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		[NN]	

Briefing EU naval forces

Keeping watch

The EU's two naval forces – operating off Somalia and in the Mediterranean – have been facing challenges. However, their mandates remain in place and EU NAVFOR activity continues, as **Dr Lee Willett** and **Luca Peruzzi** report

The Italian Navy FREMM frigate ITS *Carlo Margottini* (left), pictured sailing with the Republic of Korea Navy (RoKN) KDX-2-class destroyer *Moonmu Daewang* (right) and the Spanish Navy's first-of-class Buques de Accion Maritima (BAM) patrol vessel ESPS *Meteoro*. The Italian and Spanish navies currently provide a large number of the surface ships supporting 'Atalanta', while RoKN ships occasionally 'chop' to EU NAVFOR from the US Navy-led Combined Maritime Forces.

EU NAVFOR: 1702023

On 30 July the European Union (EU) reaffirmed its commitment to supporting the international counter-piracy campaign in the Horn of Africa by extending the mandate for the EU Naval Force's (EU NAVFOR's) Operation 'Atalanta' until 31 December 2020.

'Atalanta' became operational in late 2008 as a response to the sudden surge in pirate attacks on commercial shipping vessels transiting the Gulf of Aden. Of the national and international counter-piracy task forces deployed there, EU NAVFOR was arguably the first dedicated task force to be formally committed to tackling the problem. Moreover, its establishment also represented one of the first physical manifestations of the EU's strategic intent and its ability to commit military assets out of area in support of member-state interests.

EU NAVFOR's contribution was central in a mix of factors that ultimately brought a confluence of pressures to bear on the Somali pirates. As a result the piracy problem, which peaked during 2011–12, had largely disappeared by 2014. Pressures on the pirates included:

- The presence of national and international naval task groups alongside EU NAVFOR, which included NATO's 'Ocean Shield' deployment and the US Navy-led Combined Maritime Forces (CMF);
- the improvement of commercial ship security at sea, based on the use of the 'Best Management Practice' ('BMP') concept developed by the international shipping and naval community to provide planning and operational guidance for ship operators and masters transiting high-risk areas;
- the select use of private military security

EU naval forces **Briefing**

personnel on commercial ships using certain routes;

- and increasing presence ashore in Somalia, such as military forces conducting select military operations to disrupt pirate planning, logistics, and operations and, more importantly, international organisations working to improve social and law and order structures.

However, just as Somalia's seas became calmer, the EU was confronted with another international crisis, this time on its own doorstep. Instability in North Africa, across the southern rim of the Mediterranean Sea, and particularly around Syria resulted in a massive increase in maritime migration across the Mediterranean. To manage such mass migration, disrupt criminal trafficking networks, and help prevent the loss of life at sea, the EU stood up the EU NAVFOR Mediterranean (EU NAVFOR Med) task force and Operation 'Sophia' on 22 June 2015.

Although both operations have made a demonstrable difference in their assigned regions, they have been facing uncertain futures for different reasons.

Atalanta

Uncertainty for 'Atalanta' has manifested itself in the residual risk of piracy returning to Somali waters. However, another issue is that EU navies are being stretched by other requirements, not only 'Sophia' but the need to generate more visible presence, nationally and within NATO maritime groups, to counter increasing Russian naval activity in the European theatre.

EU NAVFOR's operating area covers approximately 4,700,000 sq n miles, stretching from the southern Red Sea, across the Gulf of Aden, around the Horn of Africa, and down as far as the Seychelles, the Comoros Islands, and Mauritius. It also includes Somali coastal territory.

According to EU NAVFOR, at the peak of the piracy problem in January 2011, 736 hostages and 32 ships were being held by pirates, but by October 2016 no hostages or ships were being held. At this point there were conflicting views on what the future held for the region's maritime security: in some senses the problem had disappeared; in others, however, its underlying causes had not been wholly addressed.

In May 2017 a BBC report raised the question of whether piracy was returning following the hijacking of the Comoros-flagged small tanker *Aris 13* off Somalia's Puntland



A sailor keeps watch from the bridge of the Italian Navy Bergamini-class frigate ITS *Carlo Margottini* during a previous task force rotation of EU Naval Force 'Atalanta'.

region in March that year and, a month later, international naval forces having to free the crew of the bulk cargo ship MV *OS-35* from the vessel's citadel after the ship had been boarded by pirates. According to EU NAVFOR figures, seven attacks occurred during 2017, although up to the end of September this year only one attack has taken place. Moreover, according to information provided by EU NAVFOR, no ships and only an estimated four hostages are currently being held.

