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NATO ready to step up cooperation with EU along the Central Mediterranean Route

On 23rd June NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that the North Atlantic Alliance was ready to assist Libya in establishing security services and defence institutions. In an interview with the Italian newspaper La Repubblica, Stoltenberg said that NATO will help create a military force under the oversight of civilian authorities [Giampaolo Cadalanu, *Jens Stoltenberg: Libia, la Nato pronta ad aiutare l'Italia*, 23 June 2018, La Repubblica]. The Secretary General also confirmed that NATO's officials are already in talks with Libyan authorities, negotiating solutions to better assist them in this difficult task.

The interview confirmed NATO's engagement with the Libyan authorities in implementing effective Security Sector Reforms (SSRs), ending the proliferation of militias and establishing a unified military force. In February 2017 the Secretary General had already met with the Government of National Accord (GNA) Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj in Brussels. Shortly after, Stoltenberg said that Sarraj had submitted a formal request to obtain support for SSRs in Libya, including the establishment of a Defence Ministry with a chief of staff and intelligence-gathering capabilities. Negotiations slowed down in the following months, as tensions between the GNA and the Libyan National Army (LNA) undermined reconciliation efforts. Furthermore, since July 2017 Egypt took the lead in the negotiations to unify the Libyan military, convening the main rival factions in Cairo for talks and relegating NATO's offer of support to the background [Umberto Profazio, *A window of opportunity closing fast for Libya*, March 2018, NATO Defence College Foundation].

As a political solution to the Libyan crisis continues to appear out of reach, NATO is exploring other options to assist its Libyan partners. During the interview with La Repubblica, Stoltenberg seemed sceptic about the organization's participation in efforts to contain the migrant crisis, as he said that there are no military solutions to the challenges posed by the migration flows. Nevertheless he left the door open to for further collaboration with the EU on the issue. Referring to the NATO's mission in the Aegean Sea, where the organisation have helped decrease the illegal and dangerous trafficking of human beings, he said that NATO could help make the problem less serious.

Off the coasts of Libya NATO is already present with the Operation Sea Guardian, announced at the Warsaw summit in July 2016 as part of the organisation's plan to project stability beyond its borders. An evolution of the Operation Active Endeavour, Sea Guardian carries out maritime security capacity building, providing, among other tasks, support to maritime counter-terrorism operations and to the fight against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

At the same time, the Operation Sea Guardian has also provided support to the EU Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR Med, also known as Operation Sophia), engaged in disrupting human smuggling networks along the Central Mediterranean Route. During the interview with *La Repubblica* Stoltenberg said that NATO would soon sign a joint declaration with the EU on the issue, outlining a new model of cooperation. It is likely that building upon the experience of the mission in the Aegean Sea, Sea Guardian will strengthen the information exchange with and the logistic support to the Operation Sophia, with the aim to cut off the lines of human trafficking and illegal immigration.

Enhancing the NATO-EU cooperation in the Mediterranean Sea represents the best option not only to assist Libyan authorities but also to deal with the concerns of EU States affected by unexpected migrant inflows. For the time being other options seem premature and could backfire, in particular if associated with unilateral moves. Press reports have recently speculated about the new right-wing Italian government's attempts to involve NATO in the establishment of a military mission along Libya's southern borders [Umberto De Giovannangeli, *L'Italia chiederà una missione NATO ai confini sud della Libia*, 28 June 2018, Huffington Post]. However, protests in Ghat after rumours about an expected visit of an Italian delegation for the establishment of a military outpost along Libya's borders, highlighted the sensitiveness of the local population to what is perceived as foreign meddling [*Libya's Ghat city in dispute over upcoming Italian delegation's visit*, 28 June 2018, Libya Observer]. The move has also been condemned by the LNA, which rejected any attempt to establish a foreign military presence in the country under the pretext of fighting illegal immigration [Sami Zaptia, *LNA warns against presence of foreign troops in southern Libya*, 29 June 2018 Libya Herald].

For NATO, adopting a multilateral approach to the crisis in Libya represents the only way forward to assist the Libyan people in building effective institutions and fight human smuggling networks active in the country. Stepping up the cooperation with the EU can also help recompose fractures among States members of both organisations with conflicting agendas and different interests in the war-ravaged country, where external interferences continue to be detrimental to the peace process.

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