

THE COMBINED MARITIME FORCES AND VOLUNTARY MULTINATIONAL INTEGRATION

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Abstract

This paper examines the 'Combined Maritime Force' in a voluntary multinational security integration. To achieve its objectives, the paper utilized Content Analysis method where information provided in published books/journals, online journal papers, magazines/newspapers, government policy documents and conference proceedings were reviewed. Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism are adopted for the research framework analysis. Based on the assessment made by the paper, the study concludes that, the Combined Maritime Force (CMF) has proven to be a pivotal player in addressing maritime security challenges in the 21st century. Through collaborative efforts and shared operational responsibilities, the CMF has significantly curbed piracy, enhanced maritime domain awareness, and ensured the safety of major shipping lanes, especially in volatile regions like the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea. Its structure as a voluntary multinational coalition has fostered inclusivity and adaptability, allowing nations to contribute in line with their capabilities while maintaining sovereignty and operational independence. However, while the CMF's achievements are commendable, several challenges remain. Issues such as unequal participation, limited enforcement capabilities, and the need to adapt to evolving threats such as cyberattacks on maritime infrastructure highlight the necessity for continuous strategic and structural reforms. The study therefore recommends that the CMF should also invest in modern technologies to counter emerging threats such as cyberattacks and unmanned maritime systems. Strengthening intelligence-sharing mechanisms and aligning rules of engagement among member states will improve operational cohesion and responsiveness. Furthermore, CMF should increase its humanitarian missions and public diplomacy efforts to improve its legitimacy and perception in host regions, thereby fostering deeper trust and collaboration for future maritime security operations.

Key Words: Maritime, Coalition, Piracy, Collaboration, Threats, Multinational Integration

Introduction

Contemporarily, in an era characterized by global interdependence and increasing threats to maritime security, the concept of a Combined Maritime Force (CMF) has emerged as a critical approach to safeguarding international waters. A Combined Maritime Force is a multinational naval partnership designed to promote security, stability, and prosperity across key maritime regions, particularly in areas prone to piracy, smuggling, terrorism, and other transnational threats. One of the most prominent examples is the U.S.-led Combined Maritime Forces headquartered in Bahrain, which includes over 30 member nations cooperating on maritime operations in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean (Combined Maritime Forces, 2023). These

coalitions are built on the principles of collaboration, interoperability, and shared responsibility among naval forces.

The significance of CMFs has grown in response to challenges that single nations cannot address alone. The rise in piracy off the coast of Somalia, the smuggling of arms and narcotics, and the exploitation of maritime routes by terrorist organizations have underscored the need for joint naval responses. CMFs offer a platform for coordinated patrols, intelligence sharing, joint exercises, and humanitarian missions, strengthening global maritime domain awareness. According to Till (2009), such collaborations reflect a shift in naval strategy from traditional warfare to cooperative security and maritime policing aimed at preserving freedom of navigation and ensuring the safety of global trade routes. Moreover, CMFs contribute not only to regional security but also to international peace and economic stability. About 90% of global trade is conducted via sea routes, making maritime security an essential concern for all nations, regardless of their geographical location (IMO, 2020). The CMF model allows both regional and extra-regional navies to contribute according to their capabilities while benefiting from shared resources and strategic frameworks. This inclusiveness fosters diplomatic relations and operational unity, essential in responding swiftly and effectively to maritime threats.

Despite their successes, CMFs are not without challenges. Issues such as command coordination, differing rules of engagement, resource disparities, and political differences among member states can hinder operations. Nevertheless, the continued evolution and expansion of Combined Maritime Forces demonstrate their importance in 21st-century naval strategy. As new maritime threats emerge, the relevance of CMFs in upholding international maritime law and ensuring cooperative global security is expected to grow (Bueger & Edmunds, 2017). This paper aimed to examine the contributions of Combined Maritime Force in regard to international integration toward addressing common interest among the member states.

Methodology

To conduct this study, the researcher utilized Content Analysis method where information provided in published books/journals, online journal papers, magazines/newspapers, government policy documents and conference proceedings were reviewed. Data selected were thoroughly analysed leading to objective presentations, drawing conclusions and provide policy recommendations.

Conceptual Clarification

The term ‘Combined Maritime Forces (CMF)’ is an international maritime coalition formed to enhance regional security and stability through cooperative naval operations. Established in 2002, the CMF operates in the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf, primarily focusing on counter-piracy, counter-terrorism, and the security of vital maritime trade routes (CMF, 2021). It serves as a platform for naval forces from various nations to cooperate and share intelligence, expertise, and resources, addressing shared maritime security threats. The CMF includes both naval and air assets, providing a comprehensive approach to regional security challenges, such as the prevention of illicit activities like smuggling and human trafficking, which threaten the stability of the region (Tolk, 2017).

