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ABSTRACT

✓ Since the early sixties Soviet naval forces have been increasing in the Mediterranean Basin at an ominous rate. Much analysis has been devoted to this phenomenon but, for the moment, Soviet strategy and tactics, apart from its broadest implications, is not fully understood.)

(It is the contention of this paper that the attention focused on the subject of Soviet-American naval confrontation in the Mediterranean has served to obscure a more important consideration: that of Libya's role in Mediterranean politics and the extent to which Colonel Qadhafi believes his relationship with Malta will affect the regional power balance. If we can understand the impact of this new condition on present regional structures, we will have provided a useful corrective to our hitherto narrow strategic perspective. ↗

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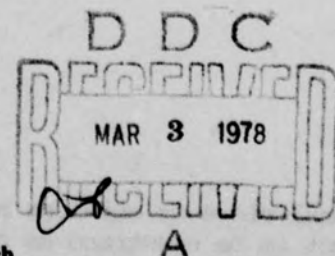
THE MALTESE-LIBYAN ENTENTE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN BASIN

Lewis B. Ware



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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

-Fertilis est Melite sterili vicina Cosyrae
Insula, quam Libyci verberat unda freti.-

-Near barren Cosyra lies the fruitful isle
Of Malta, against which there breaks the
Wave of the Libyan sea.-

Ovid, Fasti, III

The events of the past two decades have focused attention once again on the Mediterranean Basin as a region of increasing strategic importance. Of particular interest has been the impact of new political conditions on naval strategy and tactics. Today the Soviet Navy sails the inland sea in an impressive array of warships the military capabilities of which have not yet been fully assessed. Note of these recent Soviet advances having been duly taken, a new debate over the role of naval power in this region of proven volatility is now under way. The implications notwithstanding, the US Sixth Fleet claims it stands ready to meet any Soviet challenge.

The Soviets have defined their Mediterranean naval objectives in terms of the doctrine of "denial of the seas." The concept itself is ambiguous both in its meaning and in its execution. To treat the question, however, as a purely military matter without

attempting to understand its politico-diplomatic rationale is to run the risk of creating an analogy between new Soviet naval armament in the Mediterranean and Soviet intents.

Malta may well play a political part in the reconceptualization of a Soviet naval role on the inland sea. Until recently, the nuclear power balance and Italy's post-war membership in NATO have eroded the conventional strategic consideration Malta enjoyed in the thinking of naval strategists since the Second World War. Because Maltese stability is predicated on a continuing relationship between service to the British Navy and socio-economic health, the islands have felt the decline of British military power as a blow to their very existence. But the rapid reintroduction of new naval forces in the Mediterranean has given Malta a new lease on life.

We must not lose sight of the fact, however, that a new actor has appeared on the scene whose presence complicates a simple bipolar approach to the question of naval strategy in the Mediterranean. The new actor is Libya which enters the competition in both the offensive and defensive modes. As a result, a Maltese-Libyan entente must necessarily affect the way in which the Soviets and Americans view their regional military rivalry.

The thrust of this paper, then, is twofold: we must attempt to understand the significance for Mediterranean politics of present Soviet intents by analyzing the concept of "denial of the seas" while at the same time determine the extent to which a

Maltese-Libyan entente can act as a fulcrum of Soviet-American rivalry.

To accomplish these objectives we must first understand the circumstances leading to the re-emergence of the Maltese strategic potential. Secondly, we must ascertain whether Soviet and American naval strategies have the flexibility to capitalize on the Maltese potential and thirdly, we must assess Libya's capacity to raise the issue of strategy to a multipolar level. In conclusion, we expect to prove that Libyan influence in the Mediterranean Basin may indeed be crucial to the outcome of the Soviet-American naval debate.

CHAPTER II

MINTOFF THE MALTESE FALCON

Naval tacticians have been inclined to assign Malta's geographical position astride the Straits of Sicily a constant value in the Mediterranean strategic equation. Often described as an "unsinkable battleship" the Maltese Islands occupy the point where the east-west and north-south lanes of maritime traffic converge at mid-sea. In conventional military terms, the possession of Malta would render problematic the importance of control at the entrances and the exits to the Mediterranean Sea by an opposing power.

There are, however, a number of bothersome conditions to this axiom: in the first place, the evolution of an underwater nuclear deterrent diminishes the need for a naval force with assured base rights in Malta; and secondly, as Blouet points out, certain political conditions must prevail if Malta is to enjoy geostrategic pre-eminence.¹ For example, Sicily's position on the Narrows is so overwhelming that Malta's assets have no currency unless the archipelago falls to a power unfriendly to Italy. This fact has not gone unappreciated by the Maltese. In the search for political autonomy, playing both ends against the middle has permitted Malta a degree of latitude in determining her own strategic potential. Therefore, whether or not Malta is indeed of assured strategic importance misses the point: the overriding

question is how and under what conditions Malta can convince others she is.

Much as she would like to maintain complete independence in her dealings with the outside Malta is, nevertheless, severely limited by forces beyond her immediate control. These forces operate mainly in the economic and social spheres. One hundred and sixty years as a British Crown Colony have created a service economy in Malta *par excellence* which is reminiscent of Lebanon in many ways where, for example, in the absence of natural resources national health depends on the willingness of the outside to respect Lebanon's neutral middleman status. Malta, for her part, has long been the middleman of trans-Mediterranean trade. For all of the last century and most of the present one she has lived on the taxes, duties, and fees exacted for the use of her magnificent harbor at Valletta. This sad state of affairs has become more pronounced since the British seized the islands from the French in 1800. Most Maltese light industries, such as cotton weaving, fell prey to the increasing volume of transit trade that accompanied the establishment of a *Pax Britannica* on the inland sea. To make matters worse, Malta has never produced enough foodstuffs on her rocky soil to feed her growing population. She has been obliged to depend totally on the importation of comestibles. Only occasional relief was obtained by the periodic immigration of Maltese to Europe, North America, and North Africa. Furthermore,

developments in nineteenth century naval technology and the opening of the Suez Canal forged the final and indissoluble links between Malta and the entrepôt trade. By the early twentieth century the islands were relying almost exclusively on the Royal Navy to employ a sizeable proportion of total Maltese manpower on the docks and at the shipyard facilities in Valletta. With the waning of British imperial power in the aftermath of the Second World War all the accumulated problems of colonialism seemed to emerge at once. On the eve of independence Malta found herself so underdeveloped that the replacement of the British by another patron appeared virtually assured.

