Hegemony in the Mediterranean

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Volume 14 • Number 3
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By Luigi Federzoni

THE Mediterranean question has existed less than three centuries. In classical and mediæval times there could be no Mediterranean problem for the simple reason that there then existed nothing but the Mediterranean. By this I mean that only in the lands which faced naturally towards the middle sea did there develop, flourish, struggle and decay Powers capable of creating civilizations. All of history converged upon that sea, most often by way of the great streams that fed it. There it is that archeological research is continually pushing back the curtain of time, revealing to us ever more remote origins of Mediterranean pre-history in Egypt, Crete, Malta, and even Libya. The paintings at Knossos and the vases of Vaphio attest the vigorous artistic, economic, and social development of the Aegian civilization, as the carved stones and pottery of pre-dynastic Egypt demonstrate that five thousand years before Christ and two thousand before the Pharaohs certain manifestations of organized life had attained unsurpassable perfection in the Valley of the Nile.

For millennia, then, the Mediterranean was a world — we may say the world. There it was that the sea Powers arose and succeeded each other as the rulers of that closed domain. Did any of them dare pass its limits? Some have tried to prove that the "Odyssey" is not, as we long thought, the drama of the legendary exordium of adolescent humanity, but rather, like the "Iliad" (a synthesis of a resplendent age that had fallen into oblivion) the poetic transfiguration of a complex of terrifying inventions intentionally propagated by the Phœnicians with the purpose of dissuading others from venturing with their ships into the little-known waters of the western Mediterranean or into the mysterious immensity that lay beyond the Pillars of Hercules. It is told that after the voyages of Bartholomew Diaz and Vasco da Gama, the Portuguesebethought themselves of the same device to fend off their rivals from the Cape route to the East. In the "Lusiads" of Camoens the monster Adamastor, the terror of those sailing to the Orient, was probably — like the Cyclops, the Siren, Scylla and Charybdis in the Homeric poem — one of those fantastic fables invented in defense of a trade monopoly. Which proves that
in every epoch the sea Powers have adopted every means, not excluding mendacity, to forestall the rise of possible competitors.

Certain it is that the Pillars of Hercules long remained the limit to the economic and political enterprise of the Mediterranean peoples, a limit which they felt neither the courage nor the necessity to exceed. The knowledge of how to reach the Cassiterides, with their wealth of metals, was cancelled from the memory of man by the Phœnicians who alone knew the itinerary. Dante, perhaps recalling the bold attempt on which the Genoese brothers Vivaldi disappeared, launches Ulysses from the "narrow gorge" on his "wild flight." Even later the Pillars of Hercules were still the frontier of ordered and creative civilization. True, in the Dark Ages the Northmen carried home from their raids, back to the barbarians somnolent in the northern forests, the happy tumult of war and the seeds of a new life; but these germinated fully only when the blond progeny of the Vikings appeared within the Mediterranean to plunder along the sun-bathed strands of Provence and Italy.

Then came the era of the great geographical discoveries, a brief, overwhelming outburst that suddenly shifts the axis of the world's life. For two centuries the paths of conquest and trade lead out to ever more remote goals, passing over seemingly limitless horizons in the pursuit of almost magic visions of wealth and adventure. Man's daring and ambition know no bounds. He is impelled by the desire to possess, the fascination of danger and glory, the intoxication of inexhaustible booty. The mediaeval mirage of an opulent Levant overflowing with spices and silks pales before the more dazzling myths of El Dorado and Golconda.

The rapid decadence of the maritime Powers in the Mediterranean was accompanied by ever bolder usurpation in that sea by the fleets of the North African corsairs. These even dared to confront the formidable squadrons with which Spain maintained her hegemony from Gibraltar and Ceuta to the Straits of Messina. For two centuries the struggle for the formation of new imperial hierarchies took place outside in the vastness of the oceans. It was waged there, on a stage of a magnitude never before seen, while mare nostrum, which had reflected the glory of Rome, seemed by comparison an abandoned swamp.

