

From Atalanta to Aspides: Old and New Challenges for EU Maritime Operations

by Piero Barlucchi

Sixteen years after the launch of the naval operation Atalanta, the EU has once again deployed naval capabilities to secure its shipping interests. The mission EUNAVFOR Aspides aims to shield merchant vessels passing through the Red Sea and a large part of the North-West Indian Ocean (NWIO) from the terrorist attacks of the Houthi military group.¹ To pressure Israel to end the war in Gaza, the rebel movement has been disrupting freedom of navigation in the Bab-el-Mandeb area by actively targeting vessels on the critical sea line of communication connecting the Indo-Pacific and Europe. The two regions together account for over 70 per cent of global trade in goods and services, with inter-region exchanges peaking in trade of

high-value-added goods.² Rerouting the chokepoint adds 10-14 days of travel to reach Europe from East Asia via the Cape of Good Hope (even more if the diverted sea traffic puts under stress the African port infrastructure). Similarly, transportation costs have surged due to higher insurance rates, sunken cargo, supply-chain disruption etc., with a direct detrimental effect on European prosperity and global inflation. The repercussions are further magnified in the European southern states since container ships forced to avoid the Houthi threat by circumnavigating Africa have easier access to Europe through the continent's northern ports such as Rotterdam and Antwerp. Given the already existing advantages of certain Atlantic ports in terms of efficiency and interconnections with the European heartlands, such a

¹ In January 2024, the US State Department designated the Houthis as a "Global Terrorist group". See US Department of State, *Terrorist Designation of the Houthis*, 17 January 2024, <https://www.state.gov/terrorist-designation-of-the-houthis>.

² Girardi Benedetta, Paul van Hooft and Giovanni Cisco, "What the Indo-Pacific Means to Europe: Trade Value, Chokepoints, and Security Risks", in *HCSS Reports*, November 2023, <https://hcss.nl/?p=61206>.

Piero Barlucchi is a Master's graduate in International Relations and Diplomatic Affairs at the University of Bologna and former intern at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy at the Brussels School of Governance, and the Centre for the Study of Democracy.

geographical advantage could lead to the longer-term bypassing of southern harbours, with the consequential marginalisation of the Mediterranean Sea.³

The birth of EUNAVFOR Aspides

Faced with the emerging Houthi threat, Spain was reluctant to repurpose operation Atalanta – whose headquarters and operational commander, along with numerous other assets, are provided by Madrid – to address the Houthi attacks due to the qualitatively different character of the threat and the inherent risk of downplaying Somali piracy.⁴ Such a decision prompted the Council to launch its fourth naval mission. The operation is tellingly named Aspides (shield in Greek), and is a strictly defensive mission to accompany and protect merchant vessels, without the mandate to conduct any operations on land. By launching the mission, leading European countries in maritime affairs demonstrated the willingness to adopt a distinct line from Washington and the US-led Prosperity Guardian mission, also highlighting the Union's strategic autonomy and cohesion. Indeed, the alternatives – building on the Coordinated Maritime

Presence concept or the French-led operation Agenor – would have left assets outside EU command. Beyond the core duty of vessel protection, the mission is entrusted with deterring attacks, increasing maritime domain awareness or MDA⁵ (a leitmotif of the European maritime engagement) and complementing other international endeavours.

Operationally, Greece provides the headquarters and overall strategic command, confirming both Athens' increased maritime profile, as well as the Union's ad hoc approach to its command structures, which provides more flexibility and adaptability while raising complexity and the risk of duplication of efforts.⁶ In turn, Italy furnishes the Force Commander, that is, the tactical command. After more than 16 years of naval missions, Aspides represents a relevant shift in terms of the scope, ambition and nature of EU maritime operations. Therefore, the EU needs to adapt the best practices and lessons learned from the past to a higher level of threat and operational involvement.

EUNAVFOR Aspides vs Atalanta

In 2008, the EU launched its first maritime mission for a similar goal

³ Matteo Villa and Filippo Fasulo, "Mar Rosso, i costi della crisi: cinque grafici per capire", in *ISPI Focus*, 19 January 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/it?p=160905>; Gian Enzo Duci, "Mar Rosso: porti mediterranei a rischio bypass", in *ISPI Commentaries*, 5 March 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/it?p=165404>.

