

## **A stronger NATO means a stronger Europe**

### **Sea Guardian and Operation Sophia together**

*After NATO Defence Ministers decisions in February 2016, Allies have swiftly made international efforts in terms of maritime to stem the flow of irregular migration in the Aegean Sea concerning the refugees and migrants crisis. The NATO mission, approved in record time, arises from the agreement between Angela Merkel and Prime Minister Davutoglu, announced during her visit in Ankara, and after the consent of the Greek Alexis Tsipras. NATO is contributing to international efforts to stem illegal trafficking and illegal migration in the Aegean Sea, through intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance in the Aegean Sea. To this end, NATO is cooperating with the European Union's border management agency Frontex, in full compliance with international law and the law of the sea. Since then the cooperation between the European Union and NATO has increasingly intensified, both in the field of the common security defense and migration. On 8 and 9 July, during the NATO Summit in Warsaw, the Atlantic Council expressed the intention to cooperate with the EU in the Central Mediterranean. After the month of February, the Aegean routes are monitored, and the central axis linking Libya to southern Europe has become the new route for migrants. On 26 and 27 October, following the meeting of NATO Ministers of Defense, NATO intervention in the central Mediterranean in support of the European Operation Sophia was decided. Firstly, this article will provide an explanation of NATO approach and its ability to adapt itself in facing new challenges. Secondly, it will introduce the situation in the central Mediterranean, by underlining the increase of migration flows and consequently, of victims. Finally, it will explain the implications of the EU-NATO joint mission in the fight against the smuggling of migrants, and thus the additional effects of this cooperation that is spreading more and more between South and Middle East.*

#### **A comprehensive approach**

Since transatlantic allies are working on the implementation of the decisions taken during the NATO Summit in Warsaw, the threats faced by the Alliance in the European neighborhoods are divided between an Eastern Flank- which corresponds to the threat posed by the Russian foreign policy in Eastern Europe, the Baltic region and the Caucasus- and a Southern Flank, which includes terrorism, migration, and refugees flows in the Mediterranean. Challenges coming from several fronts have forced NATO to adapt its capabilities. That is why NATO has opened a way for a close cooperation with the European Union. NATO has indeed shown its commitment to reassurance measures in Eastern Europe as well as its ability to help the coordination of transatlantic intelligence regarding terrorism. In addition, its capabilities to provide a strong border control and protection in the Mediterranean area have equally been proven.

According to Ian Lesser, Senior Director of Foreign Policy at The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), and member of GMF's executive team, the reason of this of cooperation between the two organizations is mainly due to certain structural weaknesses of the European Union, which for three years has to deal with the increasing flow of immigrants coming from Middle East and Libya.

Sure enough, on 11 February, NATO decided to assist with the refugees and migrants crisis. This was based on a joint request from Germany, Greece and Turkey. The goal was to participate in the international efforts to stem illegal trafficking and illegal migration in the Aegean. NATO had to provide critical information and surveillance to combat human trafficking and criminal networks. Since then, NATO cooperated with national coastguards, and worked closely with the European Union both to monitor the illegal crossings in the Aegean Sea in cooperation with relevant authorities, and to establish a direct link with the European Union's border management agency Frontex.

The cooperation between the European Union and NATO, and the attention of the latter towards the issues of immigration and terrorism were underlined during the summit in Warsaw on 8 and 9 July. The summit was presented as an opportunity for all Member States of the Alliance to present their issues related to international security challenges. According to the policy brief "National Priorities for the NATO Warsaw Summit" presented by the German Marshall Fund on 9 May, the meeting would have been an occasion for the introduction of national priorities.

The United States has continued to demonstrate its commitment to the NATO Alliance, as well as to Europe's security and stability. They sought a more innovative, adaptive, and flexible Alliance that is able to deal with a full spectrum of threats. A recent Washington Think Tank consortium report, which included the GMF, identified the need to address a range of challenges extending from nuclear deterrence to hybrid threats.

