of establishing close relations with any country prepared to support Malta's economic development, made him increasingly unpopular in western eyes. Malta's non-alignment, with a backdrop of friendly relations with countries such as Libya, China and North Korea, was interpreted as unfriendly and created the spectre of a western intervention to bring Malta back into the western hemisphere. Nevertheless, however seriously or otherwise this risk was regarded, little could be done to prepare against the eventuality of such an intervention. Malta's own armed forces were necessarily useless, not even to hold out briefly until foreign assistance could be procured. For no state, however friendly, could be conceivably relied upon to confront western power because of Malta. Besides, western, which is to say American, intervention might take the form of intervention to restore order after internal turmoil. During the second half of the 1970s, Mintoff's socialist policies were met with stiff organised internal opposition and produced an equally stiff reaction, altogether creating a highly tense internal situation. The situation was exacerbated after the 1981 elections when Labour returned to government with more seats but fewer votes than the Nationalist Opposition. Whatever the scenario, the bottom line was that Malta was geopolitically within the western hemisphere and its external security ultimately relied on the good will of the west, irrespective of which foreign policy Malta opted for.

Even before the closure of the British base in 1979 therefore Mintoff headed for the security option sometimes preferred by countries lying in the midst of antagonistic neighbours, namely the adoption of neutrality. Neutrality was not new to Maltese history. In more brutal times, the multinational Order of St. John had adopted a policy of neutrality to steer clear of involvement in intra-European warfare and thus to safeguard its sovereignty as an Order. Neutrality was not merely a logical sequel to non-alignment. It aimed once again to realise the negative strategic value of Malta, this time by persuading competing sides that neutrality was preferable to alignment with the opposite side. Once again, neutrality combined the objectives of security and financial assistance.

Originally, the Maltese Government hoped to have four security guarantors, two from either flank of the Mediterranean. These would be Italy, France, Libya and Algeria. Ultimately, however, only one country, Italy, agreed to guarantee Malta's neutral status and signed a protocol for financial, economic and technical assistance in 1980, one year after the closure of the British base (Bin, 1995). While Malta's neutral status has been recognised by a number of countries since, the treaty with Italy remains to date the only concrete agreement which provides for support in the event of an external threat to Malta's security. Although a far cry from the multilateral international guarantee originally hoped for, it did render Malta to a large extent safe from foreign intervention. Whatever other directions Malta's foreign policy might be heading in, it was at least implicitly roped back into the western hemisphere by dint of Italy's place in the western alliance, thus also damping speculation about the possibility of a forceful or subversive recovery of Malta by the west. Inasmuch as a country that was also a member of the biggest armed alliance in the world agreed to underwrite Malta's security in return for neutrality, and not for the award of military facilities, the treaty with Italy constituted a breakthrough in Malta's history as a strategic island.

In fact, although it was not the immediate reason for the signing of the Italo-Maltese agreement, a real threat had just appeared for the first time to Malta's security, literally weeks before the agreement was signed. The threat however was not from the west, but from Libya. Following years of discussion over the respective rights of Malta and Libya to prospect for offshore oil on the sea bed between the two countries, and an unratified agreement to resolve the issue amicably at the International Court of Justice, the Maltese Government refused to wait any longer for Libya's ratification and in 1980 contracted an Italian firm to begin drilling in the zone claimed by Malta. No sooner had the Italian rig started drilling than a Libyan warship ordered it away. The Maltese Government had to back down and instructed the operation to stop. Briefly, Malta woke up to the reality of its helplessness and was relieved soon after that the agreement with Italy was concluded. The treaty with Italy which followed soon after did not extend to the eventuality of a conflict caused by an action unilaterally decided by Malta, but at least it shielded the island from a gratuitous act of aggression from a volatile friendly nation turned hostile.<sup>3</sup>

The Malta-Libya crisis in fact acted as a catalyst, on one hand raising Maltese consciousness that national security called for concrete measures, on the other enabling Malta's interlocutors to evaluate the real locus of Malta's foreign policy. Not only did it drive home the point that Malta's security *could* be threatened. It also highlighted the reality that only a country which had a national interest in defending