Turning to the mandate extension for 'Atalanta', the mandate itself remains unchanged, with four core tasks set out. First, the operation will protect vessels supporting the United Nations' (UN's) World Food Programme (WFP), alongside securing other vulnerable shipping. Second, it will monitor fishing activities off the Somali coast, with illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing remaining a barrier to delivering regional maritime security. Third, 'Atalanta' will support other EU missions and international organisations working at sea and ashore to strengthen maritime security. Finally, as stated by EU NAVFOR, 'Atalanta' remains tasked with deterring, preventing, and repressing piracy and armed robbery at sea in the region.

Alongside announcing the extension, the European Council also confirmed the relocation of the 'Atalanta' operational headquarters (OHQ) from Northwood in the United

Kingdom - where it has been since 'Atalanta' was stood up in 2008 - to Rota in southern Spain from 29 March 2019, under the operational command of the Spanish Navy's Vice Admiral Antonio Martorell Lacave. The relocation is a result of the United Kingdom's impending exit from the EU (Brexit).

Following on from the mandate renewal and the planned OHQ relocation, the EU has reiterated its commitment to building maritime security in Somali waters. As such, on 9 September senior EU and EU NAVFOR officials met with Somali government leaders to discuss maritime security efforts. According to an EU NAVFOR statement, "With the longest coastline of continental Africa, Somalia has many maritime economic opportunities. It is the safe and secure Somali seas along with the guaranteed free flow of commerce that will be the catalyst for international maritime trade to serve the major regional ports."

Regarding the mandate extension, Lieutenant Colonel David Fielder, a UK Royal Marines Commando and 'Atalanta' spokesperson, told *Jane's*, "This is a fairly standard process from the EU itself, where every two years its main operations have a mandate review and a mandate extension if it's deemed necessary."

In defining a requirement to renew the mandate, EU NAVFOR's strategic military advice to Brussels was that "there is still a

EU NAVFOR Med: IT95816



EU NAVFOR Med's five-strong task group is currently led by the Italian Navy's San Giusto-class LPD ITS San Marco.

threat", with Lt Col Fielder warning, "The threat levels are vastly reduced, but there's still a possible intent."

In a threat assessment that drew on inputs from across the region, including from partners such as the CMF, Lt Col Fielder added, "Although we have managed to effectively repress piracy, we realise that a lot of conditions are still remaining in Somalia while the country is re-building itself."

Despite the brief flurry of pirate activity in 2017, Lt Col Fielder noted that EU NAVFOR does not consider the problem to have returned at this stage. "If you look at the actual statistics this year ... we've had one reported attack in nine months," he said, adding, "When you compare that to last year, there were seven attacks reported across the year, so we've already seen a significant percentage drop."

Setting these reduced figures against the enduring risk, Lt Col Fielder argued that EU NAVFOR's current role is "to maintain that security presence, the deterrence, and just being around almost in a policing-style operation". This, he explained, is done through "conducting what we call baseline counter-piracy operations", with the ships "spending a lot of time moving up and down the coastline".

Such a presence helps EU NAVFOR to harvest intelligence and build up a picture of patterns of life at sea. "We will spend a lot of time actually going along and talking to people," Lt Col Fielder noted. "We do approaches to fishermen, where we go and chat to them and ask them if they've seen anything suspicious.

We will talk over the VHF to civilian ships, hail them, ask how they are, and so on."

Under what is the 29th rotation since 2008, this presence is currently provided by two ships and two aircraft. EU NAVFOR's surface task force consists of Spain's Galicia-class landing platform dock (LPD) *ESPS Castilla* as the current flagship and the Italian Navy's Bergamini (FREMM)-class frigate ITS *Federico Martinengo*. Both have embarked organic helicopters and boarding parties. Air presence and reconnaissance is provided by two P-3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft (MPAs) based in Djibouti that are provided by Germany and Spain.

