



Maritime Security: Operation Atalanta – Europe's Contribution

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April 2012

Abstract

Europe's first maritime operation Atalanta has been launched after a short consultation process in January 2009. Its political and military ambition was to contribute to the already ongoing protection of the UN World Food Program shipping to deliver food to Somali people.

A phenomena, which some people call "Sea Blindness" was one reason for the international community to ignore risks and threats to the very vulnerable international shipping in general and the support for Somalia in particular. The ongoing increase of piracy in several areas of the world, specifically in the Horn of Africa region and the Indic Ocean is now recognized and nations are acting in accordance with the United Nations Security Councils Resolutions and the United Nations Convention of the Law on the Sea.

Shipping with food and supply for the starving people and the African Unions Mission to Somalia is protected. Piracy out of the coast of Somalia is disrupted and will be deterred by naval operations. The vast area creates a "Tyranny of Distance" and is limiting the necessary coverage. Maritime Surveillance and a recognized maritime picture are crucial for the success of the operation.

Piracy Action Groups are using "Mother ships" to extent their attack radius. Disruption by neutralization and immobilization of ships and skiffs together with disrupting pirate logistic dumps are robust action by the navies.

The coordination of all coalition forces and independent contributors is a challenge but offers excellent opportunities for further cooperation as well. A special open and international process has been implemented to achieve this coordination.

The "comprehensive approach" by the EU is an initiative to coordinate military and civil activities in the region with a focus on Somalia.

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ANALYSIS

In the context of the overarching topic of this session, European Union's first maritime operation "Atalanta" is a contribution to protect international shipping, crews and cargo and secure trade routes and narrow and confined waters.

In the context of today's presentations from "Building Maritime Situational Awareness (MSA)" to "Piracy and Maritime Terrorism – common threats to South Korea and Germany", the Operation "Atalanta" is a concrete contribution to enhance safety and security in a defined area: beginning in 2008 with the area of the strait of Bab-el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden, it is now in its 4th year covering almost 2/3 of the huge Indian Ocean.



But to achieve a reliable Maritime Situational Awareness is a permanent challenge. The phenomenon called "Sea Blindness" which is defined as a lack of understanding of the sea and all activities related to the sea is an obstacle with far reaching

consequences. The sea is a maritime highway, a highway on which all kinds of goods are moved from port to port, from nation to nation and from continent to continent.

These highways are building a global network, which follows the cyber network. Both are depending on each other.

Both networks need to be safe and must be protected where risks and threats are occurring. The trade routes, or "Sea Lanes of Communications" are a crucial part of the national and international trade and they are very sensitive in a time where the trade is interconnected and "just in time". The global logistic chain of supply is a vital and very sensitive network. This is, in the strategic context, the justification for the international effort against piracy.

Europe and South Korea are facing very similar challenges: their economy is depending on a safe and reliable exchange of goods at sea and by air. Globally 90 % of the worlds trade by volume is based on shipping, in Europe it is 90 % by volume and value whereas it is globally only 60 % by value.

Oil and gas in sea transportation will remain a permanent task for the shipping companies, container shipping will achieve a continuous growth, and here again the number of containers carried on board one ship has reached 18 000 TEU. The ships carrying these volumes and values need a safe and secure maritime domain.

Years ago trade routes had been threatened, and narrow straits had been closed, like the Suez Canal in 1967 or the Strait of Hormuz in the Arabian Gulf during the war between Iraq and Iran in 1980. Almost 250 Tankers were damaged or sunk, or in the strait of Gibraltar in 2003, where – due to intelligence reports – terrorist attacks against international shipping seemed to be imminent. The piracy threats to international shipping in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore and in the South China Sea and adjacent waters, have been underestimated for a rather long time.



The response was a number of combined military and constabulary operations including the four countries Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

Malacca Straits Naval and Air patrol, called "MALSINDO" and "Eyes in the Sky" represented a successful answer. The foundation of "The Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia, ReCAAP" in 2006 with national focal points in 15 nations of the wider region including South Korea with its Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fishery was another appropriate common answer to a common threat.

But the answers were and will not be only governmental or military ones.

International organizations and international companies and their associations provided a broader spectrum of initiatives, a single solution was not successful. Navigational deviations and newly designed ships are a different answer. New business ideas combined with technical innovation are answers to piracy as well.

