Charting a course through stormy waters
The EU as a maritime security actor

SUMMARY

The European Union (EU) is a one-of-a-kind maritime actor, which brings both opportunities and responsibilities. It is 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 for 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.

In the security and defence field, 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 maritime dimension of the EU’s security and defence policy has been put in the spotlight by Portugal, the holder of the EU Council presidency in the first half of 2021. Two of the 17 EU missions and operations are naval military operations: EUNAVFOR Somalia Atalanta in the western part of the Indian Ocean, and EUNAVFOR MED Irini in the central part of the Mediterranean Sea. EU Member States also participate in multinational maritime coalitions as well as in NATO’s own maritime operation, Sea Guardian, patrolling the entire Mediterranean Sea.

In following the orientations provided by its maritime and global strategies, the EU is aiming to increase its capacity and reliability as a maritime security actor. One example is its coordinated maritime presences, launched in January 2021 with a pilot case in the Gulf of Guinea 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 NATO in ensuring maritime security in the transatlantic space, although political obstacles remain.

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The EU security environment: Stormy waters

The EU sees itself as a global maritime security provider. As 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. 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, EU maritime trade imports reach an average of US$227 billion in goods annually, and in 2019 around 55% of goods traded between the EU and the rest of the world were seaborne. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development estimates that maritime trade volumes are bound to triple by 2050. The EU has a vital interest in maintaining safe, open and peaceful maritime routes.

As the EU's geopolitical ambitions gain more 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 or 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. This dimension has been highlighted by the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2021.

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 conclusions calling for more strategic partnerships in the domain of the CSDP.

The EU’s maritime strategic orientations

While an EU integrated maritime policy focused on internal issues has existed since 2007, the Council adopted the first EU maritime security strategy (EUMSS) extending to 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 the EU and Member States' policies, actions and tools for a better monitoring of risks and better coordination of naval operations. The strategy has no dedicated budget line and it 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 high seas;
- **respect for international rules and principles**: promote a 'rules-based good governance at sea' and the settlement of maritime disputes according to the 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 the global maritime security. Relevant horizontal actions are listed in key sectors of cooperation, such as international cooperation, risk management, research and innovation. A pivotal set of actions concerns ‘**maritime awareness**’, which promotes ‘a coherent regime for maritime surveillance across the EU’. This coherent regime would notably be achieved through the development of a common information-sharing environment (**CISE**) allowing EU missions and the maritime authorities of the EU Member States (and of some member states of the European Economic Area) to **securely exchange** sensitive information in order to enhance the efficiency of missions at sea. Steered by the European Maritime Safety Agency (**EMSA**), CISE is currently in **test phase**. In addition to horizontal 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 due 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 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. The EU Global Strategy also emphasises the EU’s interest in ‘**global maritime growth and security**' and in ensuring an 'open and protected ocean and sea routes critical for trade and access to natural resources'. 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 Forces, EUNAVFOR Somalia operation Atalanta in the Western Indian Ocean (see box) and EUNAVFOR MED operation Irini (see below). Operation Irini partly took over the mandate of its predecessor, EUNAVFOR MED Sophia, which was terminated in 2020 and rescued 44 916 persons between 2015 and 2020.

The maritime activities undertaken as part of the CSDP address the challenges described in the EUMSS, including organised crime, robbery, piracy, and illegal trafficking and reflect the Foreign Affairs Council **conclusions** from 2019, which recognise the EU’s expertise in maritime strategic areas. 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 to 2019. That same year, the EU deployed **approximately 5 000 staff** to its 17 missions and operations and approximately 960 to the two naval operations. The **Strategic Compass** process taking place between 2020 and 2022 and seeking to better define the goals and objectives of the CSDP, is expected to address the issue of maritime security in each of its four baskets (crisis management, resilience, partnerships, and capability development), to different extents. Experts argue that the Compass should assist the EU in **prioritising its maritime capabilities** while also ‘specifying how the Union can **maintain and extend its operational and technological edge at sea**’. Additionally, the Indo-Pacific region is receiving **increasing EU attention** due to its strategic maritime position and emergence as a geopolitical hotbed. Although the EU as such is not present with missions and operations there, some Member States are. As several EU Members, such as France, Germany and the Netherlands, have developed strategies for the Indo-Pacific, expectations are **growing** about a forthcoming EU strategy for the Indo-Pacific, whose maritime security dimensions would be indispensable.
In focus: EUNAVFOR MED Irini

The political impulse for the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean 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 by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1970 (2011), recognising that, so far, neither the UN nor the EU had been able to effectively enforce the arms embargo.

