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Securing European Interests from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf: Rethinking EU Strategic Autonomy at Sea

Jean-Loup Samaan

Senior Research Fellow, Middle East Institute –
National University of Singapore

Non-Resident Senior Fellow, French Institute for
International Relations

Introduction

In the past decade, European concerns over United States (US) international leadership grew in earnest. Then President Barack Obama first suggested a reduced American engagement abroad to focus on “nation-building at home” (Bruce, 2012; Goldberg, 2016). His successor, President Donald Trump, went further as he declared the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) “obsolete” and discussed the possibility of a US withdrawal (Barnes & Cooper, 2019). Fears of a US disengagement from Europe then fuelled a policy discussion on the need for European countries to build their own strategic autonomy – a concept that has now become common parlance in policy debates across the continent.

The discussion about the implications of an objective like strategic autonomy has primarily circled around the question, could the Europeans defend themselves against a Russian offensive without US support? (Barrie et al., 2019; Meijer & Brooks, 2021). This scenario is a critical one, especially considering the long-term implications of the Russia-Ukraine war. Nevertheless, it presents a narrow view of European security interests shaped only by challenges from its eastern flank. As a result, the debate tends to put an emphasis on the need to invest in European ground and air capabilities for a Cold War-like scenario of military operations on the continent. This paper does not discount the demands of the Russian challenge on Europe’s military posture, but it offers a different perspective by looking at an under-researched topic: the concurrent need to secure European interests in the maritime domain vis-à-vis threats originating from the area going from the Mediterranean to the Strait of Hormuz.

Until recently, maritime security in that area was primarily covered by the US Navy.

However, US administrations repeatedly stated their intent to refocus military resources to the Indo-Pacific and their competition with China. The Obama administration called for a “pivot to Asia”, which was then followed by similar assertions from both presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden. Under these circumstances, it is assumed that a potential conflict in Asia would involve primarily naval and air resources. The US Navy might then be forced to significantly reduce its footprint, both in Southern Europe and in the Persian Gulf.

The Middle East and the Gulf remain a vital area for European economies: many of the goods imported to Europe, such as oil, chemicals, metal ores and agriculture products, transit through the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean. About 65% of Europe’s oil and natural gas supplies passes through the Mediterranean. Likewise, European exports to Asia also go through these maritime routes (Domballe, 2020). Moreover, given the drastic reduction in European consumption of Russian fossil fuels because of the Ukraine war, the Persian Gulf will remain a major source for the European energy sector. As a result, Europe needs those maritime spaces to be secured for the stability of its national economies.

In that context, a pullback from the US Navy in the area would have dramatic consequences for EU maritime security. True, European governments recently announced a major increase of their defence expenditures: in 2022, military spending in Central and Western Europe reached \$345 billion, the biggest sum in real terms since the end of the Cold War (Boffey, 2023). But those decisions are driven by the Ukraine-Russia conflict and, therefore, they may not yet address the shortcomings in the naval sector.

Against that backdrop, this paper investigates the requirements for strengthening European Union (EU) strategic autonomy in the maritime domain. To better grasp the stakes, it is worth going back to the original purpose of that concept. The EU Global Strategy of 2016 was the first official document to call for Europe to achieve “strategic autonomy”, an ambition that grew even bigger after the Russian invasion of Ukraine (European External Action Service, 2016, p. 4). The 2016 document did not provide a concrete definition of strategic autonomy, but it was assumed to imply the ability to rely on its own armed forces for political objectives. When push comes to shove, it required the “capacity to independently plan and conduct military operations (...) and to autonomously develop and produce the related defence capabilities with minimal or no assistance” from external partners (Meijer & Brooks, 2021, p. 8).

Based on this analytical framework, our paper first evaluates the threats and challenges that could affect EU maritime interests in the region. Those issues are different in nature and scale. They include missile and rocket proliferation as well as piracy activities, civil wars, Turkey-Greece tensions, or proxy warfare between Iran and Israel. Following this first step, our research looks at the current naval policies and capabilities of the EU, as well as its member states, to identify the operational gaps that need to be addressed vis-à-vis the security challenges. Finally, the paper explores the potential for expanding the EU partnership policy, the underlying assumption being that naval diplomacy with local partners could contribute to greater EU strategic autonomy at sea. Our attention then focuses on two sub-regions, the East Mediterranean and the Gulf, where partnership at sea could enhance EU security interests.

Threats and challenges for Europe on its southern flank

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, European views converged around the nature of the threat faced on the eastern flank of the continent – i.e., the threat of a conventional conflict with Russia. This relative consensus among Europeans in the East contrasts with the absence of a unified vision towards their southern flank – understood as the geopolitical space going from the Mediterranean to the Strait of Hormuz. This has been an enduring feature since the Cold War: during that time, the Mediterranean area was considered a secondary area, except by a few European countries (Larrabee et al., 1998; Gaub, 2012; Rynning, 2007). Whereas Russia's aggressive policies provide an overarching framework to Europe's policies on the eastern flank, the Mediterranean cannot be captured through a similar unifying issue.

Looking at Europe's southern flank, the security environment of that area is made of multiple challenges, different in their nature and scale. When combined, they do not form a coherent strategic landscape but rather a mosaic of scattered issues. This surely explains the lingering difficulties of European countries to build a common Mediterranean policy. Furthermore, different threats mean different responses, making the process of identifying the needs for European armed forces, and particularly for European navies, even more difficult.