Malta might be willing to do so. And while it might do so anyway with or without treaty provisions, a treaty was preferable. To the west, Mintoff's angry reaction to Gaddafi's aggression was a signal that Malta's association with Libya placed no limits on the former's sovereignty, thereby easing speculation that Malta was intrinsically loyal to a country that was regarded with suspicion in the west. Indeed, Mintoff publicly warned Gaddafi that Libya's action was far more damaging to Libya than to Malta, considering Libya's image abroad. Strongly implying that an American offer had been made, he added that Gaddafi should consider himself lucky that Mintoff resisted the obvious option of inviting the Americans to protect Malta, typically explaining that he did not do so because the last time the Maltese asked for foreign protection (of the British against the French in 1800), the protection became a virtual occupation lasting almost two centuries (I-Orizzont, 6 Sep. 1980). The signing of the protocol with Italy shortly after was both a signal to Libya that Malta was not isolated – without however constituting a threat to it, since it did not entail realignment with the western alliance – and a mitigation of Mintoff's latent suspicion of American intentions. In due course normality returned to Maltese-Libyan relations also and Libya did ratify the agreement to take the offshore prospecting question to the International Court, which gave its ruling in 1985. In 1984, Malta even signed a Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation with Libya, which included a Protocol on Co-operation in Security, in which the two countries among other things pledged to share security information in their mutual interest.<sup>4</sup> The agreement may have saved Gaddafi's life in 1986, when Malta's radar picked out the American bombers heading for Tripoli and alerted the Libyan leader.

Other than that, it was through the nature of its foreign policy that Malta aimed to enhance its long term security once it shed its matter-of-course adherence to the west in the early 1970s. This it did by projecting itself as a factor for peace and stability in the Mediterranean region, taking every opportunity available to champion the notion that Mediterranean and European security were indivisible and that the Mediterranean region should not be the contesting ground of adversary powers pursuing their national and global interests at the expense of peace in the region. Apart from establishing and extending Malta's relations with the Arab world, so that these became as important as those with European countries, the chief initiatives of what may be termed Malta's Mediterranean policy consisted in efforts to persuade Europe and the superpowers to include the Mediterranean in the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) process and in criticism of superpower military presence and competition in the Mediterranean. The gist of the rationale behind this approach was that the whole

Mediterranean should be a beneficiary of the process that aimed to achieve security through co-operation and that east-west détente in Europe must not be pursued at the expense of its immediate Mediterranean neighbourhood, where superpower competition continued to be rampant.

Inasmuch as no real security threat materialised, with the exception of the oil prospecting incident with Libya which to some extent was precipitated by Maltese brinkmanship, one can say that this phase of Malta's security policy was successful, although of course the non-materialisation of a threat is not necessarily proof that security was adequately provided for. However, such a security policy was based on a number of considered calculations. The first was that no country or group of countries had an interest in violating Malta's sovereignty so long as Malta fostered good relations with its neighbours and did not actively threaten anyone's national interest. It also rested on the historically-supported premise that in an international condition of latent confrontation between armed blocs and their clients, non alignment and neutrality threatened neither side, whereas alignment would have made Malta a target of the opposite side. The policy also carried the advantage that Malta, despite its small size, could formulate its foreign policy and conduct its foreign relations without restrictions on its sovereignty. Finally and perhaps most importantly, in a region where most countries have had to sustain the burden of large defence budgets at the expense of pressing social and economic needs, Malta was able to direct its scarce resources to its development needs and, indeed, to receive a degree of financial assistance in return for its choice of security policy.

In retrospect, the policies pursued between 1971 and 1987 constituted a radical recasting of the security cum economic arrangements that had been moulded in Malta's colonial history. Under certain aspects, they were born out of necessity, for despite the heavy ideological undertones that such policies acquired, they were largely formulated only as an alternative to the west's original refusal to make Malta an integral part of it in economic as well as security terms. Once adopted, however, such policies acquired a life and meaning of their own. Their culmination was reached in January 1987, a few months before the general elections that resulted in the return of the Nationalist Party to power. A two-thirds parliamentary majority being required, both sides of the House of Representatives agreed to entrench neutrality in the Maltese constitution. Malta was now defined as 'a neutral state actively pursuing peace, security and social progress among all nations by adhering to a policy of non-alignment and refusing to participate in any military alliance' (Malta Constitution, 1992). The new Nationalist Government thus returned to power in 1987 legally committed to the principle of neutrality, whereas the chief

thrust of its foreign policy programme was a realignment with Europe and the west, at least in broad political terms.