But the time came when the bands of adventurers and pioneers had spread out over the two American continents. Europe then turned to the assault of the hitherto impenetrable barriers of
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Asia. The shortest ways of approach lay through the Mediterranean. Few at that time had a rational understanding of this new historical cycle and probably no one a conscious program, though it is true that for a moment there was one who, judging from his designs, seemed to foresee events—Oliver Cromwell. Often instinct, motivated by the lure of immediate objectives, guides nations as well as individuals to unforeseen ends. England, youthful antagonist of all-potent Spain, persuaded herself that to break that nation’s hegemony she must strike at the organic center of her adversary’s life—the Mediterranean. Throughout the eighteenth century increasing English naval activity was to be noted there. Every occasion or pretext to intervene was seized upon by Britain. The War of the Spanish Succession added to the anti-Spanish policy an anti-French one. It happened that during that war Admiral Rooke, having failed to debark at Toulon, sought on his way homeward to dissipate the impression of his ill-success with some brilliant coup de main. And so he occupied the rock of Gibraltar, then weakly defended by a small Spanish garrison. Without knowing it, he secured for England an acquisition opening new routes and new horizons for her naval and imperial policy. Few military episodes have introduced such consequences and such complications into the history of Europe. From that day, August 4, 1704, dates the Mediterranean problem. Though it concerns all the littoral states, it is above all a British problem.

II

With the seizure of Gibraltar, which she was never to relinquish, England fell heir to the hegemony of the closed sea, destined again to become the master route of international currents and the locus of the greatest conflicts between nations. Thenceforward England’s action for the development and preservation of her Mediterranean supremacy was tortuous, manifold, and continuous. To this end she employed her power and her astuteness, her courage and her money, her labor and her good fortune; yet in every phase of this problem she has constantly masked her action with impersonal motivations and formulas. Sometimes she will justify her behavior by reference to ethical principles, sufficient to counterbalance or at least reduce the weight of material interests. This is not the result of a premeditated calculation; it is the happy coincidence of idealism with profit—a coincidence which constitutes the characteristic expression of the
British national genius and which originates in that complex of sentiments and moral attitudes which are at once the product and the cause of her religious and political Protestantism and which form the indispensable basis for her institutional, social, and economic structure.

This phenomenon is to be observed in England’s acquisition of the Mediterranean hegemony. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries English activity was presented as a liberating movement against oppressive and dogmatic Spanish Catholicism. During the period of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire, she assumed the defense of the legitimate order in Europe. In succession, one after the other, she raised the banner of nationality; proclaimed the necessity of arresting the menacing descent of the autocratic Russian colossus towards the shores of the Adriatic and the Ægean; abetted the victory of Christian peoples against the barbarous tyranny of the Turks; made her objective in the World War the life-and-death struggle against militarism; and finally, today, promulgates the new gospel, for which she calls upon the faithful to join in a new crusade, the defense of the pacifist ideology of the League of Nations.

One after another these moral theses have been followed with sincere fervor by wide currents of British public opinion, as well as by diverse and influential sectors of opinion elsewhere. But in every case these appeals to principle have been firmly grafted on to the mighty trunk of Britain’s imperial interests.

Typical likewise is the faculty of the English for adapting and changing their diplomatic position to accord with circumstances and convenience. To further her own Mediterranean and world hegemony England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries adopted the device of creating destructive coalitions against particular Powers. In the nineteenth century, when the balance of power prevailed, she followed the policy of isolation and of maintaining a navy twice as strong as any two. By the first decade of the present century she had passed over to the system of defensive alliances, and finally after the World War to the concept of international collaboration by means of the League, which is regarded by the practical sense of the British ruling class as offering the least danger and the greatest usefulness, but which is exalted by English Protestant morality as the sacred fortress of universal justice.
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England’s action in the Mediterranean we may divide into four periods:
1. The destruction of the hegemony of other states.
2. The prevention of new hegemonies from forming.
3. The creation of a colonial empire of her own with its base in the Mediterranean.
4. The preservation and consolidation of her own predominant imperial position.

The first period began when England came to the Mediterranean to seek out her oceanic adversaries, Spain and France, in order to overcome them on their own ground. The Treaty of Utrecht altered the European equilibrium in favor of England by giving her the naval supremacy of the Mediterranean, and this in turn led her to primacy over Spain and France in the Atlantic.