Against that backdrop, the security trends on Europe's southern flank can be understood according to two types of challenges: first, the challenge of illegal flows (including terrorism, piracy, human trafficking, and arms proliferation) that is likely to remain the most demanding one for European navies; second, the challenge posed

by several state-to-state competitions such as Algeria and Morocco; Israel and Iran; Russia and the US; or Turkey and Greece and Cyprus. Those rivalries so far remain under the threshold of an open conflict but could worsen in coming years and escalate at sea.

The challenge of illegal flows finds its root cause in the weakness of state capacities in many countries of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The inability of local security forces to control their territories and maritime space enables non-state actors to act relatively freely. For instance, in 2008-2009, the surge of piracy activities in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait – which triggered EU naval operation *Atalanta* – originated from the failure of the Somalian state to exercise its authority (Riddervold, 2011; Germond & Smith, 2009). A decade of naval operations involving the international community has been successful in containing the phenomenon. In the past three years (2021-2023), piracy incidents in the area going from the Mediterranean to the Strait of Hormuz have remained modest, with only reports of low-level attacks, in the Gulf of Aden, the Suez Canal, and the Gulf of Oman.¹ But given the prolonged crises in Libya or Yemen, the piracy threat remains a priority in the short term.

Another consequence of state failure in the area is the steady increase in irregular migration from Africa to Europe. The United Nations (UN) estimates that between January and June 2023, approximately 89,100 refugees and migrants reached Europe through the Mediterranean. This represents a 79% increase compared to the same period in 2022 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023, p. 2). The majority of those arrivals

are processed by Italy, which puts significant pressure on the country's monitoring capabilities.

Those figures require a nuanced analysis. First, the most significant inflow of refugees and migrants in Europe does not come today from Africa and the Middle East but from Ukraine: as of July 2023, some six million Ukrainians had been recorded as displaced persons due to the ongoing war. The current arrivals from the Mediterranean are also much lower than in 2015, when more than one million migrants reached the European shores. Still, the phenomenon will remain significant given the lingering security crises in Africa and it will keep putting the capacities of Southern European states under pressure.

Meanwhile, terrorism will likely remain a major feature of the Middle East security environment. The fight against terrorism was de-emphasised from the agenda of Western countries in recent years, but the mix of political instability and economic underdevelopment still make the region a fertile ground for radicalisation. International terrorist organisations like the Islamic State and Al Qaeda remain active in the area, particularly in the Sahel and Libya, where they have been able to recruit combatants and launch repeated attacks against the local government forces.

In the past, terrorist networks used the Mediterranean Sea as a gateway rather than a battlefield. In fact, there have been very few reports of attacks conducted by terrorist groups at sea or at ports. However, this does not apply to the Red Sea area: since 2015, the Yemen war did involve a naval component. The Houthi insurgency fighting the Saudi-led coalition repeatedly attacked warships as well as merchant

¹ See the public data on IMB Piracy & Armed Robbery Maps at: <https://www.iccc-ccs.org/index.php/piracy-reporting-centre/live-piracy-map/piracy-map-2022>

ships (Samaan, 2020b). This goes beyond the fight between Saudi forces and the insurgents: since the Israel-Hamas war started in October 2023, the Houthis has targeted several civilian vessels in the Red Sea, claiming that those were owned by Israeli entities. But apart from the Yemeni case, maritime terrorism has not been a major element in the Middle East in comparison to other regions of the world, such as South Asia or Southeast Asia. This means that for European navies, the challenge relates mostly to the disruption of terrorist logistics rather than their operations.

Another significant security challenge is the use of maritime space for arms proliferation. In the East Mediterranean, Iran has provided military support to Palestinian groups like Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, using transit routes through the Red Sea (Hinz, 2021). This motivated Israel's naval blockade of the Gaza Strip since 2007. In Libya, the militia of Marshall Khalifa Haftar, a former officer of Muammar Gaddafi's army, have used on the battlefield Chinese-made Wing Loong unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that were likely provided by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a key supporter of Haftar (Lacher, 2020).

Proliferation also involves the transfer of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) – nuclear, chemical and biological – as well as their delivery systems, such as ballistic missiles. After the end of the Cold War, proliferation activities in the area have been the object of great concern, due to the role of countries such as Libya, Iran or Iraq in global networks (Lesser, Tellis, 1996). Today, the WMD issue has slightly lost the salience it garnered during the past two decades. It can be attributed to several factors: a non-proliferation regime that was able through various programmes to enhance the monitoring of illicit transfer of

technologies (Abe, 2020); and the demise of Middle Eastern regimes – namely Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi's Libya – that played a central role in the proliferation networks for many years. Even though Iran's nuclear programme continues unabated, it is unlikely to constitute a threat at sea, for the time being. While still a concern, the WMD threat does not pose an imminent issue for naval forces.

The future of regional competition is the second major phenomenon that needs to be considered by European navies. Although there is no immediate risk of a major interstate conflict in the area, rivalries between local, and sometimes external, powers remain tense. Those involve naval demonstrations of force, and at time low-level skirmishes at sea.