This dilemma need not have taken on such overwhelming proportions had there not been other historical circumstances limiting Malta's freedom of action. Like Spain, Sicily, Crete, and Cyprus, Malta has provided the environment for the coexistence of European Christian and Arabo-Islamic cultures. During the early Middle Ages the Arabs dominated Malta and left an indelible linguistic imprint on its earlier Punic civilization. If, on one hand, a form of modern Arabic took root in Malta Islam, on the other hand, did not. The resurgence of Europe in the tenth century brought about the conquest of Malta by the Sicilian Normans which occasioned the reincorporation of the islands into the Roman Catholic fold. The influence of a conservative Church and its claims to be the only unifying institution in Maltese life has produced some

unfortunate consequences for modern Maltese history, especially after the British occupation when the Church began to suspect the motives of a Protestant colonial power. Because the Church hierarchy in Malta tends to reflect the Italianate tendencies of the Roman curia the introduction of the Italian language among the upper social strata drew Malta very early into an Italian sphere of influence. The Italian connection produced, among other things, an acrimonious debate over bilingualism. But more important was the Church's opposition to any form of post-independence socialism which many Maltese envisaged as the only cure for the islands' socio-economic ills. Concerned with the possibility of Malta sliding into the communist camp and the severing of her Italian ties, the Church has often put the socialists under threat of ecclesiastical interdiction. Thus, the exercise of political options has not come easy for the present-day Maltese.

The predicament reached a climax after 1947 when the US Sixth Fleet took up Britain's role in the eastern Mediterranean and the British began their arduous withdrawal "east of Suez." By the time Britain published her 1957 Defence White Paper the Royal Navy's reliance on the nuclear umbrella in the Mediterranean was complete and her commitment to Malta could be reduced, a commitment which the Sixth Fleet, designed not to live on any of the littoral countries, did not intend to assume.² Yet, in 1957 27.1% of all Maltese gainfully employed worked in the Admiralty

dockyards in Valletta, 40% of Malta's income from employment came from services rendered to the combined British military presence and 60% of her foreign exchange was earned from duties and taxes levied on the use of her port facilities.³ It has been estimated that at this moment of low ebb in British military strength 70% of Malta's total income depended on a continuing relationship with the British military.⁴

Malta's political parties were unable to propose viable political solutions. The pro-British, pro-NATO Nationalist Party saw salvation in some form of limited self-government as a British dominion within the Commonwealth. The Labour Party, on the other hand, demanded complete independence or complete integration.⁵ Whatever formula for independence the politicians might propose, the problems of Church-State relations and bilingualism still remained as an obstacle to understanding and the stabilization of Maltese-British relations. Britain, for her part, found herself in an ambiguous position. She could not stand in the way of any Maltese decision for self-determination as long as the Maltese government did not demand an extension of British social services to the islanders without a substantial Maltese contribution to offset costs.⁶ The period, then, between 1957 and the creation of the Maltese Republic in 1964 was one of protracted struggle among the Maltese political parties in an effort to find a *modus vivendi* with the British.

At this critical juncture the policies of Dominic Mintoff, the present Prime Minister, began to take shape. Mintoff's Labour Party quite early proposed a UN guaranteed neutrality for Malta which would have made the islands a "Switzerland in the Mediterranean." In 1959 Mintoff stressed that with one hundred million pounds he could create a Maltese commercial and industrial bridgehead between Europe and the North African Arab countries. The obligation for rehabilitation, he further stated, must fall primarily on the British and, secondarily, on those countries like Yugoslavia and Egypt which felt that Malta's neutrality would operate to their political advantage.⁷ This attitude, expressed with Mintoff's customary strident and authoritarian gruffness, widened the already existing breach with Sir Paul Boffa's more conservative Labourite wing. Mintoff's translation of this idea into the practical politics of independence was directly opposed by the Nationalists under Giorgio Borg Olivier, then in power. The Nationalist Party wanted monarchical government with local affairs responsible to Parliament, protection for fundamental rights of citizens, universal adult suffrage, proportional representation, and a constitution obtained by Act of Parliament. Mintoff's party wanted a republic with a president as head of a secular state whose government would appoint bishops and priests. Mintoff also disavowed proportional representation because he claimed it would undermine the party system. By all measures the single most important question that

divided the two parties was whether or not Malta should remain within the British Commonwealth.⁸ Mintooff emphatically argued that this decision should be made by the Maltese people after independence in order to maximize Malta's bargaining position with Britain.

During the interim pre-independence period the Nationalists continued to hold political authority. Borg Olivier was in the position to negotiate certain stop-gap economic measures with the British. The British were determined, as they had been in Palestine some years before, to reduce their forces unilaterally and then evacuate the islands, their obligations to Malta notwithstanding. A scheme was put forward for the conversion of the Valletta dockyards to commercial use. In this way a majority of jobs, it was argued, could be saved thereby relieving the Admiralty at the same time of a crushing financial burden. Although by 1964 the dockyards were converted to accommodate ships of up to 90,000 tons, the volume of work which the Royal Navy had accounted for--almost 70%--was never equalled and the yards were early on threatened by a chronic state of impending bankruptcy.⁹ The closing of the Suez Canal in 1967, three years after Maltese independence, only hastened the inevitable. Try as it might to make up the deficit by promoting light industry and tourism, the Maltese government found itself in the weakest possible position to negotiate an advantageous treaty with Britain when, in 1964

Malta became a republic within the British Commonwealth.

