

Efforts to set up an EU naval strategy were a "mess" with no co-ordinated planning going on, a roundtable organised by the Security and Defence Agenda (SDA) on 16 March heard. Headline-grabbing reports of piracy off the coast of Somalia may have prompted calls for more EU action but the interests of individual member states take precedence while the presence of national industrial champions means defence procurement remains fragmented in Europe.

There have been piecemeal attempts to co-ordinate European efforts but none have so far added up to a comprehensive naval strategy. "The problem with all of these activities is that they are not part of a collective co-ordinated effort. To be frank, it is a mess," said Rear Admiral Stefan Engdahl, the Swedish Military Representative to the EU and NATO Euro-Atlantic Partnership Military Council.

Operation Atalanta, the EU's mission off the Somali coast to combat piracy in the region, has been progressing well with reduced numbers of successful attacks on ships (currently one in seven attacks on ships are successful, down from one in three last year) and food is now reaching civilians ashore, Commander Snowy Lintern, Liaison Officer of the EU Naval Force - Somalia, told the participants.

But a longer-term approach needed to be taken in Somalia, Rosa Miguélez Ramos, a Spanish Socialist MEP said. "We won't succeed in eradicating piracy until the day we leave a very real economic foundation and a political project in the region", she said.

Navies also had to adapt to the new threats. Captain Bartholomé Bauzá Abril, Head of the Strategic Plans Branch of the Spanish Navy, said there should be greater co-operation with civilian agencies since these threats often came in the guise of "every-day life".

But there was also a need to focus on the threats of the future, said Giovanni Romani, Head of the Naval Armaments Unit in NATO. "The effort should be to try to focus not only on the [current] crisis but the next crisis and the crisis after next," he said.