Amid the war in Ukraine, the most worrisome scenario for Europeans is an escalation with Russia in the Mediterranean. The Russian Navy is not a newcomer in the area, its presence dating back to its competition with the Ottoman Empire in the 18th century. It declined after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) but, in most recent years, its footprint has taken a new dimension, especially after Moscow launched an operation in Syria to rescue the regime of Bashar Al Assad in 2015. Operating from its base in Tartus, the Russian fleet has deployed warships, and submarines, equipped with some of its most advanced missiles. For many observers, this signalled a Russian naval strategy that went far beyond the support for Assad inside Syria and suggested Vladimir Putin's ambition to maintain an enduring presence in the East Mediterranean (Pierini, 2021; Rumer & Sokolsky, 2021).

However, the protracted conflict in Ukraine has had a direct impact on that Russian naval posture, with ships being redeployed

to the Black Sea and the Baltic to shore up Moscow's war efforts (Richer, 2023). The future of Russian presence in the waters of the Mediterranean will obviously depend on the duration of the war, but the area will remain a major security interest for Moscow. Moreover, given the deep rift between Western countries and Russia since the invasion of Ukraine, the scenario of a spill over in the Mediterranean – a case of horizontal escalation – should not be discounted.

Meanwhile, local rivalries could also affect European interests. Specifically, the shadow conflict between Israel and Iran has intensified in past years. Since 2018, Israel has appeared to revise its previous strategy to deal with Iran and Israeli decision-makers may now be getting ready for an open confrontation with Tehran (Nissenbuam & Lieber, 2022). Clandestine operations against Iranian officials have increased, as demonstrated by the killing of seven high-level operatives of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in 2022 (Pletka, 2022). Those interventions are likely to expand amid the latest war in Gaza launched after Hamas' assault on Israel on 7 October 2023. Although there is no evidence to date that the Iranian regime was involved in the operation that killed more than 1,300 Israeli civilians, Tehran has provided military support to Hamas for years (Gleis & Berti, 2012).

The confrontation between Iran and Israel also occurs at sea (United States Institute of Peace, 2023). In the past, the Israeli Navy intercepted Iranian arms convoys in the Red Sea, suspected to supply Palestinian armed groups in Gaza (Williams, 2014). In 2021, The New York Times estimated that since 2019, Israel sabotaged at least 10 Iranian ships (Fassihi, Schmitt & Bergman, 2021). Meanwhile, Iran has been accused by Israel, the US, and the

Gulf States of naval harassment, involving its own attacks on civilian ships and the use of commercial ships to store its missiles and UAVs (Reuters, 2023a).

Meanwhile, Gulf-Iran relations are at a crossroads. For the past decade, tensions between Arab monarchies and the Iranian regime have been high. In 2016, Iranian protesters stormed the Saudi Embassy in Tehran following the execution of Nimr al Nimr, a Shia cleric and an opponent of the regime in Riyadh (Vahdat & Gambrell, 2016). As a result, several Gulf States closed their embassies in Tehran. Meanwhile, inside war-torn Yemen, the Islamic Revolution Group Corps (IRGC) provided the Houthi insurgents with missiles and drones that were later used against Saudi and Emirati cities. In 2019, Iran was also suspected of being responsible for a series of attacks on civilian ships off the coast of the UAE and Oman.

Then, both sides cautiously took measures to de-escalate. In the autumn of 2019, Emirati and Iranian navies convened meetings to prevent clashes in the Strait of Hormuz (Vahdat & Batrawy, 2019). Most importantly, in March 2023, Saudi and Iranian foreign ministers met in Beijing to sign a deal to resume their diplomatic relations. These gestures did not provide a response to the core issues of the regional dispute, but they acted as confidence-building measures to at least lower the tensions.

US and Israeli tensions with Iran because of the Gaza war now put the Gulf States in a delicate situation. Iran's mobilisation of militias across the region highlights the failure of past attempts made by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to de-escalate with Tehran. This policy has not brought any result in Yemen and in Iraq, and Iran is now using anti-American sentiments to consolidate its clout with the local government (Malik et

al., 2023). The resurgence of those tensions could then trigger naval escalation in the Strait of Hormuz.

Other regional rivalries are brewing. In North Africa, Algerian-Moroccan relations have steadily deteriorated since US recognition of Rabat's sovereignty over Western Sahara in 2020. Algiers suspended diplomatic relations with Rabat in October 2021 and then closed its airspace to Moroccan aircraft. It also stopped supplying gas to Spain via Morocco as part of the Maghreb-Europe pipeline (Barba, 2022). In August 2023, two Moroccan tourists straying into Algerian waters on jet skis were accidentally shot dead by Algerian coast guards (Reuters, 2023b).

Finally, another interstate dispute in the area involves Turkey and Greece. Both NATO member states, they have been eyeing each other suspiciously for several decades. At sea, the tensions between Athens and Ankara involve a dispute over the delimitation of their territorial waters in the Aegean Sea. Though international maritime law grants Greece the possibility of extending its territorial waters up to 12 nautical miles, Turkish governments have rejected the claim, considering that this interpretation severely reduces its access to the sea. As a result, Turkey repeatedly called such Greek maritime expansion a case of war. This is exacerbated by Turkey's "blue homeland" strategy that for several years now has provided an alternative narrative

on Ankara's exclusive economic zone. In substance, this Turkish naval strategy openly challenges Greek claims and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which Turkey never ratified (Denizeau, 2021).

