

Taking Stock of 'Aspides': A Step Forward in Europe's Geopolitical Role in the Red Sea?

THE EU-GULF **CONNECT** SERIES

POLICY BRIEF

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Almost six months after the launch of their operations in the Red Sea, the Yemeni rebels, known as Houthis, continue to keep global trade hostage. This is despite a number of Western operations to contain and degrade the threat they managed to pose, with missiles and drones continuing to be fired at commercial ships who try to cross the Red Sea towards the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean.

The United States (US) have been particularly active in trying – without success – to re-establish maritime security, spearheading the establishment of multinational campaign Operation 'Prosperity Guardian' (OPG) [in December 2023](#) under the aegis of the existing Combined Maritime Forces' Task Force 153 (CTF 153).

[Established in 2022](#), CTF 153 was also mandated to enhance international maritime security and capacity-building efforts in the Red Sea, the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, and

the Gulf of Aden. Merely a few weeks later, however, the deterrence and escort tasks of Operation Prosperity Guardian were shown to be ineffective, and Washington and London launched a joint military campaign against Houthi-controlled areas, including weapons depots and launching pads. Yet, the Houthis seemed to be resilient to those strikes too, developing new routes and tactics to continue receiving ammunitions and supplies from Iran.

By February 2024, Europe also stepped in with its own maritime security mission, with the European Union (EU) Foreign Affairs Council formally [launching](#) the EU's Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) 'Aspides' on Feb. 19. Jointly proposed by Italy, France, and Germany, 'Aspides' – the ancient Greek word for "shields" – was about finding a "European way" to address the Houthi threat. Headquartered in Larissa (Greece) with a budget of [€8 million](#) and a one-year mandate that can be renewed, the new mission [is defined](#) as a purely "defensive maritime security operation" designed to [operate](#) in the Straits of Bab Al-Mandab and Hormuz, as well as the international waters in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman, and the Gulf.

Despite Europeans and Americans actively engaging in addressing threats to maritime security in the Red Sea, taking stock of their efforts' impact is not a flattering exercise. This policy brief seeks to do just that: contextualising European and American moves in the regional and global context and proposing a more effective way forward.

INSECURITY IN THE RED SEA: A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

According to recent data, shipping costs have [risen by over 300%](#) since November. Because of the deteriorating situation in the Red Sea, major shipping companies such as Maersk, Hapag-Lloyd, MSC and [Yang Ming](#) have [rerouted](#) their operations

around the much longer and more costly Cape of Good Hope route. The ongoing diversion has caused delays that are disrupting global supply chains: the Suez Canal, which accounts for 12% of global trade, [experienced a 66% decrease](#) in traffic in April compared to the previous year. As per the “Global Economic Prospects” report by the World Bank [published in early January](#), if the situation persists or worsens, it could lead to energy supply and price disruptions, ultimately resulting in increased inflation.

Against this backdrop, Europe will be among the most affected regions long-term: around [40%](#) of European trade with Asia and the Middle East passes through these waters. Indeed, it has been [estimated](#) that approximately 3.6 million barrels of crude oil and refined petroleum products – out of the total 6.2 million barrels that traverse through the Bab Al-Mandab Strait on a daily basis – are directed toward Europe.

The Red Sea is not only a critical gateway for worldwide trade and energy transport. It is equally important for the global internet system as sixteen fibre-optic lines under the Red Sea handle about [17%](#) of all international data traffic, including trunk lines connecting Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

Considering the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the EU’s subsequent moves to eclipse its reliance on Russian oil and gas, the security of Europe is increasingly intertwined with the stability of these crucial waterways. Notably, the EU has declared the North-Western Indian Ocean (NWIO), covering the maritime area from the Strait of Hormuz to the Southern Tropic and from the North of the Red Sea toward the centre of the Indian Ocean, as a Maritime Area of Interest (MAI) since 2022.

