Maritime Human Smuggling and Implications for Littoral Operations

by Peter Thomsson

The following article is based on a contribution to the OpTech East Med conference at the NATO Maritime Interdiction Operational Training Centre in Souda Bay, Crete, organised by the Littoral Operations Center at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School. I believe that the combination of venue, topic and hosting organisations was optimal for the conference, in order to appreciate complexities but also to look at the maritime responses required.

This article is based on a presentation given in that setting, adding items that could not be accommodated under the time constraints at the podium. While this text is based on professional experience, all views and opinions herein are the author's own.

Operation SOPHIA ceased on 31 March 2020 and was succeeded by Operation IRINI, with a mandate focussed on the implementation of the the UN arms embargo on Libya.

Resumé

Artikeln är baserad på ett anförande vid en konferens om kustnära operationer. Inledningsvis redogörs översiktligt för människosmuggling till sjöss. Därefter diskuteras med utgångspunkt i detta och i tidigare erfarenheter några lärdomar som kan dras för kustnära operationer. Med kustnära urbanisering och omfattande handel har betydelsen av kustnära farvatten ökat. Trots tekniska framsteg inom sensorer och vapensystem kan den kustnära konfliktmiljön bli svårbemästrad som en följd av vilseledning, gråzonsagerande och hybridkrigföring samt obemannade system. Detta ställer krav på förmåga att snabbt bilda en situationsförståelse av komplexa skeenden samt på att med flexibilitet och situationsnära ledarskap agera balanserat.

THIS ARTICLE PROVIDES a brief outline of human smuggling across the Mediterranean in general and the Libyan example in particular. It is based on my understanding of the subject from my time in the Operational Headquarters of European Naval Force Mediterranean Operation SOPHIA in Rome. Building from these experiences I would like to develop my thoughts on the implications of these types of missions for current and future naval operations.

Human smuggling

Starting in 2013, several deadly accidents involving migrants occurred in the Central Mediterranean. On 18 April 2015 a small vessel capsized off the Libyan coast on its way to Lampedusa. Of the assessed 700 migrants on board only 28 survivors were eventually pulled from the sea.[1] As far as I am aware, this remains the single deadliest event during a migrant crossing to Europe.

The incident caused an international uproar and sparked several EU initiatives to stop ruthless smugglers.

An extraordinary session of the European Council decided upon ten-point action plan, of which Operation SOPHIA was one.[2] Other items included reinforcing FRONTEX operations, increasing coordination between concerned EU bodies and engaging key countries in the region. With a fast track process, planning for Operation SOPHIA was initiated in May 2015 with Initial Operating Capability reached only a few weeks later when a multinational force set to sea, supported by aerial and other assets.[3] This is an unparalleled accomplishment among EU operations and a sign of the resolve to swiftly address a very challenging situation with its many complexities.

Despite the wide range of efforts and progress made, human smuggling and casualties keep occurring, albeit at a lower level. As re-cently as 23 November 2019 another vessel capsized just off Lampedusa from which at least 18 dead bodies were recovered.

Smuggling

The problematic of smuggling dates back a long time, as part of a greater challenge in the Mediterranean crossroads that since the earliest days of civilisation have been a central hub of human activities and trade. The map below, from the Norwegian Center for Global Analyses (RHIPTO), depicts the smuggling routes towards the Mediterranean. The legend to the map describes the respective arrows for the different smuggling flows. For this article, the most interesting flows are those depicted by brown and blue arrows. However, as can be seen, there is substantial overlap between the different kinds of flows as smugglers employ established networks but alternate between the types of merchandise