However, the competing demands on Europe's navies can make it challenging for EU NAVFOR to find sufficient ships to maintain the deterrent presence.

Although forces such as the Italian and Spanish navies are currently able to meet EU NAVFOR's demand signal, other navies contribute where they can. France, for example, conducts regular patrols in the region and also operates an MPA.

EU NAVFOR's relationship with the CMF remains critical to its operations. Additionally, the CMF's Combined Task Force (CTF)-151 also remains dedicated to the counter-piracy problem. "What we're seeing now," said Lt Col Fielder, "is that we're quite expert in the brown-water environment, so we spend a lot of our time along that area." Meanwhile, "we find that CMF are very good in supporting us in some of the blue-water areas," he added, "so we're able to complement [each other]." CMF assets also

occasionally 'chop' across to EU NAVFOR for periods of time. Lt Col Fielder pointed to the Republic of Korea (RoK) Navy as an example, "They tend to move across from CMF, so they're bringing their knowledge from CMF and specifically from CTF-151," he noted.

EU NAVFOR's co-operation with CTF-151 also includes working with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF). For example, in August *Castilla* and the JMSDF's Murasame-class destroyer JS *Akebono* conducted a passage exercise in the Gulf of Aden. Moreover, EU NAVFOR ships also co-operate with a JMSDF P-3 based in Djibouti.

Co-operation between EU NAVFOR and CTF-151 is possible because they both have mandates that are specifically focused on counter-piracy. "If there was a need to ask for assets, we can do that," confirmed Lt Col Fielder, "and they're able to flex across quickly". Alongside the at-sea co-operation, the two task forces share information, intelligence, and maritime situational awareness (MSA) on a daily basis.

They have also recently worked together on the CMF-led exercise 'Vigilant Lion', which ran between 31 August and 8 September in the Gulf of Aden. According to the CMF, CTF-151 – commanded currently by the Republic of Singapore Navy – worked with EU NAVFOR, independent deployers, and regional stakeholders "to improve maritime domain awareness through information sharing, and [to] enhance assurance to merchant shipping through intensified actions at sea". EU NAVFOR platform participation included *Castilla* and the Spanish P-3.



The exercise tackled several tasks including communications and boarding activities. Its aim, according to Lt Col Fielder, was to develop the "continual baseline counter-piracy process [through] being in theatre, gaining information, gaining intelligence, and understanding the patterns of life ... and then being available to assist in incidents as and when we need to".

Such co-operation with the CMF also includes operational planning, for example via the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) conference. SHADE meetings take place every six months in Bahrain, with the CMF and EU NAVFOR co-chairing proceedings. The 42nd SHADE meeting is due to take place in November and Lt Col Fielder emphasised that SHADE remains "vital" because of the involvement of commercial shipping.

Regarding co-operation with the shipping community, in June the latest version of BMP – version 5 – was published. While reinforcing the enduring guidance of the BMP series – such as for ships to avoid coastal areas, maintain speed, secure the ship with physical barriers such as razor wire or with armed

personnel, and to register transits with EU NAVFOR's Maritime Security Centre Horn of Africa (MSCHOA) – BMP5 is being used to build greater global awareness of piracy and to encourage commercial ships to use the various regional maritime security reporting centres located around the world to support commercial shipping.

Maintaining presence

Although the 2017 attacks may be just a blip in a six-year period during which piracy in the region has largely disappeared, the fact that the problem returned briefly has underlined for EU NAVFOR the need to maintain an active and visible presence. "One of the reasons why we still need to maintain a presence – and be seen to maintain a presence – is ... so that, if there's any thinking about 'Let's try it again', [the pirates] know that there are forces out there that will be able to deal with this," explained Lt Col Fielder.

Given the renewed operational mandate, Northwood is currently refreshing the OHQ's internal 'Atalanta' operational plan (version six). Daily naval operations will continue

to emphasise the tactical importance of counter-piracy patrolling. However, looking to the longer term the operation will place more emphasis on protection and co-operation, according to Lt Col Fielder.

"We're looking at protection of the area, which includes the deterrence of piracy, but also importantly the co-operation piece, where we want to start encouraging deeper co-operation [across the range of regional actors] that becomes a permanent part of the modus operandi," he said. "[The] mission and the end-state haven't changed," he continued, "but [what has] is how you want to make that happen."

