

Viability of the NATO Standing Naval Forces

Project Overview

In 1968, Standing Naval Force Atlantic was formed as NATO's first Standing Naval Force (SNF). Since then, the concept has grown to include four standing groups: two maritime groups, comprising of frigates and destroyers (SNMG), and two naval mine countermeasures groups of minehunters and minesweepers (SNMCMG) operating both in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. With the formation of the NATO Response Force, subsequent to the Prague Summit of November 2002, the four groups became the initial maritime Immediate Reaction Force (IRF(M)), intended to provide a full range of maritime capabilities as an intervention capability across a broad spectrum of military operations.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, however, there has been a steady reduction in the number of assets provided by Allies to the four SNF groups. At present, this trend shows no signs of reversal and the recent deterioration of the global security environment has highlighted the need to enhance the SNF. In October 2014, NATO's two Strategic Commands, with Allied Command Operations (ACO) in the lead, supported by Allied Command Transformation (ACT), were requested to provide an action plan pertaining to the reinvigoration of the SNF. The Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (JALLC) was tasked by HQ Supreme Allied Commander Transformation to support this work and, conducted a study into the viability of the SNF in order to identify factors that impact the Allies' participation in the SNF and to make recommendations on how to improve/change the current SNF model.

The SNF Plays an Important Role

There is consensus among Nations and NATO Subject Matter Experts that the SNF continues to play an important role for NATO. However, falling participation rates need to be addressed with some urgency. Nations need to be incentivized to commit assets by developing initiatives to encourage Nations to do so and/or the current SNF Model has to be changed.

The analysis of the key SNF-related documents confirmed that they are still broadly consistent with NATO SNF requirements stated by recently updated NATO policy and guidance. However, some aspects remain out of date and require revision.

The analysis of a broad spectrum of areas of improvement for the current SNF Model identified the following three keys issues that, if addressed, may indeed serve to improve the current SNF Model:

- **Deconflicting National Priorities with NATO Commitments;**
- **Extending the Framework Nations Concept to the SNF Force Generation process; and**
- **Improving SNF Visibility.**



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A Holistic Approach to Advance the SNF

The viability of the SNF appears to depend on resolving the issues identified by the project team that predominantly relate to the falling SNF participation rates and corresponding problems with SNF Force Generation. But rather than attempting to resolve each problem individually, the project team has suggested a more holistic approach to improving the viability of the SNF in the long run. Two potential approaches are considered: maintain the SNF Model as it is but take certain measures to improve its viability; or change the SNF Model and consider other viable options.

Maintain the Current SNF Model

The current SNF Model can be maintained but, in addition to taking immediate action on the three key issues listed overleaf, the project team suggested that certain measures, aimed at encouraging Allies to adequately resource the SNF, should be taken to ensure the future viability of the SNF under the current model. These measures include: reducing costs to Allies, enhancing High-End Training, regionalizing the SNF, improving planning, and bringing SNF Force Generation issues to the attention of the NATO political level.

Change the SNF Model

Alternatively, the current SNF Model could be changed, in which case the project team suggested two options. The first option considers the merging of the two SNMGs into a single, reduced scale group. The second option introduces the concept of an on-call NATO maritime force.

Option 1: A Reduced Scale SNF

Under this option, the two SNMCMGs—historically less impacted by Force Generation problems—would be retained and the two SNMGs would be merged into one single group. However, although the principle of NATO SNF would be preserved, fewer ships would be available.

Option 2: The On-Call Concept

The second option considers the introduction of an On-Call maritime force concept. In the context of this study, the project team presented two versions of a potential On-Call Concept, which can be summarized as follows:

A Full On-Call Concept. NATO IRF(M) would be made up of a number of on call very high readiness groups. This option would address many of the Nations concerns, offering greater flexibility and potentially lower funding requirements.

A Hybrid Standing/On-Call Concept. Maritime assets would be part of the SNMG for six months and then move to the On-Call NATO Maritime Group for the following six months. This option would allow a standing element to the SNF to be retained, while Nations' concerns regarding funding and flexibility are (at least in part) addressed.

Project Team

CDR Christian Mignucci
FRA N, Project Manager

CDR Mignucci has served in the French Navy for 35 years; first as a Naval Aviation flight officer until 2000 and then as a staff officer in a Navy and joint operational environment. He was assigned to the JALLC in 2014.



CDR Marcos Sevilla

USA N, Analyst

CDR Marcello Fardelli

ITA N, Analyst

LCDR Pedro Rodrigues

PRT N, Analyst

Mr Nigel Branston

GBR CIV, Analyst

Dr Henrik Heidenkamp

DEU CIV, Analyst

Ms Jodie Lazell

GBR CIV, Editor

Ms Emina Sadic

USA CIV, JALLC Intern, Ed.



JALLC

Phone: +351 21 771 7007/8/9

Fax: +351 21 771 7098

E-mail: jallc@jallc.nato.int

www.jallc.nato.int

Avenida Tenente Martins – Monsanto
1500-589 Lisbon

Portugal