Mintoff's Labour Party kept itself aloof from the drafting of such arrangements. As a result, the Nationalist Party bore full responsibility for the ten-year Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement which allowed Britain to maintain her military presence in Malta at a small cost to the British taxpayer. According to the terms of the Agreement the Maltese government accorded Britain the right to station armed forces in Malta and use facilities there for mutual defense, the fulfillment of Commonwealth or international obligations, and the assistance of other allied nations in maintaining their independence and stability. In return, Malta was to receive by 1974 fifty million pounds in aid--18,300,000 available between 1964 and 1967 and, subject to the continuing operation of the Agreement, 31,200,000 for the remaining seven years. Of the financial assistance provided in the first years 75% was to be in the form of a gift and the remaining 25%¹⁰ in the form of loans.

To Mintoff these terms were unacceptable and, in the wake of soaring unemployment and a sharp drop in tourism due to Britain's rescinding of export currency restrictions in the sterling zone, the Labour Party came to power in 1971 by one vote in Parliament. As the new Prime Minister, Mintoff took forceful action immediately. He sacked the British Governor-General, fired the Maltese Chief of police--an old enemy--, declared the head of NATO in Malta

persona non grata, forbade the US Sixth Fleet visitation rights and repair facilities, and then abrogated the Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement with Britain.¹¹

Mintoff's intention was to force Britain to up the ante for her bases in preparation for renegotiating the treaty in Malta's favor. In 1971, he obtained, as a result, an annual rent of \$36.4 million for base privileges, an additional \$2.6 million in economic aid, and a one-time grant of \$6.5 million from Italy to which the United States contributed a considerable sum.¹² Moreover, he secured Britain's approval to a clause which denied Valletta to Warsaw Pact navies but allowed other NATO fleets to call in Malta only with the express consent of the Maltese government. Thus, he effectively excluded both the Soviet Union and the United States from free access to Maltese bases. His ability to manipulate the British rested on two factors: the year previous he had feigned an intention to accept Soviet aid by extending the USSR rights to refit her merchant marine in the Grand Harbor; secondly, he agreed to take a \$12 million loan from Libya in return for a promise exacted from the British never to use Malta as a base for an attack on any Arab country.

Had Mintoff truly possessed the option to oust the British, it is doubtful that he would have exercised it. A confirmed pragmatist, the Prime Minister recognized Malta's need for a patron to support her sagging economy until such time when she might strike out on her own. Mintoff's calculated risk during the 1971 crisis was aimed

at enlarging Malta's list of financial contributors without giving any one power an exclusive veto over Maltese external affairs. His sheer temerity permitted him to maximize his assets by minimizing his liabilities. In retrospect, it has been Mintoff's clever bargaining that has restored Malta's strategic importance in the eyes of the superpowers. Nevertheless, Malta's importance, resting as it does on the worth others believe she possesses, remains subject to constant re-evaluation. Moreover, Libya has played a paramount role in maintaining the ongoing bidding process among the superpowers, yet Libya's stability has not undergone the test of time.

Mintoff claims to espouse a policy of neutralism for Malta. His neutralism, however, can work only if he affects a balance of power in the Mediterranean by excluding the superpowers from its waters. Reminiscent of Nasser's positive neutralism and de Gaulle's concept of France as a third force between the Western and Eastern Blocs, Maltese neutralism depends for its long-term success on Mintoff's ability to transcend this initial phase of gamesmanship by uniting the nations of the Mediterranean littoral in a "Euromediterranean" organization with Malta as its pivot.¹³ For the moment he is banking on Libya to provide the money for the first step. In the next several years we shall see what fruit the Libyan connection may bear.

CHAPTER III

THE VIEW FROM TRIPOLI

Despite the overtures the Libyan regime has made to Malta and the implications for a potential confrontation with the superpowers, there is little consensus of opinion as to the direction and scope of future Libyan regional policy. This is not to say that the Libyans have no precise notion of their role in the Mediterranean; on the contrary, much evidence exists which points to a discernible pattern in Libya's relations with the outside that supports the idea of a Libyan grand design. If we are to understand this grand design and its limitations, we must first consider a number of important factors: the concept of Libyan nationhood, the relationship of Libyan national politics to Pan-Islamism, Libya's entente with the Soviet Union, and the projection of Libyan power as a legitimate means of self-defense.

Libyans possess a legitimate nationality but suffer from a lack of nationhood.¹⁴ Because Libya belongs to two socio-cultural worlds dictated by her unique geostrategic position between the Arab West and the Arab East, the modern Libyan state has been unable to affect a sense of national cohesion. The province of Tripolitania reflects the settled semi-sedentary attitudes of North African peasant life while the province of Cyrenaica exhibits the values of the Senussi Bedouin whose ethic finds its source in the puritanical culture of the Arabian peninsula. Between these extremes lies

great expanses of physical and intellectual desert which over the centuries have reduced the possibility for continuing cross-cultural interaction. Yet Libya became the first Arab country to attain independence in the post-World War II era. The disposition of Libya, the only Italian colony in North Africa, became a test of the relations between the major powers on the eve of the Cold War. Until 1950 Libya was administered jointly by Britain and France while Italy, the Soviet Union, and the United States vied for influence in a final settlement. The inability of the major powers to agree on an acceptable form for Libya's international status led to premature independence as a monarchy under the Senussi Bedouin princes. The US immediately entered the post-independence competition with Britain as Libya's principal patron in return for which the USAF received rights to Wheelus Air Force Base outside of Tripoli. France, on the other hand, disputed the control of the Libyan Sahara with the new king in an effort to enlarge the territories of her West African dependencies. Thus, for many years, it was impossible for the Libyan government to represent in an acceptable political form all the territory nominally under Libyan control. This problem, combined with an American and British military presence, the reaction of Arab nationalism to the June War of 1967, new discoveries of oil, and a traditional monarchy which ruled with the aid of a non-representative urban bourgeoisie, helped bring about Colonel Qadhafi's bloodless coup in 1969.

Thus, one of the pressing problems facing the new military leadership was that of defining Libyan nationhood. Qadhdhafi realized very quickly that the problem had complementary internal and external aspects. Internally, religion provided the most readily acceptable common denominator of socio-political cohesion. Because Libya is almost totally a Sunni Muslim country the forging of a national identity based on confessional homogeneity was a logical first step. Qadhdhafi immediately set in motion an intense religio-cultural revolution within the country which was conservative in character but activist in direction. He established local committees to oversee public morality and encouraged the destruction of books, art, and literature offensive to religious sentiment. The re-Islamicization of Libya had as its object the destruction of all forms of Western thought and influence prevalent in Libya since colonial times. By claiming the literal superiority of the socio-political world-view inherent in the Koran, Qadhdhafi took his place in the long line of revolutionary traditionalists who, throughout Arabo-Islamic history, have appeared on the historical scene to defend the Muslim peoples against contamination from alien sources.