The blockade of the Suez Canal from 1967 to 1974 had been answered by shipping companies who designed the "Super Tanker", today named VLCC or even ULCC and carrying more than 320 000 Deadweight tons. And of course the importance of pipelines both land based and sea based was growing and is still a strategic issue for all countries, which are depending on gas and oil.

But since then the MSA has grown, and again a combination of governmental and non-governmental actions are changing the political environment and the awareness to maritime domain vulnerabilities, risks, threats on one hand and challenges and opportunities on the other hand.

One lesson learnt from the long history in general and the maritime history in particular is, that it was very seldom a strategic or regional assessment of the maritime domain, which moved the responsible authorities to action. There were events with a direct and indirect impact on safety and security challenges, and therefore on the economy of nations and the whole international community.

And another lesson has to be kept in mind: to achieve a common goal in terms of regulations and standards is a very time consuming exercise which needs professionals in all matters of the maritime domain, and especially it needs negotiators with great patience.

We have to keep in mind that all operations against piracy, in our case in the Indian Ocean, are in accordance with "United Nations Convention of the Law on the Seas (UNCLOS)". This does mean that the guardian of the international law of the sea is the United Nation through the "International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and, as a private actor the "International Maritime Bureau (IMB), with its unique office in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia.

We do not know exactly how close the connections are between piracy and armed robbery on one hand and terrorism on the other hand. But keeping Dr. Roell's lecture in mind, it is almost impossible to state, that there are no links.

But it is clear that pirates are not voluntarily sharing their ransoms with terrorists: this could be used as an important argument when advanced solutions are made.

The United Nations Conventions make a clear distinction between armed robbery and piracy.

Inside territorial waters, that means 12 nm from the shore, it is armed robbery and therefore under the jurisdiction of the coastal state.

Outside it is piracy and therefore under the obligation of the law of the seas and its articles 100 to 107.

Due to pressure of the public opinion in several countries, and forced by successful pirate attacks against shipping chartered by the UNHCR to supply the starving Somali people, the United Nation Security Council agreed in the second half of 2008 upon four resolutions to react and act against piracy.

- UNSCR 1814: Protection of WFP Shipping
- UNSCR 1816: Deterrence or Piracy in SOM TTW
- UNSCR 1838: Maritime Operations of EU/Others
- UNSCR 1851: Additional Measures on Somali Territory

The urgent need to protect the WFP shipping was first taken by individual nations as their responsibility. But after a short delay the European Union took its part of the responsibility and achieved a common understanding and agreement in a rather short time. They started the first European maritime operation in respect of the Treaty of Lisbon and in accordance with its "European Security Strategy".

I want to draw your attention to some facts and will try to give you an insight into Operation Atalanta.

The Mission is to protect United Nations World Food Program Shipping which is supporting the starving Somali people and the AMISOM, The African Union Mission to Somalia and to deter and disrupt piracy and armed robbery at sea and to monitor fishing activities in Somali waters.

The mission consists of two main portions: the PROTECT portion and the DETER and DISRUPT portion. Additional mission components such as the contribution to the MONITORING of fishing activities have a less impact, but from a point of comprehensiveness they have their own value.



According to the Mission Statement, the PROTECT portion takes priority over the DETER and DISRUPT portion. This reflects – in essence – the protective character of Atalanta. This reproduces the political level of ambition and is a matter of fact.

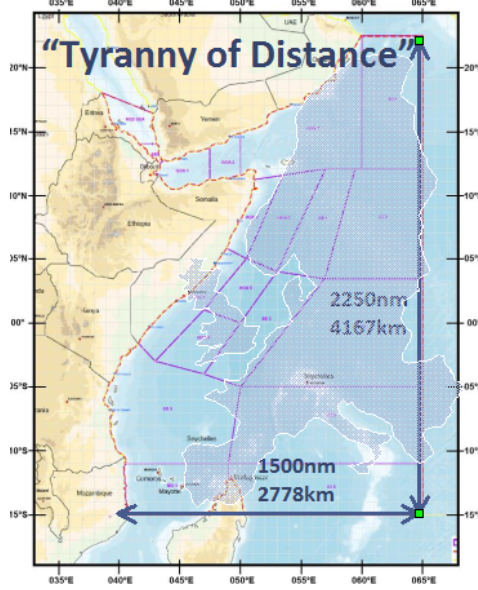
Both main portions of the mission are working like "communicating tubes". When the Operation has to put its focus on protection, that means when escort demands increase triggered by the enduring regional famine, the operation has less assets for the deter and disrupt portion.

