



*THE IRISH MARITIME FORUM*  
*Increasing Awareness of Ireland's Maritime*  
*Dimension*

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Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade  
Minister for State at the Department of Defence

The deployment of Irish naval ships to the Mediterranean Sea for a humanitarian mission (Operation Pontus) in support of Italy is one of the most significant developments in the history of our Navy. How our naval personnel have responded to the many challenges posed by Operation Pontus has demonstrated to the nation the many qualities of professionalism, seamanship and humanity which they possess. The nation began to develop a pride in the Service, which had not been widespread heretofore.

In its 2013 pre White Paper submission to the Department of Defence entitled "Toward Balanced Defence Forces for an Island Nation", The Irish Maritime Forum (TIMARFOR) argued that Ireland needed to support Operation Atalanta, the EU's highly successful mission to protect merchant shipping against piracy off the Horn of Africa. We restated this argument in our 2014 submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade entitled "The Navy Facilitating Diplomacy". The kernel of our argument was, and is, that Ireland as an island-based trading nation needs freedom of navigation to be maintained in order to prosper. In addition, as an emerging maritime nation and a member of the European Union Ireland needs to show solidarity with her fellow EU states.

While TIMARFOR supports the Navy's deployment to the Mediterranean Sea as a demonstration of Ireland's humanitarian and maritime credentials, we cannot understand why Ireland operates in a bi-lateral arrangement with Italy when an EU Mission with a UN Mandate commanded by an Italian Admiral from an Italian flagship is running in the same area. EUNAVFOR MED, also called Operation Sofia, enjoys widespread support from EU member nations. Twenty four EU states contribute to Operation Sofia, including several neutrals. The current contributing states are Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Spain, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Ireland is notable by her absence.

In the wake of the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU, Ireland needs to strengthen her ties with the remaining EU nations. Joining Operation Sofia would give a unique opportunity to demonstrate Ireland's commitment to European cooperation to the nations whose understanding and assistance we will need when BREXIT negotiations get underway.

TIMARFOR understands that the mandate of Operation Sofia is more robust than that of Operation Pontus but has no doubts regarding the capability of Irish ships or of the men and women who crew them. There certainly has been no negative publicity emanating from Operation Sofia as it discharges its mandate. TIMARFOR believes that our ships and personnel would benefit from the increased support associated with operating within a multinational force.

It is worth noting that from a political perspective the precedent has already been set with the Army participating in the EU Battlegroups.

We urge that Ireland joins Operation Sofia without delay.

On behalf of The Irish Maritime Forum

Captain James Robinson DSM FNI  
Irish Navy (Retired)

CC Secretary General at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade  
Secretary General at the Department of Defence