At the 20 January 2020 Foreign Affairs Council, the HR/VP suggested that Operation Sophia, launched in 2015, could have its mandate of countering piracy, trafficking and smuggling in the southern central Mediterranean extended to also include monitoring compliance with the arms embargo. However, on 17 February 2020, following the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2509 (2020) extending the arms embargo on Libya (voted on 11 February by 14-0, with Russia abstaining), EU foreign ministers decided to discontinue Operation Sophia and to launch a new maritime military operation. Accordingly, Operation Irini was officially launched on 31 March 2020, to patrol the international waters about 100 km off the Libyan coast. In line with its goal of implementing the arms

Figure 1: The European maritime security landscape

Source: EPRS, Based on the studies discussed in the briefing.
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 Irini and Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, have signed an agreement to deepen their cooperation and information exchange. The operation is playing a leading role in the shared awareness and de-confliction in the Mediterranean (SHADE MED) forum of Mediterranean stakeholders. The mechanism aims to de-conflict and to coordinate resources, best practices and civil and military operations.

Operation Irini is a complementary tool in the de-escalation of the Libyan conflict and cooperates closely with the EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya. Until mid-June 2020, it hailed over 130 vessels, at least 100 of them in relation to suspected violations of the arms embargo. However, the amount of weaponry transferred to Libya remained significant, and the operation’s impact limited, with no seized arms. Turkey criticized the operation as another ‘unlawful and hostile action’, pointing out that a German frigate stopped and searched a Turkish cargo vessel carrying ‘humanitarian aid’ to Libya, without the flag-state’s consent. Experts confirm that EU maritime presence in Libya can contribute to the de-escalation of the conflict.

Frontex - Themis, Poseidon, and Indalo

Frontex is responsible for securing the EU’s external borders, including by undertaking search and rescue operations at sea. Frontex currently has three operations in the Mediterranean, which combined have saved almost 500,000 lives between 2015 and 2021:

- **Operation Themis** (succeeded Operation Triton, which operated from 2011 to 2018) in the central Mediterranean;
- **Operation Poseidon** (since 2006) in the eastern Mediterranean;
- **Operational Indalo** (since 2012) in the western Mediterranean.

Frontex operations are informed by detailed risk analyses of the situation at the external borders, migratory trends, situation in the countries of origin and transit and vulnerabilities at specific points of the EU’s external borders. Search and rescue is a specific task integrated in every Frontex operation, while the agency also supports Member States with coast guard functions and actions countering border crime. The agency is currently undergoing investigations into alleged illegal push-backs of migrants and asylum-seekers, and the European Parliament has set up a ‘scrutiny working group’ to look into those aspects and produce recommendations.

Operation Irini has suffered from under-staffing and relatively limited operational assets. With approximately 563 staff, the operation’s assets are the Greek and Italian ships HS *Aegean* and ITS *Comandante Borsini*, a German P-3C Orion maritime-patrol aircraft, small reconnaissance aircraft from France, Greece, Luxembourg and Poland, and an Italian drone. The operation has been considered 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 keeps a ‘naval operations without naval assets’. In January 2021, Rear Admiral Fabio Agostini, the commander of Operation Irini, argued at a hearing that the military assets of the operation are ‘too small to verify such a vast zone’. The current force commander of operation Irini is Commodore Theodoros Mikropoulos. The operation’s initial mandate is set to expire on 31 March 2021.

EUNAVFOR Somalia – Atalanta

Operation *Atalanta* was first deployed in 2008 in the territorial waters of Somalia, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1816. Operating in an area that is 1.5 times greater than mainland Europe and is host to 20% of global trade, Atalanta is tasked to protect vulnerable vessels off the Somali coast by ‘detering, preventing and repressing acts of piracy and armed robbery’. For example, the operation is protecting World Food Programme vessels that deliver food aid. Atalanta also established the ‘maritime security centre Horn of Africa’ in Brest, France, which functions as a registration platform for vessels traveling off the coast of Somalia. Some authors argue that this operation is the most visible example of the EU’s potential as a maritime security provider. It displayed the EU’s ‘comprehensive approach to crisis management, effective operational capacity, as well as the technical resources it can offer’. Others highlight that Atalanta has helped the EU gain ‘more experience as a maritime security provider’, which has fed into subsequent efforts to develop a comprehensive approach to international security. Atalanta’s operational headquarters have shifted from Northwood in the United Kingdom to the Rota naval base in Spain. Atalanta has approximately 397 personnel and two civilian ‘sister missions’: the EU capacity-building mission (EUCAP Somalia) and the EU training mission (EUTM Somalia).
The European Peace Facility

