

## **EUNAVFOR Mediterranean: Balancing Human Safety and National Security**

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Lately, the European Union (EU) is struggling to cope with the ongoing crisis involving large-scale human migration across the Mediterranean Sea. As a part of its comprehensive approach to the crisis, on 22 June 2015, the twenty-one countries of the EU launched a combined naval operation named EUNAVFOR Med (European Union Naval Operation in the Mediterranean). The key aims of the operation are to disrupt the rampant human smuggling and trafficking in the Mediterranean Sea, and to prevent the loss of migrant lives at sea. On 7 October 2015, the naval operation entered its operational phase and was renamed as Operation Sophia. This viewpoint seeks to analyse the EU's naval approach to the migrant crisis.

### **Background**

Earlier in 2013, in response to the migration crisis in Europe, the Italian government had launched Operation *Mare Nostrum*. The operation was triggered by the sinking of a boat carrying migrants off Italy's coast of *Lampedusa*, and was thus primarily mandated for maritime Search and Rescue (SAR). However, in 2014, the Italian operation was scaled down and superseded by Operation *Triton*, which was launched under the aegis of the EU's border security agency FRONTEX. Operation Triton was essentially meant to complement Italy's effort to secure its maritime frontiers. Hence, the EU's naval operation shifted focus from human safety to territorial security, and thus proved ineffective to prevent large-scale loss of lives at sea.

Earlier in 2015, the EU member states realised the gravity of the situation in terms of their national security and were compelled to institute EUNAVFOR Med. This was the second occasion ever when the EU naval forces formed a combined task force, and was as seminal as the first occasion when the EU constituted the anti-piracy task force for Operation *Atalanta* in the Gulf of Aden.

The EUNAVFOR Med is being conducted in three sequential phases. The first phase involving investigation, surveillance and intelligence is over. The current ongoing operational phase involves boarding, search, seizure and diversion of vessels engaged in human smuggling. The third phase would involve the disposal of vessels and prosecution of human smugglers.

Although, a United Nations (UN) mandate was not necessary for the first phase of the operation, it is required for second and third phase since the effectiveness of the operation depends much on the cooperation of the coastal states like Libya. The UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2240 (2015) was adopted soon after the launch of the second phase on 7 October 2015. The resolution “authorize(s) UN member states for a period of one year to inspect vessels on the high seas off the coast of Libya... used for migrant smuggling or human trafficking”.

## **Analyses**

The EU is a unique example of ‘pooled sovereignty’. It began as an economic union, but later emerged into a political union. Lately, compelled by national security considerations, the cooperation amongst the EU member states has graduated to the naval dimension. In 2008, the EU member states came together in Operation *Atalanta* to execute a naval operation against piracy. The successful operational coordination- and possibly the realisation of the need for a common strategy- led the EU to launch its own Maritime Security Strategy in 2014. This may have facilitated the second naval operation EUNAVFOR Med against the common threat of migrant smuggling.

Interdicting human smugglers is not the primary task of the navies; instead, it is the task of the constabulary forces to deal with such illegal activity. However, it is understandable that the EU naval force undertook Operation *Atalanta* since the anti-

piracy mission was to be conducted in distant waters of the Gulf of Aden. While the ongoing migration crisis is closer home, the national security imperatives of the EU member states are so strong that employment of naval forces was considered inescapable.

Furthermore, some sections of the civil society have expressed apprehensions over the use of high-end military forces against the migrants and human smugglers as unjustified and inherently risky. However, such criticism may not be valid as the navies are inherently versatile, and their Rules of Engagement (RoE) are tailored for any specific mission within the entire spectrum of conflict. Nevertheless, it may be conceded that identification at sea would pose a major challenge for the naval forces.

During Operation *Atalanta*, the UNSCR were issued under Chapter VII of UN Charter easily as piracy was seen as a threat to the international peace and security. However, mobilizing the UN Security Council (UNSC) to move a resolution for current migrant crisis in the Mediterranean Sea was seen as a challenge because such low-end security issue can hardly be interpreted as a threat to international security threat. Nevertheless, the UNSCR 2240 was eventually adopted, and within two days of the launch of operational phase of EUNAVFOR Med. Ostensibly, the UNSC mandate was to address the possibility of the ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) operatives merging with the migrants at the sea, which is likely to have manifested in the Paris terrorist attacks of November 2015. This has a strong international security dimension; and hence, justifiable under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

According to an analyst, the EU has traditionally been a soft power that believes in adherence to global norms; and hence, seeks to meet its normative international commitments. As is evident in the [factsheet](#) on EUNAVFOR Med operation on 23 September 2015, prevention of loss of life at the sea has been accorded due priority. However, owing to the overwhelming national security concerns of the EU member states, ostensibly, the humanitarian considerations was superseded by the imperatives to respond to the serious threat of human smuggling. Hence, an operation that finds its genesis in Operation *Mare Nostrum* optimized for maritime Search and Rescue eventually graduated to a maritime military operation against human smugglers.

## **Conclusion**

While UNSCR 2240 has given a push to the operation, it is yet to be seen how this naval operation will strike a balance between the EU's traditionally benign and humanitarian stance on the one hand, and its compelling national security concerns on the other. Further, it would be interesting to see how the countries of other regions take a cue from the EU's response to this crisis, where national security imperatives are so compelling that the nation states of the region have come together to meet common objectives.

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