

The 5+5 Dialogue after 30 years: Prospects and Challenges for Western Mediterranean Cooperation

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Over the last 30 years, the Mediterranean Basin has witnessed countless initiatives to promote dialogue and cooperation between both shores of the *Mare Nostrum*. These initiatives have been heterogeneous as regards to the number of members involved – the whole Mediterranean region versus sub-regional dynamics –, the degree of political ambition – strong cooperation versus informal political dialogues – and the sectoral areas concerned.

In this context, the first Euro-Mediterranean Partnership was launched in 1995 at the Barcelona Conference while the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) was created in 2008. Similarly, the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was launched in 2003, reviewed in 2015 and given a new impetus for southern Mediterranean countries recently in February 2021 under the scope of the “New Agenda for the Mediterranean.”

However, despite the intergovernmental nature of such cooperation being channelled heterogeneously over the years, with the goal of bolstering prosperity, stability and security for the region, none of the aforementioned initiatives could claim to be the first in scope and essence. Indeed, the 5+5 Dialogue is

the oldest active forum for dialogue and cooperation among Mediterranean countries, 2020 marking its 30th anniversary.

Its creation in 1990 was a milestone on the path towards Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, as it facilitated the development of the first ever dialogue structure to bring together the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of five countries from the northwestern Mediterranean – Spain, France, Italy, Malta¹ and Portugal – and five countries from the southwestern Mediterranean – Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia. The essence of the intergovernmental structures created in the first two meetings in Rome (1990) and Algiers (1991) would become a prelude to – and to some extent served as inspiration for – the cooperation framework that was built in 1995 with the Barcelona Process.

The 5+5 Dialogue: Origin, Essence and Impasse

As ministers expressed in the first two Ministerial Declarations in Rome (Déclaration commune, 1990)² and Algiers (Déclaration Ministérielle d’Alger, 1991),³ the original and longstanding aim of the 5+5 Dialogue was to enhance western Mediterranean cooperation by finding joint solutions to shared challenges in the region. In that context, member states agreed to the principles of the comprehensiveness and indivisibility of the challenges of the western Mediterranean, expressing their conviction that the resulting advantages for each country – and for the whole sub-region – in terms of political stability, economic and human development, social progress and culture

¹ Malta participated as an observer member in 1990 but became a full member in the ministerial meeting held in Tunis in 1991.

² See the Ministerial Declaration: <https://medthink5plus5.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/1990-Roma-Exteriors.pdf>

³ See the Ministerial Declaration: <https://medthink5plus5.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/1991-Alger-Exteriors.pdf>

could contribute to the transformation of the Mediterranean at large into an area of peace and cooperation (Déclaration commune, 1990). Likewise, ministers asserted that the current development gaps between the North and the South shores of the western Mediterranean Basin could generate socio-economic imbalances that may lead to serious challenges for the stability and well-being of the whole region, and, therefore, there was a more pressing need than ever to cooperate to overcome those challenges (Déclaration Ministérielle d'Alger, 1991).

In actual fact, the first two ministerial gatherings and their respective Ministerial Declarations laid the foundations for developing the initial 5+5 Dialogue structures and set the main guidelines that would shape western Mediterranean cooperation and solidarity through intergovernmental dialogue processes. At the same time, the potential offered by the new regional context was also key to further intensifying member's efforts and establishing a strong framework for dialogue and cooperation that helped advance towards greater integration, prosperity and socio-economic development on both shores of the western Mediterranean Basin. This momentum was preceded by two key facts that shaped regional dynamics: the recent establishment of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) in 1989 and the publication of the Renewed Agenda for the Mediterranean (1990) a few months earlier, both events giving the necessary impetus for this initiative to be consolidated in October 1990.

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the 5+5 Dialogue aimed to strengthen sub-regional cooperation dynamics in the western Mediterranean, but as a complementary and non-replacement mechanism to the existing official bilateral cooperation between the European Economic Community (ECC) and the recently established AMU. The 5+5 Dialogue working dynamics were envisioned to strengthen the good neighbourhood relations between Europe and the Maghreb while furthering discussions among the ten countries on issues of strategic and mutual interest, especially related to foreign affairs.