The **financing of military operations** under the CSDP takes place outside of the EU budget, as per the Lisbon Treaty prohibition on funding actions with military and defence implications. The common costs of the missions used to be covered by the Member States through an off-budget instrument – the Athena Mechanism – which has been revamped with the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework (MFF) and incorporated into the **European Peace Facility** (EPF). Proposed in June 2017 by then HR/VP Mogherini and agreed by the Council in December 2020, the EPF has the aim to ‘enhance the EU's ability to safeguard European security interests and prevent conflict, build peace and strengthen security around the world’. The EPF will have a budget of €5 billion over the seven years covered by the current budget and running alongside it. Through the EPF, Member States can complement CSDP missions and operations with assistance measures in host countries and can contribute to the **financing of peace support operations** led by other partners around the world.

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 and CRESMAO, and an inter-regional coordination centre. The objectives 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.

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 Initiative 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, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, 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, as well as 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** (CMP). 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 is intended to enable information-sharing, analysis and awareness, and to better build on the existing maritime presence of individually engaged EU Member States. It could ‘substantially boost the Union’s maritime capacity and outreach globally’. The Gulf of Guinea is the very first pilot case of the CMP, **approved and launched** by the Council on 25 January 2021.

Through the CMP, the EU aims to increase ‘work with the coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea ... through greater operational engagement’, to closely cooperate 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 will remain 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 this pilot project, the Council will assess the possibility of applying it in other strategic maritime areas.
by January 2022. Authors argue that the CMP could be particularly valuable in the Strait of Hormuz, a hotbed of maritime and geopolitical activity.

Third countries and the CSDP framework

Third countries can participate in EU CSDP missions and operations through framework participation agreements (FPA). According to the Council, 20 countries have such agreements with the EU. These 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. In its conclusions of 18 May 2017, the Council reiterated the Member States' commitment to 'develop a more strategic approach of CSDP cooperation' focusing on partners who share EU values and are able to contribute to missions and operations. Maritime security is mentioned as an area where enhanced cooperation is desirable.

Building on these conclusions, the Council conclusions from 18 May 2018 emphasise that 'partnerships between the EU and third countries should be of mutual benefit and should contribute to strengthen the EU's security and defence efforts'. Reportedly, 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, FPA countries such as Colombia and South Korea participated in EUNAVFOR Atalanta, while the operation also cooperated with the Japanese and Indian navies, despite not having an FPA with them. Such cooperation is encouraged by Operation Atalanta's 'cooperation concept', which aims to 'increase synergies with regional states and military actors present' in the area of responsibility to reduce the impact of piracy.

The maritime component of EU defence initiatives

The EU Global Strategy states that Member States need full-spectrum capabilities in all domains, including maritime, to 'respond to external crises and keep Europe safe'. To achieve this ambition, the strategy urges moving towards defence cooperation as the norm and away from the current fragmentation of European defence. If all the navies of EU Member States were to be combined, 'Europe would indeed possess one of the world's largest navies'. To 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'. It is in this spirit that since 2016 the EU has reached several milestones in collaborative defence initiatives aiming to increase Member States' interoperability and joint capability development.

Among the most notable such initiatives is the permanent structured cooperation (PESCO). A Treaty-based framework and process to enable deeper cooperation between willing Member States, PESCO was established in 2017 and currently includes 25 members. These members have signed up to 20 legally binding commitments and have the overall objective of jointly arriving at a coherent full spectrum of defence capabilities available to Member States for national and multinational missions and operations. The following six, out of a total of 47, PESCO projects are focused on developing maritime capabilities:

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 creation of the European Maritime Surveillance Mission in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) with the support of Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and France. 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 military component of the mission, Operation Agénor, and its operational headquarters are located in the French naval base in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. On 1 October 2020, all parties agreed to extend the EMASoH mandate for the year 2021. In January 2021, Denmark assumed leadership of the mission for the next six months.
- maritime (semi) autonomous systems for mine countermeasures;
- harbour and maritime surveillance and protection;
- upgrade of maritime surveillance;
- deployable modular underwater intervention capability;
- maritime unmanned anti-submarine system;
- European patrol corvette.