Greece and Turkey are also at loggerheads because of their fierce opposition on the Cypriot issue. Since its independence in 1960, the island of Cyprus has been divided by Greek and Turkish communities. In 1974, Turkey's government launched an operation following a coup in Cyprus backed by the then Greek junta. The war caused the displacement of both Greek and Turkish communities, and, in 1983, a separate Turkish Cypriot state was established – though only recognised by Ankara until day. Since the failure of UN-led negotiations in 2017, relations between both sides of the island have remained difficult and a process of reunification unlikely (International Crisis Group, 2023).

In the past decade, bilateral disagreements between Athens and Ankara regularly escalated with naval demonstration of force, and Greek officials denounce what they perceive to be Turkey's gunboat diplomacy (Villelabeitia, 2011). Throughout that period, Turkey increased its military expenditures and made major investments in the naval domain: as data on personnel and warships reveals, the balance of power now favours the Turkish Navy over the Greek one (Charts 1, 2, 3).

Chart 1. Principal surface combatants



Chart 2. Naval personnel

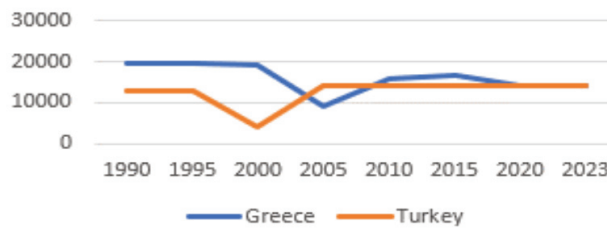
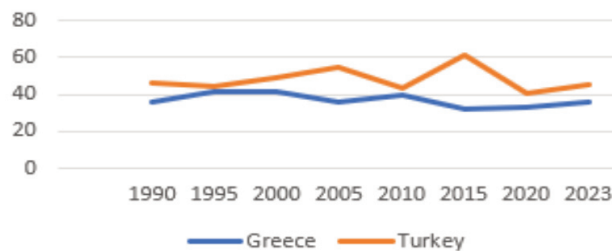


Chart 3. Patrol and coastal combatants



Fortunately, by mid-2023, the Turkey-Greece conflict seemed to enter a phase of de-escalation as both countries resumed talks after 16 months without consultations between the heads of government. In December of that year, President Erdogan visited Greece and declared that “we want to turn the Aegean into a sea of peace,” signalling a major shift in the bilateral relations (Koukantou & Gumrukcu, 2023). Although the new diplomatic climate represents a positive development, it does not yet signal the settlement of all disputes in the East Mediterranean.

All in all, the security environment on Europe’s southern flank is characterised by a diversity of the threats and actors involved. In the short term, the most likely challenge will remain the issue of illicit flows by non-state actors – though interstate conflict should not be dismissed.

The European struggle for naval relevance

Based on the security trends covered in the previous section, the defence of European interests on the southern flank requires naval resources for three primary missions: to monitor the flow of illegal activities; to secure coastal areas against potential threats; and to keep regional competition in check. However, sustaining that level of commitment goes against a long decline of European navies.

As of today, there is a disconnect between the political importance of maritime security and the reality of European naval capabilities. Previous research found that from 1999 to 2018, European navies lost about 30% of their available frigates and destroyers as well as 20% of available submarines (Major & Mölling, 2020). To verify this trend, we compiled the data on the capabilities of six major European navies – United Kingdom (UK), France, Germany, Greece, Spain, and Italy – and looked at their evolution between 1990 and 2023.² The findings confirm the conclusion of past scholarship: whether we look at the evolution of naval personnel

² The data used for the survey was taken from the annual editions of the International Institute for Strategic Studies’ *Military Balance*.

(Chart 1), principal surface combatants (Chart 3), or submarines (Chart 4), European navies have all dramatically shrunk. (Chart 2), patrol and coastal combatants