The circumstances under which the formal adoption of Malta's neutrality took place suggest strongly that the then Nationalist Opposition party agreed to support the constitutional amendment less out of conviction than out of expedience. The chief interest of the Nationalist Opposition where the constitution was concerned, was to bring about an amendment that would obviate a repetition of the 1981 electoral result, where it obtained a majority of votes but a minority of parliamentary seats. Agreement on neutrality was effectively Labour's quid pro quo for the agreement on the electoral changes, and both amendments were promulgated in January 1987. While it is certainly correct to say that the Nationalist Party harboured no wish to put the clock back and jettison all features of foreign policy adopted during sixteen years of Labour Government, the neutrality clause did represent a concrete restriction on future foreign policy options. Inasmuch as the new Nationalist Government made full membership of the then European Community its primary foreign policy goal, the neutrality clause promised to raise difficulties in the light of the Community's objective of fuller integration even on a political level, just recently signalled by the Single European Act. The Nationalist Government of Eddie Fenech Adami took the attitude that neutrality was not an impediment to EC membership and in 1990 lodged a formal application for membership. The Opposition Labour Party, however, which was against full membership, argued that it was. With the signing of the Maastricht Treaty on European Union in 1992 aiming to consolidate the progress towards political integration and to formulate a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) the question of whether Malta's neutrality would constitute an impediment to membership came more to the fore. To Labour's claims that membership of the EU went against the provisions regarding the country's neutrality, the Nationalist Government consistently replied with two main arguments. The first was that the EU itself does not regard Malta's neutrality as a legal impediment. The second argument was that the constitutional provision bases neutrality on non-alignment, a concept that has lost relevance with the termination of the cold war. It argued that the context within which Malta's neutrality was defined was one of competing armed alliances and did not contemplate non-alignment in any other context, such as adherence to a European Common Foreign and Security Policy (Bin, 1995).<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, when the Commission of the European Union issued its Opinion, or *avis*, on Malta's application in 1993, it did suggest that a constitutional amendment might be necessary to clear the legal difficulties that neutrality might constitute if Malta were to be admitted (European Commission,

1993). The EU indeed could have no interest to get entangled in a legal quagmire and the message was quite clear: it was the responsibility of the Maltese people to sort out this issue in a way that adapted the country's constitution to the EU's structures and objectives. This approach delivered a formidable weapon in the hands of the Labour Opposition, which represented almost half the electorate and was not inclined to make life for the Government easier, especially on this issue. In the end, the Government may have had no option but to seek to resolve the issue in the Maltese law courts. An attempt to test both the resolve of the Labour Party and the interpretation of the judiciary appears to have been made in 1995, when the Prime Minister, his Government having just signed the Partnership for Peace programme with NATO (see below), challenged an indignant Leader of the Opposition to take him to the Constitutional Court. The latter did not rise to the bait, and pledged instead to pull Malta out of the programme within a week of Labour's return to power (Kulhadd, 2 Apr. 1995).

All in all, the Nationalist Government's hand was weakened by the lack of enthusiasm or hurry shown by the EU to admit Malta as a member, necessitating the Government to show more eagerness to join than was prudent for a party that had yet to reach the negotiation stage of accession. While it is reasonable to believe that the EU had no objection in principle to Malta's joining, the country's size rendered it largely irrelevant to the EU's prosperity. On the other hand, its smallness could constitute institutional problems, which is also why Malta was told to wait until after the end of the Inter-Governmental Conference, which began in 1996, before accession negotiations could start. In short, the Nationalist Government's tenacious quest to join and its apparent readiness to accept all the implications of membership unconditionally made Malta a model applicant from the EU point of view, but not when within Malta itself there was no consensus.

The Government of Fenech Adami handled a potential stalemate tenaciously and resourcefully. Faced with a European Union that could be better described as not against Maltese membership than in favour of it, and with an Opposition that knew too well the political leverage that neutrality gave it, Fenech Adami's Government endeavoured to produce a positive out of two negatives, precisely by reviving the issue of security.