Like the Chinese revolution, the Libyan revolution seeks to purge itself of the colonial past. Its political force, however, pushes outward towards Arabdom in contradistinction to the Chinese model which has, for the time being, remained self-contained.

Externally, then, the Libyan revolution presents a Pan-Islamic face to the world the political expression of which is unity of all Arab nations in a supranational entity. That Qadhdhafi has met little success to date in his ambitions is no doubt due to the fact that the Arab nation-states of the traditional heartland display a more pluralistic mix of religious, national-political, and social elements than anticipated by the Colonel. But we should not underestimate the forces unleashed by the Libyan revolution. Pan-Islamism has a long and revered history among the modern Arabs and has not ceased to express the aspirations of a vast majority of Middle Easterners on all socio-economic levels. As late as the beginning of this century the religious reformers, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh, attempted to harness Pan-Islamic sentiment in the political defense of Muslim values against the encroachment of the West. Qadhdhafi adds a new dimension to this tradition by throwing the weight of Libyan wealth behind it. His goal is twofold: first, he hopes to give the Libyans a new sense of pride and national cohesion by projecting Libyan power on the international scene and, secondly, he means to create a new Muslim spiritual community--an "ummah"--which, by its very nature, will be anti-colonial in character. In this way, Qadhdhafi links the development of a new Libyan national identity to the successful creation of inter-Arab socio-political unity.

Israel plays an important part in the Colonel's calculations.

In his view, to strike a blow at Israel, the West's proxy in the Middle East, is to strike a blow against Western global imperialism. To weaken Western imperialism anywhere in the world is, *ipso facto*, to reduce Israel's ability to manipulate the Arab countries. In this Qadhdhafi has patterned his responses after his hero, Nasser. Apart from Egypt's traditional prestige, Nasser could marshal little money for the Third World national liberation movements he sought to cultivate for this purpose. Qadhdhafi, on the other hand, pumps copious amounts of cash into the coffers of extralegal transnational terrorist organizations whose political objectives coincide with his.

Hence, wherever and whenever the West opposes self-determination, Libya stands ready to right the balance. In promoting Pan-Islamism and Arab socio-political unity against Zionism, in furnishing aid to clients such as the PLO, the IRA, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) or the Baader-Meinhof gang, Qadhdhafi is attempting both to thwart the West and create a sense of manifest destiny among the nationless Libyans.

As long as the West believes that Qadhdhafi's bizarre political notions will pass with the man, it will continue to underestimate the significance of the Libyan experiment. Though the gap between the Libyan élite and the Libyan masses may be indeed great and Qadhdhafi's ultimate control over his people theoretically tenuous, we have no reason to think that the elimination of the Colonel

means the elimination of Pan-Islamic political ideology. Pan-Islamism is an activist and dynamic means for the realization of Arab self-will. At any given moment Pan-Islamism can produce Qadhdhafis by the score.

What makes Libyan Pan-Islamism particularly virulent is that it may be indefinitely prolonged by Libyan oil money. Therefore, if political Pan-Islamism is to project its power in the offensive mode, it must also be able to protect its Libyan base. Arab political unity supported by the combined strength of modern arms and Arab money would suffice to achieve these ends, but Qadhdhafi's falling out with Egypt's Sadat over the Israeli issue effectively frustrated such initiatives. At this point Libya turned to the Soviet Union.

Even the casual observer may question the advantages of this unprecedented shift in alliances. Since his accession to power Qadhdhafi has ceaselessly reiterated the basic incompatibility of Marxism-Leninism with modern Pan-Islamism. He has not been the only Arab leader to point this out. The late King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, whose religious but unmilitant conservatism made for common ground with the Libyan leader, was fond of similar pronouncements. Ideological differences notwithstanding, practical politics in the Middle East makes strange bedfellows. Until her defection from progressive Arab ranks Egypt had championed the anti-imperialistic cause by her repeated attempts to thwart Israel with Soviet arms. It was Qadhdhafi's considered decision to assume Egypt's role

as a Soviet client. On the ideological level, the Colonel justified his action by invoking his own variation of Nasser's theory of positive neutralism which permits alliances between the Arabs and the socialist camp in the mutual struggle against colonialism. In this manner, a "neutralist" Arab government can receive arms and development technology from the Soviets which they deem necessary to modernize their countries and maintain their status independent of the West. In return for Soviet arms and technology such a government promises the Russians political support against the West.¹⁵ The Soviets, for their part, require that the client state begin to build "socialism" within its borders. As long as the USSR recognizes that socialism can have an Arab national character the client regime is happy to comply. Confronted with the choice between adherence to Marxist-Leninist socio-economic principles and political influence, the Soviets have consistently chosen the latter by modifying Marxist-Leninist dogma in order to create a half-way house called "colonial communism." Thus, a "neutralist" Arab government is able to vitiate Soviet models for the implementation of socialism while adopting Soviet socialist principles.

With adroit but sophistic casuistry, the theoreticians of Arab socialism proceed to reconcile the Koran with Das Kapital in the search for complementary socialist institutions which, when found, rarely hide the étatist character of the regime. In the final analysis, a state capitalism, managed from the top by

a large bureaucracy and a mercantile oligarchy, begins to take shape. The regime regulates all aspects of Arab socialism in the name of the people and invariably outlaws the indigenous communist party which it knows to be dependent on Moscow. The Arabs, of course, do not want a socialist doctrine in competition with theirs. What they do want is a value-free method of forced-draft modernization as an alternative to continued reliance on their former colonial masters. The Soviet model is tailor-made to their specifications because it promises to skip steps in the evolutionary socio-economic process upon which Western capitalistic progress is based. In terms of the dialectics of decolonialization the Arabs have no time to waste. When the Soviet arms arrive, however, it is usually over the autonomous use of these new weapons in the name of Arab socialism *qua* Pan-Islamism that patron and client begin to disagree.

