

# Charting a course through stormy waters

## The EU as a maritime security actor

### SUMMARY

On 8 March 2023, the European Commission is set to adopt an update of its first EU maritime security strategy from 2014. The EU is a one-of-a-kind maritime actor, a fact that brings both opportunities and responsibilities. It has been argued that, if the EU-27 were to combine the capacities and capabilities of their navies, they would form one of the world's largest maritime powers. There is therefore space for better integration of capabilities and greater coherence among the EU's tools to promote its multi-dimensional strategic maritime interests. As around 90 % of global goods are traded via maritime routes, freedom of navigation, security, sustainability and respect for international law are crucial for the EU. These routes are, however, becoming increasingly contested and restricted, reflecting new patterns of global power distribution.

The EU's common security and defence policy instruments, particularly its missions and operations abroad, are the most visible manifestation of its maritime actorness. The EU currently has two naval military operations: EUNAVFOR Atalanta in the western part of the Indian Ocean, and EUNAVFOR MED Irini in the central part of the Mediterranean Sea.

In following the orientations provided by its maritime security strategy and the Strategic Compass, the EU is aiming to increase its capacity and reliability as a maritime security actor. One example is its coordinated maritime presences (CMPs), launched in January 2021 with a pilot case in the Gulf of Guinea, and another CMP launched in February 2022 in the north-western Indian Ocean, to boost the EU's maritime capacity and global outreach. Another is the EU's action to boost its maritime defence capabilities through the various post-2016 initiatives that aim to incentivise collaborative projects. Finally, the EU has also enhanced its cooperation with partners, in particular with NATO, in ensuring maritime security in the transatlantic space, although political obstacles remain.

*This updates a February 2021 briefing by Tania Laïçi, Eric Pichon and Branislav Stanicek.*



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## EU security environment: Stormy waters

The EU sees itself as a global maritime security provider. As already evidenced in the 2016 [EU Global Strategy](#), the maritime domain lies at the junction between commercial, security, and political interests. The EU's strategic maritime interests are multi-dimensional – ranging from ensuring freedom of navigation and safe maritime infrastructure to promoting peace and security and attaining climate change preparedness. Similarly, the 2022 [Strategic Compass](#) for security and defence – an actionable framework for the EU's security and defence for the coming 5 to 10 years – identifies maritime security as essential for the EU's security, free trade, energy security, economic development and transport. It notes that maritime zones and [chokepoints](#), as well as essential sea lanes, are becoming increasingly contested. The EU's first maritime security [strategy](#) from 2014 provides a comprehensive approach to this domain, including both internal and external aspects. Maritime security refers to the protection of maritime territories from challenges including illegal arms, drugs and human trafficking, pollution, piracy, and actions obstructing freedom of navigation.

Recent years have seen a flurry of **geopolitical activity at sea**. From illegal trafficking and piracy operations to energy exploration missions and military posturing, the waters surrounding Europe have become stormier. Growing economic and resource stakes at sea have led to a more dynamic power distribution among seaborne actors, and made maritime space 'increasingly [restricted and contested](#)'. Between [80%](#) and [90%](#) of global goods are traded via maritime routes. In 2021, the net value of EU maritime trade imports and exports [reached](#) €2 070 billion in goods in 2021, and around [55%](#) of goods traded between the EU and the rest of the world were seaborne. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development estimates that maritime trade [volumes](#) are bound to triple by 2050. The EU thus has a vital interest in maintaining safe, open and peaceful maritime routes.

As the EU's geopolitical ambitions gain in nuance, maritime security is a key field where the EU's diverse instruments can empower it to fulfil the role of security provider and peace promotor. The EU is expected to take action on issues ranging from ensuring the safety of sea-based [critical infrastructure](#) – such as submarine communication cables and wind farms – to discouraging piracy and criminal non-state actors from proliferating across maritime corridors. In the security and defence field, the EU's common security and defence policy (CSDP) instruments, particularly its missions and operations, are the main manifestation of its **maritime actorness**. The EU has 'unique [operational expertise](#), institutional capacities and human resources to manage complex maritime challenges'. Among them are instruments for naval coordination, law enforcement, and the integrated approach linking all aspects of maritime security. The EU is a one-of-a-kind maritime actor, a fact that brings both opportunities and responsibilities. Recognising that the EU can leverage its **global network of partnerships** in a way no other actor can, the Foreign Affairs Council has adopted several sets of conclusions calling for more strategic partnerships in the domain of CSDP.

## EU maritime strategic orientations

While an [EU integrated maritime policy](#) focused on internal issues has existed since 2007, the Council adopted the first maritime security strategy ([EUMSS](#)) covering external security aspects, in June 2014. The strategy [acknowledges](#) the need to protect sea lanes that are strategic for the EU, and aims to coordinate EU and Member State policies, actions and tools for better monitoring of risks and better coordination of naval operations. The strategy, with no dedicated budget line, follows four guiding principles:

- **cross-sectoral approach:** promote wide cooperation between military and civilian maritime authorities, EU agencies and all sectors of the shipping and maritime industry;
- **functional integrity:** aim at better coordination of policies and capabilities at international, EU and national levels in respect of sovereign maritime rights and the law of the high seas;
- **respect for international rules and principles:** promote 'rules-based good governance at sea' and the settlement of maritime disputes according to the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Law of the Sea;

- **maritime multilateralism:** promote cooperation with the UN and NATO and other international and regional players.