As leading maritime powers in global shipping, [Greece](#) and Denmark – the latter being home to the [Maersk Group](#) – clearly attribute great importance to the safety

and freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Similarly, France's priority in ensuring safety in this maritime space primarily stems from its need to secure passage to its overseas territories in the South-Western Indian Ocean (La Reunion, Mayotte, and the Scattered Islands). Additionally, France's military presence in [Djibouti](#) and the [United Arab Emirates](#) (UAE) has helped solidify its regional strategic position, making it a major European player. For its part, Italy – which has [maintained](#) a military base in Djibouti and recently [assumed command](#) of both Operation EUNAVFOR 'Atalanta' and [CTF 153](#) – wants to demonstrate its ability to protect an area of such strategic interest, and has thus made maritime security in the Red Sea a top priority of this year's [Italian G7](#).

In this context, 'Aspides' can be seen as a step toward Europe's attempt to bolster its own defence autonomy in this strategic area. Indeed, 'Aspides' aims to provide a politically attractive alternative to the US-led OPG: European countries, especially France and Italy, have thus far [preferred](#) to keep a degree of distance from the US and United Kingdom (UK) military operations, and have expressed their concerns about Washington's approach in the region, fearing it could worsen the situation and potentially fuel a more dangerous escalation.

Tellingly, 'Aspides' members also aim to avoid any association between their maritime mission and the ongoing conflict in Gaza, focusing strictly on tasks such as accompanying and protecting merchant vessels from Houthi attacks at sea or air, monitoring and evaluating potential threats, and strengthening sharing-information activities with like-minded partners.

'Aspides' [relies](#) on personnel from 19 EU members to contribute to operational and force headquarters. Athens has [assumed](#) the operation command under Rear Admiral Vasileios Gryparis, with Rome [appointing](#) Rear Admiral Stefano Costantino

to lead the force command. Since its inception, the mission has successfully completed [100 close protections](#) and [repelled](#) at least eleven Houthi attacks. Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, and Italy have each participated with a frigate in the mission, on a rotating basis.

Three months in, the track record for 'Aspides' is mixed. On one hand, the mission represents a concrete step by Europeans toward securing strategic autonomy in the Red Sea and wider Gulf region. On the other hand, the deployment of this mission has highlighted some challenges in both effectiveness and operational matters, as well as in the constructive positioning of Europeans vis-à-vis the wider regional context and other international actors active in the area.

IN MARITIME SECURITY, EUROPEANS MUST RIDE THE WAVES HEAD-ON.

The simultaneous presence of multiple military operations – each with its separate chains of command and instruments and partially overlapping mandates – makes it necessary to build comprehensive, cohesive architecture to operate more effectively in this strategic area. In the Red Sea, 'Aspides' should [closely cooperate](#) with other regional European missions, including the long-standing EUNAVFOR 'Atalanta' and 'European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz' (EMASoH). The former operates off the eastern African coast and the Gulf of Suez, Aqaba and Aden, and it has progressively turned into a reference in the area as a [Maritime Security Provider](#).

The mission is a significant component of the EU's Horn of Africa strategy, supporting two other sister missions: 'EUCAP-Somalia' and 'EUTM-Somalia.' French-led EMASoH and its military wing Operation 'Agénor' are, rather, a collaborative effort among individual European states, with critical [contributions](#) from Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, and the Netherlands [providing](#)

surveillance capabilities in the Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, and a part of the Arabian Sea.

The other major challenge is the consistency of political will in deploying resources to this complicated region. Due to withdrawals or delays in sending assets, the 'Aspides' mission faces a logistic shortage, potentially impacting its success in escalating confrontations with the Houthis. Belgian frigate *Louise-Marie* joined 'Aspides' in early May, but will reportedly be part of the mission for a relatively short period of time before [transitioning](#) to the 'Agénor' mission. On the other hand, Germany's FGS *Hessen* just [ended](#) its presence in the Red Sea, which should be replaced by the FGS *Hamburg* in late summer.

The Netherlands – already involved in the US-led OPG – should [offer](#) the joint support ship HNLMS *Karel Doorman* in the upcoming weeks until the end of August. At this point, Denmark, Portugal, Romania, and non-EU countries Albania and Norway have only [declared their willingness](#) to participate in the mission. Nonetheless, showing political willingness for the continuity of a European presence in the Red Sea becomes particularly fundamental in the credible scenario of a continued US retrenchment from the region, especially in the event of Donald Trump's re-election to the White House.