The six maritime-focused PESCO projects could eventually feed into a more horizontal project, namely 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 and suggested that PESCO members could 'establish a naval force package which 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 coordinated maritime presences 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 during the 2021-2027 MFF. The fund had two precursor programmes setting the scene since 2017: the preparatory action on defence research (PADR) and the European Defence industrial development plan (EDIDP). The research-focused PADR was run by the European Defence Agency (EDA) for three years (from 2017 to 2019) and financed several collaborative defence research projects. One in particular stands out for its maritime security relevance: the 'open cooperation for European maritime awareness' (OCEAN2020) project signed in 2018 and led by a consortium of 15 EU Member States. With a grant of approximately €35 million, the project aims to 'support maritime surveillance and interdiction missions' for enhanced maritime situational awareness. Its capability development sister, the EDIDP, received financing for two years (2019-2020) and selected 16 collaborative projects. While several were relevant for operating at sea, two 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 (there is a sister PESCO project with the same focus).

The European Defence Agency has also contributed to enhancing its members' maritime capabilities through projects, often complementary to the ones in PESCO. One of its longest-standing projects is the 'maritime surveillance' (MARSUR) project led by Germany and bringing together 15 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.

Other EDA projects are the 'unmanned maritime systems' – aiming to deliver next generation technical solutions; the 'maritime mine countermeasures – new generation'; 'project team naval training' – promoting training and education activities in the maritime domain; and the 'European maritime capability for the Arctic' – studying potential scenarios in the Arctic region. The EDA has also set up a maritime capability technology group to act as a forum for enabling technological solutions for filling capability shortfalls.

The EDA also coordinates another flagship EU defence initiative, 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, out 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.

Military mobility has emerged as a major civil-military initiative in several contexts: an action plan by the European Commission, 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 MFF earmarks approximately €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.

The European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) also has a rich toolbox of information-sharing and coordinating mechanisms at sea. For instance, the agency provides a search and rescue service to all EU Member States as well as an operational service providing real-time information exchange from terrestrial and satellite systems. Perhaps most relevant for CSDP missions and operations is its 'integrated maritime service', which currently provides Operation Atalanta with vessel reporting information as well as 'intelligence-led information such as vessel piracy risk profiles into a customised maritime picture'.

Maritime multilateralism

Both the EU Global Strategy and the EUMSS emphasise the importance of international and multilateral cooperation. While the latter sees it as 'instrumental to achieve safe and secure seas and oceans across regions and improve global maritime security', the former highlights cooperation with the UN and its specialised agency, but also with NATO, other strategic partners and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The October 2020 report assessing the implementation of the EMSS confirms the EU's regular engagement with global actors in maritime security. More recently, the EU's new Agenda for the Mediterranean, launched in February 2021, proposes to further enhance and customise partnerships with neighbouring countries, including on 'maritime security and coast guard cooperation'.

In the context of multilateralism, the relationship between the EU and the UN involves a solid crisis management arm since 2003. Council conclusions adopted in 2018 set priorities for strengthening the EU-UN strategic partnership on crisis management and peace operations, emphasising the need to increase cooperation between each other's respective missions and operations as well as to deepen the EU-UN-African Union trilateral cooperation. The EU and the UN also signed a framework agreement for the provision of mutual support on 29 September 2020. The EU's 2020 report assessing the EMSS implementation highlights the 'fight against maritime crime, terrorism and piracy/armed robbery at sea' as the main synergies with the UN.

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.
With ASEAN however, 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 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. Some experts argue that environmental maritime security (including issues relevant to the protection of wild species, water supply, marine pollution, illegal fishing) should be an additional domain for cooperation between the two.

Experts argue that the EU has several qualities that make it an attractive maritime security partner: namely, the fact that it is an ‘approachable ... reliable ... [and] 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 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.

EU-NATO cooperation at sea

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 in common as well as a myriad of shared threats and challenges has pushed cooperation with each other 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.

Having succeeded NATO Operation Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean in 2016, Sea Guardian is a maritime security mission with the aim of supporting maritime situational awareness by working with Mediterranean stakeholders, upholding freedom of navigation, conducting maritime counter-terrorism and non-proliferation activities, protecting critical infrastructure and contributing to capacity-building. It is commanded from the NATO Maritime Command (MARCOM) in Northwood in the United Kingdom, 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 had 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 also has an information-sharing agreement with Frontex in the Aegean Sea and co-chairs the SHADE MED forum on a rotational basis with Operation Irini (and formerly with Operation Sophia).

MARCOM is responsible for the maritime component of the NATO response force – NATO’s four standing naval forces. These are respectively: standing NATO maritime group one (in the North and Baltic Seas), standing NATO maritime group two (in the Mediterranean, Aegean, and Black Seas), standing NATO mine countermeasures group one (in the Baltic and North Seas), and standing NATO mine countermeasures group two (in the Black and Mediterranean Seas). These are permanently active multinational integrated forces. NATO is also involved in supporting projects on maritime security technologies, such as unmanned systems and digital underwater communications.