Balancing available assets, the situation in-theatre, and the required end state, this emphasis is designed to provide the operational commander with a focal point for how to attain and maintain that end state, said Lt Col Fielder.

Change of command

The UK's involvement in 'Atalanta' will, for the time being at least, conclude on 29 March 2019 when the OHQ relocates to Rota.

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The Spanish Navy LPD ESPS *Galicia* is pictured here escorting the container ship *MV Altinia*. The presence of naval vessels is one of a number of factors that have driven down the piracy risk for commercial ships in the waters off Somalia.

MSCHOA will relocate to Brest in France, although it will remain under OHQ command.

What 'Atalanta' needs to do and how it does it will remain as defined by the current mandate and operational plan. The extensive input provided by the Spanish, French, and other navies involved ashore in Northwood and at sea off Somalia means that there is already a lot of knowledge that will support

the new OHQ. "It's simply a change of command, really," said Lt Col Fielder. "Ultimately, it's only a change of operational headquarters. It doesn't change the operation."

'Sophia' and the Med

EU NAVFOR Med's purpose – under Operation 'Sophia' – has been to identify, capture, and dispose of vessels and enabling assets

used or suspected of being used by migrant traffickers. It also aims to provide safety at sea to prevent loss of life.

Headquartered at Italy's Joint Armed Forces Operational Command in Rome under the command of Rear Admiral Enrico Crendino, 'Sophia' is tasked with controlling an area of operations spanning 1,250 km in front of Libyan territorial seas and spreading about 600 km across central Mediterranean waters from the Tunisian coast to Egypt's maritime borders and the Eastern Mediterranean. At-sea presence is generated by a naval task force that currently consists of five ships led by the Italian Navy's San Giorgio-class LPD ITS *San Marco*, with operational support provided by two embarked helicopters and four land-based aircraft. In all, 26 EU countries are contributing to 'Sophia'.

Since its inception, additional tasks have been added to EU NAVFOR Med's mandate. For example, in June 2016 the mandate was expanded to include the training of Libya's coastguard and navy, and to support the UN arms embargo off Libya under UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs) 2292 and 2357. In July 2017 the European Council added further tasks: the monitoring of Libyan trainees to ensure the long-term



EU NAVFOR Med is tasked with training Libyan coastguard and navy personnel. The training is already delivering operational outputs, with Libyan forces conducting more than 70 search-and-rescue operations in the 12 months up to September this year.



Spanish Navy forces operating under EU NAVFOR Med conducting maritime security activities. In total 26 European Union member states are contributing to Operation 'Sophia'.

efficiency of their training; surveillance and information gathering relating to illegal oil trafficking from Libya (under UNSCRs 2146 and 2362); and information exchange with the EU law enforcement agencies Frontex and Europol.

Following the June 2016 agreement, in October that year EU NAVFOR Med became fully involved in training Libyan coastguard and navy personnel. The objective was to improve their capacity to perform primary duties and enhance wider maritime security by building, for example, their search-and-rescue (SAR) skills and the ability to disrupt trafficking networks. Training courses cover navigation, international human rights and maritime law, SAR doctrine, asylum request procedures, and the provision of medical aid at sea. According to an EU NAVFOR Med statement, the requirement to deliver 241 trained personnel has been met. More training modules are foreseen as taking place in Croatia, Italy, and other member states. However, the recent increase in instability in Libya may affect these plans.

Despite the instability operational effect is still being delivered. Building on the work undertaken by the Italian Navy and the Guardia di Finanza's customs police, along with

support from other navies such as Greece, the Netherlands, and Spain, the Libyan coastguard has already begun manning four 27 m patrol boats provided by Italy, as well as the Libyan naval assets being reactivated by the Italian Navy. The combination of training, assets, and technological assistance provided by the Italian Navy, the Italian Coast Guard, EU NAVFOR Med, and other parties operating in the Central Mediterranean has resulted in Libya's naval services being able to conduct independent SAR operations. According to a statement to parliament by Italian Defence Minister Elisabetta Trenta on 6 September, during the past 12 months Libyan forces have conducted more than 70 SAR operations. The minister also acknowledged the work of the Libyan authorities in disrupting smuggling networks ashore. Overall, during the first seven months of this year migrant flows were reduced by 80% compared with the same period in 2017, the minister added. However, the ongoing security crisis in Libya and the lack of resources and governance ashore could, according to local observers and international analysts, lead to a return of the migrant flow.