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Source: Guardia Costiera.
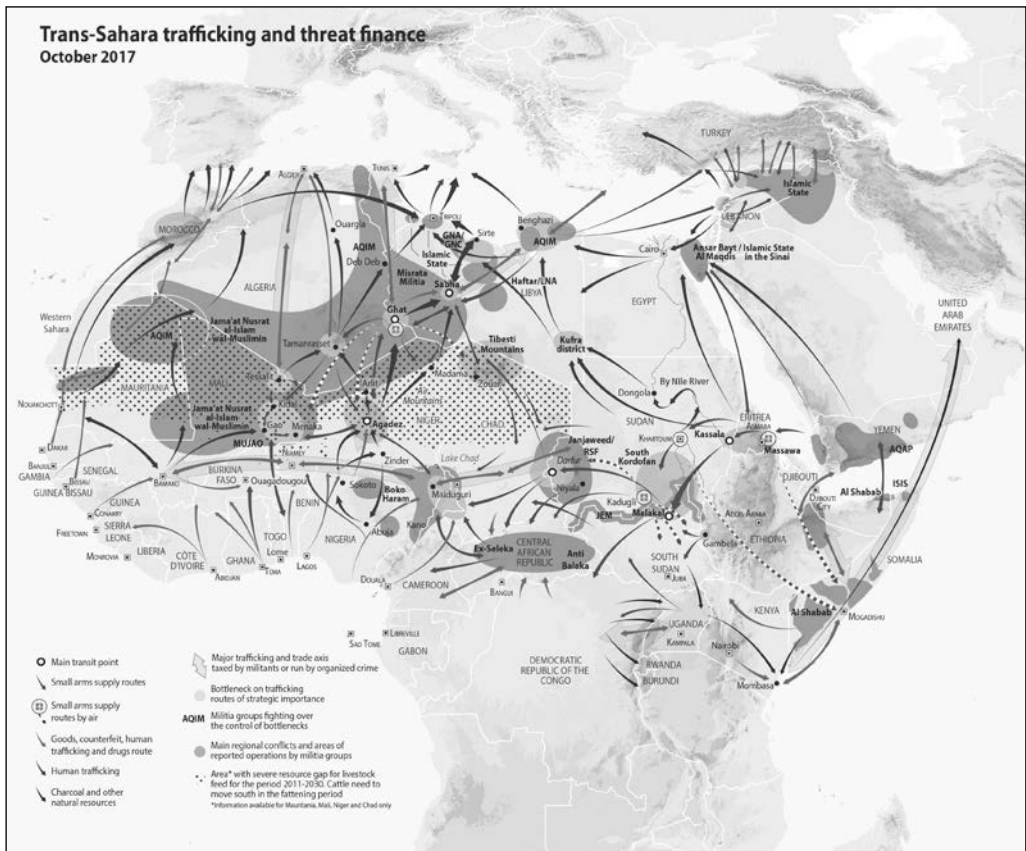
Source: RHIPTO, World Atlas of Illicit Flows, 2018.

according to changes in demand, perceived risk and profitability. Migrant smuggling and trafficking appear to offer relatively low risk for high returns.[4]

In this article, migrant smuggling refers to persons who travel by their own subjective will, at least to some extent, while trafficking refers to persons who are traded and transported as objects, with little or no influence over their situation. For both categories there seems to be an excess in demand for smuggling, which will maintain criminal activities and cause smugglers to innovatively adapt and seek new ways and means to achieve their ends, if they are countered.

Migrants, asylum seekers and trafficking victims

Turning to migration there are a number of factors influencing migration in the region. The International Organization for Migration, IOM, points to demographic and socioeconomic trends, climate change and conflict as being the main causes for migration.[5]

Armed conflict is certainly a case in point with regard to Libyan smuggling, where transiting migrants and refugees originate from a wide area from Central Asia and the Middle East to Africa. According to the United Nations High Commissioner

for Refugees, UNHCR, there are almost 70 million forcibly displaced people in the world.[6] Many of these are in the Middle East or Northern Africa. Globalisation has opened trade flows between poorer and richer regions.[7] In the wake of this, information about the standard of living and employment opportunities has become accessible for disenchanted individuals who seek to travel to what is perceived as the land of plenty. The ease of access to and opportunities at the destination are often strongly exaggerated by smugglers, as marketing, as well as by those who have travelled before, who seek to justify the costs that often leave families indebted to smugglers for years.

In Operation SOPHIA we saw the smuggling routes being employed for escaping war as well as of seeking better ways to provide for their families, many with combinations of these and ambiguous grounds for determining their right as asylum seekers or other status. It should be borne in mind that not only asylum rights but also the general standard of living makes Europe attractive. This is true even for those who are limited to an irregular status in the European Union and the grey or even black labour market, where many are cynically exploited.

