



“SHARED AWARENESS AND DECONFLICTION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN”

**"CHALLENGES FOR COOPERATION IN THE
MEDITERRANEAN AFTER THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC"**

26 November 2020, 09:55-10:15, VTC

(DISCLAIMER: Actual delivery may differ from the text)

INTRODUCTION:

- Good morning and many thanks to Admiral Agostini and his staff, for organizing this event.
- First of all let me tell you I wished we all had an opportunity to gather in Rome in person.
- In my role of primary point of contact for EU CSDP military missions and operations, which in this moment insist mainly in the enlarged Mediterranean Area, both at sea and ashore, and as military advisor to the High Representative/Vice President Mr Borrell, I was really keen to meet you, but I remain confident that we will do that soon.
- As nothing can replace physical presence.
- The pandemic has contributed to complicate all aspects of our lives.
- But has also directly affected many of the security challenges we were facing before the outbreak, for a scenario that is now urgently calling for an joint approach by all of us, if we are to show resilience, and come out of the crisis stronger than before.
- I am sure that in the next two days you will discuss in depth, and from different angles, the need for this improved cooperation.

COVID – EXISTING CRISES – OLD AND NEW CHALLENGES

- Without a doubt, the New Year did not start very well: the events in Libya and Iraq, not a real surprise, were followed by the deterioration of the security situation in East Mediterranean Sea, in Belarus, in Armenia or in Azerbaijan, Lebanon, with state actors seeking new roles, pursuing their strategies, often filling gaps left by others.
 - On top of this, the pandemic has further contributed to worsen a security scenario already compromised by existing threats, like international terrorism, failed states, uncontrolled migration, disinformation, hybrid and cyber.

- And finally, this crisis has also brought to our attention other threats in non-conventional domains, like health, climate, or even energy, an issue we will deal with for the next decade, or more.
- The future security situation will then be much more complex than the one we are experiencing nowadays, with no shortage of crises.

IMPACT OF PANDEMIC ON THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION:

- As we know, while the impact of the pandemic has been severe at global level, it had an even stronger effect in those regions already devastated by conflicts, and in those countries with fragile socioeconomic conditions.
- And this is especially true in the broader Mediterranean area, from Libya to Sahel, with magmatic dynamics filled with crises, turning this region into one of the most volatile in the world, with geopolitical repercussions which go far beyond its geographical borders.
- Therefore, the Mediterranean Sea has come back as the leading centre of gravity for wider geopolitical balances, being at the crossroads of three continents and a gateway to Europe, and the terminal of the crises insisting in the MENA region and in Sahel.
- And this is where Europe has turned his attention, towards Africa and the root causes of the problems, what I call the triangle of Instability, made of international terrorism, illegal migration, and overall degraded security in the whole region.

LIBYA AND THE GREAT POWERS COMPETITION

- Among others, the Libyan crisis which has been strangling the country for over a decade and further aggravating the regional situation, exemplifies the current chaos in the Mediterranean, with its repercussions for the security of the euro region and its surroundings.
- But the Libyan case is extremely important, because the solution of this crisis could bring a model for cooperation for the whole region.
- What we observe in Libya, is that some external actors got directly involved in the conflict, further complicating the already complex situation, bringing unilateral strategies, exploiting proxy wars to continue their competition abroad.
- These strategies have been sending out a clear message also to other players, both regionally and externally.

A CHORAL RESPONSE

- In the unfortunate circumstances dominated by COVID, therefore, it is obvious how some new or old adversaries, like terrorists who never rest, are indeed taking advantage of the pandemic.

- Something that demands an urgent and chorale reaction, addressing the root causes of the problems in the region.
- Firstly, by all EU Member States, which must speak at their best with a single voice, engaging in all the EU Defence initiatives, providing resources to CSDP missions and operations, and thus contributing to the achievement of the agreed LoA.
- Secondly, by a committed EU, capable of exploiting its integrated approach, made of a complete set of instruments: the political, the diplomatic, the economic and -yes- also the military, since if there are no pure military solutions to crises, no crisis can be solved without the use of military means, in an effective combination of soft and hard power.
- Something that the EU must implement, by practicing the language of power, and not just speaking it!
- And finally, by all international stakeholders, in partnership, also one of the objective of EU Global Strategy: the EU, with the UN, the African Union and, of course, with NATO, being the Alliance our first, natural partner in this endeavour, particularly for our closest crises.