The Council adopted a [revised action plan](#) in June 2018 aligning the EUMSS with the EU Global Strategy. It takes on board the proposals of the 2016 [joint communication](#) on the role of the EU in the international governance of the oceans, and the June 2017 Council [conclusions](#) on global maritime security. Relevant horizontal actions are listed in key sectors of cooperation: education and training, risk management, capability development, research and innovation, maritime surveillance, and international cooperation. In addition to cross-cutting actions, the revised action plan features a regional component identifying **eight key maritime hotspots** – the European sea basins; the Mediterranean Sea; the Black Sea; the Baltic Sea; the North Sea; the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans; and the Arctic region – alongside specific actions to be implemented for each one. Each set of actions refers to relevant existing EU frameworks and tools – such as the Critical Maritime Routes programme ([CMR](#)) – and calls on Member States to support them.

Experts point out the [difficulty](#) in identifying a lead actor for these actions owing to diverse security interests and working methods of the relevant EU bodies and the Member States. To address these constraints and the EU's operational limitations, the EUMSS identified freedom of navigation activities and the fight against crime as converging areas of action. The October 2020 implementation [report](#) on the EUMSS affirmed its contribution to the implementation of the EU Global Strategy by strengthening the EU's capacity to act, and its profile as a security provider in the maritime domain. The report also notes that 'progress and achievements so far have been significant' in all five key areas.

In June 2021, the Council adopted [conclusions](#) on the EU's intention to increase its role as a global maritime security provider. It invited 'the Commission and the High Representative to continue to actively implement the policy and to initiate an assessment of the need for an update of the EUMSS and its action plan, and provide its outcomes as soon as possible at the latest by the end of 2021'. It also underlined that maritime security should be addressed under the Strategic Compass. The Strategic Compass emphasises the importance of maritime security for the EU. It highlights the maritime domain as a key area for international cooperation with partners. In the Strategic Compass, Member States commit to further asserting their interests at sea and enhancing the EU's and Member States' maritime security. Member States also agreed to expand their coordinated maritime presences – a tool to increase the EU's capacity to act as a reliable maritime security provider – and, building on an update of the EU maritime security strategy and its action plan, further invest in maritime security.

According to the Commission's [work programme](#) for 2023, a joint communication on the update of the EU maritime security strategy is planned for the first quarter of 2023. Subsequently, 8 March 2023 was set as the expected date of adoption. Many [experts](#) who have deemed the current EUMSS from 2014 rather outdated will welcome this EUMSS revamp. They note that it does not take account of the proliferation of threats and risks to maritime security that have arisen since 2014, including the increase in geopolitical tensions in the Suez, Malacca, Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb Straits, the Mediterranean and the South China Sea. An EUISS [analysis](#) finds that, with the exception of a few Member States, maritime power is a rather neglected area overall. The analysis calls for a rapid change in course if the EU wants to continue to maintain its free access to the global commons and reap its economic benefits, underlines the need for further investment and capabilities. Moreover, the analysis stresses that the EU is 'uniquely placed to generate maritime power', particularly if it manages to 'fuse' all relevant policy areas (such as trade and investment and security and defence) successfully. The analysis also emphasises that, because of the breadth of the policy areas involved, joint Commission and European External Action Service (EEAS) management of maritime security will be important. A [study](#) suggests that the following elements, among others, be included in the revision of the EU's maritime security strategy: expanding coordinated maritime presences to south-east Asia and north-east Asia; developing naval vessels and strategic enablers; deploying military advisers with an emphasis on naval expertise; and working more closely with partners and increasing exercises with them. The [results](#) of a public consultation on the way forward for the EU maritime security strategy, carried out by the Commission and the High Representative from 16 June to 8 September 2022, confirms that the EUMSS

needs 'a forward looking update to allow the EU to preserve its strategic interests'. The findings highlight several elements that need further reflection, such as more transversal and inclusive maritime governance; enhanced exchange of information on maritime situational awareness; strengthened ability to identify and respond to cyber and hybrid threats in the maritime domain; and more flexible maritime security operations. In terms of geographical focus, respondents highlighted the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Baltic, the Arctic Sea Basin and the Indo-Pacific.

## CSDP at sea

As maritime insecurity grows, partner countries and the maritime industry are looking to the EU 'to assume a more prominent [role](#)', according to High Representative/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) Josep Borrell. Maritime security is seen as 'one of the most promising areas of recent and future [CSDP activity](#)'. The EU currently has **two major naval operations** deployed under its CSDP: the EU Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) Operation Atalanta, in the western Indian Ocean (see text box) and EUNAVFOR MED Irini (see next section). Operation Irini partly took over the mandate of its predecessor, EUNAVFOR MED [Sophia](#), which was terminated in 2020 and rescued 44 916 people between 2015 and 2020. Since 2021, the common costs of these naval operations have been covered by the European Peace Facility ([EPF](#)), an off-budget fund initially worth €5 billion in 2018 prices (political agreement exists to increase the financial ceiling to €10.5 billion).