Another EU NAVFOR Med achievement is the establishment, under a six-month trial

period, of a Crime Information Cell (CIC) on board the 'Sophia' task group. This decision was taken in May this year and later, on 5 July, specialist personnel from Frontex, Europol, and EU NAVFOR Med embarked in the flagship (originally *San Marco's* sister ship ITS *San Giusto*).

According to an EU NAVFOR Med statement, "The CIC will open a new chapter in operational co-operation between the [EU's] Common Security and Defence Policy and justice and home affairs actors, further enhancing information exchange on criminal activity in the Central Mediterranean." The CIC, the statement continued, provides "a platform to make full use of the agencies' unique capabilities to disrupt criminal networks in [EU NAVFOR Med's] area of operation and beyond".

EU NAVFOR Med also has its own SHADE forum, the meetings of which take place in Rome. SHADE was established to enable countries and other stakeholders to discuss and share knowledge and to deconflict and co-ordinate activities. As EU NAVFOR Med has grown, so too has participation in SHADE. The recent meeting in June focused on issues such as communications and information exchange systems (including with



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Current 'Atalanta' flagship ESPS *Castilla*, a Spanish Navy Galicia-class LPD, conducts a passage exercise with the JMSDF's Murasame-class guided-missile destroyer *JS Akebono* in the Gulf of Aden in August.

commercial shipping), migration patterns and understanding traffickers' business models, best practice for Libyan coastguard and naval capacity building, and legal challenges related to oil smuggling.

An important element in creating and maintaining MSA in the region has been the introduction of the MARitime Traffic (SMART) tracking infrastructure system, which was developed by and is in service with the Italian Navy. SMART is an unclassified, advanced software package aimed at enhancing MSA. It highlights commercial and fishing vessel traffic and is designed to identify anomalies in stated routes. Libyan personnel are already using SMART and the system also is available to commercial shipping.

Despite this progress, EU NAVFOR Med has encountered development issues – particularly the fact that the operation has not yet proceeded into what is termed Phase 2B. Under that phase EU NAVFOR's reach would be extended to include the ability to conduct vessel boarding search-and-seizure (VBSS) activities and divert traffickers' vessels into Libyan territorial waters.

However, this phase requires UNSCR and local authority approval, which have not yet been granted. This situation has also

reduced the extension of the Italian Navy's support, limiting it to vessel maintenance and reactivation activities only.

The disruption of planned EU NAVFOR Med developments has raised questions about the future evolution of the operation. However, EU NAVFOR Med supports the UNSCR anti-smuggling and arms embargo implementation at sea and is the only other task force providing maritime security in the Central Mediterranean area where the Italian Navy's 'Mare Sicuro' national operation is active. 'Mare Sicuro', however, is tasked with protecting Italian interests, including natural resource extraction and fishing fleet operations in the Sicily Strait, safeguarding commercial traffic, and supporting Italian Coast Guard SAR operations opposite Libyan waters and any contingency arising in Libya. However, the recent deterioration in Libya's security situation has led to surveillance requirements being elevated in this area.

Meanwhile, the risk of terrorists travelling to Europe under the guise of being migrants is causing concern for the Italian authorities as well as other EU member states. Additionally, migrant flow levels have prompted Italy's new government to encourage other EU countries to receive migrants from Italy, although some EU member states are

opposed to this. During the last EU defence ministers' informal meeting, in late August, Trenta proposed a review of EU NAVFOR Med procedures, including the introduction of rotation in disembarkation ports, rather than exclusively using Italian ports. This proposal appears closely linked to the issue of relocating migrants to other EU member countries. The proposal has been rejected so far, but it is understood Italy will continue to pursue this initiative.

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Comment

At a time of limited surface ship numbers in the Royal Navy, the opportunity to host the EU NAVFOR OHQ (including MSCHOA) provided the UK with the chance to play a central, high-profile, and highly influential role in a major international strategic campaign in the Indian Ocean without having to continually deploy a ship into theatre. The loss of the OHQ as a result of Brexit may have a significant impact on UK presence and influence in this area.