EUROPE'S OPPORTUNITY

- For this, the EU has a great opportunity to consolidate its network of cooperation, as one actor cannot tackle these challenges alone.
- And this is a real necessity, also because Covid-19 crisis has shown a dramatic discrepancy between the scale of current challenges and the weakness of global governance, a gap already existing before, but more evident since the beginning of this year.
- Hence, the absolute need to improve ties with all relevant regional organisations for actionable initiatives, for crisis management or capacity building, an area of cooperation where the Union has proved itself capable of expressing a true excellence.
- For instance in Sahel, but also elsewhere in Africa, where we may even need to even increase our engagement, looking at the latest developments like the coup in Mali, tensions in Ethiopia or the spreading violence in Sahel, suggesting that more instability may characterize the upcoming scenario.
- And these are some of the areas where the EU, in line with its 2016 Global Strategy and its increased Level of Ambition, has found an autonomous space, where to engage and act more, as a Global Security Provider, in coherence with its efforts towards Strategic Autonomy.
- A Strategic Autonomy that does not mean autonomy from someone, but autonomy to do something alone, or in better cooperation with partners, if possible.
- Like with NATO

COOPERATION WITH NATO:

- In this regard, it must be noted that EU and NATO, although being different organizations with different problems, have walked side by side, in a sort of continuity, to today's solid partnership, but... we must also admit, with a potential for cooperation yet to be fully exploited, from the strategic to the tactical level.

- The EU, on its side, has made a lot of efforts to contribute to this relationship with NATO with a double approach:

1. Indirectly, thanks to the set of EU Defence initiatives, creating new tools like the Headline Goal, CARD, PESCO, and the EDF, practical ways for the Member States to spend better, and less, for those capabilities need to play more. All initiatives – it must be noted - crafted to be in synergy with the NATO Defence Planning Process, to avoid duplications and waste of resources. Because what is good for the EU is good for NATO, in line with the single set of forces principle.

2. But also directly, mainly through CSDP military missions and operations. In fact, all the previous efforts are instrumental for the effective conduct of our CSDP military missions and operations, which will result in a direct way to support NATO, since our objectives are coherent and complementary with the ones of the Alliance.

- Of course, we should try to overcome some of the current obstacles to our cooperation with NATO, exploiting ways for an effective collaboration at strategic, operational and particularly tactical level, where we should not let political issues impede the necessary interaction in the field.

- A problem we might easily spot in the Mediterranean Sea, between Operation Irini and Sea Guardian.

- In a perfect world, we would have one single operation, but nowadays we should aim at a better cooperation.

OPERATION IRINI

- Operation Irini is the most visible and instrumental CSDP activity in the Mediterranean Sea, the only EU military operation for Libya, through which the EU can really boost the perception of a EU Defence willing and capable to take its responsibility as a Security Provider.

- Of course with an increased cooperation with all partners, demonstrating an impartial commitment towards the region's stability, a model for cooperation for the whole International Community.

- As it stands, though, Operation IRINI is still lacking essential contributions from MS, in order to be able to fully achieve its mandate, a mandate that could easily have the potential

to be expanded, pending political decisions, for a more integrated role for the solution of the crisis.

- Nevertheless, given the circumstances, we must praise the Operation for the considerable results achieved, also in spite of pandemic.

IMPACT OF COVID ON EU CSDP - LESSONS IDENTIFIED

- And this allows me to briefly touch upon the effects that COVID 19 had on our CSDP missions and operations, and how the cooperation that these activities enjoy with the Host Nations could be improved.

- Following the outbreak of the pandemic, as in any other environment, a number of mitigating measures had to be put in place, in IRINI as in all CSDP missions and operations, with the double objective of safeguarding the health of our deployed personnel, while guaranteeing at best the accomplishment of the mandate.

- The overall response was generally positive: while some training activities had to be put on hold, the pandemic had a lower impact on the executive operations, particularly the maritime ones, which were able to go through the crisis with no discontinuity.

- Important to note is that beside their specific mandates, our missions and operations cooperated with the Host Nations on all efforts to contain the pandemic, within any of their means and capabilities.

- At HQ level we established an internal Task Force on COVID-19, to collect data and respond to inquiries, informing the decision-making processes.

- That said, there are areas where we shall be able to do more, working ahead on our resilience, and a number of lessons were identified, starting from the need to review contingency and business continuity planning.

- Additionally, we will have to improve coordination for health related emergencies by fostering partnerships, sharing best practices, policies and documentation, awareness of medical stockpiles and, whenever possible, through training and dedicated joint exercises.

- In the specific circumstances, though, two specific shortfalls brought serious concern: the shortage of medical teams and adequate communication equipment.

- While the lack of the latter represents a long-standing issue, a specific element that the pandemic emphasised was the importance of disposing adequate military medical teams, both in terms of quality and quantity, ready to be deployed.

- And this reminding that any properly trained and equipped military medical team, thanks to its peculiarities, could be useful for many purposes, in a mission in Mali, an intervention on board a ship, or in support of national authorities and Host Nations, fighting the pandemic.

CONCLUSION:

- And I conclude.
- While we all continue to struggle with the measures to contain the pandemic, professionally (and personally, I would say), we should not miss the unique chance that this crisis is bringing for improving our resilience.
- The pandemic has surfaced some of our weakness, especially collectively, and it would be simply unacceptable not to draw serious lessons, working on the remedies to approach these challenges together, in a shared path, for a worthwhile legacy.
- Thank you all, and I wish you a very fruitful conference.