During the second period England sought either to prevent or to cut short every hostile action that might have menaced not only her predominance in the Mediterranean but her Asiatic empire, then in the process of formation. The struggle was first carried on against the oriental ambitions of Napoleon and then against the North African policy of the Restoration. With his expedition to Egypt, Bonaparte struck out for Asia and its overland routes in order to deliver a blow against India, heart of Britain’s nascent imperial power. Thenceforth India and the Mediterranean became indissoluble elements in British policy. Aboukir and Trafalgar destroyed the oriental dream of Napoleon. Charles X sought to revive France’s Mediterranean policy by throwing the reconstituted forces of France against Algiers; but the July Revolution of 1830, undoubtedly fomented by the British opposition to Charles’ adventure, complicated and prolonged the undertaking. The conflict between England and France for the Mediterranean, now open, now latent, endured down to the accords of 1899 and 1904. Even more overt and resolute was the struggle against the “Mediterraneanization” of Russia, with its double objective: Constantinople and the Straits. The acquisition of Byzantium would have perfected Russia's religious and ethnic system; while the possession of the Straits would have conferred upon her a direct outlet into the Mediterranean. To conjure, therefore, the Russian peril, England embarked on the Crimean War. The results, then, of this second period are: a new base of action at Malta, the closure of the
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Straits to the Russian navy, and the occupation of the Ionian Islands and their sudden cession to Greece as a propitiatory gift to the new Danish dynasty ensconced at Athens.

The third period, which lasted until the postwar settlement, was determined by the decay of Turkey and the opening of the Suez Canal. During these years England enlarged her colonial plans to include the entire sector of the Mediterranean-Black Sea-Indian Ocean, a sector which united Europe to India and the Orient.

Egypt was used by England as the vertex of her two great imperial lines: Cape-to-Cairo and Port Said-India-Malaya. The Mediterranean thus became the political and strategic nexus of the whole empire. Across the deserts and immense forests of the African continent British policy moved systematically from north to south and from south to north, utilizing the marvelous initiative, constancy, patience, and pertinacity of her best men. Territorial occupation followed upon geographical exploration. The stations set up by the traders along the coast of the Indian Ocean soon became the capitals of new colonies. The Sudanese and Boer campaigns consolidated the two ends of the Cape-to-Cairo route, while the connecting links were added after the war by the acquisition of mandates over the former German colonies.

In the actuation of this plan England for a moment collided with France, resurgent from her dark period of trial after 1871. The culmination of this rivalry came at Fashoda. Thereafter it subsided through the agreement to partition Africa peacefully between them: English predominance was recognized in the east, French in the west; England disinterested herself in Morocco, France held aloof in Egypt.

Thus came to pass the Entente which was to suffocate the incipient imperialism of Germany and its menace to the routes to the East. In the eastern Mediterranean, in order to ward off the danger of a Russian thrust to reach Alexandretta, England in 1876 possessed herself of the island of Cyprus. But Russia later dissipated her forces on the plains of Manchuria; and after the Bolshevik Revolution she entirely eliminated herself from the struggle for the Mediterranean. A much graver peril was the march of Germany towards Baghdad, which bade fair to nullify the value of England's positions on the Red Sea route. This danger the Great War removed. England resolved none the less to create for herself a land route from the Mediterranean to the
Indian Ocean. The Treaty of Sèvres was to have guaranteed the fulfilment of this design. But even the most subtly calculated policy is subject to great errors; this was certainly the case when the custody of the Smyrna zone was very cunningly taken from Italy, to whom it had been promised in the Convention of St. Jean de Maurienne, and confided to the fictitious imperialism of the Greeks. The unexpected reaction of the Turks brusquely over-turned this plan, neatly arranged in the protocols but not corresponding to the political and historical realities.