Therefore, there is always a conflict for asset allocation, which – due to the low force flow – makes operational planning very challenging.

Force Flow of Surface Units and Maritime Patrol and Reconnaissance Aircraft is crucial – it is depending on the political level of ambitions of the participating member states and their naval capabilities and to a high degree on financial constraints to support the operation.

The military level of ambition is defined by the Operational Head Quarter, OHQ, for a minimum of 4 and a maximum 10 surface units and 3 to 5 aircrafts for the conduct of the operation. These criteria are based on three factors: the monsoon seasons, the intensity of the piracy action groups and the “Tyranny of Distance”.

The biggest contributors are France, Germany and Spain with at least one or two frigates with embarked helicopters and counter piracy packages like Special Forces.



Atalanta is an intelligence driven operation. The sheer vastness of the Area of Operation has a detrimental effect on operational flexibility, agility and responsiveness of the force available.

Maritime Surveillance and through this the “Recognized Maritime Picture” is a precondition for all operations.

Sufficient air assets, 4 MPRA, 8 H/C and national AWACS capabilities provide an invaluable contribution which is extensively and successfully employed. The real coverage of all sensors available is a permanent challenge. And there are sufficient opportunities for undetected deployment of Pirate Action Groups.

In this context the explicitly use of “Pirate Mother Ships” increased during the last three years the range of pirates up to 1750 nautical miles today. The Indian Navy and Coast Guard are involved in counter piracy operations in front of their territorial waters.

waters.

Nowadays the pirates depend much less on good weather conditions in the inter monsoon periods than before.

“Mother Ships” are mostly understood as pirated mid – sized Motor Vessels with the crews kept hostage onboard in order not to be boarded or engaged by naval forces.



These “Mother Ships” are stationed somewhere far out in the Indian Ocean, waiting for easy, slow or visible less protected ships of all kind. A skiff will be launched and start its attack.

The “Mother Ships” are identified but not all can be traced throughout the vast Indian Ocean. But at anchorage in front of the coast of Somalia “Mother Ships” are a good target for the option: “Neutralization and Immobilization”.

This became possible due to a more robust approach since mid 2011.



The possible disruption of the logistic dumps of the pirates ashore is under consideration.

It is easier to locate and identify the logistic dumps and the prepared attack skiffs ashore rather than waiting until they spread into the Indian Ocean.

Assets and capabilities needed are already in the area of operation. This needs clear regulations and a common definition about the area of the beach. Even with the UNSCR 1851, which agreed to “Additional Measures in Somali Territory”, no EU Member state has the ambition to become involved in internal Somali conflicts.

Operation Atalanta is one of the ongoing operations in the area and has always been the biggest force provider. But due to the famine in Somalia the number of escort demands for protection tripled during the last months.

Therefore the other contributions by NATO through its Task Force “Ocean Shield” and the US lead “Combined Maritime Force” are of great importance.

In addition to this, independent contributors are in the area, securing ships carrying their national flag. Most units of these navies are supporting all shipping in the case of an emergency. These national tasked units and Maritime Task Forces are partly from the wider region and partly from outside the region, from Asia. The Peoples Liberation Army Navy, PLAN, is a frequent contributor, and as for the European Union, it is the first operation in an international context.

Somali Basin Coordination is one focus of operation Atalanta. NATO operation “Ocean Shield and US operation “Combined Maritime Force” are mainly responsible for the “International Recommended Transit Corridor” which is a secured transit lane into the Gulf of Aden, in parallel to the Coast of Yemen.

But today it is more than just coordination. It is an effective synchronization between different Task Forces. In this area it is the concept to “Contain and Disrupt” with its wide reaching Rules of Engagement.

Due to the fact that the participating nations in these three operations, EU, NATO and US, have at least a common set of Standing Operation Orders, the same set of communication procedures and a basic common understanding and experience how to organize such an operation, it is rather easy to synchronize efforts and to avoid misunderstandings. This is difficult to achieve with independent contributors.

