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The Aegean Sea and its wider consequences

In the last few months, Europe has been facing the worst refugee and migrant crisis since the end of the Second World War. In this regard, NATO is joining forces with ongoing EU actions to assist with the consequences of the crisis.

The current refugee and migrant crisis caused internal conflicts and social instability on NATO's borders in the Balkan region and within some Central and Eastern European member countries. In the meantime several criminal networks mushroomed contributing to the increase of illegal human trafficking in the Aegean Sea.

Following the request of aid from Germany, Greece and Turkey at the beginning of February, NATO decided to participate in the international community's efforts to stop illegal human trafficking and migration through the following instruments: intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance in the Aegean Sea and at the Turkish-Syrian border. To this extent, NATO has established new operational links and tactical procedures between the Allied Maritime Command and Frontex. The purpose is to enable Frontex be even more effective by the sharing of information on a real-time basis.

At the end of February, the NATO Defence Ministers underlined the essential need of the relationship between NATO and the European Union to overcome the current crisis in south Europe and the Balkans. In his speech the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated: “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. Today’s agreement also means that we are working closer with the EU than ever before. So NATO has a unique role to play as a platform for cooperation”.

Next to this statement, NATO ships in the Aegean Sea have started collecting information and monitoring activities. However, this long term crisis is requiring to the Alliance more resources than expected. On 7th of March, NATO Secretary General met Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in order to work in close collaboration with the government of Greece and Turkey. At the end of this meeting, NATO agreed with the deployment of further assets to limit the dangerous consequences of this migration crisis, *inter alia*, the expansion of the operations in the Turkish and Greek territorial waters, the increase of the present task force and the intensification of the cooperation with Frontex.

By the 12th of April Central European and EU candidate countries sent a formal proposal to the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, to strengthen the actual Frontex mission with a new civil-military mission

NATO’s engagement in the Aegean Sea can be seen as a one-off initiative or as a precedent that could enlarge the competences of the Alliance in the field of emerging challenges. In fact some could be concerned by a “mission creep” from established missions, but probably it will be a process of trial and error that the organization will have to digest.