Belgium expected NATO to help in managing the challenges of terrorism and sees a long term "Strategy South" as a key test for the Alliance evolution. This country believed that balance was an important factor for NATO's unity and solidity. For Belgium, however, its security environment was principally defined by instability on NATO's southern flank, a reality painfully demonstrated by the terrorist attacks in Brussels on March 22. Terrorism linked to Islamic extremism in southern Europe, including the phenomenon of foreign fighters, will head the list of challenges faced both by Belgium and other NATO allies in the years ahead.

France's main priority at the Warsaw Summit was to maintain a balanced and flexible Alliance. This position reflects the desire of France to preserve its strategic autonomy and the ability to carry out its interests either via NATO or EU structures. Instead, German posture towards the south was reluctant because it recognized the necessity for more engagement in the South for a major political cohesion within the alliance.

But the most important position was that of Turkey, a member state of NATO but not of the EU. During the summit, Turkey expressed its concern on the migration issue, affirming its willingness to continue to seek the support of the Alliance to monitor the flows in the Aegean Sea. Partnerships, particularly the strengthening of the Mediterranean Dialogue and further enhancement of relations with Gulf countries through the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative remained priorities for Turkey as Ankara has recently closed ranks with the Gulf Cooperation Council members.

NATO had to find a solution to resume different proposals from states with different needs and priorities. At the end of the Summit, NATO had not only adjusted its priorities as an organization, but it has also included proposals and concerns that several states pictured as "threats" coming from the South of the Alliance. When the Heads of State wrote the final document, a *Communiqué*, on

the priorities of NATO and its approach on the migration crisis, it was underlined the NATO capability to adapt itself in order to struggle challenges coming from different parts of the Alliance.

At the point 92 and 93 of the *Communiqué*, NATO considered its intervention in the Aegean Sea as a success, thanks to the cooperation of Greece and Turkey, but above all thanks to the support provided by Frontex, the EU's Border Management Agency. Also, just because of the concerns of some states, NATO agreed on a possible role in the Central Mediterranean, to complete the EU's Operation Sophia through the provision of a range of capabilities including Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance, and logistics support; through contribution to capacity building of the Libyan coastguard and navy, if requested by the legitimate Libyan authorities and/or the EU; and in the context of the implementation of UNSCR 2292 on the situation in Libya, in close coordination with the EU.

In Warsaw, then NATO's approach was comprehensive: it tried to summarize the preferences of its member states, trying to satisfy the demands (at least on the issue of migration) of the states most affected by the phenomenon of migration flows. NATO has indeed conceived the idea of further intervention in support of some of its member states, but this time in the case of the Central Mediterranean is a joint operation with the EU.

### **Sophia + Sea Guardian**

The arrival of more than a million asylum seekers in Europe in 2015, deep divisions between EU Member States sparked, because it revealed both the weakness of the Schengen system, lacking sufficient tools to keep the external borders of the Union under control, and the unsustainability of the Dublin Regulation, which assigns the responsibility for registering and processing asylum applications to the country of first arrival. As numbers became unmanageable, Greece and Italy failed to prevent migrants from continuing their journey to northern Europe. Alongside immediate actions to cope with the urgency of the ongoing crisis, the European Agenda on Migration introduced proposals for structural reforms to manage migration in all its aspects in the longer term. The First Implementation Package of the European Agenda on Migration, presented by the European Commission on 27 May 2015, planned to triple the capacities and assets of the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union's (Frontex) joint operations Triton and Poseidon in 2015 and 2016, in order to restore the level of intervention provided under the former Italian 'Mare Nostrum' search and rescue operation.

On 18 May 2015, the European Council approved the crisis management concept for a CSDP (Common security and defense policy) operation to disrupt the business model of smugglers in the Southern Central Mediterranean. The Union decided to conduct a military crisis management operation contributing to the disruption of the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Southern Central Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED), achieved by undertaking systematic efforts to identify, capture and dispose vessels and assets used or suspected of being used by smugglers or traffickers, in accordance with applicable international law. On 22 June 2015, in Strasbourg, the Council decided to launch the operation, initially structured into 3 phases:

- support the detection and monitoring of migration networks through information gathering and patrolling on the high seas in accordance with international law;
- conduct boarding, search, seizure and diversion on the high seas of vessels suspected of being used for human smuggling or trafficking, under the conditions provided for by applicable international law, and conduct boarding, search, seizure and diversion, on the high seas or in the territorial and internal waters of that State, of vessels suspected of being used for human smuggling or trafficking;
- in accordance with any applicable UN Security Council Resolution or consent by the coastal State concerned, take all necessary measures against a vessel and related assets which are suspected of being used for human smuggling or trafficking, in the territory of that State, under the conditions set out in that Resolution or consent.