Chart 4. Naval personnel in Europe 1990-2023

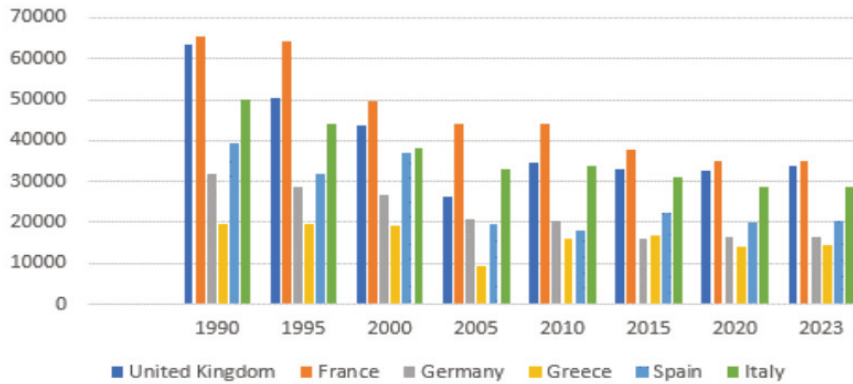


Chart 5. Principal surface combatants in Europe 1990-2023

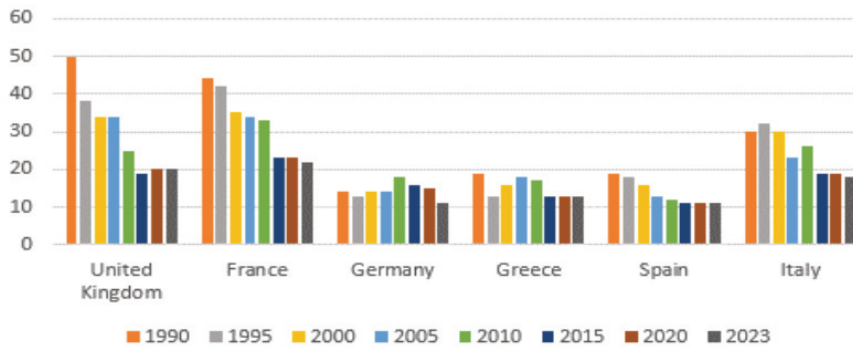


Chart 6. Patrol and coastal combatants in Europe 1990-2023

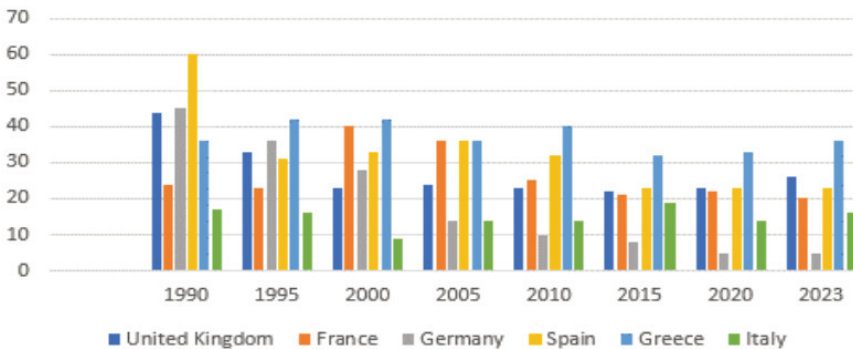
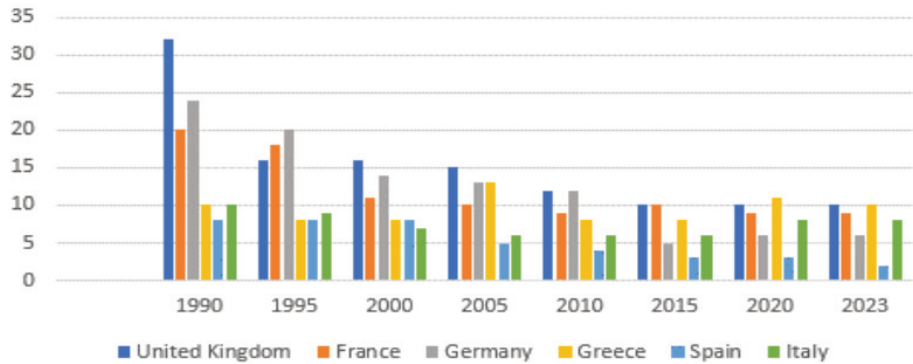


Chart 7. Submarines in Europe 1990-2023



This decline does not match the growing security challenges faced by the Europeans on their southern flank. It does not match the behaviour of local actors either: when checking the naval capabilities of six Middle Eastern countries – Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Algeria, Egypt, and the UAE – we note a steady rise in their naval investments, be it in terms of naval personnel (Chart 5) or patrol and coastal combatants (Chart 6).

Chart 8. Naval personnel in the Middle East

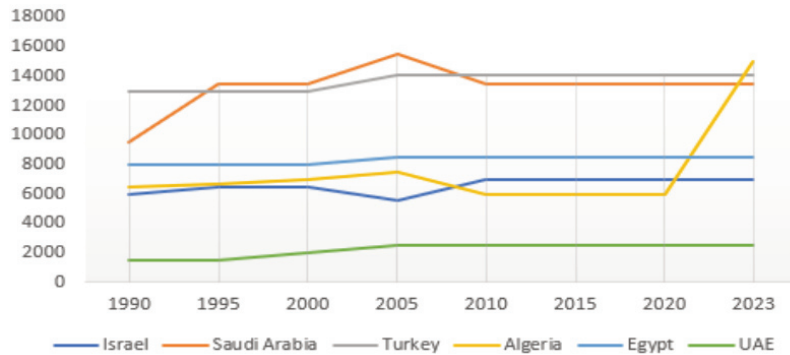
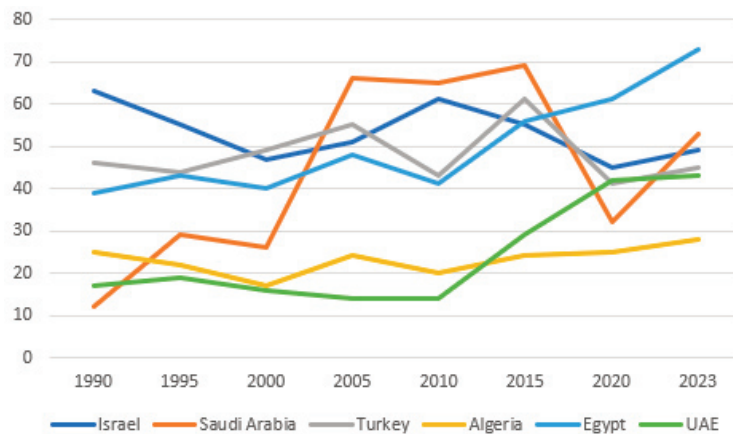


Chart 9. Patrol and coastal combatants in the Middle East 1990-2023



Those sharp cuts in European naval capacities led analysts to warn against Europe's "sea blindness", a concept used to castigate government's neglect for their naval forces (Stöhs, 2018; Cropsey, 2017). It highlights a conclusion also observed on the ground and in the air: European interests in the South remain largely dependent on US naval presence.