Some migrants, especially those with a relative level of wealth, make a single payment at the point of origin to purchase a passage by several transportation means all the way to the destination. Others are repeatedly pressed for additional payments at each stage of the journey, despite having been promised a package deal. This leads to extortion where families are pressed for ransom payments, to abuse and mutilation or even to migrants being sold as slave labourers or trafficking victims. Some, especially young women, are trafficked from the outset, most often for prostitution. Others
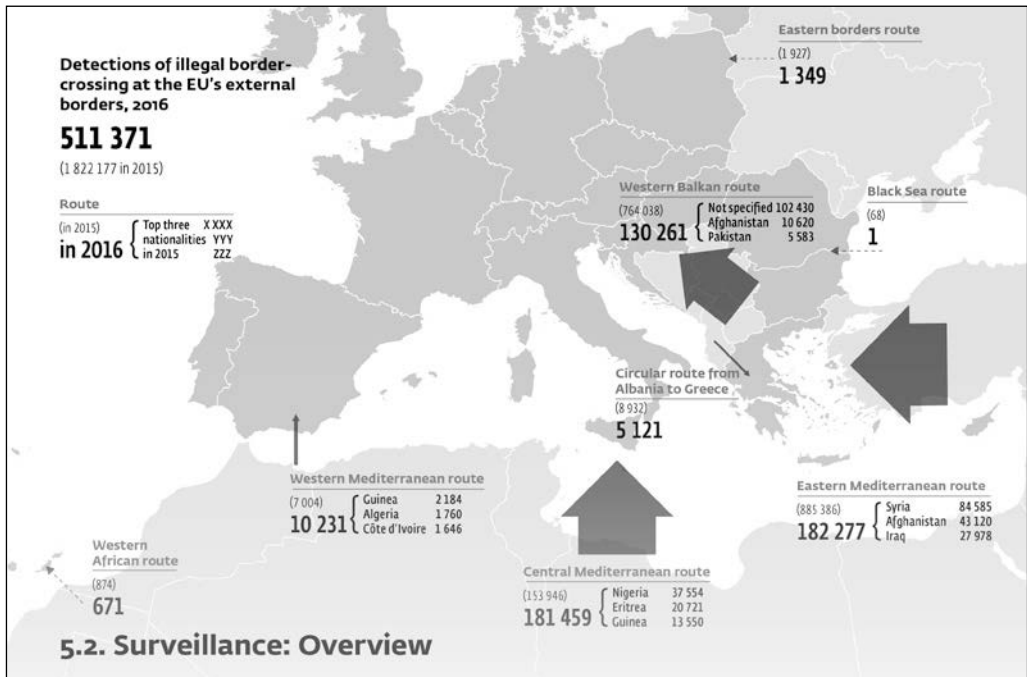
fall victim to trafficking along the way as they are snared by criminals.

Crossing the land continent is challenging in itself; across barren deserts, regions with contested control and national borders where passage may or may not be permitted.[8] Having reached the coastline, migrants and trafficking victims are crammed together in so called safe houses for days or weeks before departure.[9] This naturally poses great risks for the spread of contagious diseases, in itself a concern when migrants originate from regions stricken by Ebola or other epidemic diseases. There have also been cases where competing smuggling bands have intercepted boats after they have set off, to press the migrants for their last possessions.

The crossing

The graphic below from FRONTEX shows illegal border-crossings into the European Union in 2016, with 2015 in parentheses. Those were the two years with the greatest total number of arrivals in modern time. Cross Mediterranean human smuggling and migration has, however, been present as a phenomenon for a long time, shifting between different routes and means over time, as well as in quantity.

The fluctuation is mainly attributed to changes in push factors, such as armed conflict, and the availability of a transit corridor through which to arrive at the coastline and set out across the sea. The latter occurs when law enforcement is insufficient to stem migrant flows. The most significant impact recently was the conflict in Syria, occurring at the same time as governmental control decreased in the post-Ghaddafi turmoil. This opened up Libya as a transit channel and smugglers were quick to establish their networks. The business idea is to provide access for asylum seekers and economic

Detections of illegal border-crossing at the EU's external borders, 2016

511 371

(1 822 177 in 2015)

Route

(in 2015)
in 2016 {
Top three   X XXX
nationalities YYYY
in 2015   ZZZ

Eastern borders route

(1 927)
1 349

Western Balkan route

(764 038) { Not specified 102 430
              Afghanistan   10 620
130 261 { Pakistan   5 583

Black Sea route

(68)
1

Circular route from Albania to Greece

(8 932)
5 121

Western Mediterranean route

(7 004) { Guinea   2 184
           Algeria   1 760
10 231 { Côte d'Ivoire 1 646

Western African route

(874)
671

Central Mediterranean route

(153 946) { Nigeria 37 554
            Eritrea 20 721
181 459 { Guinea   13 550

Eastern Mediterranean route

(885 386) { Syria   84 585
            Afghanistan 43 120
182 277 { Iraq   27 978

5.2. Surveillance: Overview

Source: FRONTEX, Risk Analysis for 2017.

migrants into Europe, preferably into the Schengen area.

