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THE MILITARY AFFAIRS COLUMN BY TIM DUNNE

Canada's been traffic cop in the Indian Ocean

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For more than four months, the Royal Canadian Navy's Commodore Brian Santarpia was the chief traffic cop of the Indian Ocean. He assumed command of the multinational counter-terrorism task force, Combined Task Force 150, from Commodore Sajid Mahmood of the Pakistan navy at Bahrain on Dec. 4, 2014.

From his headquarters in Bahrain, Commodore Santarpia and the multinational forces under his command were responsible for an area of operation of over five million square kilometres, covering the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman. It also incorporates the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandab, all narrow waterways where vessels are required to pass closely between two coastlines, allowing for limited manoeuvrability and increased vulnerability than in open waters.

"The mission of CTF 150 is a counter-terrorism mission as part of Combined Maritime Forces which is a coalition of 30 partner nations now," Commodore Santarpia explained. "Many are from the region, but others are from Europe and North America and from southeast Asia, and all of these nations that are part of the Combined Maritime Forces agree that it is in all our interests that this region be safe for maritime traffic."

Combined Task Force 150 is one of three task forces operated by Combined Maritime Forces. The activities of CTF-150 directly influence events ashore, as terrorist organizations are denied a risk-free method of conducting operations or moving personnel, weapons or income-generating narcotics.

The task force's area of responsibility is a critical artery of global trade with the main shipping routes from the Orient to Europe and North America, with over 23,000 shipping movements per year. More than one-third of the world's oil passes through these waters. Any interruption of the flow of goods through this region would immediately effect virtually everyone in the western hemisphere.

Maritime security is vital to global trade, which is enhanced by maritime security operations such as CTF-150, contributing to regional and global stability and prosperity. They pre-empt use of the maritime environment for terrorism and complement the counter-terrorism and security efforts of nations using the Indian Ocean's trade routes.

CTF-150 began as a U.S. Navy formation under the control of the United States Naval Forces Central Command. Following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, it was re-established as a multinational coalition to undertake counter-terrorism operations at sea as part of Operation Enduring Freedom. The coalition has evolved beyond that operation's scope to encompass and address threats to member states and their values.

The 30 partner nations participating in the coalition come from an alphabet soup of maritime nations: The Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans, and their many seas, gulfs and straits. Participation is voluntary, with no nation asked to carry out any duty that it is unwilling to conduct.

Commodore Santarpia deployed to Bahrain with 24 Canadian staff members. Australian Navy Capt. Nick Stoker, CTF 150's deputy commander, and six key staff members from Australia made it a joint headquarters staff.

“You'd be hard-pressed to find two countries more alike than Canada and Australia,” he noted. “In terms of attitudes, work ethic and sense of humour, a lot of the things are the same, so it's a lot easier to work together than I would have imagined. And Nick Stoker's experience included a year working HMCS Mackenzie on the west coast a long time back, so he has lots of experience working with Canadians. It was seamless to fold in with them.”

During his term as task force commander, Commodore Santarpia visited 10 countries in 20 days, in Europe, the Middle East and South Africa to discuss the important work of CTF-150. He described how the multinational naval organization denies international terrorists the use of the seas to exploit or attack those using the region's ocean commons for legitimate purposes or to illegally transfer people, weapons or other illicit materials.

Maritime security operations are conducted under international maritime conventions to help ensure security and safety in international waters so that all commercial shipping can operate freely on the ocean commons. CTF-150 vessels also assist mariners in distress and humanitarian efforts.

Commodore Brian Santarpia passed command of CTF 150 to Capt. René-Jean Crignola of the French navy in Bahrain on April 6, as command is rotated among participating nations on a four- to six-month basis.

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