At that time, the need to harness the new Euro-Arab relations through an informal cooperation mechanism outweighed the latent differences that some of the members had over two major conflicts that were shaping the region from West to East. First, the Western Sahara war was still raging, although at the

end of 1991 the two sides would reach a ceasefire agreement; second, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was escalating in violence, while the Oslo Peace Accords would not be brokered until 1993. However, these two ongoing crises did not represent a stumbling block for the founding members, and neither did they interfere with the dialogue roundtables and working groups that were formed around the western Mediterranean countries. Moreover, the personal implication of both the Italian and Spanish governments, precisely through their Prime Ministers Bettino Craxi and Felipe González, was crucial to ensure the 5+5 Dialogue's formation.

However, while these warlike events did not negatively influence the consolidation of intergovernmental working dynamics for two years, two other events at the end of 1991 did indeed break the 5+5 Dialogue cooperation, leading to a 10-year lethargy where no other ministerial meetings among its ten members were convened. Firstly, the involvement of two nationals of Libyan origin in the bombing of a transatlantic flight – also known as the Lockerbie bombing – where 243 passengers and 16 cabin crew were killed, led to the country suffering reprisals from the international community and international isolation in 1991. And secondly, the legislative elections in Algeria that took place in December 1991 resulted in the outbreak of an armed civil war between pro-Islamist rebel groups against the Algerian government, which plunged the country into an armed civil war that lasted ten years.

Rising from the Ashes: An Evolving Format amid Regional Dynamics and Area Needs

After the end of the Algerian crisis and the lifting of the isolationist context against Libya, the 5+5 Dialogue in its foreign affairs format resumed in Lisbon in January 2001. A working format was established by which ministers would meet at least once a year and working groups were developed to discuss cooperation actions over selected areas. Moreover, after the Rabat meeting in 2008, it was decided that the presidency of the foreign affairs ministerial format would adopt a bicephalous head by which the country hosting the gathering would share the co-presidency with the outgoing country. Aside from the rare occasions such as in 2006, 2007,

2011 and 2017 when there were no meetings, every year since 2001, the ministers of foreign affairs of the ten founding members have met to discuss issues of common interest to both shores, and to further advance western Mediterranean cooperation and greater integration.

However, a turning point for the 5+5 Dialogue arrived in 2003 during the foreign affairs meeting held in Sainte-Maxime.⁴ Ministers gathered in France decided to promote a first-ever Summit of Heads of State and Government, which was held in Tunis in December 2003. This intergovernmental gathering served to strengthen the 5+5 Dialogue structures and its continuation in line with the spirit of the Declarations of Rome (1990), Algiers (1991) and Lisbon (2001), i.e., encouraging peace, political stability and socio-economic development through regional integration and cooperation in the western Mediterranean region. Moreover, given the increasing role of the European Union (EU) as a core interlocutor in the region, – the European Neighbourhood Policy was recently launched in that same year – Heads of State and Government recalled the importance of the EU accompanying their cooperation efforts and processes with a parallel effort to support the countries on the southern shore of the western Mediterranean Basin (Déclaration de Tunis, 2003).⁵ The formal involvement of the EU, first through the European Commission and later also through the European External Action Service, underlined the increasing mutual attractiveness in the relations between the Maghreb and EU countries.

As a consequence of the events that occurred in the Middle East and North Africa region after 2011, the political, social and economic landscape of Europe's southern neighbourhood was plunged into turmoil. The latter prompted the decision to hold a second Summit of Heads of State and Government in La Valletta (2012)⁶ to reinforce the dialogue mechanisms and cooperation framework created by the 5+5 Dialogue. Upon the suggestion of the European Commission, the Summit endorsed the regular presence of the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean

in the ministerial meetings of the 5+5 Dialogue, while it also welcomed the readiness of the UfM to assist in the implementation of decisions adopted by ministerial meetings and flagship projects identified in the framework of the 5+5 Dialogue.