According to the Missing Migrants project, in the period from January 2014 to October 2019, about 19,000 migrants died during their journey crossing the Mediterranean.[10] Not only do smugglers abuse, extort and sometimes kill migrants, there are furthermore indications that the business model is based on a ruthless understanding of a fatality tolerance of about 2-3 %. During my time in Operation SOPHIA it seemed that following mass drownings, smugglers took measures to reduce risks and the number of fatalities decreased. That effect was often temporary as greed soon again took precedence over caution. But as long as migrants, in one miserable way or another, are landed in Europe, there is little disincentive for others against trying.[11] Consequently, yet more are encouraged to undertake the

journey, in turn exposing themselves to the risk of atrocious abuse while at the same time financing large scale organised crime.[12]

Looking closer at the Libyan example, Libyan smugglers long ago abandoned any intention to ensure that the migrant vessels reach all the way across to the European mainland or even the European islands closest to the African coast. Instead, they rely on the legal and binding obligation for mariners to save lives. Thus, they cause each crossing to become a Safety of Lives at Sea (SOLAS) event. Thereby ships of all kinds are forced to render assistance, if they are capable, as prescribed by article 98 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.[13]

Smuggling vessels, rubber or wooden boats, are rarely in shape to put to sea and are furthermore crowded and heavily overloaded. There are accounts that on occasion, migrants reluctant to board unseaworthy vessels have

been killed on the beach to coerce others to board for the perilous journey. The rubber boats, often imported from less scrupulous exporters in the Far East, may even be of substandard components and construction that will start to disintegrate after a few hours at sea. While wooden boats may appear safer, they can be so crowded that smugglers put migrants in locked compartments below deck for stability reasons, which has caused death by suffocation.[14]

This deliberate and coldblooded business practice on the part of smugglers causes difficult dilemmas. Just as an example, in 2015 several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) started operating closer to the Libyan coast, seeking to reduce risks for migrants. But in doing so, they became an instrumental part of the business model, as smugglers adapted to the changed conditions this implied. During my time in the opera-tion, I saw the average distance from coast to SOLAS event slashed from 80 nautical miles (NM) to around 20NM. At the same time, boats were launched from the coast ever more overloaded, in poorer state and in harsher weather conditions. Thus, with the honourable intention of saving lives, NGOs were exploited to allow smugglers greater profits.

It is possible that the decreased smuggling from Libya to a great extent is an effect of the re-establishment of the Libyan Coast Guard.[15] Here it might be worth to point out that it may be both unhealthy and un-profitable for a coast guard officer to counter smugglers.[16] However, the decrease may to some extent also be an effect of the reduced presence of NGO vessels close to the coast, since SOLAS events in late 2018 occurred in excess of 100NM from the coast as the civil war resumed along the coastline.

© Luca Catalano Gonzaga

Source: Guardia Costiera.

Large scale rescue operations

The subsequent large-scale rescue operation entails substantial risks for all parties involved. If not already shipwrecked, the migrants upon seeing a rescue vessel may cause their own to capsize as they rally to the side of the vessel facing the rescue. The process of taking hundreds of persons on board is difficult, exacerbated by their being weakened by starvation, dehydration and abuse. Modern merchant and naval vessels often have high freeboards and few access points for rescue operations. Once on board, the shipwrecked must be tended to, with food and water as well as sanitary and resting possibilities. But neither naval, nor merchant, vessels are adapted for mass rescue of this kind. Indeed, the Mediterranean situation caused the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) to issue guidance on the subject of large-scale rescue operations at sea, in 2014 with a revised second edition issued in 2015.[17]

Furthermore modern merchant vessels have small crews, which risks causing new problems as the sheer number of people taken on board and their needs to be tended to may compromise the security provisions of the ship and invalidate measures in the Ship Security Plan that are required under the International Ship and Port Facility Code (ISPS).[18] The small crews and sometimes insufficient possibilities of isolating restricted areas pose a risk for hijacking. In March 2019, a group of shipwrecked migrants hijacked the ship that had rescued them, when they learned that it was bound for Libya. This was contrary to the promises made by smugglers and so they demanded instead to be taken to Europe. The situation had to be resolved by a military Hostage Rescue Operation.[19]

Source: Guardia Costiera.

From time to time, smugglers seek to recover the vessels, after the SOLAS event, in order to reuse them for yet another launching of migrants. At first smugglers maintain distance, posing as fishermen or any other innocuous activity meant to keep them from being compromised and to avoid undesired attention from patrols. Once the migrants are transhipped to a rescuing vessel, smugglers sweep in to try to recover the boat. In some cases, smugglers have even fired upon rescuers. Despite normally being in poor state, the smuggling vessels represent a value both from a financial standpoint and from the fact that boats are hard to come by. Many boats have been destroyed in the civil war, others have been seized at sea and rubber boats may even be confiscated before are imported.[20]

Additional risks and threats

Unfortunately, the hardships endured by the migrants and the consequent increased risk of contracting contagious diseases poses a risk also to the rescuers, especially with large numbers of people within the limited space available.

