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**Collaborative Maritime
Security in Europe:
An Italian Navy Perspective**

Ferdinando Sanfelice di Monteforte



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Miami - Florida European Union Center

University of Miami
1000 Memorial Drive
101 Ferré Building
Coral Gables, FL 33124-2231
Phone: 305-284-3266
Fax: (305) 284 4406
Web: www.miami.edu/eucenter

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Collaborative Maritime Security in Europe: An Italian Navy Perspective*

Ferdinando Sanfelice di Monteforte♦

It does not happen too often that maritime issues reach the front titles in the world press. This apparent lack of interest is quite natural, though, even if sailors are not pleased by it, as our information society tends to focus on dramatic events, while the largest amount of the Navies' work deals with prevention, namely an activity which procures few medals, aimed as she is at the avoidance of problems - just the opposite of what attracts the general attention.

As a consequence, when prevention fails, and the press is involved in maritime affairs, this means that big troubles, deeply affecting our populations' future, are looming immediately ahead of us, and this is precisely the case today.

In fact, there are two maritime issues most extensively discussed on all western newspapers and televisions, namely human trafficking through the sea, as well as piracy, and this surge of the general attention toward what happens, beyond the blue horizon, has prompted, as usual, our governments to take action on them.

However, it is fair to say that these issues are not the product of sudden changes. Most maritime affairs, in fact have a slow, but steady evolution, but with long-lasting effects. These are normally the consequence of changing maritime power balances, often in a single region, and sometimes worldwide. Most importantly, the two problems I have just mentioned are only the tip of an iceberg, which means that we can expect other kinds of difficulties, in the blue water environment.

It is worth highlighting, at this stage, that maritime power – or sea power, as you prefer – namely the combined result of a respectable Navy, a prosperous merchant fleet and adequate

* This paper was presented in Amsterdam on January 28, 2009.

♦ **Vice Admiral (ret) Ferdinando Sanfelice di Monteforte** studied at the Joint Centre of High Defence Studies in Rome, and has held a number of distinguished diplomatic and military posts, including with the Navy General Staff in Rome in the Plans and Operations Department, as Naval Attaché and Liaison Officer to SACLANT in Washington, as well as Commander of the Second Naval Division, Navy General Staff as Head of Public Information Office and COMNAVSOUTH as ACOS Logistics and Administration Division and Multinational Logistic Commander CTF 440 during Operation SHARP GUARD, Vice Admiral as Deputy Chief of Staff, SHAPE, Commander of the Naval Forces Southern Europe, Commander Maritime Component Command Naples (MARCOM NAPLES), and most recently as the Italian Military Representative to the NATO and EU Military Committees until his retirement last year. Since then he has been a lecturer at the Catholic University of Milan in General Strategy and International Relations, and at the Italian Joint Staff College in Maritime Strategy. Additionally he is a Senior Concept Developer at NATO, SAC-T; Chairman of the ATA Italy Military Working Group; a member of IIHL Sanremo; and President of the Centre of Strategic Studies for the Mediterranean Union.

His publications include "Strategy and Peace" (Aracne Editrice, Rome, 2008). A second book, "I Savoia e il Mare" will be published in 2009, in addition to several articles for *Rivista Marittima*, the paper series of the Centro Studi Melitensi, and the European Union Center at the University of Miami/Coral Gables, FL.

He has been awarded many distinctions, such as Knight Commander of the Order for Merit of Republic of Italy; the Bronze Medal for Navy merit; the Silver medal for Long Command Duty; a Silver Medal for Long Sea Duty; NATO and WEU medals for service in the Former Yugoslavia Operations; the Officer US Legion of Merit; the Honour and Devotion Knight of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta; the Grand Cross of Justice of the Sacred Military Constantine Order of Saint Giorgio; the Knight Commander of the Order of Merit of Saint John; Grand Cross of Naval Merit of Spain; and the NATO Meritorious Service Medal.

bases for both, is like freedom: you become aware of its importance only when you have lost it, totally or partially, as is the case now.

It is not a coincidence that the first Italian scholar who elaborated the theory of maritime power in 1837, was Giulio Rocco, an officer of the Neapolitan Navy when Murat was the king and his domains were literally besieged by the Royal and Bourbons' Navies, to the extent that even coastal convoys had problems to reach their destination. Therefore, the lack of maritime power was deeply felt by all those involved with sea activities in the unfortunate kingdom.

Now, coming back to our days, we must consider that the direct causes of this balance change are two-fold: First comes the big revolution of world maritime trade, sparked thirty years ago, among other measures, by the economic warfare carried on by the former Soviet Union.

Beyond starting that self-destructive process which became known as *steel* dumping, the government of that power also decided to build cheap and simple bulk carriers, in order to hinder the western maritime trade, thus causing a sharp and sudden reduction of fares.