Although he was careful to retain some of his traditional connections, it was no surprise that Qadhdhafi signed an arms deal with the USSR in early 1974. In the spring of that year Qadhdhafi also added to his inventory of one hundred ten planes, thirty to fifty of the latest Mirage fighters. In addition, he bought ten French missile-carrying gunboats with a speed of thirty-eight miles per hour and a range of over twenty-five hundred miles.¹⁶ By September Libya possessed more than two hundred of the latest Soviet tanks, a new supply of SA-3 and SA-6s and about

sixty French Crotale missiles.¹⁷ In May 1975, in advance of a visit by Kosygin, thirteen MiG-23s arrived at Benghazi accompanied by more SA-3 and SA-6 missiles and some technicians. At the same time, Qadhdhafi received a number of T-62 tanks with promises that the Soviets would supply Blinder bombers at a later date.¹⁸ By summer Libya was already in the process of rebuilding Second World War submarine pens for the reception of six Soviet diesel-powered submarines. One hundred Libyan naval personnel were subsequently sent to the Soviet Union for a four-year training program. An increase of six hundred tanks was expected and of thirty-two MiG-23s scheduled for delivery sixteen had arrived.¹⁹

In May 1976 it was estimated that Libya possessed as many as two thousand tanks, two squadrons of MiG-23s, an unknown number of TU-22 supersonic bombers and an array of surface-to-air missiles, anti-tank guns, and helicopters.²⁰ Furthermore, both FOXTROT-class submarines and OSA-class patrol boats appeared to be on the list of planned acquisitions. Previously purchased missile corvettes from Italy and France would combine with these ships to make the Libyan Navy a powerful force in the area abutting the Sicilian Narrows.²¹

Libya, it now appears, can deploy her military forces in either the offensive or defensive modes. But the meaning of these two postures in the Libyan context is not altogether clear.

Libya's anti-colonialism, as already mentioned, is activist and dynamic. Recently, it has taken on an imperialistic and expansionistic coloration. In September 1975 Libya quietly marched troops into the Saharan confines bordering Chad, Niger, and Algeria and then issued new maps to show that these disputed territories had been formally annexed to the Libyan state.²² Although no official explanation was offered by Tripoli, it appears clear that Chad, and to a lesser extent Niger and Algeria, possess untapped resources of uranium and Libya, with the help of the Soviet Union, is preparing to become a nuclear power. The Chadian government of the Christian General Félix Malloun demanded as a *quid pro quo* that Qadhdhafi cease his support of the Muslim rebels in the north led by the guerrilla leader Hussein Habre. It may be recalled that Iran reached a similar *modus vivendi* with Iraq when, in exchange for a settlement of the disputed border along the Shatt al-Arab waterway which jeopardized the transshipment of oil from the Iranian port of Abadan, the Shah withdrew his support from the Kurdish rebels operating in the northern mountains of Iraq.

If Qadhdhafi's adventures to the south portend an aggressive African strategy we cannot be certain whether he has similar plans for the Mediterranean. For sure, a Libyan presence on the inland sea would insure the uninterrupted flow of oil north to Libya's major European purchasers. To defend her lifeline Libya would naturally

seek an advantageous understanding with Malta. Again, the Iranian example is instructive. The Shah recognizes the importance of unfettered transport of oil through the Persian Gulf into the Indian Ocean as an essential precondition for Iranian national survival. To insure this, he occupied the Tunb and Abu Musa islands in the Gulf over the protests of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates. Furthermore, he agreed to quell the communist insurgency in Oman's Dhofar province on behalf of the Sultan Qabus.

In the event of instability in Malta would Qadhafi follow the same path? Does his strategy for defending Libya's Mediterranean interests require such a step? To answer this question it will be necessary to look more closely at Maltese-Libyan relations since the Anglo-Maltese crisis of 1971.

At the height of negotiations with the British Mintoff made the first of a number of short visits to Tripoli. Returning to Valletta on 31 December 1971, Mintoff declared that he had reached a preliminary understanding with Colonel Qadhafi over common objectives in the Mediterranean. He extended by two weeks to 15 January the deadline for the evacuation of all British troops.²³ It was rumored that Qadhafi would best the British offer of aid by fifty-four million pounds over a three-year period under three conditions: that all British troops leave Malta; that Libya have a share in any Maltese offshore oil industry so that Maltese oil would not compete with Libya's production and, lastly, that Libya

have access to both naval and air facilities on the islands. On 2 January 1972 a group of forty Libyan technicians arrived in Malta ready to take over ground control of Luqa airfield should the British leave abruptly.²⁴ This action prompted the British to terminate immediately her 1953 military treaty with Libya.

At this point in Maltese-Libyan relations some serious bargaining took place. As a result of Libyan interest in Malta the US and Italy increased Britain's offer of nine and one half million pounds to ten million pounds for the use of Maltese facilities. Moreover, it was intimated that even if a new Maltese-British agreement were signed Libya would be willing to pay as much as ten million pounds to Malta should Mintoff exact a promise from the British not to use the island as a base for attacks against the Arab world.²⁵ In fact, this is exactly what happened.²⁶ By early February Malta and Libya had already exchanged trade delegations and Mintoff dropped restrictions on Libyan investments on the islands. Simultaneously, Qadhdhafi announced that Malta would receive forthcoming Libyan aid whether the British departed or not. Mintoff thanked Qadhdhafi for this generosity and stated that Malta would not pawn her sovereignty to anyone.²⁷ At the end of the year Libya had taken up considerable slack in the Maltese economy. The Libyan government agreed to encourage Maltese labor to work in Libya by setting up preferential social security arrangements. This action alleviated, for the time being, Malta's

chronic overpopulation problem. In return, the Mintoff government agreed to give industrial training to a number of Libyans and arranged for a median line to be drawn in the Mediterranean for the purposes of oil exploration.²⁸ In addition, the Malta Drydocks Company won a 1.57 million pound contract for the construction of a floating drydock which would enable the Libyan Navy to be serviced entirely at home.²⁹

The new economic relations between Libya and Malta appear to be both complementary and mutually advantageous. Libya lacks human resources while Malta lacks natural wealth. Libya extends her line of defense into the Mediterranean Basin while Malta maintains her neutrality in the Nasserist sense insofar as she continues to hold a Libyan trump to Britain's ace.

