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The EU should get serious about maritime security in the Middle East and the Gulf

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Brief Summary

To achieve its global maritime ambitions, the EU must strengthen its presence in the Middle East and the Gulf. The current geopolitical climate offers a chance to become a key maritime security provider and a reliable partner to actors in the region.

Securing shipping lanes from the Mediterranean to the Gulf is crucial for the EU's economy, its energy supply, and its geopolitical influence.

This policy note argues that the EU should (1) overcome fragmentation in its maritime operations in the region; and (2) emphasize the distinct 'European approach' to maritime security.

Maritime security is vital for the EU. There is no shortage of strategic documents acknowledging this reality and emphasizing the EU's growing maritime ambitions. However, translating these words into action has more than once proven to be difficult for the EU.

In the current geopolitical landscape, it is essential for the EU to take matters in its own hands regarding the security of critical sea lanes. By investing in its maritime presence in the Middle East and the Gulf, the EU can position itself as a reliable partner for regional actors seeking alternatives to other major powers.

With EUNAVFOR Aspides, the EU and its member states have a tool in place in the region to show that they are serious about putting its maritime ambitions into practice. Yet, the mission is underutilized and the EU's maritime efforts remain fragmented.

European maritime security efforts in the region

The EU and its member states' maritime security efforts in the Middle East and Gulf have evolved significantly in recent years in response to regional security challenges.

In January 2020, following Iranian attacks on European merchant ships in the Strait of Hormuz, a French-led coalition of eight EU member states, along with Norway, established the European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) mission. EMASoH, with Operation Agénor as its military pillar, operated outside the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) framework due to a lack of consensus in the Council. The European ad hoc coalition aimed to ensure safe navigation in the region and contribute to de-escalation.

By the end of 2023, focus shifted to the Red Sea area, where Houthi rebels began attacking merchant ships after Israel's military campaign in Gaza. This time, calls for an EU-led military response were answered, with the launch of EUNAVFOR Aspides on 19 February 2024. The EU mounted its own defensive naval response, distinct from the US-led maritime coalition Operation Prosperity Guardian and the US/UK military operation Poseidon Archer. EUNAVFOR Aspides initially focused only on the Red Sea area, but its mandated area of responsibility extended to the Gulf. In July 2024, when Operation Agénor ended after having paved the way, EUNAVFOR Aspides took over full responsibility for the entire area of operation.

The stakes are high

About 47 per cent of the EU's trade by volume is transported by sea. Before the Houthi attacks, approximately 12 per cent of global seaborne trade and roughly 40 per cent of trade between Europe and Asia passed through the Suez Canal. The Strait of Hormuz is a main artery for the world's energy market, carrying about on-fifth of global oil shipments and LNG supply. The EU is furthermore the second largest trading partner of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

The stakes are also high for individual EU member states. France has an interest in securing maritime routes to its overseas territories in the Southwestern Indian Ocean and protecting its military outposts in Djibouti and the UAE. For Italy, with its military base in Djibouti and its renewed ambition to become Europe's southern energy hub, maritime security is a priority. Denmark is heavily invested as well, particularly to protect its largest company, the Maersk Group. Along with Belgium, Germany, Greece and the Netherlands, these member states represent the vast majority of European shipping.

Strengthening its maritime footprint in the region has considerable geopolitical value for the EU. Protecting sea lines from the Mediterranean to the Gulf not only secures the EU's connectivity but also demonstrates its potential as a regional security provider and a viable, alternative partner to the GCC monarchies in times of uncertainty.

In other words, securing shipping lanes from the Mediterranean, through the Suez canal and the Red Sea, to the Gulf is essential for the EU's economy, its energy supply and its geopolitical ambitions. It should therefore be a no-brainer for the EU and its member states to show their firm commitment to maritime security in the region.

Rationalize, to overcome fragmentation

European sea power today is still underwhelming, after decades of downsizing, budget cuts and strategic shortsightedness. Despite investments and procurement contracts in recent years, results have yet to materialize. With escalating maritime threats, European navies are under mounting pressure, underscoring the urgent need for a unified European maritime strategy.