The operations of CMF are guided by the principle of collective security, where participating nations work together to promote peace and deter destabilizing activities at sea. While the CMF does not engage in conflict resolution or peace enforcement, its primary objective is to safeguard

international shipping lanes and protect the freedom of navigation, which are crucial for global trade (Dobbins et al., 2011). The coalition operates in multiple task forces, each specializing in a specific aspect of maritime security, such as the fight against piracy or the prevention of weapons proliferation. The coalition strengthens multilateral collaboration while also emphasizing on the importance of collective action in addressing transnational maritime threats.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for assessing the role of the United Nations (UN) in conflict resolution can be built around Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism, which are among the prominent primary theories of international relations. Realism emphasizes the role of state power and the pursuit of national interests, asserting that international organizations like the UN function primarily as tools for powerful states to advance their own agendas (Morgenthau, 2006). From a realist perspective, the UN's effectiveness in conflict resolution is often limited by the geopolitical dynamics and the influence of the permanent members of the Security Council, who hold veto power, thus determining whether a conflict can be addressed through UN mechanisms (Waltz, 1979). In this view, the UN may serve more as a diplomatic tool for maintaining the balance of power rather than an independent actor that can resolve conflicts impartially.

In contrast, Liberalism offers a more optimistic perspective on the UN's role in conflict resolution, emphasizing the importance of international institutions and norms in promoting cooperation and peace. Liberals argue that international organizations, including the UN, are critical in fostering collaboration, building trust, and creating frameworks for collective security (Keohane, 1984). According to liberal theory, the UN provides a forum where states can work together to address global issues such as conflict, poverty, and human rights. The UN's peacekeeping operations, mediation efforts, and the establishment of international laws and treaties can, in theory, prevent conflict and foster a more stable international system. The creation of norms like the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) reflects the liberal emphasis on human security and the role of international law in conflict resolution.

Constructivism, on the other hand, focuses on the role of identity, norms, and social constructs in shaping the behavior of states and international organizations. Constructivists argue that the UN's conflict resolution efforts are not solely determined by material power or institutional design but also by the evolving norms and values that shape global politics (Wendt, 1999). From a constructivist perspective, the UN's success in resolving conflicts can be attributed to its ability to foster a shared understanding of peace, security, and justice among states. The evolving role of the UN in conflict resolution, especially in terms of promoting human rights and peacebuilding, reflects the changing norms around international intervention and the protection of civilians. Therefore, the UN's capacity to resolve conflicts is not merely about the power dynamics at play but also about how global actors perceive and internalize international norms.

Literature Review

The concept of the Combined Maritime Force (CMF) has its roots in the growing recognition of the interconnectedness of global maritime security threats. According to Till (2009), traditional naval operations have evolved from state-centric defense to cooperative security frameworks where navies operate jointly to address common threats. CMFs exemplify this evolution, representing coalitions formed to protect international waters from piracy, terrorism, illegal trafficking, and other non-traditional threats.

One of the primary motivations behind the establishment of CMFs is the inadequacy of individual national navies to secure vast maritime spaces alone. Bueger (2015) argues that piracy off the coast of Somalia in the early 2000s particularly exposed the need for collective maritime responses. No single country could maintain a constant naval presence in high-risk areas, thus necessitating the pooling of resources and operational capabilities through multinational cooperation.

The Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) headquartered in Bahrain are often cited as a successful model. According to the CMF official website (2023), this organization comprises 39 nations working together to promote security, stability, and prosperity across some of the world's most important shipping lanes. Their operations span counter-piracy, counter-narcotics, and the disruption of terrorist activities, demonstrating the versatility and breadth of combined naval efforts.

Piracy, especially in the Gulf of Aden and the Somali Basin, served as a significant catalyst for CMF operations. Chalk (2010) emphasizes that coordinated international naval patrols through CMF units like Combined Task Force 151 significantly reduced piracy incidents in these regions. Shared intelligence, coordinated patrols, and legal frameworks for prosecuting pirates were key elements in this success.