On the ideological level, however, Qadhdhafi is building his relationship with Malta on tenuous grounds. He assumes that both the Libyan and Maltese colonial relationship to the West is based on the exploitation and suppression of a common heritage by the imperialist powers. On numerous occasions Qadhdhafi has declared that Malta is not a Western but an Arab Phoenician nation. As Phoenician islands, he claims, Malta is inextricably linked to the Arab world.³⁰ To justify his assertions he indicates the close resemblance of the Maltese language to Arabic.³¹ At best, these historical and ethno-linguistic connections remain dubious. The Maltese have been a Catholic people for most of their history

and are neither ethnically Arab nor Berber but rather a mix of the peoples found on both shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Qadhdhafi, of course, was exercising the Arab nationalist's penchant for hyperbole. In violating history his remarks have for their object the incorporation of Malta into the anti-imperialist struggle as it is perceived by the radical Arabs. Qadhdhafi is suggesting that Maltese neutrality be applied to the service of movements for national self-determination, in particular, the PLO. Mintoff is not unaware of Qadhdhafi's motives. Nor is he unaware of Malta's potential as a link between the US, NATO, and the zone of conflict in the eastern Mediterranean.

But Mintoff also realizes that Malta must survive among neighbors ravenously hungry for control of the resources of the Mediterranean Basin. On the other hand, he will no doubt do his best not to allow Malta to become someone else's defense perimeter. For the moment Malta's precarious position on the periphery of global politics makes it essential that Mintoff play off all contenders for regional hegemony.

In this respect the Prime Minister believes that an entente with Libya is the lesser of a number of evils. Although Libya shows interest in neutralizing Tunisia, another contender for control of the Sicilian Narrows, and Italy, from whom Libya gained approval to build some hotels on the island of Pantelleria southwest of Malta, her foreign policy vis-à-vis these neighbors is as yet

too vague to cause overt concern. Libya's ultimate direction may, therefore, hinge on her growing relationship with the Soviet Union.

In September 1975 the London Sunday Telegraph claimed that the port of Tobruk was being extended to the Soviet Navy and that a base at al-Bardia, twelve miles from the Egyptian frontier, was likely to be offered as a facility for Soviet submarines.³² If Libyan power is to be effective in both the offensive and defensive modes it stands to reason that Colonal Qadhdhafi must maintain a military posture independent of his Soviet suppliers. Otherwise he may be forced, as Sadat was, to evict the Russians in order to reassert his control over the offensive potential of his new armed forces. Here we can clearly discern the negative constraints under which contenders for hegemony among the Arabs must operate. Were it not for the need to replace the Egyptians as the upholder of Arab rights against Zionism Libya might never have had to encourage the Soviet presence.

For the present then, a Libyan defensive posture in the Mediterranean seems plausible. Such a posture requires Soviet military protection, a compliant Malta, and a neutralized Italy, Tunisia, and Egypt. Qadhdhafi has already achieved the first three goals. Tunisia, though firmly in the Western camp, does not possess the resources to challenge Libya over possession of the Straits of Sicily. Italian interference is also doubtful because of Italy's internal political and economic unrest. To be certain of Italian

acquiescence, Qadhdhafi is attempting to prevent further slides in the balance of Italian domestic power towards the left with generous loans and the purchase of Italian arms. Thus, he guarantees Italian neutrality between NATO and the Soviet Union by increasing Rome's economic stability and political manoeuvrability

But this situation will not remain so for long. The situation in the Mediterranean can best be described as temporarily static. Libya is poised at any moment to move aggressively forward from a position of defense to one of power projection. A resurgence of Egyptian political power or a change in Mintoff's political or economic requirements could trigger such a move as early as 1979 when the Anglo-Maltese Defense Agreement expires. In the interim, should the Russians reassess their Mediterranean naval policies, Qadhdhafi may have even less time to decide than he bargained for. Under what conditions the Russians would consider such a reassessment remains the crucial question with which this paper will now conclude.

CHAPTER IV

ARE WE SAILING ON A SOVIET SEA?

With the internal political thaw that followed the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, the Soviet Navy embarked on the construction of a fleet to support its expanding global role. Admiral Gorshkov, the father of the new Soviet Navy, called his new fleet "balanced." By this he did not mean a representation of all types of vessels, as understood in the Western sense, but rather a navy "balanced" to deal with a certain number of maritime contingencies.³³ This concept is based, according to George Hudson, on four points worth repeating here: "a fleet balanced to perform nuclear and non-nuclear missions; a fleet balanced to perform peacetime and wartime activities; a fleet balanced in terms of the type of vessels in service; and a fleet whose time spent on the above activities should match other branches of the Soviet armed forces reflecting a balance of forces with the Soviet military."³⁴

Of interest to us is the second point for it reveals the political nature of the Mediterranean strategy which has evolved from Gorshkov's balanced fleet concept. This strategy has been referred to before as "denial of the seas." Once again, Hudson counsels us not to confuse "denial of the seas" with "command of the seas." "Denial of the seas" signifies that one's adversary is not to be allowed to attain command of the seas in an area of

one's own interest.³⁵ Thus, the political aspect of naval strategy assumes paramount importance in the Mediterranean where the Soviets claim a potential sphere of influence by virtue of the contiguity of the Mediterranean Basin to the Black Sea. The Soviet balanced fleet can be expected, therefore, to deny the ability of a competing power to manoeuvre politically without raising conflict to the level of military activity.³⁶