Last 20 June 2016, the Council extended until 27 July 2017 Operation Sophia's mandate reinforcing it by adding two supporting tasks: training of the Libyan coastguards and navy, and contributing to the implementation of the UN arms embargo on the high seas off the coast of Libya. On 30 August and on 6 September 2016, the PSC authorized the commencement of the capacity building and training to the implementation of the UN arms embargo. For this reason, now, there is a 4<sup>th</sup> phase that will consist of a withdrawal of forces and completion of the operation. On 27 October, EUNAVFOR MED operation Sophia started training the Libyan Navy Coast Guard and Libyan Navy. The objective is to enhance their capability to disrupt smuggling and trafficking in Libya and to perform search and rescue activities which will save lives and improve security in the Libyan territorial waters. The training is taking place on board of two EUNAVFOR MED assets on the high seas for 78 embarked trainees and their mentors. The initial training package comprises various models, ranging from basic seamanship to more advanced specialist skills and includes a substantial focus on human rights and international law. This task will be financed through voluntary contributions from some EU member states managed by the Athena mechanism, and from voluntary assets and personal contribution provided by the Member States.

On the same day, at the end of the meeting of NATO Ministers of Defence, the Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, after the meeting of the North Atlantic Council, which was also attended by the EU High Representative Federica Mogherini, decided to support the EU's Operation Sophia in the Central Mediterranean with the Operation Sea Guardian. From November NATO ships and planes will be in the Central Mediterranean, ready to help the EU's Operation Sophia with situational awareness and ready to provide logistical support.

In 2011, NATO launched an Alliance Maritime Strategy that foresees a complete revamping of NATO's maritime forces, an extensive multi-year program of maritime exercises and training, and the enhancement of cooperation between NATO and its partners, as well as other international actors, in particular the European Union. In this context, NATO has created a Sea Guardian, which will respond to the threats linked to the maritime security that straddle the boundary between defense and law enforcement. NATO's support to law enforcement under the Sea Guardian will contribute to mitigate gaps in the capacity of individual countries to enforce civilian and/or military law at sea. The NATO contribution will be complementary to efforts by other actors. NATO and the EU evaluated the employment of this operation in the Central Mediterranean during the Warsaw summit in July 2016.

This operation in the Central Mediterranean will have 7 main tasks:

- Support maritime situational awareness;
- Uphold freedom of navigation (surveillance, patrol, maritime interdiction, Special Operations, deployment of law enforcement detachments and, when authorized, the use of force);
- Conduct maritime interdiction;
- Fight the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction;
- Protect critical infrastructure;
- Support maritime counter-terrorism;
- Contribute to maritime security capacity-building.

Greece and Turkey announced that they will offer ships to Sea Guardian as of the 7th of November. Greece, Italy, Spain and Turkey will provide air assets and that will be mainly maritime patrol aircrafts to help the European Union Operation Sophia to obtain a better situational awareness.

On 27 October, during the meeting, NATO decided to continue its intervention in the Aegean because its presence provides operational support to the efforts of the Coast Guards, to the Greek and the Turkish Coast Guards and to FRONTEX. From the beginning of the operation, there was a very substantial reduction in the numbers of illegal crossings and the Alliance was able to cut the lines of the criminal networks organizing the illegal crossings. According to NATO many of the first sightings have been done by NATO vessels partly because they're able to operate both in Turkish and Greek territorial waters. Moreover NATO presence in the Aegean Sea could add value, because it is a platform for enhanced cooperation between Turkey and Greece (and the EU as institution). So both for the operational reasons, but also as a political platform, the NATO presence in the Aegean has proven how an institution with a military vocation can promote the cooperation between coastal states.