From the start, the Government aimed to attract Europe's concern by repeatedly asserting that Malta wanted to join the EC not only for economic but also and especially for political reasons. Although such 'political reasons' were not quite clearly defined at first, the implication was that it was in the EC's interest to recover Malta back into the western hemisphere while the Labour Party was out of power. However, in terms of its chances of accession,

Malta's efforts to attract the attention and interest of the EC began at an inopportune time. The international situation that emerged shortly after the change of government in 1987 had created more disadvantages than advantages for the new government's bid for European membership. There was the advantage that it could underplay the obligation towards neutrality and non alignment since there was progressively less to be neutral and non-aligned about. But this was more than offset by the fact that with the end of the cold war, there was less cause for concern that Malta's weaning from the west implied an opening to the east, even if the new Government had not been so unequivocally pro-west anyway. Another disadvantage was that a whole new sphere of interest opened up in central and eastern Europe, diverting the EC's attention away from the Mediterranean. The great watershed in international relations occurring in 1989 meanwhile found the European Community independently embarking on a process of consolidation and deepening. All told, the EC now had less motivation to be concerned with the political advantages of admitting economically less developed Mediterranean states, or other states for that matter, as had been the case with Greece and, more recently, Spain and Portugal. From now on, new members had to have reached levels of economic development and structuring equivalent to those of existing members before joining, not after. Witness the speed with which the EFTA countries' application for membership was processed and accepted.

Whereas the Maltese Government lost no time tackling the restructuring of the economy, so that in many respects Malta came to pursue economic policies as though it were already a member, the political hurdles did not go away. However, developments on the international scene, which had shifted the parameters within which the Government was trying to operate soon after 1987, eventually presented a new opening. After the original euphoria following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the understood implication that the great threat to Europe's security was gone, western Europeans began waking up to security concerns that had existed for a long time but with which they had dealt only half-heartedly. Though not always connected, the end of the cold war was followed by rising concern about dangers to Europe emanating from the south. South-north migration, the spread of militant Islamic fundamentalism, the dangers of chemical and nuclear weapons proliferation, traffic in illegal substances, terrorism, and a morass of other dangers shook Europeans awake to the reality that if an iron curtain had fallen in Europe, a chasm was deepening between them and their immediate neighbours across the Mediterranean. Decades of initiatives to promote Euro-Arab dialogue and to pursue Community 'Mediterranean policies' had not brought the two sides of the Mediterranean any nearer in either

political or economic developmental terms. The resulting security threat, perceived by the haves from the have-nots, was under certain aspects more dangerous than the one which had just disappeared, if only because it took many different forms and was less easy to pin point. Europe's awakening to the urgency of fostering its own security by building bridges of co-operation with the non-European Mediterranean states, which found concrete expression in the 1995 Barcelona Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Conference, was the cue for the Maltese Government to put it to the EU that Malta did, after all, have something concrete to offer to it (Fenech Adami, 1995).<sup>6</sup>

The new Mediterranean focus of the European Union was as opportune for the Nationalist Government's case for membership as the end of the cold war had been inopportune. For it seemed to restore to Malta the security value that had historically been its only claim to fame and importance. With Libya under UN sanctions and still regarded in the west as a sponsor of terrorism, and the Algerian regime precariously holding its own against the biggest known Islamic fundamentalist popular movement in the Arab world, Malta seemed to recover its strategic importance in both a negative and a positive sense. Insofar as Europe may perceive a threat from which it wants to defend itself, it might have an interest in taking Malta within its frontiers. Insofar as Europe seriously wants to build confidence through co-operation with its southern neighbours, Malta's established tradition of casting itself as a natural bridge between Europe and north Africa renders it a useful asset. The Maltese Nationalist Government hence mounted a campaign to demonstrate that Malta was both necessary and useful to the EU: necessary as a frontier post if it should come to pass that Europe finds itself in confrontation with the Arab world, useful as a bridge to support Europe's endeavours to prevent such a confrontation. On the first aspect, bypassing altogether the potential limitations entailed by the country's neutrality, the Government began giving clear signs that it supported all the security initiatives and objectives of western Europe, and moreover wanted to be part of them. Thus, in 1994 it declared that Malta was prepared to contribute to UN peace-keeping missions, supported warmly Baladour's initiative for a Pact of Stability in Europe, and addressed for the first time a meeting of the Western European Union, while berating the Non-Aligned Movement, of which Malta is a member, for failing to find a new post-cold war identity (Fenech 2, 1995). In April 1995, then, the Government took the even more audacious step of signing for the Partnership for Peace programme, the first outside central and eastern Europe, bringing Malta closer to an association with NATO than it had ever been. In May 1996, Malta's Foreign Minister told a press conference in Brussels that 'Malta hopes



to take part in [the EU's] common foreign and security policy . . . [and] had, in more than thirty cases, come into line with the political track adopted by the Union', a position statement received with uncharacteristic enthusiasm by Brussels (Europe, 15 May 1996). In the meantime, Malta was once again becoming a regular host to NATO warships, restoring to the Grand Harbour the once familiar physiognomy of a naval port.