Specifically, the 5+5 Dialogue was created with the aim of encouraging inter-ministerial cooperation in areas of mutual interest related to foreign affairs, while the celebration of two Summits of Heads of State and Government helped give visibility and strength to the initiative. However, in recent years the sub-regional gathering has increased its activity in a significant number of sectoral fields, thereby expanding its original framework towards thematic ministerial summits beyond external action. This expansion occurred due to changing regional interests and the growing need to include other types of ministerial dialogues on issues that to a greater or lesser extent had an influence on improving western Mediterranean integration, cooperation and development. In this regard, the ten founding members have also organized ministerial meetings concerning affairs related to the interior (since 2002), migration (since 2002), defence (since 2004), tourism (since 2006), transport (since 2007), education (since 2009) and environment and energy (since 2010). Other ministerial formats that have been organized – yet have not fully reached the working dynamics of the other formats – were related to agriculture, water, finances, culture, research and higher education, and territorial development.

Furthermore, and with the aim to open the scope of the Dialogue 5+5 to civil society and business organizations, including national parliamentary representatives, events all over the region have been organized back-to-back with the ministerial gatherings in recent years. For instance, based on the mandate of the Summit of Heads of State and Government in Malta (2012), the first Economic and Business Forum was organized in Barcelona (2013) and Lisbon (2014). Likewise, the first ever forum on civil society was held in Tangiers (2015) – organized by the national networks of the Anna Lindh

⁴ See the Ministerial Declaration: <https://medthink5plus5.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/2003-Saint-Maxime-A-Etrangeres-pdf.pdf>

⁵ See the Final Declaration of Heads of State and Government: https://medthink5plus5.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/FR_2003-Tunis-Chefs-dEtat.pdf

⁶ See the Final Declaration of Heads of State and Government: <https://medthink5plus5.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2012-La-Vallette-Chefs-dEtat.pdf>

Foundation –, as well as the *Med Think 5+5*⁷ Forum, which was organized in 2016 in Barcelona, and since then in Lisbon (2017), Algiers (2018) and Valletta (2019). Finally, the first meeting of the parliamentary presidents of the 5+5 Dialogue countries was held in Tripoli in 2003.

Prospects and Challenges for Western Mediterranean Cooperation

In its thirty-year history, the 5+5 Dialogue (also referred to as the Western Mediterranean Forum) has proven to be a flexible and trustful framework of sub-regional cooperation. Notwithstanding the complex regional environment, member states of the Western Mediterranean Forum have continued to rely on this intergovernmental dialogue, and so ministerial meetings have occurred on a relatively regular basis, particularly in the foreign affairs format, alongside the core sectoral fields of defence, interior affairs, migration and transport. In the remaining sectoral areas and new ones that have been instituted in recent years, the organization of ministerial meetings has instead relied on the specific initiative of individual member states like France, Morocco, Spain, Tunisia or Algeria due to the informal and non-institutional nature of such a grouping.

The informality of the 5+5 Dialogue has been unequivocally regarded as a virtue that has provided strength to this sub-regional cooperation framework (Coustillière, 2012), in particular if one considers that multilateralism has weakened worldwide, as well as across the region, but also bearing in mind the region has been more exposed to security threats since 2012. The latter might not have necessarily diminished the appetite for multilateral action in favour of individual bilateral relations, but it could have steered the attention of the involved parties towards other more effective multilateral and regional frameworks.