### EUNAVFOR Atalanta

EU Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) Operation [Atalanta](#) was first deployed in 2008, and its mandate again [extended](#) in December 2022 until December 2024. In March 2022, the UN Security Council [did not extend](#) Resolution 2608 (2021) allowing EU NAVFOR Atalanta and other international forces to fight piracy and armed robbery within Somalia's territorial waters. In spite of this, Atalanta maintains a wide [area of operations](#) – covering the Gulf of Suez, the Gulf of Aqaba, the Red Sea, the Somali Basin and the Gulf of Aden – through which 95 % of the EU's sea trade and 20 % of global sea trade pass. In this area, its [ships and aircraft](#) protect vulnerable vessels, in particular those of the World Food Programme delivering food aid. In addition to countering piracy and armed robbery at sea, Atalanta helps monitor and prevent drug trafficking, illegal trade in charcoal and arms, and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. EUNAVFOR Atalanta collaborates with two civilian '[sister missions](#)' in Somalia: the EU capacity-building mission in the maritime security sector (EUCAP Somalia) and the EU training mission for the federal security forces (EUTM Somalia). EUNAVFOR Atalanta established the Maritime Security Centre – Horn of Africa ([MSCHOA](#)) in Brest, France, which registers (on a voluntary basis) vessels transiting its area of operations, to protect them more effectively. It also liaises with the [international military presence](#) in the area (combined military forces, NATO, China, and India, among others).

The maritime activities undertaken as part of the CSDP address the challenges described in the EUMSS, including organised crime, robbery, piracy, and illegal trafficking. They reflect the Foreign Affairs Council conclusions from [2019](#) and [2021](#), which recognise maritime security as key priority for the EU and its Member States in order to protect its strategic interests. Reports for 2020 include a [rise](#) in piracy and armed robbery, 'most frequently resulting in either [kidnappings or hostage](#) situations', with a roughly 10 % increase in incidents compared with 2019. The year 2021 recorded the lowest number of incidents since 1994, leading to the [recognition](#) that 'the presence of international naval vessels ... has had an impact'. However, a major reason for this could be the severe [impact](#) of COVID-19 on the international shipping industry in 2021. Significantly, crew kidnappings dropped by 55 % globally. In the Strategic Compass, the EU and its Member States committed to further asserting their interests at sea and enhancing the EU's and Member States' maritime security by 'improving the interoperability of naval forces through live exercises and by organising European port calls'. It also notes that the two EU CSDP naval operations will be 'further developed as appropriate'.

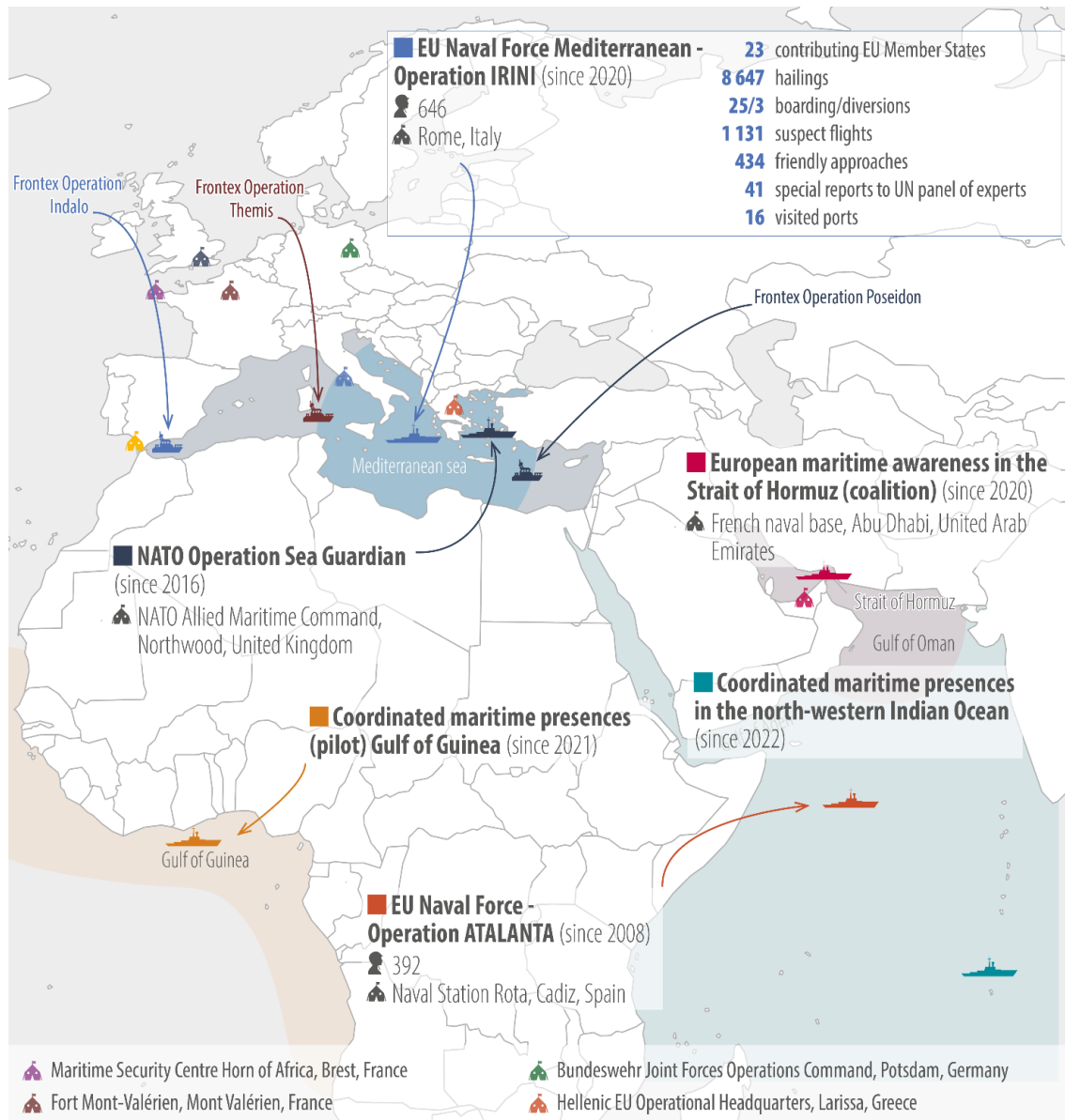
### EUNAVFOR MED Irini

The political impulse for the EU Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED) Operation Irini (Greek for 'peace') came during the 2020 [Berlin conference on Libya](#). Conference participants committed to