This reduction was the death toll for many western ship companies, which were at that time heavily reliant on national subsidies. The owners migrated to the flags of convenience in order to offset the reduction of profits, thus saving on mariners' paycheck, but – worse – escaping their forced compliance with the strict construction rules imposed by their former parent states.

The unforeseen aspects of such a de-regulation through the exponential growth of the flags of convenience, were two: first, more freedom of action was allowed to those companies which were willing to profit through transportation of illegal cargoes. Also, the ship-owners of that time did not consider that their mass migration to the flags of convenience would have deprived their merchant vessels of the customary protection by the flag states.

Piracy, therefore, had a favorable situation to exploit, and so it did: to hijack a vessel became a risk-free endeavour, as states like Panama, Liberia, the Marshall Islands – to mention only a few, among the convenience flag-states – were unable to retaliate.

The same problem occurred with human trafficking, as no state, receiving a vessel laden with immigrants, was able to find an interlocutor in the flag-state concerned, who was empowered to act against the ship-owners carrying this sort of cargo. Add to that the growing amount of contraband of drugs, arms, as well as weapons of mass disruption and you will have the bleakest possible scenario!

Clearly, this situation is a symptom some time since the Western Countries have lost control over the maritime trade, a key component of sea-power. Until recently, however, few were concerned about this, as long as the effects did not touch them directly. What started happening few years ago in the Far East, where these illegalities spread initially, was a tragic underestimation of the problem, but the general reaction was a dismissal with a shrug instead.

Even worse, the fact that trade fares were lower, thus having a positive impact on the price of goods, was seen with favor by the promoters of free markets, especially industries relying on raw materials, reaped higher profits producing industrial goods.

Selfishness was therefore rampant, and the first rude awakening came during the Iraqi-Iranian war, when tankers became targets of the opposed belligerents. The American ship-owners were the first to ask their government's protection, meeting with a well-justified flat refusal.

Only those tankers hoisting the U.S. flag got, in fact, the required protection, but with the subsequent advent of peace they reverted to their customary practices, and soon forgot this lesson. Now the ship-owners face a similar threat. The reaction of the states concerned, who are receiving requests for protection, might likely be similar as President Reagan's reaction was at that time..

The second immediate cause of this change in world maritime affairs is due to the changing strategic environment during the last ten years. The pre-eminence of peace-keeping operations, which requires the capability to project force overseas, led many Navies to follow suit, thus giving top priority to the development of their expeditionary capabilities, in a joint environment, at the expense of those assets that were actually best suited for sea control.

Only the possibility that some warships, belonging to a failed state could be used to carry on *Sea Denial* activities against our peace-keeping efforts, convinced Western Nations to retain a limited number of those assets required to perform this mission, as the threat was considered to be minimal. This has been particularly evident for the U.S. Navy, whose focus on power projection has virtually deprived it of the traditional component of the so-called “work-horses”, namely frigates, corvettes, Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) and off-shore patrol vessels, historically present in great numbers in her inventory. But also in the European Navies, the inventories of these precious assets are dangerously dwindling since the late ‘90ies.

The dire consequences of such neglect became particularly evident a few years ago, when the competing demands of U.S. Navy assets for NATO Operation “Active Endeavour” and the nationally-led Proliferation Security Initiative prompted the dispatch to NATO of the high-value (and high-cost) *Burke* class destroyers for these activities, to replace the very few remaining frigates.

The European Navies on their part found themselves with sharp reductions of financial resources, and were unable to offset the above equipment with an increase in their own ship-building programs. A similar situation is occurring with the Maritime Patrol Aircraft, the well-known M.P.A., as all existing types are reaching the end of their life expectancy, with no valid replacement on hand. By focusing on threats at sea, instead of considering the essential controlling maritime tasks, the Western governments have created a power vacuum in this domain, ignoring the fact that in such a situation there is always someone ready to exploit it.

This has led to widespread crime and illegality at sea, as we have seen - a situation which developed to such an extent that even some terrorist organizations decided to create their own merchant Navy, in order to use the sea to carry out direct attacks, to infiltrate and/or threaten the Western Countries, as well as to reap profits for illegal activities, thus offsetting the financial measures undertaken to block their bank accounts worldwide! Furthermore, there are cases in which prosecutors have proven that terrorist organizations control the flow of immigrants much to their financial advantage.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the deep troubles affecting some areas of the world have started to assert their dire consequences even in the maritime environment - once considered to be a peaceful and undisputed domain for the Western Countries since the implosion of the Soviet Union.

The same applies to the attempts made by our governments to increase and diversify energy sources. In some areas, like the Gulf of Guinea, drilling of the sea bottom, as well as the existing platforms are constantly threatened by local piracy to such an extent that their number cannot grow as desired. Unfortunately, while our governments have agreed more than once to send tens of thousands of troops to stabilize potential oil or gas producing countries well inland, like Afghanistan and Chad, they have not started similar actions at sea in these areas, where extraction is simpler to protect and to distribute.

Such a quagmire as a result of what could be defined as a persistent “*sea-blindness*” by the Western governments led us investigate how the Italian Navy is reacting to the existing challenges.