## **Conclusions**

The refugee and migrant crisis is the worst humanitarian crisis Europe has witnessed since 1945. NATO has established arrangements enabling direct links with Frontex at the operational and tactical levels. This allows the exchange of liaison officers and the sharing of information in real time so that Frontex can take even more effective action.

Since February 2016, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has held discussions on the refugee and migrant crisis with several EU counterparts including the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, the EU High Representative/Vice-President of the Commission, Federica Mogherini, and the European Commissioner for Migration, Dimitris Avramopoulos. To respond to the refugee and migrant crisis in Europe, NATO is working closely with the European Union. At the tactical and operational level, NATO cooperates with the EU Border Management Agency, Frontex. Thanks to the liaison arrangements between Allied Maritime Command and Frontex, information is being shared in real time, enabling Frontex to take even more effective action. Furthermore, Greek, Turkish and Frontex

liaison officers have been deployed to the NATO Aegean activity, which also enables the exchange of information. Cooperation is also ongoing at the political level.

At the Warsaw Summit in July, NATO leaders also agreed, in principle, on a possible NATO role in the Central Mediterranean, to complement or support the EU's Operation Sophia.

On 9 November 2016, Operation Sea Guardian was launched. According to the Maritime Command Marcom (the central command of all NATO maritime forces) three NATO ships and two submarines – the Italian frigate ITS *Aviere*, the Bulgarian frigate BGS *Verni*, the Turkish frigate TCG *Gemlik*, the Greek submarine HS *Papanikolis* and the Spanish submarine ESPS *Mistral* - will conduct the first patrols in the central Mediterranean under NATO standing Operation Sea Guardian. At the Warsaw Summit in July, NATO announced the transformation of Article 5 Operation Active Endeavour into this new operation in response to the evolving security environment. Operation Sea Guardian has a broader scope adapted to a wider range of maritime security threats. Air support will include rotational patrols by Maritime Patrol Aircrafts (MPAs) from Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece and Turkey. These first patrols will run through the 17th Nov 2016, with other patrols on the forge and to occur according with approved schedule of operations.

Within a global context, the joint operation in the Mediterranean shows the strengths and weaknesses of the two organizations. Starting from the European Union, and considering the defense policy in the field of migration, support "asked" to NATO could be interpreted as a call for help to manage the crisis. This shows that, although since the last ten years, the EU has made great strides to respond to emerging crises, the intervention of a military organization is still considered. The management of defense policy, and in the specific case of the migratory crisis containment, is among the European Union's competences. However, the request for an intervention by Turkey in the Aegean, but especially by Germany and Greece (European countries) to NATO, and the operation Sea Guardian, could be read as a lack of "trust" by member states towards the European means. In fact, in proportion to the NATO, the EU has a more limited experience in the military, defense and security field, and this may also explain why the EU wants to cooperate with NATO to counter the emerging crisis.

NATO availability has an explication, or maybe more. The first concerns the geopolitical aspect. The constant military presence of NATO in the south of the Alliance in a joint humanitarian operation with the EU is an opportunity to monitor the transit in the Central Mediterranean, and at the same time, to contribute to EU objectives, perhaps in the future, for the Libyan reconstruction. Other hypothesis can be put forward, for instance, to control the transits of ships bound for pro-government forces in Syria, but the Mediterranean is not a lake, and until now the aim of the mission includes maritime situational awareness, counter-terrorism and capacity building. The second interpretation is linked to NATO's legitimacy. The strong cooperation with the EU serves to NATO. This is the reason why since 2014 relations between the two organizations have improved, so that the joint program is to proceed hand in hand to follow a path based on mutual transparency, collaboration, and cooperation. The main reasons are two. The first is related to the Alliance's composition: the majority of NATO member states are also EU members. The second is related to the existence of NATO. If it is considered when and why NATO was created, it can be noted that many things have changed and now the Alliance benefits from the cooperation with the EU in terms of legitimacy. On several occasions it has been said by both organizations that a stronger NATO

means a stronger EU, and vice versa. This is because in reality, one has something the other lacks, and vice versa, so they tend to balance each other, and the proof is the joint operation in the Central Mediterranean.

*Maria Elena Argano*

**For further information:**

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