Other concerns are those of the risk of terrorists infiltrating migrant groups. They could do so either to strike ships or to carry out attacks on targets ashore, the main threat feared being that of suicide bombers or bomb-laden vessels. There have been several instances of suspected foreign terrorist fighters being encountered on the Mediterranean routes. Between July and September 2019, INTERPOL conducted Operation Neptune II, detecting more than a dozen suspects in ports of debarkation in southern Europe.[21]

Yet another type of threat is that of military weapons systems, employed either by regular or irregular armed groups or even terrorists.[22] Naval irregular warfare has not

attracted as much attention as that on land but represents a substantial threat to be reckoned with.[23] Indeed, force protection or the capability to mitigate this kind of threat are part of the reasons for deploying naval vessels and other military assets for a mission that primarily would be a civilian mission. Another concern is the law enforcement part of the mission that requires efforts to collect evidence and to identify smugglers. This can be risky but is a necessary component in the full range of efforts to combat this criminal activity. Fortunately, law enforcement authorities can contribute training and second officers to the ships.

Assets employed

Widening the perspective to include another mission primarily of a policing character, that of counter-piracy, it is perhaps no surprise to see that the capabilities are similar. Consequently, the assets requested in the Combined Joint Statement of Requirements (CJSOR) and in Force Generation Conferences, show a high degree of correspondence. In EUNAVFOR Operation ATALANTA, off Somalia, participating nations have contributed vessels for off-shore patrolling, ranging from corvettes to destroyers and even LHDs (Landing Helicopter Dock ships); reconnaissance aircraft either of sophisticated military types, coast guard or even civilian aircraft; as well as specialized teams for boarding and interviewing. To this can be added general ISR (Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance) assets and systems that tend to be the same for supporting any military mission.

While counter-smuggling, just like counter-piracy, may seem to make suboptimal use of military assets like those listed, they are nonetheless two types of challenging missions. Being better equipped to respond to

military threats than most law enforcement vessels, naval vessels may be the only choice for these types of missions. Furthermore, due to their mobility, dexterity and versatility, naval vessels are likely to remain politicians' preferred instrument for operations in littoral environments. They can be employed in the full spectrum from counter-smuggling, counter-piracy and counter-terrorism to low- and high-intensity conflict. This width of operational types naturally poses a challenge to ensure that ships, equipment, doctrine and training provide adequate support to build the required situational awareness and the capability to operate in an environment that is expected to be cluttered, contested and constrained.[24] For this, I am sure that the NMIOTC is an excellent organisation to hone the skills for a key part of the operational spectrum.

Implications for future operations in the littorals

Some of the solutions that may be forwarded to address migrant smuggling have already been implemented. Information campaigns in countries of origin counter the exaggerated marketing of smugglers. Embargoes and other ways to intercept weapons and rubber boats in transit to launching areas have been enacted. There are also capability development efforts in supporting Libyan authorities in countering the smugglers.

Looking further, I would like to finish by offering some thoughts on future littoral operations. I find it unlikely that the ambiguous nature of conflicts will decrease. With an increase of hybrid threats and grey zone activities, the threat may not be the high-intensity and clear-cut type. Rather the requirements to be capable of addressing a low-tech threat and of discriminating between legitimate and illegitimate targets remain. This is of

particular importance in the busy littoral waters with a plethora of activities and actors. It is further compounded by the increased practice of employing sophisticated efforts to deceive and confuse as well as working through proxies or other non-attributable measures. However, it is also complicated by the necessity to cope with peer or near-peer state adversaries, employing state-of-the-art technologies.[25]

At this time, Anti-Access, Area-Denial (A2/AD) is a very pertinent subject. A2/AD extends far out to sea but naturally also has consequences for operations in the littoral area. Since this has attracted strong interest and been analysed upon by experts in the field, I will abstain from elaborating on the subject in this article.[26]

The littorals

The littorals have substantial concentrations of human population as well as resources and are also the cross-roads for trade and other exchange.[27] It is even suggested that for future conflict, the littorals may be designated as Strategic Centres of Gravity.[28] The increased importance of the littorals has been recognised since the end of the 20th century.[29] With the vast majority of all maritime activity being located in, or at some point passing through the littorals, it may be wise to ensure capability to operate in this type of environment. Shallow waters, narrow passages and choke points or other navigational constraints make of the littorals an operating environment that possesses other opportunities and limitations than the open sea.[30] This implies a difference in what types of weapons and sensor systems as well as tactics that can be employed.