On the second aspect, the Government placed increasing stress in its statements on the tradition and experience of Malta in brokering good relations between Arabs and Europeans. Though this tradition was chiefly a legacy of the preceding Labour Governments, it was upheld by the Nationalist Party once in power, also because the EC approved of it. Thus in the first contact with Brussels following the election of 1987, the Minister for Foreign Affairs had been told by Claude Cheysson, Commissioner in charge of Community relations with Mediterranean Countries, that Malta should consolidate further its relations with the Arab Maghreb, in the context of the EC's western Mediterranean members' initiatives in that direction (*Malta Review*, 17 June 1987). Malta has participated in the various Euro-Mediterranean initiatives undertaken since, including the 'Five plus Five' forum, the Conference for Security and Co-operation in the Mediterranean (CSCM), and the Western Mediterranean Forum, admittedly unspectacular initiatives which nevertheless signalled Europe's at first slow recognition of the need to foster relations with the non-European Mediterranean (Pace, 12–13). In its turn, Malta has come up with its own proposals, namely the setting up of a Council for the Mediterranean (*The Times*, 10 April 1993) and a Pact for Stability in the Mediterranean (*The Times*, 23 Sep. 1995). Underlying both the Community and the Maltese initiatives, was the tendency to replicate European institutions in the Mediterranean. With the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Conference due in November 1995, the Government repeatedly spoke of the need to strengthen the 'Mediterranean dimension' of the EU and of Malta's potential to be a bridgehead of Euro-Mediterranean security (*The Times*, 25 November 1995). Meanwhile, having been told that accession negotiations would begin six months after the termination of the 1996 EU Inter-Governmental Conference, the Government's statements were also motivated by its apprehension that the Central and Eastern European countries might jump the Mediterranean applicants in the queue for accession.

The reverse side of the Nationalist Government's unqualified loyalty to Europe's security interests remained the question of whether Malta's usefulness could be realised in view of its neutral status. The Opposition Labour Party's disagreement over EU membership and its adamant resistance to any attempts to tamper with the country's neutrality

remained a reality the EU could not ignore and accordingly expected the Maltese people themselves to sort out. Hence, the almost gratuitous promoting of the issue of national security to the top tier of the country's list of priorities represented the Government's strategy of creating a national consciousness about an issue that public opinion had hitherto tended to regard passively. The corollary of upgrading the importance of the security issue was that something had to be done about it. The implied message to the nation was that not only was neutrality not enough to guarantee national security, but that it could not be allowed to impede concrete measures to safeguard it. In a nutshell, the EU's projected Common Foreign and Security Policy made membership more, not less, suitable for Malta. The Government thus aimed to extricate itself from the potential checkmate posed by neutrality by shifting the burden of justification onto the Labour Opposition.<sup>7</sup> Although this still did not dispose of the legal problem, it might have been useful in the event of a referendum having to be called.

While still in opposition, the Labour Party, which regarded Europe's belated acceptance of the inseparability of Mediterranean from European security as a vindication of past Labour Government exhortations, of course had no quarrel with the idea of active participation in Euro-Mediterranean dialogues. It did however perceive that the Nationalist Government was seeking every possible way to circumvent neutrality and align Malta with western security structures, where the hegemony of NATO was clearly emerging. It considered that the Nationalist Government, which in the past had been prepared to align Malta with NATO in an east-west context, was now heading for alignment with it in a north-south context. The Labour Party therefore responded by formulating its own security blueprint. Holding fast to the principle that Malta's neutrality was not negotiable, it claimed that the Government was not really worried by any threat to national security, which the latter failed to identify, but was only pandering to the EU in order to improve the chances of Malta's accession, as such serving the security of the EU, not of Malta. On the contrary, Malta's security was best served by its continued adherence to neutrality, in fact as in spirit, the more so if a north-south confrontation across the Mediterranean was being contemplated. Was not the island's frontier location the essential reason justifying non alignment and neutrality? Alignment with the northern bloc, in a scenario of such a confrontation, would return Malta to its subservient role of a frontier post in someone else's interest, and therefore a vulnerable target. So long as Malta maintained amicable relations with both its European and its Arab neighbours, there existed in fact no threat from either side. Besides, security concerns in the contemporary Mediterranean had more to do with international lawlessness and