Yet England was not discouraged by this negative result. The very Treaty of Lausanne, which consecrated the new situation in the eastern Mediterranean, she used as the touchstone of well-meditated and efficacious action to be exercized over the Arab states under her mandate. To these states is assigned the duty of protecting the overland route from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. The point of departure is Palestine, which offers itself as an eventual substitute for Egypt, either because the Canal can be defended as well from the east as the west, or, in case the canal is lost completely, because Akaba can replace Suez and Haifa can become both a naval base and the outlet for the oil of Mosul. The creation of a Jewish national home through the Zionist movement can be utilized to offset politically the Christian and Moslem groups in Palestine. The existence of the buffer-state of Transjordania serves above all to separate Palestine from the mass of the Arabs. In England's tortuous yet agile Arab policy Iraq undoubtedly represents her most successful creation, so successful, in fact, that she has considered it possible to confer on Iraq formal independence.

III

Thus we are at the fourth phase: the consolidation and preservation of the hegemony over the Mediterranean as the base for Britain's great imperial structure. London believes that among the possible factors which might upset the pax britannica in the Mediterranean three stand out: Egyptian nationalism, a strong Turkey, and the rise of Fascist Italy.

Effective domination over Egypt undoubtedly flatters the amour propre of the English, though it brings them vexations. But the real reasons for their continued stay in Egypt are two: to command the Suez Canal and to preserve access to the Sudan. However, as we have seen, the possession of Palestine can assure
the safety of the Red Sea route. Furthermore, the bold creation of Port Sudan has rendered the Sudan virtually independent of Egypt. England can therefore suffer the loss of Egypt without great damage to her imperial interests in Africa and India. From all of which emerges the importance of the Red Sea as an indispensable complement of the Mediterranean — indeed, an integral prolongation of it.

Against Turkey, revivified under Kemal, England has placed the counterbalance of the Arab states; but in all this region British policy must operate with such elasticity that often it seems contradictory. Its foremost objectives are to prevent the Russo-Turkish understanding from becoming too close, and to give positive political meaning to the entente between Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. Particularly intense is English vigilance in defense of the clauses in the Treaty of Lausanne relative to the freedom of the Straits. The Ankara government complains about these continually. Perhaps it is not unwarranted to suppose that the very special sympathy with which London has followed recent events in Greece reflects a desire to see the latter return to an anti-Turkish policy.

But by far the most important of the factors that might trouble the English in the Mediterranean is the presence of Fascist Italy.

Everyone knows how England made use during and following the Risorgimento of the new stabilizing element which the creation of Italy brought into being. In the Mediterranean the British and Italians were long in accord with the Triple Alliance, the principal animus of which was anti-French and anti-Russian. In like manner, after the tragedy of Khartum, the English wanted Italy on the coast of the Red Sea to protect their flank during the reconquest of the Sudan. But today there is no French peril in the Mediterranean, much less a Russian or a German one. Consequently certain British political circles have come to the conclusion that the necessity of friendly collaboration with Italy no longer exists.

As long as Italy was weakened by the chronic crises of factionalism and morbid parliamentarism, her occupation of Lybia and the Ægean Islands and her consequent possession of the trans-Mediterranean lines Sicily-Tripoli and Dodecanese-Tobruk were not regarded as offering an immediate menace to the great imperial artery from Gibraltar to Port Said. In any event, England left no stone unturned to weaken our rights over the
Ægean Islands and to make their definitive acquisition impossible. But now that Fascism has incalculably strengthened Italy's spiritual, political, and military efficiency, England judges the alteration in the traditional balance of Mediterranean forces to be harmful to her. And she has taken umbrage at Italy's activities, especially when there appeared a prospect of a general entente between Italy and France, bringing to an end the period of bitter attrition which has long separated the two Latin nations.