the 55-point [conference conclusions](#), including to 'unequivocally and fully' respect and implement the **arms embargo** established UN Security Council [Resolution 1970 \(2011\)](#), recognising that, so far, neither the UN nor the EU had been able to effectively enforce the arms embargo. Replacing Operation [Sophia](#), (launched in 2015 with a mandate to counter piracy, trafficking and smuggling in the southern central Mediterranean, extended to include also monitoring compliance with the arms embargo), **Operation Iridi** was officially [launched](#) on 31 March 2020 (with an initial mandate until 31 March 2021), to patrol the international waters about 100 km off the Libyan coast. In line with its goal of implementing the arms embargo imposed on Libya by the UN Security Council, this military operation covers the main central Mediterranean route used for smuggling weapons into the country, and does not cover humanitarian tasks. Operation Iridi and Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, have signed an [agreement](#) to deepen their cooperation and information exchange.

Figure 1 –European maritime security landscape



Source: EPRS, based on the studies discussed in the briefing.

Operation Iridi is a complementary tool in the de-escalation of the Libyan conflict, and [cooperates](#) closely with the EU border assistance mission in Libya ([EUBAM Libya](#)). Since its inception, the operation has, among other things, [boarded](#) and inspected 25 suspect ships and investigated 8 736 merchant

vessels through request of information via radio calls, and investigated 25 airports and 16 ports. Experts [confirm](#) that EU maritime presence in Libya can contribute to de-escalating the conflict.

However, Operation Irini has suffered from under-staffing and relatively limited operational assets. As of January 2023, 23 Member States are contributing to the mission. With approximately 646 [staff](#) (as of 31 December 2021), the operation's [assets](#) are the Greek and Italian ships *HS Limnos* and *ITS Foscari*; a German and a Portuguese P-3C Orion maritime-patrol aircraft; small reconnaissance aircraft from Greece, France, Luxembourg and Poland; and an Italian drone. The operation has been deemed [under-resourced](#) for its assigned task – it has rarely had more than one vessel, with the French destroyer *Jean Bart* and the Greek frigate *Hydra* having been deployed together for just two weeks, between 14 and 28 May 2020. The operation is echoing the problems encountered by its predecessor, Operation Sophia, which had prompted then HR/VP [Federica Mogherini](#) to observe that the EU maintains 'naval operations without naval assets'. The current operation commander is Rear Admiral Stefano Turchetto. On 26 March 2021, the Council [decided](#) to extend the operation's mandate until 31 March 2023.

## Coordinated maritime presences and the Gulf of Guinea

The Gulf of Guinea is a **strategic hub** in global and regional energy trade, plagued by piracy and illegal fishing. Building on the 2014 [strategy](#) for the Gulf of Guinea, the EUMSS is [aligned](#) with the regional Yaoundé Code of Conduct ([YCoC](#)) process, which operates notably through two regional maritime security centres, [CRESMAC](#) (Central Africa) and [CRESMAO](#) (West Africa), and an [inter-regional coordination centre](#). The objective of the EU's Gulf of Guinea strategy is to strengthen existing cooperation structures, build a common understanding of the threat, help regional governments to put robust institutions in place, and support economic prosperity.

### European maritime awareness in the Strait of Hormuz

Growing regional tensions and insecurity in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz in 2019 affected freedom of navigation, and sparked security concerns for vessels and crews in the area. Instability has also jeopardised trade and energy supplies, with potential worldwide economic consequences. On 20 January 2020, the French government [announced](#) the establishment of the European maritime surveillance mission in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) with the support of Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Portugal. With a double military and diplomatic track, the mission provides concrete 'enhanced maritime situation awareness and surveillance' while undertaking complementary diplomatic efforts to increase regional stability. The mission's military component – Operation [AGENOR](#) – and its operational headquarters are located within the French naval base in Abu Dhabi.

A concrete deliverable is the Yaoundé Architecture regional information system ([Yaris](#)), an information-sharing and incident-management platform, developed in the framework of the EU Critical Maritime Routes programme's Gulf of Guinea Interregional Network ([GoGiN](#)). The EU also supports YCoC [implementation](#) as a member of the G7++ Friends of the Gulf of Guinea [group](#), together with the G7 states, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Switzerland (and Brazil as an observer), and international bodies (the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and Interpol). The strategy for the Gulf of Guinea tracks down the root causes of maritime crime on shore and sets up a comprehensive approach to cooperation with affected states.

