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## IN TROUBLED WATERS

### NATO'S NEW MARITIME ACTIVITY IN THE AEGEAN

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During their meeting in Ankara on February 8, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu announced that NATO would launch new maritime activity<sup>2</sup> in the Mediterranean. This activity should monitor the flow of migrants in the eastern Aegean Sea and stop illegal human trafficking and smuggling. Only a couple of days later, on February 11, NATO defence ministers, in a surprisingly quick move, officially agreed on the plans and announced that the Alliance would deploy one of its Standing Maritime Groups to the eastern Aegean Sea. This new, and still nameless, activity marks NATO's first intervention in the European refugee crisis and represents an unusual and new type of mission for NATO.<sup>3</sup> This paper explains the political background and mandate of NATO's new maritime activity in the Aegean and discusses its operational details and prospects for success.

#### **A trilateral initiative**

The arrival of more than one million refugees and asylum seekers in 2015 poses an enormous challenge for the European Union and its member states alike. Over the last couple of months it has become obvious that Europe is institutionally and politically not up to dealing with the huge influx of migrants. With the appearance of the so-called "Balkan route," not only Turkey and Greece but also Germany – being by far the largest recipient of refugees in the EU – are the primary focus of any

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<sup>2</sup> Technically, this "NATO activity" is neither a "NATO mission" nor a "NATO operation."

<sup>3</sup> Yuri M. Zhukov, "NATO's Mediterranean Mission. What the Alliance is Doing in the Aegean Sea," *Foreign Affairs-Snapshot*, 21 February 2016, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2016-02-21/natos-mediterranean-mission> (accessed February 2016).

European attempt to better manage the refugee crisis.

Given its geographic location, Turkey is currently taking the main burden of hosting refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war. Ankara criticizes EU countries for leaving it mostly alone with the financial, humanitarian and political costs. Within the EU, Greece has become the main gateway to the Union and struggles with the enormous challenge to control, register and manage the influx of refugees. Since the *de facto* closure of the “Balkan route” by Austria, Hungary and several Balkan states in early 2016, a bottleneck of migrants has built up, adding to the country’s problems as it tackles its precarious financial situation. Germany is in a difficult situation too. Domestically, German Chancellor Merkel is under intense pressure to uphold her pledge to the public to reduce refugee numbers. At the same time, frustration in Germany over its European partners’ will to fulfill their quotas and over the effectiveness of Greece and Turkey in controlling and patrolling their coastline has grown.



**Figure 1. Map of the Aegean Sea**

(Source: *The Encyclopedia of Earth*  
<http://www.eoearth.org/view/article/149849/>)

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the new NATO activity is based on a trilateral request by these three countries, at least at first glance. In reality, it was mostly Germany and Turkey who drafted the idea during the abovementioned bilateral meeting in Ankara. Germany is strongly pushing for a multilateral solution to deal with the refugee crisis, and is in dire need of Turkey’s cooperation in its efforts to reduce numbers. Institutionally, this is not an easy task. Turkey is not an EU member state; the Union’s border control unit, FRONTEX, has no authority there. The previous European missions in the Mediterranean, Operation Triton and Operation Sophia (EUNAVFOR MED), which were established in 2014 and 2015

to monitor the flow of refugees from Libya to Italy, cannot serve as a blueprint here. For Germany, this left NATO as the only available institutional framework, which could possibly multilateralize its efforts to manage the refugee crisis and bring in Turkey at the same time. Similarly, the idea of NATO involvement found favour in Turkey, as NATO is an institution in which Ankara carries a lot of weight.

Albeit based on a proposal by a small group of NATO members, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg repeatedly underlined that it was the consensual decision by all 28 member states to deploy ships. He also pointed out that this decision was not based on individual pressure by certain countries or by the EU.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the EU and the European Parliament welcomed NATO's decision. In late February, members of the European Parliament's Committee of Foreign Affairs described it as a welcome step to further strengthen EU-NATO cooperation to tackle the refugee crisis.<sup>5</sup>