This American presence involves the US Sixth Fleet, based in Italy, the US Fifth Fleet, headquartered in Bahrain, as well as several naval bases in Greece, and Djibouti. The US regional footprint is unmatched, but the force structure of its navy also matters. Whereas European navies primarily operate as forces protecting coastal areas against non-state threats, the US Navy has a much broader ambition. For instance, it plays an essential role as a deterrent against regional conflicts like those between Turkey and Greece, or between Israel and Iran – a function none of the European navies could seriously contemplate today or in the near future.

One could argue that as of 2023, there is no sign of a US naval pull-out. Despite the speculations over a US disengagement, the US Navy announced in the summer of 2023 the deployment of two amphibious warships and thousands of Marines to the Gulf (LaGrone, 2023). Then in October 2023, after Israel launched its retaliatory operation against Hamas in Gaza, the US Department of Defense announced the deployment of two US carrier strike groups, as well as one guided missile submarine, and an amphibious ready group with embarked Marine Expeditionary Unit (Myers, 2023). Additionally, the US government closely monitors Russian manoeuvres in the East Mediterranean and sees the Fifth Fleet acting as a barrier against Moscow's assertiveness there (Hadjicostis, 2023).

Like in other sectors of defence policy, the European over-reliance on the US Navy puts their governments at the mercy of decisions made in Washington. Understandably, the US has different priorities in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. US administrations often emphasise issues such as regional competition, terrorism and WMD proliferation, and leave the Europeans to deal with secondary issues such as other forms of illicit flows (piracy, human trafficking). That European dependence has consequences: if Washington was to drastically remove naval assets from the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean – for instance, in case of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait –, this would leave European navies without the means to act as a credible deterrent. Such a security vacuum could exacerbate local tensions.

One may argue that the lack of naval procurement from European countries is now addressed by the surge in military budgets witnessed across the continent after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, military expenditures in Europe reached \$345 billion in 2022 – the biggest amount in real terms since 1989 and an estimated 30% higher than a decade ago (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2023). This increase is likely though to focus on the threat posed by Russia on the eastern front, rather than on the challenges around Europe's southern flank.

Indeed, the growth of military budgets is most obvious in the countries bordering Ukraine or Russia, such as Poland and Finland. After the Ukraine war started, Germany announced setting up a special €100 billion fund, and reports suggested Berlin would order new P-8 Poseidon maritime surveillance and anti-submarine aircraft. Nevertheless, if those purchases go ahead, they are likely to be used in the

North Sea or the North Atlantic, not in the Mediterranean or the Persian Gulf (Sprengrer, 2022; Associated Press, 2023).

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, European navies should not be dismissed. Both France and the UK operate nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines and nuclear-powered attack submarines while the French “Marine Nationale” is the only country, except for the US, to deploy a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. Furthermore, other Southern European countries like Italy, Greece and Spain are keen on maintaining naval ambitions, despite facing chronic fiscal challenges. For instance, the Greek Navy is expected to start deploying three frigates – a first in the last three decades – in 2025.

Finally, the ongoing development of the European Patrol Corvette (EPC) also signals the resolve of four of those countries (Italy, France, Greece, and Spain) to address collectively the capability gap. Initiated in 2019, the EPC project is to deliver new corvettes by 2030. The warships should provide European navies with greater capacity to monitor the security environment in the Mediterranean and, if needed, to intervene. This involves diplomatic as well as industrial cooperation (with national companies such as Fincantieri, Naval Group, and Navantia). It is also supported by the European Defence Fund, which provided \$202 million to produce a first prototype (Kington, 2022).

The steady rise of European naval missions

Limited capabilities do not mean that European navies are merely sitting in the dock of their ports. In fact, European naval forces

regularly deploy in the area, either through an EU or a NATO framework. In 2008, the EU launched operation Atalanta, which aimed to counter piracy activities off the Horn of Africa and in the Western Indian Ocean – the first ever naval operation by the EU. Specifically, Atalanta has played a successful role in escorting vessels of the World Food Programme across the Gulf of Aden. In the past 15 years, this enabled the UN agency to deliver more than 10.5 million tons of food supply to the countries in the Horn of Africa (EU Naval Force Operation Atalanta, 2022). More recently, the EU started Operation Irini, whose objective is “to counter illegal arms trafficking, supporting the implementation of the arms embargo on Libya based on the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions” (European Union External Action, 2023).

Likewise, European navies also contribute to NATO Operation Sea Guardian launched in 2016 (and replacing Operation Active Endeavour). Sea Guardian is meant to provide support to maritime situational awareness and maritime counterterrorism. It relies on ships and maritime patrol aircraft dispatched by Canada, Portugal, Spain, the UK and Turkey.

Additionally, some of the European navies are also involved in the ad-hoc mission for European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH), also known as Operation Agenor.³ Launched in November 2019, EMASOH is meant to ensure freedom of navigation by protecting merchant ships against potential attacks in the Persian Gulf. Its headquarters are located within the French Naval Base in the UAE. Created amid tensions between the US administration of Donald Trump and the Iranian regime, EMASOH reflected the desire of European governments to distance

³ Countries include Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Norway.

themselves from Washington's "maximum pressure" approach towards Tehran (Samaan, 2020a). Five European navies (France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and Spain) are also contributing to the US-led operation "Prosperity Guardian" set up in December 2023 to deter Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, following a wave of drone and missile attacks launched by the Yemeni group.