Despite technological advances, it remains challenging to detect, acquire and engage surface and subsurface targets close to the

Photo: Hampus Hagstedt, Swedish Armed Forces.

coastline, especially in archipelagic areas and waters busy with merchant and fishing vessels.[31] The coastal state, or potentially a coastal non-state actor, also benefits from the shorter ranges and protected waters that enable the use of small vessels. These can be used for swarming tactics, as have been employed by Iran in the Strait of Hormuz. Naturally, the coastal state also enjoys the home-field advantage and is able to bring land and air systems to bear.[32]

Shallow and constrained waters provide ample opportunities for both offensive and defensive mining as well as other means of modern undersea warfare. Covertly delivered, such systems have a capability of wreaking havoc on an enemy's freedom of movement at sea. However, a deliberately conspicuous emplacement will also represent a threat to sea lines of communication and cause time

consuming mine clearance, where time is traded for probability of clearing all mines, or rerouting. This is a powerful tool for coercion and for shaping the battlespace. By exploiting technological gains, autonomous vehicles can be used for various purposes by an attacker.[33]

Creating ambiguity and sowing doubt may have equal or potentially stronger effect than a successful attack. For example, the unclaimed explosions on tankers off Fujairah in May 2019 and in the Strait of Hormuz in July 2019 immediately affected oil prices and brought the world's attention to the region while retaining some deniability for the alleged perpetrator, even if Iran is strongly suspected for direct or indirect involvement. Unmanned systems, in particular in the lower cost range such as COTS (Commercials off the shelf) that are adapted for military use

may well be more frequent in coastal areas where there is a lesser need for speed and endurance.

Scouting and Antiscouting

With the Eastern Mediterranean being a very busy maritime region, obtaining sufficiently detailed situational understanding to make decisions and conduct operations was a challenge in Operation SOPHIA. Every technological gain, be it in sensor range and detection capability or in weapons range, speed or hit probability, in itself also represents an imperative for the adversary to counter it, which naturally applies also to an irregular actor. The latter was blatantly obvious in Operation SOPHIA where smugglers made efforts to avoid detection and deceive sensors by hiding among commercial and fishing vessels. Sophisticated actors can employ signature reducing measures in multiple dimensions, which, when combined with adequate tactics, may negate technological advances in sensor and sensor integration. This may render extended ranges and higher speeds practically irrelevant. At least it may reduce the effective engagement distance to such a degree that it forces the attacker to operate in less advantageous ways or at shorter range than preferred.

Given that a firing solution starts with locating and acquiring target data, scouting and anti-scouting measures represent a competition in itself with the objective being to deny the opponent the ability to "fire effectively first".[34] To a great extent, this echoes the findings of the late Wayne P. Hughes. In 2000 he pointed to trends towards defence by cover, deception and dispersion, towards unmanned and autonomous systems and integrated cooperative engagement technologies. Cover, deception and dispersion could potentially be mitigated

by multi-disciplinary sensor fusing and by big data analysis, the downside of which is that it is dependent on technology and communications. Particularly with reference to the capabilities that sophisticated command and control systems offer, Hughes reminds us of the concurrent vulnerability of such systems if and when we become excessively reliant upon them.[35] Indeed, an opponent may well exploit this to create an electronic warfare (EW) environment that causes a technological asymmetry in which his systems and doctrine enjoy a comparative advantage.[36] Naturally, this renders the already challenging concept for cooperative engagement even more difficult.[37] There is thus a risk that an exaggerated dependence on technology and on a close command and control loop will hamper or even paralyse modern naval forces.

Particularly in the archipelagic waters, operating close to the coast or behind islands can deny the use of extended sensor and weapon ranges, potentially even the use of hypersonic weapons if terminal phase manoeuvring cannot be executed at sufficient distance to strike the target. Hence, within the final miles to shore the effective striking power of small and stealthy vessels with light and shorter range weapons systems may be bigger than that of larger vessels with heavier and longer range weapons systems.[38] Naturally, this is under the condition that the small vessel has the capability to adequately manage close range and cluttered combat environments. Strands of this reasoning can be seen in a recent report, which suggests changing the force composition of the U.S. Navy by increasing the number of small manned and unmanned surface vessels at the expense of large vessels; in an effort to increase capability, reduce costs and improve tactical decision-making.[39]