organised crime than with the potential of a large scale confrontation, and Malta did not need to align itself with any political-military bloc to give its contribution in that field and co-ordinate its efforts with others', in its own as well as its neighbours' interest. Other than that, the treaty with Italy guaranteeing Malta's neutrality should continue to be the foundation of Malta's security policy. In the same spirit of that treaty then, Malta should seek a bilateral treaty with the European Union as a whole, which would be in line with Labour's position of wanting close relations with the EU short of full membership. Such a course should neutralise Malta's negative strategic value to Europe without implying a threat to Malta's southern neighbours. Malta would meanwhile remain prepared to sign non-aggression agreements with any Mediterranean country wishing to do so (Malta Labour Party, 1994).

On October 26, 1996, anticipated general elections were held in Malta, this time returning to office the Labour Party. Security was not high among the priorities of either political party during the electoral campaign. Nor was EU membership – not surprisingly given both the lukewarm response received from Brussels so far, and the unpopularity of the recently introduced Value Added Tax, believed by many to have been introduced to comply with EU expectations, and which Labour pledged to remove once in office. The first measure taken by the new Labour Government, only two days after assuming office, was to withdraw from NATO's Partnership for Peace. Significantly, the Government was careful to explain to NATO that the reason for withdrawing was that it considered PFP membership to be incompatible with the country's constitutional neutrality. The Government indeed hastened to add that this was 'not a political measure to signify the distancing of Malta away from Europe', that diplomatic relations with NATO would be maintained, and that Malta was eager to continue co-operating in the field of security on a bilateral or multilateral level, as well as to take an active part in promoting co-operation and stability in the Mediterranean (*The Times*, 1 Nov. 1996).

In conclusion, it would appear that beneath the rhetoric promoting broader competing political agendas, there exists in Malta much more consensus on the question of security than might appear on the surface, or than there has been during the past decades. What has essentially changed with the government is, first, that neutrality is again regarded as an instrument, rather than a hindrance, of Malta's own security as well as that of its neighbourhood; and second, that Malta's security policy need not be subjected to the question of EU membership, whether the Labour Government decides to formally withdraw the membership application or to leave its options open. Other than that, there is consensus that Malta lies within the European sphere and that it is with Europe, from where of course no threat is contem-

plated, that the basis of the island's security must be worked out in the first place, without prejudice to Malta's relations with its southern neighbours. Finally, where once there had been a marked divergence between one party's 'Mediterranean' and the other's 'European' orientation, consensus has been reached also on the intrinsic value, in the national interest, of maximising Malta's participation in and contribution to Euro-Mediterranean security through dialogue and co-operation.

#### Notes

1. For a detailed account of Malta's political history from the end of the war to independence, see Pirotta, 1987; 1991.
2. See reports in the *Times of Malta*, 5 Nov. 1962; 17 Feb. 1968; 26 June 1968; 18 June 1971.
3. For a review of Italo-Maltese relations in the years preceding and following the treaty, see Fiammetta Atzei 1985.
4. For the text of the treaty see *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali*, April–June 1985, 301–303.
5. For the respective legal arguments in favour and against see in particular Tonio Borg, 'Malta's Neutrality and EU Membership', *The [Malta] Sunday Times*, 27 Feb. 1994 and Alex Sceberas Trigona, 'The Politics of Neutrality, 1, 2, and 3', *The [Malta] Sunday Times*, 12, 19 and 26 June 1994.
6. See also for example report of the Prime Minister's speech to the Paris Institut Francais des Relations Internationales, on 11 Mar 1996, in *In-Nazzjon*, 12 Mar. 1996.
7. See Prime Minister's speech commemorating 'Freedom Day', reported in *The Times*, 1 Apr. 1996. There is an element of irony in the choice of this particular occasion to expound on the Government's security policy, since Freedom Day, on 31 March, denotes the closure of the British base, which is much closer to the heart of the Labour Party than the Nationalist Party.

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