

23. Operation Active Endeavour



Under Operation Active Endeavour, NATO ships are patrolling the Mediterranean and monitoring shipping to help detect, deter and protect against terrorist activity.

The operation has evolved out of NATO's immediate response to the terrorist attacks against the United States of 11 September 2001 and, in view of its success, is being continued.

As the Alliance has refined its counter-terrorism role in the intervening years, the operation's mandate has been regularly reviewed and its remit extended.

The experience that NATO has accrued in Active Endeavour has given the Alliance unparalleled expertise in the deterrence of maritime terrorist activity in the Mediterranean Sea. This expertise is relevant to wider international efforts to combat terrorism and, in particular, the proliferation and smuggling of weapons of mass destruction, as well as enhanced cooperation with non-NATO countries and civilian agencies.

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The aim of the operation and its current functions

The operation aims to demonstrate NATO's solidarity and resolve in the fight against terrorism and to help detect and deter terrorist activity in the Mediterranean.

For instance, NATO forces have hailed more than over 100,000 merchant vessels, boarding some 148 suspect ships. The increased NATO presence in these waters has benefited all shipping traveling through the Straits by improving perceptions of security.

Keeping seas safe

Keeping the Mediterranean's busy trade routes open and safe is critical to NATO's security.

In terms of energy alone, some 65 per cent of the oil and natural gas consumed in Western Europe pass through the Mediterranean each year, with major pipelines connecting Libya to Italy and Morocco to Spain. For this reason, NATO ships are systematically carrying out preparatory route surveys in "choke" points as well as in important passages and harbours throughout the Mediterranean.

Controlling suspect vessels

Since April 2003, NATO has been systematically boarding suspect ships. These boardings take place with the compliance of the ships' masters and flag states in accordance with international law.

What happens in practice is that merchant ships passing through the Eastern Mediterranean are hailed by patrolling NATO naval units and asked to identify themselves and their activity. This information is then reported to both NATO's Allied Maritime Component Commander in Naples, Italy, and the NATO Shipping Centre in Northwood, England. If anything appears unusual or suspicious, teams of between 15 and 20 of the ships' crew may board vessels to inspect documentation and cargo. NATO personnel may otherwise convey this information to the appropriate law-enforcement agency at the vessel's next port of call. The suspect vessel is then shadowed until action is taken by a responsible agency/ authority, or until it enters a country's territorial waters.

Unexpected benefits

While the mandate of Active Endeavour is limited to deterring and detecting terrorist-related activities, the operation has had a visible effect on security and stability in the Mediterranean that is beneficial to trade and economic activity.

NATO ships and helicopters have also intervened on several occasions to rescue civilians on stricken oil rigs and sinking ships. This includes helping 84 workers to evacuate an oil rig in high winds and heavy seas in December 2001 and winching women and children off a sinking ship carrying some 250 refugees in January 2002 and helping to repair the damaged hull.

Operation Active Endeavour provided the framework for the maritime component of NATO's assistance to the Greek government to ensure the safe conduct of the 2004 Olympic and Paralympic Games in August and September 2004. Task Force Endeavour conducted surveillance, presence and compliant boarding operations in international waters around the Greek peninsula with Standing Naval Forces surface ships, supported by maritime patrol aircraft and submarines and in coordination with the Hellenic Navy and Coast Guard.

Closer cooperation with partners

The increased NATO presence in the Mediterranean has also enhanced the Alliance's security cooperation programme with seven countries in the wider Mediterranean region - Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia. This programme - the Mediterranean Dialogue - was set up in 1995 to contribute to regional security and stability and to achieve better mutual understanding between NATO and its Mediterranean Partners.

Mediterranean Dialogue countries are equally concerned by the threat of terrorism and have already been cooperating with NATO in Active Endeavour by providing intelligence about suspicious shipping operating in their waters.

Enhanced coordination and cooperation mechanisms are currently being developed.

Command and structure of the operation

The operation is conducted from the Allied Maritime Component Command Naples, Italy (CC-Mar Naples) through a Task Force deployed in the Mediterranean.

Task Force ENDEAVOUR consists of a balanced collection of surface units, submarines and maritime patrol aircraft. The operation also regularly makes use of NATO's two high-readiness frigate forces, which are permanently ready to act and capable of conducting a wide range of maritime operations.

The current operational pattern uses surface forces as reaction units to conduct specific tasks such as locating, tracking, reporting and boarding of suspected vessels in the light of intelligence.

The NATO Standing Maritime Groups 1 and 2 rotate in providing periodic support to Operation Active Endeavour.

Evolution

An Article 5 deployment

The deployment was one of eight measures taken by NATO to support the United States in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, following the invocation of Article 5, NATO's collective defence clause, for the first time in the Alliance's history.

The deployment started on 6 October and was formally named Operation Active Endeavour on 26 October 2001. Together with the dispatch of Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) aircraft to the United States, it was the first time that NATO assets had been deployed in support of an Article 5 operation.

Since October 2001, NATO ships have been patrolling the Mediterranean and monitoring shipping, boarding any suspect ships. Compliant boarding operations are essential to the successful continuation of OAE. They are limited to trying to establish whether a vessel is engaged in terrorist activity.

Moreover, in March 2003, Active Endeavour was expanded to include providing escorts through the Straits of Gibraltar to non-military ships from Alliance member states requesting them. This extension of the mission was designed to help prevent terrorist attacks such as those off Yemen on the USS Cole in October 2000 and on the French oil tanker Limburg two years later. The area was considered particularly vulnerable because the Straits are extremely narrow and some 3,000 commercial shipments pass through daily. In total, 488 ships took advantage of NATO escorts until Task Force STROG (Straight of Gibraltar) was suspended in May 2004. Forces remain ready to move at 30-days notice'.

Covering the entire Mediterranean

One year later, in March 2004, as a result of the success of Active Endeavour in the Eastern Mediterranean, NATO extended its remit to the whole of the Mediterranean.

At the June 2004 Istanbul Summit, Allied leaders decided to enhance Operation Active Endeavour. They also welcomed offers by Russia and Ukraine to support the operation.

Contributing countries

Being an Article 5 operation, Operation Active Endeavour initially involved member countries only.

Some NATO members, mainly Greece, Italy, Spain and Turkey, contribute directly to the operation with naval assets. Escort operations in the Straits of Gibraltar used to involve the use of fast patrol boats from Northern European Allies Denmark, Germany and Norway. Spain also provides additional assets in the Straits. Operation Active Endeavour relies heavily on the logistic support of Mediterranean NATO Allies.

From 2004, Partner countries started offering their support. Russia and Ukraine have been contributing ships since 2007.

All offers of support by Partners and non-NATO countries are considered on a case-by-case basis. To date, Exchanges of Letters have been signed between NATO and Albania, Georgia, Israel, Morocco, Russia and Ukraine. Russia deployed vessels twice, once both in 2006 and 2007, and Ukraine a total of four times, twice in 2007 and in 2008.