The Gulf of Guinea's strategic importance for freedom of navigation, trade routes and sustainable development, along with the multiple challenges it faces – ranging from armed robbery against ships and illicit maritime activity to kidnapping of seafarers, and smuggling and trafficking of drugs and arms – prompted the EU to designate it as a 'maritime area of interest' in early 2021. The designation took place in the context of the establishment of **coordinated maritime presences** (CMPs). A result from the informal EU defence ministers meeting in August 2019, the [CMP concept](#) was envisioned 'to increase the EU's capacity as a reliable partner and maritime security provider' by encouraging greater maritime operational engagement, ensuring a permanent maritime presence, and promoting stronger international cooperation at sea. The concept was intended to enable information-sharing, analysis and awareness, and to build more effectively on the existing maritime presence of individually engaged EU

Member States, ensuring 'a permanent [European maritime presence](#) and outreach around the world, [and] promoting international cooperation and partnerships at sea'. It could 'substantially boost the Union's maritime capacity and outreach globally'.

Through the Gulf of Guinea CMP – the very first [pilot case](#) approved and launched by the Council on 25 January 2021 – the EU increased 'work with the coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea ... through greater operational engagement', to cooperate closely with international and regional partners, and to enhance 'the **visibility of EU maritime presence**'. It is important to note that the CMP is distinct from the EU CSDP missions, and that operations and assets deployed in the Gulf of Guinea under the CMP are 'under national command' and on a voluntary basis. The political control and strategic guidance of this pilot case remains under the authority of the Council, while a Maritime Area of Interest Coordination Cell has been set up to boost coordination. Based on the lessons learned from the pilot case, the Council extended it for [two years](#) in February 2022, and decided to apply the CMP concept in the [north-western Indian Ocean](#), another [hotbed](#) of maritime and geopolitical activity. Given that, in the Strategic Compass, EU leaders agreed to expand their coordinated maritime presences, a potential for even more CMPs exists. Analysts [note](#) that the CMP in the Gulf of Guinea has enhanced the EU's overall position as a maritime security provider, and will be thus the 'model to follow'. They argue that CMPs should be extended to other areas: 'The seed is planted, and now it is time to grow the tree.' However, experts [warn](#) that, because of the specific sensitivities of certain Member States, the requirement of unanimity in CSDP decision-making may hamper the expansion of CMPs to critical maritime areas around the world.

## Third-country participation in the CSDP

Third countries can [participate](#) in EU CSDP in different ways, ranging from joint training to participation in security and defence dialogues. They can also take part in EU CSDP missions and operations through **framework participation agreements** (FPA); [20 countries](#) have concluded such agreements with the EU. They provide a legal and political basis for the partners' contributions but do not assign them a decision-making role in planning, strategic guidance or command. The Strategic Compass specifically states:

*We welcome the contributions to our CSDP missions and operations from all our partners and encourage them to dedicate more personnel and capabilities to our missions and operations as part of a mutual effort to promote international peace and security. To this end, we will help our partners to strengthen their capacity to contribute to CSDP missions and operations.*

The EU Military Committee considers four main [conditions](#) that need to be fulfilled for a third party to participate in CSDP missions and operations: an FPA with the EU, an existing security of information agreement with the EU, good neighbourly relations, and shared values and principles. For example, [Colombia](#), [South Korea](#), and [Montenegro, Serbia and Ukraine](#), among others, participated in EUNAVFOR Atalanta.

## Maritime component of EU defence initiatives

The Strategic Compass highlighted the EU's ambition to develop further 'full spectrum forces that are agile and mobile, interoperable, technologically advanced, energy efficient and resilient'. To do so, EU leaders agreed to step up their defence spending substantially, and to improve their defence budget spending by increasing interoperability and reducing fragmentation, especially building on existing EU tools such as the European Defence Fund (EDF) and permanent structured cooperation (PESCO), including in the maritime domain. The Compass highlights EU Member States' strategic capability projects, which include a new class of European naval vessel that will make 'a tangible difference to European security and defence in the future'. EU leaders also committed to developing strategic capabilities in the maritime domain, stating that 'to ensure a more assertive Union presence at sea as well as the ability to project power, high-end naval platforms, including unmanned platforms for surface and underwater control, are required'. According to the Compass, the focus area European patrol class surface ships will be an important step in this direction.

EU Member States already have substantial naval capabilities: if all the navies of EU Member States were to be combined, 'Europe would indeed possess one of the world's largest [navies](#)'. However, to

#### Russia's war on Ukraine and Black Sea security

Russia's war on Ukraine has drawn attention to the importance of Black Sea security, which has wide-ranging global effects. For instance, the Russian blockade of Ukrainian ports in the Black Sea has worsened the [global food crisis](#), given that 90 % of Ukraine's agriculture exports were [seaborne](#) prior to the war. EU-Ukraine [solidarity lanes](#) – land corridors for Ukraine's agricultural exports – and the Black Sea Grain [initiative](#) – a humanitarian corridor in the Black Sea – were able to [alleviate](#) some of the effects; however, export backlogs remain substantial. Moreover, a significant part of Europe's energy security, prosperity and [stability](#) depends on stability in the Black Sea. Experts therefore [argue](#) that 'hard naval power... to ensure security seems inevitable'. They suggest that Romania and Bulgaria, as both EU and NATO members, could establish such a capability, and say that an integrated strategic European policy is needed. It is also [argued](#) that NATO military exercises in the region should be increased, and that NATO should develop a Black Sea strategy, distinct from the strategy for its eastern flank.

be able to act from a position of strength in its maritime neighbourhood, the EU needs '[continuous investment](#) in its naval power and a greater use of pooling and sharing amongst EU Member States'. In this spirit, since 2016, the EU has reached several milestones in collaborative defence initiatives aiming to increase Member States' interoperability and joint capability development.