Most importantly, operations like Irini and Atalanta shed light on the way the EU can play an innovative role in maritime security cooperation. Both operations go beyond traditional sea patrolling activities. First, they involve a training component: IRINI forces contribute to the formation of Libya's Coast Guard and Navy's Search and Rescue units, whereas Atalanta supports both the EU Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP) and the EU Training Mission to Somalia. Second, the two operations rely on regular consultations with other organisations such as Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency), the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA), the European Fisheries Control Agency (EFCA), as well as national bodies.

The EU ability to coordinate among a myriad of stakeholders in maritime space may be its strongest asset. This has led European decision-makers to state that the EU centrality in this multi-agency process is its biggest value. As a result, documents such as the EU Maritime Security Strategy assert that "the EU will lead in maritime domain awareness by enhancing information collection and exchange among different maritime sectors" (European Commission, 2023).

In this context, the list of commitments at sea for European navies is not negligible. But it also demonstrates the disconnect between the lofty ambitions of EU representatives and the shortcomings of their

resources. Leading in "maritime domain awareness" may sound an impressive goal, but navies cannot be only about monitoring activities at sea. Eventually, warships are designed to fight. Securing maritime spaces such as the Mediterranean Sea or the Western Indian Ocean requires means that European countries cannot match. In that perspective, Europeans should review their naval policies, starting with their partnership diplomacy with countries from the region.

Naval autonomy through partnership

Aiming for a greater European autonomy in maritime affairs requires consideration of ways to build greater synergy between local partners. The underlying belief is that cooperation with partners empowers the EU by expanding its influence and building anchors of stability across the southern flank.

That belief is at the heart of the concept of EU "coordinated maritime presences" introduced in 2022. This new policy concept is a "light and flexible instrument that allows EU member states present in areas of maritime interest to share awareness, analysis and information" (European External Action Service, 2021). Since then, a coordination cell within the EU Military Staff has been mandated to designate a specific "maritime area of interest" and then to coordinate efforts between the EU, its member states, and local partners. In other words, it posits an EU naval presence that does not require permanent resources deployed in the bases and ports of local partners (Fiott, 2022).

Following a pilot case in the Gulf of Guinea, a second coordinated maritime presence was launched in the North-Western Indian Ocean to cover "an area from the Strait of

Hormuz to the Southern Tropic and from the north of the Red Sea towards the centre of the Indian Ocean” (Council of the European Union, 2022). The latter builds on another EU naval initiative in the area called CRIMARIO (an acronym standing for Critical Maritime Routes Indian Ocean) launched in 2015 and which already involves several Middle Eastern countries such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

CRIMARIO is also meant to improve cooperation among the naval forces and the maritime operators in the area through training programmes and the development of a coordination and communications platform. In 2020, the EU went further and extended the scope of CRIMARIO to the Indo-Pacific, and €17.5 million have been earmarked for the 2020-2025 period (Crimario, 2023). According to the rhetoric from EU officials, CRIMARIO directly contributes to the idea of leading in maritime domain awareness.

In addition to the new approach provided by the “coordinated maritime presences”, the EU has also revamped its regional partnership policy, particularly towards the Gulf States. In that context, European navies could benefit from greater engagement with their Gulf counterparts in the area going from the Red Sea to the Strait of Hormuz.

In May 2022, the EEAS released a “joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council on a strategic partnership with the Gulf” that signalled the desire of Brussels to raise its ambitions towards the region (European Commission, 2022). If this new partnership focuses on regional consultations and economic relations, it could involve a strong maritime component. The 2022 joint communication acknowledges this dimension, yet it refrains from getting too

specific. The document states that EU-Gulf cooperation on maritime security “could include de-confliction channels, sharing maritime information, incident prevision and codes of conduct” (European Commission, 2022, p. 9). It also suggests additional cooperation through the framework of Operation Agenor, and the EU-coordinated maritime presence in the North-Western Indian Ocean mentioned above. There could also be stronger EU-Gulf cooperation in the Red Sea, where Saudi Arabia launched its own regional initiative – the Red Sea Forum – in 2019 (Vertin, 2019).

Countries such as Saudi Arabia, Oman and the UAE have invested in recent years in the modernisation of their naval forces, with an emphasis on both procurement and training programmes. At bilateral level, those reforms have involved close ties with European countries: the French Marine Nationale contributes to the training of Emirati forces, whereas French and Spanish companies supply warships to Saudi Arabia, and Oman hosts UK military advisors. As mentioned above, the European operation for the Strait of Hormuz, Agenor, is headquartered in Abu Dhabi.

As a result, greater EU-Gulf engagement should build on this momentum and push maritime cooperation as a priority on the diplomatic agenda. Greater engagement implies a more robust political-strategic dialogue as well as operational and training programmes. This could involve the setting up of a permanent mechanism of consultation, such as an EU-Gulf maritime forum gathering naval commanders on both sides. In terms of training, an EU Centre of Excellence for maritime security could also be established in one of the relevant Gulf States (Saudi Arabia, UAE, or Oman), using the creation of the EU CRBN Centre of Excellence in Kuwait as a model to emulate.