In some cases, less sophisticated technology has its advantages. In Operation SOPHIA, a civilian aircraft with a couple of standard civilian instruments allowed crude sensor fusing by an operator on board. This enabled detection, location and classification of vessels at sea. It was a relatively unsophisticated platform that successfully provided actionable intelligence for the operation at low cost. Similarly, the civilian maritime patrol aircraft of the Swedish Coast Guard were some of the most capable in Operation ATALANTA off Somalia. While this may not translate into high-intensity conflict it does serve as an example of affordable sensors that can provide valuable situational awareness in lower conflict ranges. The use of unmanned sensors already in practice also represents a lower cost, if not in money then at least in lives at risk.

Situational understanding or situational misunderstanding

Other means an adversary could employ to gain an advantage would be to target cognitive processes, in order to degrade the ability of operators and decision-makers to properly assess the situation and implement the necessary actions.[40] There is a requirement for a joint and detailed situational understanding to be able to act in time and in a concerted effort. Furthermore, this action or reaction must be adequately balanced; neither over- nor under-reacting, and doing so at the right time so as not to be presented with a hard to reverse *fait accompli*.[41] Modern western armed forces are to a high degree reliant on technology and may have become complacent from low-intensity conflict. This is a known vulnerability but difficult to rectify. The advantage may well lie with the challenger, for whom degrading the use of technology may be sufficient. However, even when actions can

be observed and attributed to an adversary, there remains a risk of failing to understand the meaning, since seeing is not necessarily believing. This has been shown by numerous military surprises throughout history.

One way to mitigate this is by extensively adopting mission command, supporting the commander on scene with the requisite means and mandate.[42] This requires doctrinal cohesion and application throughout the command chain to be practicable. The same applies for force integration in joint and combined operations. As advanced during OpTech East Med, technical interoperability is a necessary but insufficient requirement for effective force integration. Both mission command and force integration are likely more difficult to implement in practice than to express in guiding documents.

Mission command may be more challenging at lower conflict levels, where the error margin is smaller as even minor tactical actions may have strategic consequences.[43] Furthermore, the German *Auftragstaktik* that is often referred to is not always implemented in the way originally conceived, due to differences in strategic culture and other factors.[44] For mission command to function effectively it has to be nurtured within an allowing culture, such as exemplified by German examples.[45] It may, however, be more feasible for a country like Sweden, where there is a high level of trust for subordinates coupled with a sheer necessity to be agile and respond to surprise, while other countries' conditions might be less permissive.

Technological developments with Network Centric Warfare and operations with lower tolerance for deviation or failure may have hampered the possibilities to develop and maintain a culture allowing mission command at its best.[46] Furthermore, in addition to a mandate, the commander on-scene must be furnished with units possessing the

capability and agility to adapt to the situation at hand.[47] This needs to be possible at short notice and as the situation evolves, so as not to be overtaken when the adversary increases tempo. With all due respect for the shortcomings of human cognition, I am sceptical that artificial intelligence will within the foreseeable future be able to replace a human being in factoring in and weighing all aspects and making necessary decisions.

Learning from the less obvious

How does all this tie in with the human smuggling this article started out from? According the UK Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, the future operating environment is expected to be characterised by 5 Cs in being: congested, cluttered, contested, connected and constrained. This description is fitting for littorals in general and probably even more so for the littorals of conflict areas where refugees, trafficking victims or migrants may well be encountered both in the coastal areas and offshore. While the problematic of human smuggling and trafficking is a tragic phenomenon in itself and primarily a policing mission, it also represents one end of the wide spectrum of naval operations in the increasingly congested littoral zone.[48] Furthermore, as has been advanced under the label of "weaponization of migration", it is a potential tool for an adversary to employ along with contracting organised crime and other covert means within a greater scheme to influence the target state.

It is possible for an antagonist to covertly mine a fairway by making use of an inconspicuous merchant vessel, where a single mine may cause enough uncertainty and disruption to achieve desired ends.[49] Such a tactic was tried by Libya in the Red Sea to disrupt Saudi trade.[50] Even if these types

of operations may appear different from high-intensity conflict between peers or near-peers, it would be unwise to envisage such conflict, even in a worst case large scale war, as something of the like of World War II.[51] Rather, a skilled adversary should be expected to make use of any and all ways to deceive and confuse where the same difficulties that are faced in the lower conflict range or even in policing missions may be present. The example of the Swedish Coast Guard aircraft also serves as an example of the benefits from closer integration between governmental authorities, something that is also crucial for addressing grey zone threats in national defence operations.