A European commitment to a naval, military, and diplomatic presence in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden region would also strengthen its credibility and legitimacy to engage more comprehensively with local regional partners on both shores of the Red Sea. Arab partners like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members and Egypt remain priority interlocutors. Red Sea waters are crucial to Egypt's economic security – especially given 30% of state revenues derive from Suez Canal fees – and to the success of geoeconomics plans for GCC countries like Saudi Arabia and the

United Arab Emirates (UAE). This is why Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have consistently shown a strong interest in [promoting](#) the internationalisation of maritime security, particularly in light of the perceived US withdrawal from the region. On its side, Brussels has prioritised strengthening EU-Gulf cooperation in the maritime field through its [Strategic Partnership with the Gulf](#), unveiled in May 2022. As per the document [approved](#) by the EU Council on Feb. 8, 'Aspides' searches for a "strong and targeted diplomatic outreach to Gulf Cooperation Council partners", as expressed in special briefings with the Ambassadors of [Oman](#), [Bahrain](#), and [Qatar](#) to Brussels in late February.

The North-Western Indian Ocean presents, therefore, a major opportunity for constructive Europe-Gulf cooperation, with 'Aspides' also potentially serving as a platform for sustainable deconfliction in the long term. Indeed, promoting confidence and capacity building with regional partners sharing the same strategic interests in the North-Western Indian Ocean is crucial for protecting sea route communications in these waters in the longer term, especially against asymmetrical threats. Ultimately, constructive and meaningful engagement with Arab partners is the only way towards developing inclusive maritime diplomacy, that would, over time, also include principal spoilers, such as Iran.

Moreover, Europeans also should keep a holistic view of the Red Sea context, including the African shores. The Houthis military escalation has significantly worsened existing challenges in the Horn of Africa, notably piracy and illicit traffic, demonstrating the interconnectedness of regional crises. Since last November, merchant vessels have been the [target](#) of about 20% of Somali piracy-related incidents, a noteworthy rise when compared to the previous six years. East African navies lack the capability to combat piracy effectively, and any naval assets committed to [thwart](#) the attacks in the southern Red Sea leave fewer vessels to

monitor hotspots along the eastern African coast. The civil war in Sudan, Ethiopia's [gambling](#) to gain access to the Red Sea, and the increasing instability in Somalia are further contributing to the deterioration of the safety of trade lanes across Bab Al-Mandab and the Gulf of Aden. Indeed, the sudden decision by the Somali government to [request](#) termination of the 30-year United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) without any replacement – a move coinciding with the [withdrawal](#) of the African Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) – has raised a number of concerns about Mogadishu's ability to effectively defeat the extremist group Al-Shabaab and take full responsibility for the country's security, including its coast.

Europeans need to also recalibrate their posture and role vis-à-vis other international players. While still closely aligned to the US, Europeans should continue stating the difference between their modus operandi and America's. Europe should also intensify its outreach to other actors who potentially have the capabilities to work with them on Red Sea security, such as India. India shares with Europe and the Gulf monarchies a strategic connectivity interest in the Red Sea via the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), and Delhi has its own maritime security cooperation that is ongoing with regional partners and can be further built upon.

Finally, despite China's resistance to the US invitation to be cooperative in the Red Sea security effort, Europeans should not give up on encouraging Beijing to play a more positive role, deploying its leverage towards Tehran for the safety of global trade, and to prevent the collapse of regional security on both shores of the Red Sea.

Overall, to achieve strategic autonomy and maximise the likelihood of success, Europeans must demonstrate a holistic commitment to regional stability in

cooperation with both regional partners and international actors. Military actions alone cannot provide a comprehensive solution; persistent diplomatic efforts are necessary to tackle the underlying factors contributing to the instability along the eastern and western coasts of the Red Sea.

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

The EU-Gulf Connect

Building upon the EU's Strategic Partnership with the Gulf, the EU-Gulf Connect platform will promote intensified collaboration between the two regions in trade, energy, security, research and innovation, and cultural exchange. This hub fosters dialogue, knowledge transfer, and expertise sharing among stakeholders from the EU and the Gulf.

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