The attempt now being made by London to fabricate a new and wider system of bases and armed assistance from other Powers — using as pretext a hypothetical Italian attack on the English fleet — at least proves London's total indifference in the face of the agreements reached at Rome on January 7 of last year. She should have discerned therein the fundamental bulwark of European peace. But the truth is that England loves peace above everything else — but peace with a salting of discord. In the Mediterranean it has ever been her wish to preserve a moderate but irreducible amount of discord, which, without endangering peace, would foster her own predominance. The open opposition to our legitimate claims in Ethiopia is primarily the reflex of English Mediterranean preoccupations, aggravated by the Rome Agreements. We may say that on January 7 were sown the seeds that bore fruit on November 18. This opposition, as we have seen, manifested itself in recourse to the Covenant of the League and to all the possibilities of collective action provided for in that document. England desires from the League collective solidarity even in the Mediterranean, and at the same time a certain freedom of manoeuvre for herself against particular Powers. The League, that is, must give her the desired support, but at the same time follow a procedural system which permits England to evade the fulfilment of specific obligations outside the Covenant, thus in reality assuring her own liberty of action. This may be described as the policy of the greatest good with the least risk; but for third parties it is a policy of suffocation, tending under a legal and impersonal (because collective) cloak to bar the road to every new force, which is condemned as troublesome merely for being new.

The Anglo-French proposals for the settlement of the Italo-Ethiopia conflict, if England's immediate repudiation of them is any indication, conformed to her customary attitude of suspicion
and hostility more than she wished to admit. We were to have decided whether it was advisable for us to accept them as a basis of discussion. After reading the stenographic record of the speech made by Sir Samuel Hoare before the Commons on December 19, I have my doubts about them. Indeed, even after making allowance for the psychological influence of the occasion on the former Foreign Minister and on the Members of the House, the evidence which he cited to justify his proposals prove that it would have been absolutely impossible for Italy to obtain any better terms. As for the spirit of the proposals, at least on England's part we need only recall that Sir Samuel presented the so-called territorial exchanges (Assab and an accompanying "wide corridor" in return for a small strip of desertic Ogaden and a part of Tigré, excluding Axum) as primarily satisfaction for the aspirations of the Negus for an outlet to the sea.

Such an admission characterizes the serious historical error committed by England in granting preference not to a great European nation, the mother of civilization, but to a barbaric horde of blacks whose savage concept of war arouses the horror and contempt of anyone with a sense of human dignity. This preference has brought us Italians bitter sorrow, but a manly one. We have reacted from it with the will to avenge our noble fallen soldiers with final victory. The moral and material support which that British decision has brought to our enemies will cost the blood of many more of our soldiers than would otherwise have been necessary, the same blood that during the Great War we spilled as valued allies of the English. But above all it will signify irreparable loss to the authority of the white race; and a day in the not distant future may come when it will be more costly still to the nation which rules so many colored peoples.

The substance of the Anglo-French proposals constituted merely a basis for negotiation, the acceptance of which would have frustrated Italian rights recognized by England in the agreements of 1891 and 1894, and renewed in the conventions of 1906 and 1925. It would have frustrated the prodigious spirit of abnegation and discipline with which the heroic work of Il Duce and the action of the Fascist régime have infused the Italian people. Above all, it would have frustrated the ardor, the valor, the sacrifice of the soldiers and Black Shirts of Italy on the fields of Africa.

This crisis, which is certainly dangerous, though not through any fault of Italy, must be overcome. It will be overcome by the
calm and resolute prosecution of the action undertaken. Every one must make up his mind that, alike in the Mediterranean and in East Africa, Italy is an irrepressible political reality. No one has the right to ask a nation of forty-four millions to renounce its future.

In any case, Italy’s African aspirations are only marginal to Britain’s imperial interests. On this point Il Duce has repeatedly issued declarations that leave no room for equivocation. Nor has Italy any reason for seeking to undermine the position of England, for that would displace the balance of power to our own disadvantage. We are, then, entitled to a better understanding of our course from other peoples. The problem of the Mediterranean and the related problem of East Africa involve nothing less than the question of our very independence. For a state, certainly a great state, cannot attain the conditions necessary for its independence without control of the maritime routes leading to it — unless, perchance, it happens to enjoy complete economic self-sufficiency. This clearly is not the case of Italy, poor in raw materials and surrounded by a closed sea. These facts are so well-known and so self-evident that we may legitimately expect others to come to appreciate our position more accurately.

Italy’s loyal and positive collaboration in the cause of general peace, documented in a memorable series of international acts, is still precious, is still necessary for the universal ends of civilization. In the service of that civilization Italy can today place not only the force of her intelligence and her labor but her new political and military power.