Against this backdrop, the 5+5 Dialogue continues to be one of the two main intergovernmental

settings, alongside the Union for the Mediterranean, through which the ten countries of the grouping conduct their regional cooperation in the Mediterranean. Despite there being no prospects of a short to mid-term upgrade of the current institutional settings of the 5+5 Dialogue, there are several areas of improvement needed to turn this sub-regional grouping into a more effective cooperation framework without losing the benefits of its informal character:

Enhance Inter-institutional Coordination Namely with the European Union and the Union for the Mediterranean

As noted beforehand, the Summits of Heads of State and Government of 2003 and 2012, respectively, facilitated the involvement of the EU institutions and the Secretariat of the UfM as observers of the 5+5 Dialogue. The informal nature of the Dialogue hinders the possibility that this coordination can become structural for all ministerial formats and permanent over time. If the rotating presidencies of the various ministerial formats of the 5+5 Dialogue established regular concertation and coordination with the European Commission (through the Directorate General for the Neighbourhood, and by extension the other concerned sectoral Directorates General) and the EU External Action Service, which acts as the northern co-presidency of the UfM, their respective presidency's agendas and topics for cooperation would be streamlined with those of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, and, in return, the latter would also gain substantial leverage into this sub-regional cooperation framework.

As a quasi-unique example, at the transport ministerial format of the 5+5 Dialogue, there is the Centre for Transportation Studies for the Western Mediterranean⁸ (CETMO), which has acted as the ad-hoc secretariat of this ministerial format since it was launched in 2007, and which keeps this permanent cooperation with both EU institutions and UfM to the benefit of all institutional settings.

⁷ Upon the decision of the 2012 Summit of Heads of State and Government, the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) established a network of think tanks, and academic and public diplomacy institutions of the western Mediterranean to respond to basic needs within the system of the 5+5 Dialogue by working to enable dialogue through the organization of conferences, seminars and symposia with key players in the region. It also serves as a platform for joint research and dissemination, providing an output for the policy-making leadership of the Western Mediterranean Forum.

⁸ See www.cetmo.org

Reinforcing the Implementation of the Ministerial Conclusions

Since its establishment, the 5+5 Dialogue has been engulfed by a trade-off between co-ownership from its member countries and the will to pursue further institutionalization. Whilst member countries have generally expressed appreciation and support for the 5+5 Dialogue, some of them have conspicuously opposed any form of institutionalization, arguing that by introducing institutional constraints, the Dialogue's cohesion might be severely hampered. In this context, the absence of (almost) any kind of institutionalization limits the capacity to perform a proper follow-up of the ministerial declarations, and leaves the implementation of decisions adopted at the ministerial meetings to the will of national ministries.

In March 2015 in Madrid, the 5+5 Dialogue's ministerial meeting of higher education and research invited the Secretariat of the UfM to act as the ad hoc secretariat of this format, and thus provide the support⁹ needed to implement decisions adopted at ministerial level. The Union for the Mediterranean does not share competences with all the ministerial formats of the 5+5 Dialogue, but it could progressively step in and support the work undertaken by those ministerial formats in which competences overlap,¹⁰ besides merely attending the ministerial meetings.

Bolstering the Role of Civil Society within the Dialogue

The 5+5 Dialogue was conceived as a purely inter-governmental setting. Back in 1990, it made complete sense, and these thirty years of history have served its initial purpose well. However, the regional context has changed so drastically since then, that now an effective presence of civil society representatives would boost the legitimacy of the works conducted by the various ministerial formats. Since the 2012 Summit of Heads of State and Government in Malta, at which a specific call was adopted to involve civil society and think tank organizations in its deliberations, a few ministerial formats of the 5+5

Dialogue, especially the one on foreign affairs, have held structured dialogue with civil society organizations. In June 2019, the French government decided to promote a bottom-up exercise which fully engaged civil society representatives entitled the "Summit of the two shores." While not exactly falling into the 5+5 Dialogue dynamics, it did target the ten countries of the western Mediterranean and a number of regional and international organizations with the aim to appraise and foster different regional projects. Despite the good intentions of the original idea, the impact of the exercise could have been stronger had the initiative been conceptualized and developed under the umbrella of the 5+5 Dialogue.

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⁹ See the Ministerial Declaration: <https://medthink5plus5.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2015-Madrid-Recerca-Ed.-Sup.pdf>

¹⁰ A milder idea was suggested by the UfM Ministers of Foreign Affairs when they adopted the UfM Roadmap for Action in January 2017: <https://ufmsecretariat.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/UfM-Roadmap-for-action-2017.pdf>