## Main tasks and operational details

To monitor human trafficking at sea seems to be an unusual task for a military alliance. However, for NATO, it is not. NATO's Strategic Concept from 2010 explicitly mentions illegal trafficking of people as one of the challenges that directly threaten Alliance security.<sup>6</sup> This stance is confirmed by NATO's *Alliance Maritime Strategy* (AMS), issued in 2011, which also mentions "illegal trafficking of humans"<sup>7</sup> as one of the core challenges for maritime security. The document further elaborates that conducting "surveillance and patrolling, and sharing information" is considered one of the main tasks of Alliance maritime strategy.<sup>8</sup> The Wales Summit Declaration, issued in September 2014, further underlines the importance of the AMS and states that the Alliance will "... continue to intensify and expand our implementation of the Alliance Maritime Strategy, further enhancing the Alliance's effectiveness in the maritime domain and its contributions to deterrence and collective defence, crisis management, cooperative security, and maritime security."<sup>9</sup> However, the Summit Declaration also mentions the intent to "... reinvigorate NATO's Standing Naval Forces by making their composition and the duration of national contributions more flexible and, in principle, no longer using them for protracted operations or for operations with low-end tasks."<sup>10</sup> This raises the question whether NATO's new Aegean activity – notwithstanding the fact that it is clearly in line with the AMS – might be considered by some member states as falling into the category of "low-end tasks" mentioned in this Summit Declaration. As the operational details of the deployment become clearer, this aspect

4 NATO, "Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs and its Subcommittee on Security and Defense," 23 February 2016, available at: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_128311.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_128311.htm) (accessed February 2016).

5 European Parliament, "Refugees: EU-NATO coordination set to deepen, say Mogherini and Stoltenberg," *Press Release*, 23 February 2016, available at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/20160222IPR15333> (accessed February 2016).

6 NATO, "Active Engagement, Modern Defence," Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization adopted by Heads of State and Government in Lisbon issued 19 November 2010, available at: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_68580.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_68580.htm) (accessed February 2016).

7 NATO, "Alliance Maritime Strategy," publically released on 18 March 2011, available at: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_75615.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_75615.htm) (accessed February 2016). For a discussion of NATO's Maritime strategy see Brooke A. Smith-Windsor, "NATO's Maritime Strategy and the Libya Crisis as Seen from the Sea," *Research Paper* No. 90, NATO Defense College, March 2013.

8 NATO, "Alliance Maritime Strategy."

9 NATO, "Wales Summit Declaration" issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales 5 September 2014, available at: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm) (accessed February 2016).

10 *Ibid.*

should be kept in mind.

By the end of February 2016, the main tasks of the activity were defined, while most of the operational details still seem to be subject to debate. On February 25, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg explained that NATO ships should conduct reconnaissance, monitoring and surveillance activities and provide information to the coastguards of Greece and Turkey and to FRONTEX. It would be the first time that NATO cooperates with the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders on an operational base. “NATO’s task is not to turn back the boats. We will provide critical information. To enable the Greek and Turkish coastguards, as well as FRONTEX, to do their job even more effectively. Our added value is that we can facilitate closer cooperation and assist in greater exchange of information between Greece and Turkey, as both are NATO Allies, but only Greece is in the EU.”<sup>11</sup>

Contrary to previous speculations, Mr Stoltenberg also made clear that NATO ships will operate in both Turkish and Greek territorial waters. However, Greek and Turkish forces should not enter each other’s territorial waters or airspace. How this complicated rule should be put into practice is currently subject to intense discussions.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, there have been indications of quite some good will on all sides to make this work. In principle, the ability to operate in Turkish territorial waters would give NATO a key advantage over previous European missions and could be the most important operational feature of the activity.

But there is another substantial difference. When NATO ships encounter refugee boats they should primarily inform Turkish and Greek coastguards and FRONTEX and make sure they handle the issue and take people in distress to Turkish or Greek shores. NATO ships should intervene directly only in case of immediate danger to the lives of passengers aboard refugee boats. Stoltenberg also made clear what will happen to migrants taken on board NATO ships: “In case of rescue of persons coming via Turkey, they will be taken back to Turkey.”<sup>13</sup> This is an important detail that gives the activity a certain deterrent component.<sup>14</sup> Although Turkey seemingly still sees some need for discussion, it did not object to NATO-statements referring to this provision. It is quite obvious that this would mark a substantial shift from the previous European practice. All refugees rescued by the European missions in the waters between Libya and Italy were brought to European shores, from where they travelled further north and applied for asylum. This practice was based on the fact that it would be illegal and unethical to let people drown or take them back to Libya, which is not considered to be a “safe third

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11 NATO, “Statement by NATO Secretary General on NATO support to assist with the refugee and migrant crisis” (25 February 2016), available at: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_128372.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_128372.htm) (accessed February 2016).

12 See “NATO’s Aegean deal only half the battle, as Turkey, Greece set for thorny talks,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 1 March 2016.