Hence, to achieve its mission the Soviet Navy does not require the kind of aircraft carriers and marine force deployed by the US Sixth Fleet on the inland sea. The presence of helicopter carriers of the Moskva-class, which are designed primarily for anti-submarine warfare, and the new Kiev-class carrier with its V/STOL aircraft, underscore the fact that the Soviets still depend on land and missile forces for their offensive and defensive capabilities.³⁷ Although an argument has been advanced which suggests that the Kiev-class carrier is the first step towards a Soviet sea assertion capability in the Mediterranean, most analysts agree that, for the moment, the Soviet Navy possesses limited ability to project power ashore.³⁸

The military situation in the Mediterranean Basin tends to bear out this conclusion. The Soviet Fifth Squadron competes with the Sixth Fleet for the psychological advantages accruing to a well-orchestrated tactic of political presence which complements nicely the strategy of sea denial. Today both fleets

cruise the Mediterranean showing their respective flags in a cat-and-mouse game of threat and counter-threat. The Sixth Fleet implicitly threatens to project power against the Arabs; the Fifth Squadron attempts to deny the Sixth Fleet the use of the seas for that purpose. As Admiral Stansfield Turner indicates, the question is not whether each navy can indeed accomplish what it sets out to do but what impact its manoeuvres have on the contemplated actions of the littoral states.³⁹ From this perspective, numbers, technology, and techniques of employment have no objective validity. The reality lies with the subjective perceptions of the observable facts. What will really happen in the event of a conflict is still unknown.

The Soviet Navy has been sailing on the inland sea in force since the middle sixties when she was able to coerce the Turks into a relaxation of the restrictions imposed by the Montreux Convention on the passage of heavy warships through the Dardanelles. This is, perhaps, one of the principal reasons behind the ambiguity in defining the capability of the Kiev-class carrier. The strength of the Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean continues to vary. She deploys as many as ninety ships on the inland sea or as few as twenty at any one time. Until now, the Soviet Union has acquired base facilities at, but no rights to, a number of ports on the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, in particular, Latakia and Tartus, Alexandria, Mers al-Kebir near Oran in Algeria,

and Benghazi in Libya. On the other hand, the Soviet Navy still prefers to rely on sheltered deep-water anchorages rather than ports for replenishment and supply. These anchorages are located principally in the Gulf of Hammamet, the Gulf of Sirta, and off the coast of Crete. Since the October War of 1973 the Soviets have lost their facilities in Alexandria and are in the process of pulling out of Latakia and Tartus.⁴⁰ Algeria has been reluctant to provide more than token assistance. This leaves Libya as the only country willing to offer the Soviet Navy regular port facilities. The Sixth Fleet, on the other hand, possesses a permanent home at Naples but a swing to the left in Italy could mean the end or curtailment of such privileges.

For all intents and purposes, the Mediterranean has two almost homeless fleets adrift on its waters. Nevertheless, the ability to remain free of its bases for longer periods of time and a demonstrated capacity to project its power ashore makes the Sixth Fleet a powerful military force for the Russians to contend with. If the Fifth Squadron's intention is to match the fighting strength of the Sixth Fleet it would require, given the perceived capability of its Kiev-class carrier, an air base on the North African coast. Up to now no base rights have materialized. Should the Soviets desire such an arrangement it is still a matter of conjecture whether they will press either the Libyans or the Maltese to comply.

CHAPTER V
SETTING THINGS STRAIGHT

If projection of Soviet power is the question in point base facilities in either Libya or Malta would suffice to serve the purpose. Both, however, would be redundant. Given the ability of the Soviet Navy to deploy for offensive action, the difference in nautical miles from either location to targets of importance is negligible. If, on the other hand, denial of the seas, from both the military and political points of view, is the primary consideration then base facilities in Malta are more attractive. Which way, and under what circumstances, will the Soviet Union go?

The availability of a submarine base in Benghazi and a port across the Mediterranean on the Adriatic coast of Yugoslavia could conceivably obviate the need for a permanent Soviet presence in Malta. It is no secret that Moscow has made overtures to Belgrade with respect to an air and naval installation from which the Leningrad, Moskva, and Kiev may sail into Mediterranean waters. On the other hand, the Grand Harbor at Valletta is admirably suited for the construction of submarine facilities and extensive dockyard repair works. In addition, the airfield at Luqa fulfills the requirement for a complementary airbase. Here the Soviet Union would possess both the advantage of concentration in the Sicilian Narrows and the disadvantage of vulnerability to

a massive attack should the Grand Harbor be closed off from outside waters. If the Soviet Navy continues to emphasize the strategy of denial of the seas, Malta provides an excellent location for the installation of an impressive network of sonar and other underwater detection devices which could monitor the movement of US submarines into the eastern Mediterranean. Such a possibility puts pressure on the US to maintain cordial relations with Italy in order to maintain the Sixth Fleet in Naples and this emphasis on accommodation may bring the Italian communist party more bargaining power in the disposition of political influence within the Italian parliament. But as long as the United States Navy sails from Italy it has no need of an Maltese base. Furthermore, it is not to the Soviet advantage to send the Sixth Fleet scurrying around the Mediterranean looking for a new home if the securing of an alternative to Naples means more, rather than less, freedom of action for the Sixth Fleet.

Besides, it is not the Soviet style to contract military relationships with a nation like Malta whose basic anti-imperialistic philosophy is not in total harmony with the Soviet establishment's point of view. As was pointed out in a previous chapter, Mintoff is interested in making Malta a center for a neutralist "Euromediterraneanism." Preferring to work with more reliable proxies the Soviet Union has taken the gamble that Libya can be trusted to perform the role formerly entrusted to Egypt. In the Soviet view,

Libya's activist, anti-imperialist stance is exemplary. The USSR has much to gain by encouraging Libyan intractability. Recently, for instance, the Soviet Union proposed the idea of counter-cartel to OPEC composed of the radical states of Algeria, Libya, and Iraq. It is logical, therefore, that the Soviet Navy will prefer to remain in Libya while demanding a presence in Malta for their Libyan proxy. In this way the Soviet Union can close the triangle between Benghazi, Rijeka, and Valletta.

Once established, it is not inconceivable that a Libyan naval and military force in Malta might be used actively against a US attempt to project power against the Arabs in the event of another conflagration in the Arab-Israeli zone. Presently the Libyans have a small navy of FOXTROT-class submarines and OSA-class patrol boats, but if augmented by other Soviet craft and more missile corvettes from France and Italy, she would have a significant interdictory force present for action in the Sicilian Narrows.