⁴ "Spanish PM Open to Creation of New EU Mission to Protect Vessels in Red Sea", in *Reuters*, 27 December 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/spanish-pm-open-creation-new-eu-mission-protect-vessels-red-sea-2023-12-27>.

⁵ Maritime domain awareness refers to the production of knowledge about activities associated with the maritime domain that could impact the security, safety, environment or economy of the EU and its members.

⁶ Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds, "The European Union's Quest to Become a Global Maritime Security Provider", in *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Spring 2023), Article 6, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol76/iss2/6>.

as Aspides': securing the commercial route and freedom of navigation in the NWIO. However, the context was very different. Somali pirates were harassing commerce in the Gulf of Aden, threatening global recession and a humanitarian crisis in Somalia, while causing dramatic economic losses for the EU, which amounted to 11 billion US dollars per year.⁷ Beyond commercial reasons, normative (upholding the rules-based order) and humanitarian (protecting seafarers and aid shipments directed to Somalia) concerns concurred to deploy Atalanta.⁸ Instead of joining existing NATO and US-led anti-piracy efforts, member states decided to launch their own mission. Such a decision stemmed from the perception that the Commission's strategy and capacity to reach agreements with local states for the prosecution and incarceration of captured pirates offered a more sound and lawful solution.⁹

Atalanta is fundamentally an anti-piracy and vessel protection operation

⁷ Ondřej Filipec, "The Evolution of EU Counter-Piracy Policy", in *European Journal of Transformation Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2017), p. 20-39, <https://czasopisma.bg.ug.edu.pl/index.php/journal-transformation/article/view/9130>.

⁸ Trineke Palm, "Cooperative Bargaining in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy: EUNAVFOR Atalanta", in *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2019), p. 129-149, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2018.1477463>.

⁹ Marianne Riddervold, *The Maritime Turn in EU Foreign and Security Policies. Aims, Actors and Mechanisms of Integration*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018; Michael E. Smith, "Maritime Security and the CSDP: Interests, Operational Experience, and Strategies", in Laura Chappell, Jocelyn Mawdsley and Petar Petrov (eds), *The EU, Strategy and Security Policy. Regional and Strategic Challenges*, London/New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 119-134.

with the capacity (and legitimacy) to intervene onshore and offshore. It is also part of a comprehensive regional approach featuring two other Common Security and Defence Policy capacity-building missions – EUTM and EUCAP Somalia – and regional maritime security, MDA and development projects. The operation has enjoyed a resounding success, which is evident in the disappearance of pirate incidents and the participation of non-EU countries in the mission and anti-piracy frameworks promoted by the Union. Therefore, Atalanta is still often considered a landmark contribution of the Union to global maritime security.¹⁰ Despite suppressing piracy, however, the mission has been unable to eradicate its root causes. The recent resurfacing of piracy – due to the focus on the Houthis, reduction of assets for anti-piracy operations and the atrophy of anti-piracy structures¹¹ – demonstrates how piracy incidents re-appear when the naval deterrent is reduced.¹²

Compared with Atalanta, Aspides operates amidst a very different international environment. Somali piracy was the primary result of a failed

¹⁰ Eva Pejsova, "The EU as a Maritime Security Provider", *EUISS Briefs*, No. 13 (December 2019), <https://www.iss.europa.eu/node/2398>.

¹¹ Christian Bueger, "Somali Pirates Are Back in Action. A Strong Global Response Is Needed" in *Safe Seas*, 19 January 2024, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/bueger_somali-pirates-are-back-in-action-a-strong-activity-7153955942642921472-V1xa.

¹² Neil Winn and Alexandra Lewis, "European Union Anti-Piracy Initiatives in the Horn of Africa: Linking Land-based Counter-Piracy with Maritime Security and Regional Development", in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 9 (2017), p. 2113-2128, DOI 10.1080/01436597.2017.1322460.

state incapable of controlling its waters and with a desperate population. While such a description suits Yemen too, the Houthi attacks started in response to the war in the Gaza Strip, and the group is backed by Teheran and part of the Iranian-led “axis of resistance”. The threats are also qualitatively different. While piracy is driven by financial gains and eschews attention, maritime terrorism pursues political goals and seeks publicity. Furthermore, while Somali pirates reaped profits from sea trade, Houthis target commerce as such and employ higher-end capabilities, such as anti-ship missiles, speedboats and drones. Thus, the success of Aspides will depend on its capacity to safeguard trade routes near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, which will be far more difficult than deterring pirates who tried to board vessels, rather than sinking them.