One of the most notable initiatives is [permanent structured cooperation \(PESCO\)](#), a Treaty-based framework and process to enable deeper cooperation between willing Member States. Eight of a total of 60 PESCO [projects](#) are focused on developing maritime capabilities. One example is the [European Patrol Corvette \(EPC\)](#). The eight maritime-focused PESCO projects could eventually feed into a more cross-cutting project, the [Crisis Response Operational Core \(EUFOR CROC\)](#), which aims to create 'a coherent full spectrum force package' to improve the EU's

crisis management capabilities. Some experts have gone further, suggesting that PESCO members could establish a naval force [package](#) that could prepare itself for deployment in EU naval operations, as well as train and exercise together. Most likely, this would be complementary to the EU's CMP concept and in coherence with the NATO standing maritime forces.

Another flagship EU defence integration initiative is the **European Defence Fund (EDF)** – the first of its kind to co-fund collaborative defence research and development activities from the EU budget. The EDF is implemented through annual work programmes containing seven thematic and cross-cutting categories of action, two of which relate to the maritime security domain: naval combat and underwater warfare. In 2021, €103.5 million of the EDF were invested in naval combat projects, such as [European Patrol Corvette](#). The 2022 [EDF call](#) also seeks proposals for several research and capability development projects in the sphere of naval combat and underwater warfare. The EDF had two precursor programmes: the preparatory action on defence research (PADR) and the European defence industrial development plan (EDIDP). One PADR project in particular stands out for its **maritime security relevance**: the 'open cooperation for European maritime awareness' ([OCEAN2020](#)). It aims to 'support maritime surveillance and interdiction missions' for enhanced maritime situational awareness. Two [EDIDP](#) projects specifically address [maritime capabilities](#): the 'SEA defence' project, focused on future naval platforms, and the DECISMAR project, focused on supporting the upgrade of maritime surveillance (a sister PESCO project has the same focus).

The European Defence Agency (EDA) has also helped enhance its members' maritime capabilities through projects, often complementary to the ones in PESCO. For instance, one of its longest-standing projects is the 'maritime surveillance' (MARSUR) [project](#) led by Germany and bringing together 19 EU maritime information systems plus Norway's through a common network. Running since 2016, the project aims to facilitate the 'exchange of operational maritime information and services such as ship positions, tracks, identification data, chat or images'. MARSUR is intended to [support](#) CSDP operations, having been tested out in Operation Sophia, and being deployed in the Gulf of Guinea as part of the pilot of the coordinated maritime presences concept outlined above. The EDA also coordinates the



coordinated annual review on defence ([CARD](#)). Approved in 2017 by the Council, CARD aims to map the defence capability landscape in the EU with the intention of identifying potential areas for cooperation and gaps between Member States. After a pilot phase, the first full CARD cycle took place in 2019 and 2020. The report identified '55 collaborative opportunities throughout the whole capability spectrum', and recommended that Member States focus on six specific areas of high potential, of which two have particular relevance for maritime security: patrol class surface ships and military mobility. Maritime command and control, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities are recognised as '[major shortfalls](#)', and a European patrol class surface ship is recommended to replace current vessels to meet maritime operational requirements. The 2022 [CARD report](#) recommends that, to address shortfalls corresponding to strategic enablers, particular attention should be paid to maritime power projection. In terms of collaborative opportunities, the report identifies projects in the area of maritime surveillance and harbour protection as 'most promising, pressing and needed'. Building on the six focus areas introduced by the 2020 CARD, it recommends in the maritime domain for the focus area European patrol class surface ships and military mobility be developed further. [Military mobility](#) has emerged as a major civil-military initiative in several contexts: action plans by the European Commission (the [latest](#) from November 2022), a project and a binding commitment under PESCO, and an action under EU–NATO cooperation. Broadly, military mobility refers to the ability to deploy, train, and supply armed forces across the European continent and beyond in EU missions and operations. While the 2021–2027 multiannual financial framework earmarks around [€1.7 billion](#) in co-funding for military mobility-related projects, the EDA also coordinates several related projects, such as the EU multimodal transport [hub](#), aiming to harmonise procedures and make better use of air, sea, and land infrastructure in support of the CSDP.

Important in the realm of defence initiatives is also the 2022 [defence investment gap analysis](#), a key deliverable of the 2022 informal meeting of the EU Heads of State or Government in [Versailles](#). In addition to short-term needs, it identifies strategic medium- to long-term capability priorities also in the maritime domain, stating that:

*Further strengthening Member States' naval forces remains critical in light of increasingly contested Black, Baltic and Mediterranean Seas as well the need to reinforce force and power projection but also anti-access denial and coastal defence capabilities. This includes frigates, submarines and patrol corvettes to ensure maritime security. In the medium to long term, ISR [intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance] capabilities and the protection of sea lines of communication will benefit from high-end inter-connected ships augmented by unmanned platforms for surface and underwater control.*

## Maritime multilateralism

Both the EUMSS and the Strategic Compass stress the importance of international and multilateral cooperation. The former sees it as 'instrumental to achieve safe and secure seas and oceans across regions and improve global maritime security'. The latter highlights the necessity of deeper security and defence cooperation with countries such as Canada, Japan, Norway, the UK and the US, and partner organisations, in particular NATO and the UN, as well as regional organisations, such as ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and the African Union. The October 2020 [report](#) assessing the implementation of the EUMSS confirms the EU's regular engagement with global actors in maritime security. Experts argue that the EU has several [qualities](#) that make it an attractive maritime security partner, namely: the fact that it is 'approachable and reliable ... and a neutral security provider', and that it has a 'low-key security profile'. Its diplomatic instruments can apply additional pressure in maritime conflict-resolution, and its capacity-building ones can 'promote legal solutions and conflict prevention'.