The fight against piracy on the Horn of Africa has developed to an international engagement with more than 60 participants. Military coalitions have their role as well as unilateral acting nations like China, Russia, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and others.

The international organizations like the UN or its Maritime Organization, IMO, are becoming relevant players. More and more regional actors contribute by supporting the infrastructure or the possibilities of the Operations. Improvement of and regional imprisonment regularities and capacities are crucial contributions.

In the Atalanta Operational Headquarter in Northwood, UK, the officers from all participating nations are working together with civilian representatives from shipping companies and non governmental organizations for the first time.

The local or tactical coordination of these independent participants is carried out through the “Shared Awareness and Deconfliction Mechanism”, SHADE.

Meetings on a regular basis, mostly in Bahrain, are the way to achieve this ambitious undertaking. Despite their original purpose, they are an important tool to improve trust and confidence, which could create a basis for further common activities at sea in other regions and against other threats.

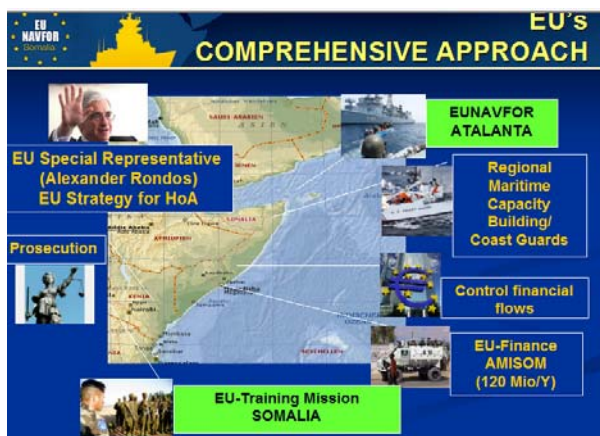
SHADE is a platform for close coordination, all players can take the chair of meetings and all have access to the “Mercury” information network, an internet based network, which allows exchange and cooperation on the tactical level.

Finally it is of importance to think about three different aspects:

The question: What has changed since the beginning of the operation in January 2009? And the consequent question: what has not changed?

Both are relevant for the political decision process in the participating nations. Nations are free in their decision to continue the operation, and they are independent in their decision how to contribute. There is no automatism in the EU Operation nor in the NATO operation. Whereas the US operation is a Combined Maritime Force, the participation is a national decision by each nation providing assets.

Of crucial importance are the national mandates and the Rules of Engagement derived from the mandates. This has a direct impact on the success of all operations, if in coalition or under national leadership.



What makes the EU operation Atalanta different from other operation is the political and practical ambition to operate under the framework of a “Comprehensive approach”.

Key words in this context are:

Maritime Capacity Building, in order to support Coast Guard capabilities in Somalia and in the neighbouring countries.

EU – Financial support to AMISOM

EU Training Mission to Somalia

Control of ransom flows

Improving the prosecution of piracy and hostage taken through training and education and financial support.

This will be achieved through a European Union Special Representative who is in charge of the coordination of military and civil activities and who will implement the EU's strategy for the Horn of Africa region.



Remarks: *Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.*

This paper has been presented on April 4, 2012 at the International Conference “Maritime Security – Challenges and Opportunities in 2012” in Seoul, South Korea, co-organised by SLOC Study Group Korea; Center for Maritime Studies, East West Center, Yonsei University; Yonsei – SERI EU Center at the Yonsei University and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) Korea.

About the Author of this Issue

Lutz Feldt, Vice Admiral (ret.) of the German Navy, born in April 1945 in the hanseatic city of Greifswald, joined the Navy in April 1965. He served in the German Navy for 41 years on all levels of Command including two years in NATO, responsible for Operations and Logistic and two years in the German Army in a Joint command.

Since retiring he became the President of the German Maritime Institute, he has been contracted by the European Commission to undertake a study about “Critical Maritime Routes” as part of the “Instrument for Stability”. From July 2009 until today he has been engaged by the European Defence Agency as a part of the “Wise Pens International” and delivered two studies about “Maritime Surveillance” and future capabilities of European Navies. As a senior mentor and facilitator he participated in several Command Force Maritime Component Commanders Courses for the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, Naples and Bahrain.



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