Unfortunately, the EU's maritime approach remains fragmented. The introduction in January 2021 of Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP), aimed at coordinating European naval and air assets in areas of interest, was a step in the right direction. However, CMPs are not a cure-all for lacking political will and diverging interests. Fragmentation persists even in the CMP Northwest Indian Ocean, covering the area from the Strait of Hormuz to the Southern Tropic and from the North of the Red Sea towards the centre of the Indian Ocean.

EUNAVFOR Aspides illustrates the difficulty of aligning military efficiency and political interests. Before Aspides took over full responsibility of Operation Agénor's area of responsibility in July 2024, the two naval missions operated in parallel (but in close cooperation). Although merging them at Aspides' launch would have been logical from a military efficiency perspective, conflicting member state interests prevented this. Consequently, member states could only make short-term commitments to both missions, with naval vessels

shuttling between them.

Similarly, Spain's protectionist stance towards EUNAVFOR Atalanta, deployed since 2008 initially to protect commercial shipping in the Indian Ocean, hinders efficiency. Aspides and Atalanta have partly overlapping areas of responsibility, but Spain has consistently blocked discussions about integrating the two missions, resulting in duplicated command and control efforts.

Support for US-led initiatives in the region is also divisive within the EU. Several member states have been reluctant to support the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian in the Red Sea, fearing an escalatory spiral. Meanwhile, the coalition has received support from countries like Denmark, Finland, Greece, and the Netherlands, ranging from public backing to logistical and active military support.

These diverse commitments strain already limited European naval capacities. As a result, EUNAVFOR Aspides operates with only three naval vessels, far below the ten vessels plus air support initially assessed as necessary by Operation Commander Vasileios Gryparis. Strengthening European naval capacity will take time, making rationalization of commitments crucial. Additionally, the EU should consider involving non-EU members with clear maritime interests, such as Norway.

Accentuate the 'European approach'

It is not only sea power that matters; perception is also crucial. This simple truth is essential for the EU to understand regarding its maritime efforts in the Middle East and the Gulf. The last Force Commander of Operation Agénor, Belgian Rear Admiral Gilles Colmant, emphasized it clearly in his legacy document. The coalition's image as a de-escalatory initiative "tailored to the nuances of the region" was one of its key assets. The EU should engage in a lessons-learned exercise based on these experiences.

Operation Agénor in the Strait of Hormuz maintained a low profile with a light HQ structure. Commanders kept discreet but active communication lines with the Gulf states, highlighting the coalition's intention to protect freedom of navigation for the region and global economy. This approach distinguished Agénor from the offensive actions by the US and the UK. Its integration in EMASoH, with a parallel diplomatic track led by a Senior Civilian Representative to promote confidence building in the maritime domain, strengthened this image, making the mission acceptable for regional stakeholders, particularly the Gulf monarchies.

In the initial deployment phases, EUNAVFOR Aspides failed to highlight its intentions. Its relatively large HQ footprint was one part of the problem. Another issue was (and still is) Europe's divisiveness about supporting US-led coalitions in the region, such as Operation Prosperity Guardian. This ambiguity can easily confuse regional stakeholders about the EU's intentions.

The EU should better emphasize its approach to maritime security in the region. As a global economic power, it should build an image around its maritime operations as being uniquely focused on protecting freedom of navigation through defensive measures only. Additionally, it should embed its maritime operations in a broader diplomatic effort. Mirroring EMASoH, EUNAVFOR Aspides would benefit from active diplomatic representation on the shores to promote confidence building. This can be pragmatically achieved by having the EU Special Representative in the region consistently refer to the good intentions of EU maritime operations.

The momentum is there for the EU to present itself as a maritime security provider and as a credible partner in the Middle East and the Gulf. There is no time to loose if it wants to show that it is serious about its maritime ambitions.

Suggested reading

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