NATO’s maritime strategy dates from 2011 and 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 two joint declarations,
one from 2016 and another from 2018. Signed by the Presidents of the European Commission and the European Council, and by the NATO Secretary-General, 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 better coordinate and mutually reinforce ‘our activities in the Mediterranean and elsewhere’.

A common set of proposals aimed at implementing the declaration, were 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 the 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 further 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’, to enhance cross-briefings on maritime security, among others, and to 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. The second one restates NATO’s support to Operation Sophia’s mandate in implementing the arms embargo on Libya and reports on a lessons learnt seminar. The third report focused in greater detail on this topic, restating the coordination between the operations and reporting joint engagement in the SHADE MED mechanism, including through an informal staff-level working group, and information-sharing efforts. In 2019, the fourth progress report confirmed the active exchange of information between the two operations based on the administrative agreement between NATO MARCOM and Operation Sophia and the continuous exploration of ‘modalities to enhance coordination, complementarity and cooperation in the Mediterranean’. As regards defence capabilities, the report confirms cooperation to ensure coherence of multinational efforts including on a project on ‘maritime patrol and situational awareness aircraft’. It also mentions cooperation between the EU and NATO’s respective centres of excellence and training centres on enhancing a common understanding of maritime challenges. The fifth and final progress report from 2020 confirmed the continuing dialogue on operational maritime cooperation thorough mutual cross-briefings. While the report affirms continued co-leadership of SHADE MED and continued information-sharing in the Aegean Sea, it does not address any planned coordination between Operations Irini and Sea Guardian.

As regards the Horn of Africa, the EU is currently active there with its Operation Atalanta (see box above) while NATO ended its counter-piracy Operation Ocean Shield in 2016. During the latter’s deployment however, it is on the one hand argued that the two ‘worked in hand in hand’, and on the other that they were ‘lightly coordinated’.

Experts argue that maritime coordination depends on sharing information amongst actors at sea on the threats faced. However, political obstacles, such as the Cyprus problem, remain in the way of EU-NATO intelligence-sharing. Namely, 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 in the EU-NATO framework. These matters, arguably, stand in the way of operational cooperation between Operations Sea Guardian and Irini, despite the fact that such cooperation ‘would have fundamentally positive effects for regional stability’.

Position of the European Parliament

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 resolution of January 2021 on the implementation of the common foreign and security policy, the Parliament reiterated its support for the EU maritime security strategy in a context where freedom of navigation is increasingly challenged,
while also recommending stronger coordination and civil-military convergence 'in order to achieve effective management of global maritime information'. In its January 2021 resolution assessing the implementation of the CSDP, Parliament welcomes the launch of Operation Irini and, reiterating its appeal from 2020, urges the Member States to boost its intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and naval assets. The Parliament also encourages stronger cooperation with NATO's Operation Sea Guardian and with regional partners. Nevertheless, it notes the 'lack of political willingness' of Member States to participate in CSDP missions and operations and underlines the importance of making them more robust, including through an increase of 'contributions of forces and assets'. As regards capability development, Parliament calls for speeding up the development of capabilities in all domains, including the naval one. The resolution stresses 'the need to strengthen the EU's status as a maritime security provider' and to increase the bloc's resilience to maritime crises through a 'coherent maritime strategy' and by harmonising rules and standards that can enable 'coordinated and unitary' responses to maritime crises and incidents. Lastly, the necessity of EU-NATO cooperation in combating maritime threats is equally emphasised.

Parliament's resolution on EU-African security cooperation from 2020 acknowledges the 'decisive drop in piracy off the coasts of both eastern and western Africa as a result of international maritime security efforts from both the EU and NATO' and calls on the EU to upgrade security cooperation with regional partners. In a 2019 resolution on search and rescue in the Mediterranean, Parliament called on Frontex to become more transparent about its operational activities at sea, and to regularly brief Members of the European Parliament, to which it is accountable.

MAIN REFERENCES

Pejsova, E; The EU as a maritime security provider; EU Institute for Security Studies, December 2019.

Marcuzzi, S; NATO-EU maritime cooperation: for what strategic effect?; NATO Defence College, December 2018.

ENDNOTE

1 Countries with a framework participation agreement allowing them to participate in EU crisis management missions: Vietnam, Jordan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Australia, Colombia, South Korea, Chile, Georgia, Moldova, North Macedonia, Albania, New Zealand, Serbia, USA, Montenegro, Turkey, Canada, Ukraine, Iceland and Norway.