There are secondary advantages to a Libyan presence in Malta. Recently, Qadhafi has been very receptive to Fidel Castro's new initiatives in Africa and has applauded his efforts to keep Ethiopia and Somalia within the Soviet orbit. Should Qadhafi export his brand of regional "Castroism" to a new base in Valletta, Malta may become the "Cuba" of the Mediterranean. Such a move would certainly put great pressure on the Tunisian and Egyptian "renegade" regimes to comply with a Libyan-Soviet policy

for dominance on the inland sea.

Of course, the success of such ventures depends on the growth of firm and unalterable common interests between Libya and the Soviet Union, on one hand, and Libya and Malta, on the other. In this region of proven volatility, no lasting political relationships can be assured. The three countries are not natural allies. The Soviet Union's ambiguous standing among the non-radical Arab countries militates against the consolidation of long-term interests with Libya. And Malta, for her part, remains closer ideologically to Bourguiba's brand of Tunisian "Euromediterraneanism" than to Qadhafi's mercurial Mediterranean politics. Unfortunately for all the actors in this drama Tunisia possesses no exportable wealth which she can employ as a lever to pry Malta loose from her Tripoli connections. Nevertheless, it is not at all certain that Malta will comply in the long-run given Mintoff's flair for autonomy in political and economic relationships with the outside. In 1979, when the British leave Malta, the first intimations of a future scenario in the Mediterranean will appear. Until then, all attempts to propose appropriate responses to the questions posed in this paper will be premature.

CHAPTER VI

SOME AFTERTHOUGHTS AND PREJUDICES

This paper has endeavored to demonstrate that Malta has a negative strategic value but is, nonetheless, pregnant with possibilities in the event of a strong and durable Maltese-Libyan entente. At this moment in time the US does not require Maltese bases. Yet, the Maltese situation demands our constant scrutiny if Malta is to be kept out of the hands of our adversaries.

Thus, we should develop a forward-looking plan to deal with future eventualities. We have already made a number of mistakes in Malta which can be remedied. As Jesse Lewis points out, the US erred in not stepping in, except at the eleventh hour, to help Britain out of her 1971 Maltese quandary with either our good offices or our immediate and unrestricted financial aid.⁴¹ Reluctantly, we decided to up Mintoff's ante for the British bases and then only as a stop-gap measure. By 1979 we must certainly be prepared to present Mintoff a proposal for the internal development of Malta that will prevent him from trading his bases for Libyan money. Moreover, we must maintain, in the interim, compatible relations with Valletta so that the Sixth Fleet can continue to show the flag as it plays the political hide-and-seek game with the Soviet Fifth Squadron on the inland sea.

More important, we have important fence-mending tasks to accomplish in NATO. Our Italian allies must be convinced that we

remain committed to a free democratic Italy within the Atlantic alliance. This requires a co-opting of the Italian Communist Party into the decision-making process so that an alienated Berlinguer will not play us against Moscow or opt for hegemonical politics. To achieve these ends, we must promote a mutual cooperation between the United States and Western European communist parties should a post-Tito Yugoslavia turn once again towards the Soviet Union. Only in this way will we be able to continue to call the Mediterranean "mare nostrum."

FOOTNOTES

1. Brian Blouet, *A Short History of Malta* (Frederick Praeger, New York), 1967, pp. 16-17.
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3. *Ibid.*, also cf. William E. Newman, Lt. Cdr. (USN), "Malta: Who Needs It?" (Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell AFB, Alabama), 1972, p. 19.
4. Berry, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 12, also cf. Klaus Herkener, Lt. Col. (GAF), "The Threat of a Socialist Malta," (Air War College, Maxwell AFB, Alabama), 1972, ch. I.
6. Billy J. McNair, Col. (USAF), "Malta: East or West," (Air War College, Maxwell AFB, Alabama), 1972, p. 29.
7. Edith Dobie, *Malta's Road to Independence* (University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma), 1967, p. 1p3.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
9. Berry, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
10. Dobie, *op. cit.*, p. 253.
11. McNair, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
12. Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
13. C. L. Sulzberger, "Dreams of a Little Man," *New York Times*, 9 January 1977, p. 21.
14. For a discussion see my "To Merge or Not to Merge: A Study of Arab Movements Towards Socio-political Union," (Directorate of Documentary Research, Maxwell AFB, Alabama), 1974, ch. III.
15. For an illuminating discussion of this point see Anouar Abdel-Malek, *Egypte: Société Militaire* (Editions du Seuil, Paris), 1962, pp. 223-226.
16. *The Washington Post*, 12 October 1974 and 11 April 1974.

17. *The Christian Science Monitor*, 3 September 1974.
18. *The Baltimore Sun*, 9 May 1975.
19. *Ibid.*, 30 June 1975.
20. *The Washington Post*, 25 May 1976.
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22. *The Washington Post*, 9-10 September 1975.
23. *The Middle East Economic Digest* (Beirut, Lebanon), 7 January 1972, p. 16.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, 28 January 1972, p. 106.
26. *supra*, p. 7.
27. *Middle East Economic Digest*, 4 February 1972, p. 133.
28. *Ibid.*, 28 July 1972, p. 857.
29. *Ibid.*, 15 September 1972, p. 1056.
30. *Foreign Broadcast Information Service* (Washington, D.C.), 25 May 1976, p. 1-3, and 24 December 1974, pp. 1-3,4
31. *Ibid.*, 24 May 1976, p. 1-3.
32. *Ibid.*, 23 September 1975, p. I-1
33. George E. Hudson, "Soviet Naval Doctrine and Soviet Politics, 1953-1975," *World Politics*, vol. XXIX, October 1976, p. 97.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
38. Stansfield Turner, Adm. (USN), "The Naval Balance: Not Just a Numbers Game," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1977, p. 341.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 342.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 342-3.

41. Jesse W. Lewis, Jr., *The Strategic Balance in the Mediterranean* (American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Washington, D.C.), 1976, pp. 98-9.

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The Mediterranean Basin