13 NATO, “Statement by NATO Secretary General on NATO support to assist with the refugee and migrant crisis.”

14 For this deterrent component, see also Zhukov, “NATO’s Mediterranean Mission.”

country” or a “safe country of origin.” To return refugees to Turkey, therefore, would require its being defined a “safe third country” by the EU and NATO member states.<sup>15</sup>

In sum, NATO’s new Mediterranean activity attempts to attain three different goals. First, it should provide surveillance and information on human trafficking in the area. Second, it should serve as a coordinating platform between the two countries mostly affected by the crisis and FRONTEX. Third, it should establish a legal and ethically acceptable deterrence against illegal migration.

### **The ships in charge**

NATO assigned its *Standing NATO Maritime Group 2* (SNMG2) to the activity. SNMGs are multinational, integrated maritime forces made up of 4-5 vessels from various allied countries on a rotational basis. These vessels (including their helicopters) are permanently available to NATO to perform different tasks, ranging from participating in exercises to actually intervening in operational missions. These groups provide NATO with a continuous maritime capability for all kinds of operations. NATO has two SNMGs and two standing NATO Mine Countermeasure Groups (SNMCMGs). SNMG1 is currently deployed in the Baltic Sea, while SNMG2 operates in the Mediterranean. Here, it provided contributions to NATO’s counter-terrorism Operation ACTIVE ENDEAVOUR, patrolled and monitored sea traffic and checked suspicious merchant vessels. Germany currently holds the revolving command of SNMG2 and operates the flagship of the group, the combat support vessel FGS BONN. SNMG2’s other ships are the Canadian Navy frigate HMCS FREDERICTON, the Turkish Navy frigate TCG BARBAROS and the Greek Navy frigate HS SALAMIS. Recently, SNMG2 was reinforced by an Italian frigate. Later on, a French frigate should further support the activity.

Operationally, SNMG2 is well-equipped for a multinational surveillance, communication and patrol operation in the Aegean. In the recent past, it conducted training missions with the Turkish Navy, which dealt with maritime interdiction and search and rescue missions. SNMG2 ships carry drones, helicopters and speedboats. Additionally, the flagship has a hospital and large storage capabilities. Since mid-February, the units have been patrolling in the assigned areas. They already started reconnaissance, monitoring and surveillance activities, and training in the approach to small boats in distress and procedures related to the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Seas (SOLAS).<sup>16</sup>

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15 For the discussion about Turkey being a “safe third country” in the context of the current refugee crisis see “Turkey as a ‘safe third country’ for Greece,” ESI-Background Document, 17 October 2015.

16 NATO MARCOM, “Standing NATO Maritime Group Two Conducts Drills in the Aegean Sea,” *Allied Maritime Command HQ MARCOM Press Release*, 27 February 2016, available at: <http://www.mc.nato.int/PressReleases/Pages/Standing%20NATO%20Maritime%20Group%20Two%20Conducts%20Drills%20in%20the%20Aegean%20Sea.aspx> (accessed February 2016).

The SOLAS drill is another remarkable detail of the activity. According to Rear Admiral Jörg Klein, Commander of SNMG2, “It is necessary to be prepared for any possible incident concerning a SOLAS case, as this is related to our task of surveillance and reconnaissance ... We are currently operating in an area where the probability to run across a refugee or migrant boat is a lot higher than in other areas. Therefore I want the units of our multinational force to be able to handle such a situation quickly and professionally.”<sup>17</sup> This can be seen as a reaction to the tragic incident that occurred during NATO’s *Operation Unified Protector* in Libya in 2011. Back then, 63 Africans adrift in the Mediterranean perished, seemingly because a distress call was not correctly forwarded to a NATO frigate nearby.<sup>18</sup>

Next to its operational features, SNMG2’s national composition is of significance. Being under German command, with both a Greek and a Turkish frigate “on board,” and having the support of an Italian and a Canadian ship, the activity not only brings the three initiators of the initiative together but also adds experience with Mediterranean surveillance missions and a transatlantic component. For Germany, the assignment of SNMG2 under its command is also an important step to show political and operational leadership to manage the refugee crisis in a multilateral context.<sup>19</sup>

### **The debate about NATO’s new Maritime Activity in the Aegean**

NATO’s new mission in the Aegean has been discussed from a political, operational, and humanitarian perspective.