The **EU and the UN** cooperate in the maritime security domain. The EU's 2020 report assessing the EUMSS implementation highlights the 'fight against maritime crime, terrorism and piracy/armed robbery at sea' as the main synergies with the UN. In 2020, both signed a framework [agreement](#) on mutual support in missions and operations in the field. In December 2021, the EU and UN [renewed](#) the priorities for cooperation on peace operations and crisis management for the years 2022 to 2024.

On 24 January 2022, the Council adopted [conclusions](#) endorsing the new priorities for the 2022-2024 period for the EU–UN strategic [partnership](#) on peace operations and crisis management, which include, among other things, strengthening cooperation between missions and operations in the field. The Strategic Compass highlights that the strategic partnership with the UN will be strengthened through the new joint set of priorities on peace operations and crisis management.

Peace and security [cooperation](#) are also high on the agenda of cooperation between the EU and its main political and institutional [partner](#) spanning the African continent, the **African Union**. Enhancing cooperation on maritime security as such is under discussion, and has been [recommended](#) by several experts. In the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Guinea, African, EU and international frameworks are designed to [complement](#) each other. The Strategic Compass highlights that cooperation with the African Union will be strengthened based on political dialogue and operational engagement, and a more robust and balanced security partnership with African partners.

With [ASEAN](#), the issue of peace and security has been singled out as 'a shared concern', to the extent that 'enhancing maritime security cooperation' is part of the EU–ASEAN [plan of action](#) for 2018-2022. The latter includes knowledge-sharing, combatting sea piracy, armed robbery and arms trafficking, and undertaking actions on maritime safety and search and rescue. The EU and ASEAN share a [strategic partnership](#) and often host high-level gatherings on maritime security.

The EU has varying bilateral approaches to the topic of maritime security with the relevant partners. Examples include Vietnam regarding the South China Sea, [China](#) as regards exercises (i.e. medical evacuation in Djibouti), South Korea – the first Asian partner to sign a framework participation agreement with the EU in 2014, [India](#) – the first maritime security dialogue having taken place in January 2021, but also [Jordan](#), Russia, and the United States (US). Moreover, the Indo-Pacific region is receiving growing [EU attention](#). The region's sudden spike in relevance to the EU [is due](#) to the renewed tensions in Taiwan, and to China's alarming strategic ambitions in the South China Sea – but also to the fact that around [40 %](#) of the EU's foreign trade passes through the South China Sea. The Strategic Compass makes particular reference to strengthening dialogues on security and defence with partners in the Indo-Pacific.

This renewed focus on the region has also become evident in the EU [strategy](#) for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. The strategy includes seven priority areas for EU action, one of which falls into the security and defence domain. The EU intends to enhance its naval presence through the strategy, an objective that is also emphasised in the Strategic Compass. To demonstrate its strengthened commitment to the region, the EU has conducted a series of [joint naval exercises](#) and port calls with Djibouti, India, Japan and Korea. Moreover, on 14-15 August 2022, the EU and Indonesia [conducted](#) their first-ever joint naval exercise. According to the Strategic Compass, the EU intends to make these live exercises a common practice. While an [expert](#) from the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAD) notes that Europe's efforts in the Indo-Pacific are already 'impactful, valuable and necessary', it remains to be seen whether EU Member States will commit to this strategy. [Research](#) from the European Council on Foreign Relations shows that many EU Member States have relatively little interest in the region. The authors go further, highlighting that it will take more than Germany, France and the Netherlands pushing this matter if the EU wants to ensure the effectiveness of the strategy in the long run. Indeed, analysts note that for the EU to be an effective security provider in the Indo-Pacific region, Member States must share the burden of responsibility. [Some](#) note that EU Member States such as Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Spain, Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden should contribute naval assets and staff more permanently. Furthermore, when it comes to Indo-Pacific security, the European powers will eventually have to face the question as to how to position themselves vis-à-vis China, given that – as the KAD expert quoted above argues – there is 'no such thing as a united and coherent approach on China to date'. EU Member State relations with China are mostly determined by their individual economic priorities; however, these economically driven motivations have since shifted, according to some experts. More specifically, since 24 February 2022, the day Russia invaded Ukraine, Member States have developed an increasingly harmonised approach towards China. This [change](#) of attitude results from China's inaction with respect to Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine.

The importance of the semi-conductor industry in Taiwan, and thus the need to maintain stability in the region, is another factor contributing to Member States' more coherent stance on China.