The future operating environment is expected to exhibit more convoluted civil and military aspects in warfare, as is taken into account in descriptions of hybrid threats and grey zone activities.[52] Indeed, on this there is agreement across the divide since references are often made to a speech by the Russian Chief of the General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, that is often used to designate the contested term of Gerasimov doctrine.[53] Knowingly employing the terminology for these terms, for which final agreement on definition remains to be seen, they can be considered indirect strategies and ways either to obtain objectives without escalation to armed conflict, or to shape the battlespace, should armed conflict be unavoidable.[54] Conditions are expected to be more obfuscated as an adversary when possible will employ a wider range of instruments of power, fomenting dissent and divide to obtain his objectives or at least to shape the battlespace for potential armed conflict.

This may perhaps be easier on land where there are human activities of greater scale and diversity, bearing in mind that the object of war remains on land. Nonetheless, the littorals are expected to grow in impor-

tance and consequently so will the risk for conflict.[55] Naval operations today are an even more indispensable component of a comprehensive strategy.[56] Naturally, this is already recognised by leading professionals, as for instance by the former SACEUR, Admiral Stavridis.[57]

Flexibility is of the essence

The key take-away I offer is that unfortunately we will not revert back to a clear-cut conflict situation but find challenges aggregated or even compounded. This adds to the complex operational environment, about which I have developed my thoughts above, drawing on the expertise of other theorists, practitioners and analysts. Thus, learning to master convoluted operational environments such as the littorals of Libya – with its migrants, smugglers, terrorists, as well as oil platforms and legitimate maritime activities – reduces the risk of being overwhelmed by the 5C-operational environment and a deliberately caused chaos that an adversary may attempt to use. In that vein, while employing sophisticated, high value assets like modern warships in policing missions remains somewhat unsatisfactory, I strongly believe that there is a learning opportunity from which to benefit, which will allow for honing crucial skills for mastering a future, more complex, operating environment.

State-of-the-art technology can be exploited to improve situational understanding but such use must not become a reliance that presents a critical vulnerability. Ability to sustain low-tech operations or to operate in a challenging environment must be maintained as well as flexibility to quickly adapt as the situation evolves. The example of the civilian airplane serves to show that in the daily operations as well as at lower conflict levels low-cost solutions may bring

substantial benefit that may complement – but never replace – the sophisticated units built for high-intensity conflict. From sheer economic rationality, in the lower conflict range we cannot do without sensor systems that are affordable in procurement or operating costs, even if they lack robustness for wartime conditions. Nonetheless, the challenge is to strike a balance between these and more costly but robust systems required for high-intensity conflict.

To be able to cope with the surprise that an aggressor will seek to achieve, Finkel develops a strong argument for flexibility in several strata: doctrinal and conceptual; organisational and technological; cognitive and command and control; and lessons learning and rapid dissemination. He postulates that these are required for a military organisation to successfully overcome surprise.[58] After all, it would be unwise to expect the enemy to follow a script and role that we have written, or more succinctly expressed in the quote "The enemy gets a vote", ascribed to former the former US Secretary of Defence, James Mattis.

Final remarks

I hope that with this article, based on my contribution to the OpTech East Med conference, I have conveyed some of my understanding of a complicated web where human smuggling interacts with large scale organised crime and potentially also with terrorism and war. To this I have added some thoughts of implications for littoral operations. Naturally, my thoughts are not altogether unique as I have tried to show by the referencing. Of particular mention is the late Capt. Wayne P. Hughes whose *Fleet Tactics and Coastal Combat* is a recommended read for anyone with an interest in the littorals and in which the fictional battle incidentally is situated

just off Crete, in the Aegean.[59] The subject remains current, only in December 2019 an article at the U.S. Naval Institute made a similar argument.[60]

Since this article is based on experiences from the counter-smuggling operation off Libya it builds from a low-intensity littoral operation to argue for the lessons that can be learned from these and similar operations. What is suggested in this article is in no way meant to infringe upon the core mission of modern navies: the capability to successfully engage in high-intensity conflict at sea. Rather, I argue for how recent experiences in the lower range of conflict can contribute to being capable of addressing a wider range of challenges as the conflict spectrum is broadened to include activities such as hybrid or grey zone operations.

While I fear to have delivered more questions than answers, I hope at least to have contributed to the understanding of the challenges ahead. I am looking forward to learning of current and future ways and means to overcome whatever challenges we must face. As Rear Admiral Drimousis pointed out in his opening remarks at the OpTech East Med conference, in the modern day the littorals are an operating area of utmost importance.

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