Beyond counter-piracy, CMFs have played a critical role in combating terrorism at sea. The rise of maritime terrorism, particularly threats to energy infrastructure and shipping routes in the Middle East, has necessitated a stronger multinational naval presence. Lehr (2007) points out that the strategic significance of choke points like the Strait of Hormuz makes multinational maritime security efforts not only desirable but essential. Interoperability is a central theme in CMF literature. The ability of different navies to work together seamlessly, despite varying doctrines, languages, and capabilities, is crucial. As explained by Murray (2017), CMFs rely heavily on standardization of communication systems, joint exercises, and flexible command structures to achieve operational harmony among member nations.

Another critical aspect of CMFs is information sharing. Effective maritime security operations depend on timely and accurate intelligence. According to Bueger and Edmunds (2017), CMFs have developed robust mechanisms for intelligence exchange, enabling quicker responses to emerging threats. Maritime domain awareness, powered by technology and shared databases, remains fundamental to CMF operations. However, several scholars have also highlighted challenges facing CMFs. One issue is the asymmetry of capabilities among participating navies. Not all member states possess advanced ships, surveillance equipment, or trained personnel. According to Patalano (2012), this disparity can create operational gaps and necessitate a heavier burden on more capable navies like those of the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia.

Political commitment and divergent national interests also present challenges. Member states may have differing priorities or political constraints that affect their level of engagement. As discussed by Liss (2013), not all nations are equally willing to undertake high-risk operations, which can affect the overall effectiveness of the CMF initiative.

The legal dimension of CMF operations is another important area of scholarly inquiry. Maritime law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), provides a framework for naval operations but leaves room for national interpretations. Kraska (2011) notes that boarding suspect vessels and prosecuting offenders can be legally complex and politically sensitive, requiring careful coordination among CMF members. Despite these challenges, CMFs

have demonstrated significant adaptability. They operate under a "come as you are" policy, meaning that participation is voluntary, and contributions can vary according to national capacity and political will (Combined Maritime Forces, 2023). This flexibility allows for broader participation without stringent operational obligations, making it an attractive model for many countries. Case studies from the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Sea illustrate the tangible impact of CMFs. According to reports from the International Maritime Bureau (2021), piracy incidents in the region have dropped by more than 80% since the peak years, thanks largely to persistent multinational naval patrols and enhanced security measures aboard commercial vessels, coordinated by CMFs.

Emerging threats such as cyber piracy and the use of autonomous vessels for illegal activities are now reshaping CMF strategies. Research by Bueger et al. (2020) suggests that CMFs are increasingly focusing on cyber-security initiatives and technology-driven surveillance to counter these evolving threats, indicating a shift from traditional ship-based operations to broader maritime security governance. The regional expansion of CMFs into areas like the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia reflects a growing recognition of the global nature of maritime threats. Studies by Raymond (2014) demonstrate that CMFs are working alongside regional initiatives like the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) to create a more integrated global maritime security network. The outcome of the reviewed literature highlights that Combined Maritime Forces have become indispensable in the contemporary maritime security environment. They represent not only operational necessity but also a political commitment to multilateralism and collective security at sea. Despite operational, political, and legal challenges, CMFs are evolving to meet new threats, underscoring their enduring relevance in safeguarding global maritime interests.

Discussions

The Combined Maritime Force (CMF) has emerged as a vital instrument in the global effort to secure international maritime domains. The increasing threat of piracy, terrorism, illegal trafficking, and unregulated migration on the high seas prompted nations to explore joint solutions. The CMF, as a voluntary coalition of over 30 nations, stands out for its collaborative, non-binding structure which allows member states to contribute according to their capabilities and strategic interests (Combined Maritime Forces, 2023).

One of the most prominent areas of CMF operation is counter-piracy, particularly around the Horn of Africa. Through Combined Task Force (CTF) 151, the CMF significantly reduced piracy incidents from their peak in 2010. By engaging in patrols, escort missions, and the establishment of safe transit corridors, CMF demonstrated that multinational naval presence can effectively deter non-state actors on the sea (Murphy, 2009). The success here underlines the value of shared maritime governance. However, this success is not universal. The lack of a unified command structure sometimes hinders real-time decision-making. Different rules of engagement, legal frameworks, and operational doctrines among member states can complicate mission execution (Bateman, 2011). As a result, the CMF often operates on consensus, which, while inclusive, can delay critical actions during fast-moving maritime incidents. Despite these challenges, the CMF promotes interoperability among navies. Frequent joint exercises such as the "IMCMEX" (International Mine Countermeasures Exercise) build mutual trust and operational fluency among participants. These engagements allow navies from different regions to familiarize themselves with

each other's technology and communication procedures, thereby enhancing collective response capability in emergencies (Bueger & Edmunds, 2017).