Politically, some observers describe the activity as the result of a minimal consensus among NATO member states without much impact. Others argue that patrolling the Aegean could challenge NATO’s Mediterranean posture against the backdrop of Russia’s enhanced naval capabilities in the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Additionally, it would divert already scarce resources from other priorities and requirements. From this perspective, the deployment of SNMG2 is considered to be mainly about political symbolism or – even worse – is seen as a waste of time and money.<sup>20</sup> Greek voices also object that the activity reflects more Turkish priorities, rather than European needs, and will only deflect the European pressure on Turkey and enable it to “trade off” its contribution in the migration crisis for support in other domains.<sup>21</sup> Turkish commentators, instead, point at the lack of

17 Cit. after *ibid.*

18 For details on the incident see Brooke A. Smith-Windsor, “NATO’s Maritime Strategy and the Libya Crisis as Seen from the Sea,” p.7.

19 Nick Childs, “NATO’s Aegean odyssey,” *IISS-voices*, 23 February 2016, available at: <http://www.iiss.org/en/iiss%20voices/blogsections/iiss-voices-2016-9143/february-df45/nato-aegean-odyssey-88d1> (accessed February 2016).

20 Barbara Wesel, “Using a hammer to crack a nut,” *DW Opinion*, 10 February 2016, available at: <http://www.dw.com/en/opinion-using-a-hammer-to-crack-a-nut/a-19041328> (accessed February 2016).

21 Angelos Chrysogelos, “NATO’s new migrant mission in the Aegean is a victory for Turkey and a proof of Europe’s strategic irrelevance,” *EUROPP/LSE-Blog*, 24 February 2016, available at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/02/24/natos-new-migrant-mission-in-the-aegean-is-a-victory-for-turkey-and-proof-of-europes-strategic-irrelevance/> (accessed February 2016).

European support for Turkey and praise Turkish-German cooperation on the refugee crisis.<sup>22</sup>

Operationally, the hasty decision-making and the remaining questions on the operational details of the activity have met with some criticism. In fact, the speed of decision was remarkable by NATO standards and it seems that it took many NATO officials by surprise. According to NATO's *Supreme Allied Commander Europe* (SACEUR) General Philip M. Breedlove, the decision came quickly and it left many details open to clarification and "some military work."<sup>23</sup> Given the narrow and sometimes contested eastern Aegean in which SNMG2 has to operate, such work is in fact needed.

Finally, the new activity raised some criticism from a humanitarian perspective. In particular, the abovementioned "mild" deterrence component is blamed for scaring off migrants rather than protecting them. Additionally, human rights groups put forward that the Alliance would unnecessarily "militarize a humanitarian issue." Some even assume that NATO wants to increase the price and risk of the already expensive and dangerous crossing by forcing migrants back to Turkey by military means.<sup>24</sup> NATO officials and NATO experts counter these arguments by referring to the limited mandate. From the relevant statements and documents, it is very clear that NATO understands the deployment of SNMG2 to the Aegean as a surveillance and monitoring activity and that NATO ships will only intervene in exceptional cases.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

NATO's new Aegean activity might soon face some tough realities. Given its limited mandate, it will be quite difficult to find the delicate balance between deterring and fighting illegal human trafficking on the one hand and allowing for the possibility to legally seek asylum on the other hand. This would probably require a more ambitious mission, with an extended mandate and clearer rules of engagement. Such a mission is hardly acceptable for the US and some other NATO member states. For them, the refugee crisis is primarily a European/EU problem. Representatives of other NATO member states have repeatedly made clear that the deterrence of further Russian aggression ranks much higher on NATO's agenda than the deterrence of illegal human trafficking in the Aegean.

But even given its limited scope and mandate, NATO's new Aegean activity carries an important political message. It must be seen as a part of an evolving multilateral strategy to deal with Europe's migrant's crisis. This strategy is about to take shape over the next couple of months. It consists of better border control, provisions for emergency help, a distinction between economic migrants and

<sup>22</sup> "EU and EP should model Germany," *Daily Sabah*, 9 February 2016.

<sup>23</sup> "NATO ships to combat migrant-smuggling networks in Aegean," *The Washington Post*, 11 February 2016.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> For the discussion of the activity see also Zhukov, "NATO's Mediterranean Mission."

political refugees, and more support for Turkey and Greece in dealing with the people who have already entered these countries. In this context, the deployment of NATO's standing Maritime Group 2 to the Aegean shows the Alliance's willingness and ability to act and to cooperate with European institutions. In times of reduced cohesion within NATO and within the EU, and with an assertive Russia at the borders, this is no insignificant step.



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