What challenges lie ahead

By launching Aspides, the EU has embarked on a dangerous naval mission outside its usual repertoire. Protecting vessels from Houthis’ attacks is qualitatively different from anti-piracy activities like Atalanta, primarily because the attackers aim to destroy vessels and discourage trade rather than boarding and robbing ships. Additionally, a higher level of operational involvement is required. Having traditionally engaged primarily in the fight against blue crime, the EU is now addressing instead terrorist attacks at sea. Whereas much of the existing countermeasures to safeguard civilian vessels target human attackers (guards, barbed wire, water cannons, acoustic systems etc.), Houthis’ drones and

anti-ship missiles must be countered with higher-end capabilities, including artillery, projectiles targeting drones, boat nets, jamming and spoofing techniques etc. Finally, the regional environment must also be carefully considered, from both a strategic and political perspective. Indeed, the Red Sea crisis is dependent upon the Gaza War and Iranian support for the Houthis. Furthermore, it unfolds within a theatre crowded with multiple military missions and foreign militaries:¹³ numerous actors, instruments and endeavours contribute to the security equation of the NWIO, adding further complexity to the strategic picture. Hence, the success of a defensive operation in neutralising the Houthi military threat seems uncertain; especially, considering the absence of a coherent and comprehensive framework that further differentiates Aspides from Atalanta.

With Aspides, the EU is adopting a novel, distinct approach that aims to advance its strategic autonomy while avoiding escalation and addressing the disruption of trade in a key maritime region. By doing so, the Union wants to prove its capacity to pursue its interests independently and attain the status of global maritime security provider. Yet, as mentioned, there are numerous challenges that may complicate Aspides’ path. Despite its defensive nature, the mission could escalate the confrontation with the Houthis or be accused of providing indirect support for Israel. Getting drawn into

¹³ Neil Melvin, “The Foreign Military Presence in the Horn of Africa Region”, in *SIPRI Background Papers*, April 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/node/4796>.

escalating confrontations with the Houthis might lead to a shift in strategy by the Yemeni armed group, resulting in the sabotaging of undersea cables, a scenario for which the operation is currently ill-prepared. Furthermore, the new mission faces problems of cooperation and competition with other naval operations, chiefly Atalanta, Agenor and Prosperity Guardian. Coordinating these missions is an operational challenge due to the partially overlapping mandates and limited assets of the participating states. Indeed, diverging national objectives could lead to operational tensions, ultimately hijacking Aspides' assets towards alternative endeavours. Lastly, the fact that the EU is simultaneously balancing other fronts, supporting Ukraine and pursuing internal rearmament, highlights the unprecedented ambition and magnitude of the task.

19 March 2024

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffarInternazionali*), two book series (*Trends and Perspectives in International Politics* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Editor: Leo Goretti (l.goretti@iai.it)

- 24 | 12 Piero Barlucchi, *From Atalanta to Aspides: Old and New Challenges for EU Maritime Operations*
- 24 | 11 Filippo Simonelli, Maria Luisa Fantappiè and Leo Goretti, *The Italy-Africa Summit 2024 and the Mattei Plan: Towards Cooperation between Equals?*
- 24 | 10 Daniele Fattibene and Stefano Manservigi, *The Mattei Plan for Africa: A Turning Point for Italy's Development Cooperation Policy?*
- 24 | 09 Elio Calcagno and Alessandro Marrone, *NATO's Posture vis-a-vis Russia: Features and Challenges*
- 24 | 08 Michele Nones, *The Russia-Ukraine War and Implications for the European Defence Industry*
- 24 | 07 Rafael Ramírez, *The Venezuela-Guyana Dispute over the Essequibo*
- 24 | 06 Alessandro Marrone, *Six Takeaways from Two Years of Russia-Ukraine War*
- 24 | 05 Menachem Klein, *Hamas's Narrative of 7 October and the Impossibility of Ignoring It*
- 24 | 04 Akram Ezzamouri, Colin Powers and Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria, *Charting the Course: European Perspectives on EU-Tunisia Relations*
- 24 | 03 Pier Paolo Raimondi and Max Münchmeyer, *From Interconnection to Integration: German-Italian Energy Relations and the SouthH₂ Corridor*