## EU–NATO cooperation at sea

The Strategic Compass specifically states that the EU and NATO will deepen common work on enhancing maritime security. The relationship between the EU and NATO has come a long way since the two organisations were established. The fact that they have 21 members (23 once Finland and Sweden join the Alliance) in common, as well as a myriad of shared threats and challenges, has pushed mutual [cooperation](#) increasingly higher on their political agendas. The two have shared interests in ensuring maritime security in the transatlantic space, particularly in the Mediterranean, where both have naval operations: EUNAVFOR MED Irini and NATO's [Operation Sea Guardian](#). Sea Guardian is a maritime security [mission](#) that aims, among other things, to support maritime situational awareness by working with Mediterranean stakeholders, upholding freedom of navigation, and protecting critical infrastructure. It is commanded from the NATO Maritime Command (MARCOM) in Northwood, United Kingdom (UK), which also serves as the NATO 'hub of maritime security information'. Sea Guardian has a broader scope and geographical mandate than Operation Irini (the entire Mediterranean as opposed to the central Mediterranean). MARCOM and EUNAVFOR MED Sophia signed an administrative arrangement in 2017 to enable [information-sharing](#) and 'mutual logistical support', authorising Sea Guardian to support Sophia in [implementing](#) the Libya arms embargo by accompanying suspicious vessels. MARCOM is also responsible for the maritime component of the NATO response force – NATO's [standing naval forces](#).

NATO's [maritime strategy](#), which dates from 2011, includes the goal of striking enduring relationships with 'relevant national and international actors in the maritime environment' such as the EU. The operationalisation of this strategy in 2014 outlined six working strands, one of which is dedicated to 'enhancing [NATO–EU](#) coordination, cooperation and complementarity in the maritime domain'. The most recent **formalisation of the EU–NATO relationship** took place through three joint declarations, one from 2016, another from 2018, and the [most recent](#) from January 2023. Signed by the Presidents of the European Commission and the European Council, and by the Secretary-General of NATO, the [2016 declaration](#) states that the EU and NATO should urgently 'broaden and adapt our operational cooperation including at sea', increase the sharing of **maritime situational awareness**, and coordinate and mutually reinforce 'our activities in the Mediterranean and elsewhere' more effectively. A common set of [proposals](#) aiming to implement the declaration was produced a few months later. The document has a dedicated section on operational, including maritime, cooperation. Among others, it mandated the two organisations to enhance cooperation and cooperation between the then EUNAVFOR MED Sophia and Operation Sea Guardian, to identify relevant maritime exercises they could undertake, and to increase the frequency of meetings with partners participating in shared operations. These proposals were [expanded](#) in December 2017, when the EU and NATO decided to further build on their experience in the Mediterranean Sea and the Horn of Africa, in order to explore 'further possibilities for mutual logistical support and information sharing between staffs on operational activities', enhance cross-briefings on maritime security, among others, and cooperate on ensuring maritime military mobility. The implementation record of these proposals is mixed. As regards maritime security, the first [progress report](#) from June 2017 only refers to an enhancement of coordination between Operations Sophia and Sea Guardian. Other progress reports confirm, among other things, the active exchange of information between Operations Sophia and Sea Guardian, and highlight cooperation to ensure coherence of multinational efforts including on a project on 'maritime patrol and situational awareness aircraft'. Cooperation between the EU and NATO's respective centres of excellence and training focuses on enhancing a common understanding of maritime challenges. The most recent [progress report](#) from June 2022 underlines regular staff dialogue on operational cooperation, and the practice of mutual cross-briefings in respective NATO and EU committees. As regards the Horn of Africa, the EU is currently active there with its Operation Atalanta (see text box on page 4, while NATO ended its counter-piracy [Operation Ocean Shield](#) in 2016. During the latter's

deployment, some argue that the two 'worked in [hand in hand](#)', with others say they were '[lightly coordinated](#)'.

The third EU–NATO declaration states that the organisations have 'have reached tangible results in ... operational cooperation including maritime issues'. However, political obstacles such as the Cyprus problem remain in the way of EU–NATO intelligence sharing. The lack of a security agreement on the sharing of classified documents between Cyprus and NATO [impedes](#) information sharing, with Turkey consistently blocking the formal exchange of classified information between the EU and NATO. These matters, arguably, stand in the way of **operational cooperation** between Operations Sea Guardian and Irini, even though it 'would have fundamentally positive effects for [regional stability](#)'.

## European Parliament position

Maritime security is a recurring issue on the agendas of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee and Sub-Committee on Security and Defence. In its January 2023 [resolution](#) on the implementation of the common security and defence policy – annual report 2022, MEPs underline that the EU must strengthen its role as a global maritime security provider, and welcome the revision of the EU's maritime security strategy. They highlight that the new strategy should be 'aligned with the Strategic Compass and ... reflect new opportunities and challenges'. Parliament also notes that the EU's external maritime borders must be monitored effectively to prevent illegal activities. It also calls for the Member States to consolidate their capabilities in the military naval domain in order to enhance the EU's maritime presence and visibility. It highlights the coordinated maritime presences 'as a crucial tool in strengthening EU maritime engagements around the world', particularly welcoming the CMPs' contribution in the Gulf of Guinea to the decline of maritime security incidents. MEPs also commend extending the CMPs to the Indian Ocean, and highlight the important work done by EUNAVFOR MED IRINI. Moreover, they call for the extension of EUNAVFOR Atalanta's mandate. In its January 2023 [resolution](#) on the implementation of the common foreign and security policy – annual report 2023, Parliament notes that it is committed to a 'free, open connected and rules-based Indo-Pacific region', highlighting that the new EU Indo-Pacific strategy must be implemented promptly. Lastly, MEPs underline the importance of respecting open and free maritime routes in the region, in line with the UN Convention on the Laws of the Sea, and highlight their support for resolving disputes through peaceful means in the South China Sea.

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