An important factor in CMF's effectiveness is its emphasis on maritime domain awareness (MDA). By using satellite imagery, automatic identification systems (AIS), and information-sharing networks such as SHADE (Shared Awareness and Deconfliction), the CMF enables proactive monitoring of maritime activities (Bueger, 2015). This preemptive approach helps identify and mitigate threats before they escalate. Moreover, CMF operations are not confined to hard security tasks. Humanitarian efforts like ensuring the safe passage of food aid to Yemen or rescue operations for distressed migrants highlight the CMF's broader humanitarian and peacekeeping role (Combined Maritime Forces, 2020). Such missions align with broader international goals of peace, security, and development at sea. The CMF's presence in strategic chokepoints such as the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Strait of Hormuz ensures the uninterrupted flow of global commerce. Given that approximately 90% of international trade is conducted through maritime routes, CMF's role in protecting shipping lanes contributes directly to global economic stability (IMO, 2020). The economic rationale for such operations has helped sustain political support among member nations.

Nonetheless, the CMF faces legitimacy concerns, especially from non-member coastal states. Some view the CMF as Western-dominated, with the U.S. and UK playing disproportionately influential roles. This has led to occasional mistrust, particularly among developing coastal nations who may feel their sovereignty or local priorities are overlooked (Bueger, 2020).

Another recurring critique is that CMF primarily addresses the symptoms of maritime insecurity rather than its causes. While CMF can intercept pirate vessels or smuggling boats, it cannot resolve the poverty, political instability, and weak governance that drive individuals toward maritime crime. As Chalk (2010) notes, effective maritime security must be complemented by land-based reforms. Furthermore, while CMF is strong in addressing visible threats like piracy, its capacity to manage emerging challenges like cyber threats to maritime infrastructure is still developing. The digitalization of the shipping industry has exposed vulnerabilities that require cyber-naval integration, a frontier where CMF's adaptation is still in progress (Bueger & Stockbruegger, 2017). Still, the CMF remains a template for maritime cooperation. Its voluntary structure, though criticized for operational delays, has encouraged broader participation and minimized political friction among diverse partners. It offers a model for other regional maritime initiatives seeking to foster cooperative security without rigid alliances (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Bondaroff, 2014).

Looking ahead, the sustainability of CMF depends on continued resource commitment, regular diplomatic engagement, and the ability to adapt to non-traditional security threats. Member nations must also ensure that capacity building and inclusive governance remain core priorities, especially when operating in foreign waters. In sum, the CMF has proven to be a versatile and largely effective maritime coalition. Its achievements in securing vast and volatile maritime regions demonstrate the potential of multilateral naval cooperation. However, to remain relevant, CMF must evolve with shifting security landscapes and deepen its integration with local and global maritime stakeholders.

Conclusion

The Combined Maritime Force (CMF) has proven to be a pivotal player in addressing maritime security challenges in the 21st century. Through collaborative efforts and shared operational

responsibilities, the CMF has significantly curbed piracy, enhanced maritime domain awareness, and ensured the safety of major shipping lanes, especially in volatile regions like the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea. Its structure as a voluntary multinational coalition has fostered inclusivity and adaptability, allowing nations to contribute in line with their capabilities while maintaining sovereignty and operational independence.

However, while the CMF's achievements are commendable, several challenges remain. Issues such as unequal participation, limited enforcement capabilities, and the need to adapt to evolving threats such as cyberattacks on maritime infrastructure highlight the necessity for continuous strategic and structural reforms. The long-term success of the CMF will depend on sustained political will, enhanced inter-agency coordination, and broader integration of coastal states in its operations. If effectively managed, the CMF will not only continue to secure the seas but also serve as a model for cooperative global security efforts in an increasingly interconnected world.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion:

- i. it is recommended that the Combined Maritime Force (CMF) enhances its engagement with regional coastal states by promoting inclusive participation and capacity-building programs that empower local navies and maritime agencies.
- ii. The CMF should also invest in modern technologies to counter emerging threats such as cyberattacks and unmanned maritime systems. Strengthening intelligence-sharing mechanisms and aligning rules of engagement among member states will improve operational cohesion and responsiveness.
- iii. Furthermore, CMF should increase its humanitarian missions and public diplomacy efforts to improve its legitimacy and perception in host regions, thereby fostering deeper trust and collaboration for future maritime security operations.

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