In light of the preceding, the first remark made by the ITN Chief of Staff in his recent interview to NAVAL FORCES comes as no surprise : “*The center of gravity of the current and future economic and geo-strategic scenarios is significantly shifting seawards*”. This implies that he expects a growth of problems at sea, as well as of the role of the Italian Navy, within the four joint missions defined by the government, namely:

- the *defense* of national vital interests, against any possible threat (national territory, SLOC, areas of interest, Italian citizens abroad);
- the *protection* of the Euro-Atlantic area, within national strategic and/or vital interests through the contribution to NATO’s collective defense;
- the *management* of international crises in a multi-national environment;

- the *support* to the national democratic institutions, through the accomplishment of specific tasks in case of internal emergencies (earthquakes, flooding, etc.).

The weight of the evidence is greater than human will, and it is better to be prepared to cope with a worsening of the situation at sea, at least until the western sea-power will be restored. But how to offset a scarcity of assets, as compared to the growing challenges? The only possible reply relies on collaboration, among all interested stake-holders, for the achievement of a shared goal.

Therefore, to project capabilities at sea and from the sea, the Italian Navy seeks to participate in the efforts led by the international and multi-national collective security structures, i.e. UN, NATO and ESDP, EUROMARFOR, etc.

However, to achieve the “critical mass” required to provide a significant contribution in the most important sector of force projection from the sea, where scarce capabilities exist outside the USA, the Italian Navy relies on existing agreements, first with the Italian Army, which led to the Joint Amphibious Brigade, and then with Spain, which gave rise to the SIAF/SILF structure.

It is worth briefly noting at this stage that amphibious capabilities are essential, in case of natural disasters, as the tsunami in Indonesia and the earthquake in Golchuk, Turkey, have demonstrated. Prompt relief interventions, it is worth emphasizing, are the modern version of the classic action of *Naval Diplomacy*, as they build solid and long-lasting ties between the relieved Nation and the relievers.

To perform the other function related to prevention of threats from abroad, and to guarantee homeland defense and security, the Italian Navy has realized the impossibility of acting alone, not only due to budget constraints, but also because a lot of different expertise can be utilized to achieve success against this explosive mixture of illegality, crime and terrorism.

Therefore, for homeland defense, inter-agency and inter-ministerial agreements have been signed, especially in the domains of fishery protection and – most of all – to control and interdict human trafficking through the sea, in the Central Mediterranean area. The new generation C4 systems, allowing effective networking, have proven crucial to achieve a common picture and a common intent, thus smoothing corporate sensitivities and parochialism, two historical enemies of every combined endeavor.

But by national action only, nothing effective can be done, in a region, like the Wider Mediterranean, without an effective participation by all neighboring Countries. The general interest to curb crime and illegality, as well as terrorist exploitation of the sea, has been evident during the Regional Symposia arranged in Venice, starting six years ago, and has allowed a collaborative project, the Virtual Regional Maritime Traffic Control Centre mechanism to take off, to the benefit of all participants.

The results of such voluntary regionally-focused collaboration have been so encouraging that other stakeholders, such as Brazil and Singapore, have shown interest in federating the maritime security networks they lead with the Mediterranean V-RMTC. This represents hopefully a first step to establish a global network of federated systems, which may allow globally a better control of the sea surface, and a greater effectiveness in countering the existing threats, notwithstanding the scarcity of maritime assets available.

It is a sort of mutual defense against crime and illegality, but primarily against any attempt to exploit the sea against those nations willing to grow in peace and prosperity, thus depending upon international maritime trade, the vital artery for an unhindered flow of goods, and the key for their security.

One side note at this stage: so far, in envisioning similar projects, the national and international stakeholders had downplayed the importance of the regional dimension, in the collaboration among concerned countries. This has proven too cumbersome, as no Nation found the possibility to regulate small differences or to solve common problems, through contacts with interlocutors having similar perspectives and interests.

Different regions have different problems, apart from a few global issues. Solving the host of local issues is, therefore difficult in a global forum. Nonetheless it is essential to achieve harmony and real cooperation among Countries having interests in the region they live in.

For this reason the Italian Navy has focused its attention on the so-called Wider Mediterranean region with outstanding results: the widespread desire to contain crime, illegality and to thwart the maritime terrorist threats facing us has proven to be a force multiplier in several occasions, and is a guarantee that the Mediterranean Sea, where sea trade is among the most intense worldwide, will enjoy an unprecedented degree of security, to the general benefit.

It is quite clear that in other areas of the world similar processes of regional solidarity may require some time and a lot of effort, but there is no alternative to stem, once and for good, the growing flow of illegal, criminal and terrorist activities at sea, strictly inter-twined as they are.

The slogan “*Acting nationally, Focusing regionally, Envisioning globally*”, recently adopted by the Italian Navy, is therefore a good way to depict her approach, to face the challenges of our time.