Meanwhile, in the East Mediterranean region, Europeans could explore new opportunities for cooperation with Turkey and Israel. Some aspects of the regional context may indeed favour such engagement. The recent resumption of consultations between Ankara and Athens could help in lowering the tensions at sea. Furthermore, in past years, Turkey contributed to the process of de-escalation and reconciliation across the Middle East: President Erdogan met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed to restore relations that suffered deeply due to Ankara's support for Qatar during the Saudi-led blockade of Doha. The Turkish leader also mended ties with Israel after a decade of crisis between both countries, though the future of the rapprochement between Ankara and Jerusalem is fragile after the latest Gaza war started in October 2023.

This new cooperative environment could pave the way to better relations at sea, starting with the joint development of gas projects in the East Mediterranean region (Stevenson, 2023). To date, the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, formed in 2019, initially included Egypt along with Cyprus, Israel and Greece. In the following years, other littoral states of the Mediterranean joined: France, Italy, and Jordan. The forum now provides an effective instrument for gas cooperation between countries that may not see eye to eye on other foreign policy issues. However, it does not include Turkey because of Ankara's refusal to recognise the Republic of Cyprus – a reminder that cooperation in the East Mediterranean will still face obstacles.

Europe-Israel cooperation at sea should also be considered. Given Israel's strategic location in the East Mediterranean and the readiness of its naval forces, closer relations with them are worth exploring. Since the Abraham Accords in

2020, the normalisation of Israel's relations with Gulf States – namely with the UAE, and Bahrain – has eased the integration of Israel into regional security initiatives. For instance, the Central Command of US armed forces “absorbed” Israel into its area of responsibility in 2021, enabling stronger cooperation between the US, Israel and Arab militaries (Frantzman, 2021). European-Israeli naval exchanges could for instance support efforts at curbing the flow of arms proliferation.

European maritime cooperation with countries like Turkey and Israel may work in specific areas but it will also continue to be constrained by political realities. At the diplomatic level, EU-Turkey relations are unlikely to improve dramatically. At the heart of the dispute in the East Mediterranean still lies the Cyprus issue, with no sign of a settlement with the Turkish side. Moreover, Ankara's maritime assertiveness, as evidenced with its “Blue Homeland” doctrine, will remain a significant obstacle to cooperation. Meanwhile, cooperation with Israel in the naval domain must be carefully calibrated by Brussels to avoid providing legitimacy to other, more controversial, policies pursued by the current Israeli government, in particular in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

Avoiding the risks of a toothless strategy

Overall, the EU follows an approach that favours partnerships to compensate for its lack of raw power. Sharing the burden makes sense but it has a cost too. Although the EU literature on the concept of “coordinated maritime presences” emphasises operational and institutional considerations, its significance at strategic level is worth unpacking: a “coordinated maritime presence” posits a flexible partnership policy

that does not rely on forward naval bases and stationed troops and ships.

It echoes the American concept of “off-shore balancing” that surfaced in policy and academic debates in the 1990s (Layne, 1997; Ikenberry, 2000; Posen & Ross, 1997). Proponents of offshore balancing, like those of EU coordinated maritime presences, called for a reduction of Western long-term military commitments in the Middle East and elsewhere. Instead, it favoured a strategy of “restraint” that would carefully stay away from local disputes. It would rely on partners, instead of acting on their behalf. In other words, it suggests the possibility of shaping the regional balance from afar – or literally *off-shore* – with limited means.

Though such arrangements might work in the case of the US, there are two major reasons why it is less relevant in the case of Europe. The first is the geographical factor: whereas the US can distance itself from the Middle East, Europe is neighbouring the region. As a result, offshore balancing would not be relevant in the East Mediterranean, with regards to tensions with Turkey.

Secondly, the US can cultivate the idea of offshore balancing because it still relies on vast naval resources that can be quickly mobilised if its restrained posture proves insufficient. In the case of European countries, the light footprint of their “coordinated maritime presences” looks less like a choice than a constraint: with the small resources of European navies, its regional presence will inevitably be stretched thin.

Moreover, without credible capabilities, Europeans may also find themselves at the mercy of the agenda of local partners, be it Gulf States, or Turkey. The current circumstances at the regional level favour multilateral cooperation, but it has not en-

abled the settlement of longstanding conflicts. After a decade of fierce competition, the diplomatic tensions between Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran may have been toned down, but distrust among the three countries did not disappear. Therefore, there are reasons to doubt it will last (Hiltermann, 2023). The resumption of Middle Eastern disputes could then spill over at sea.

Addressing then the issue of European naval capabilities involves several aspects. First, there needs to be more joint projects like the EPC allowing for industrial cooperation among European countries. Under the current economic circumstances, it is unrealistic to expect European navies to expand their force structure, especially regarding surface combatants, without them working together. Some naval programmes launched by the European Defence Agency such as MARSUR (Maritime Surveillance) are worth considering, though their scope remains yet too modest.

Second, the other major challenge regarding European naval capabilities concerns the actual allocation of those resources to the Mediterranean-Middle East region. In coming years, European naval debates will be shaped by both the need to protect the North Atlantic and the Baltic Sea against Russia, and the European desire to play a more active role in the Indo-Pacific. The southern flank finds itself in the middle of those two objectives and it risks becoming the lowest priority of European governments.

Conclusion

Europe's strategic autonomy is likely to remain a key component of policy discussions in the near future. But this has largely been influenced by the resurrection of military competition with Russia on the continent. Until now, threats and challenges

from Europe's southern flank have been pushed to the background, with the idea of containing them rather than confronting them. However, as this paper argued, the security environment in the Mediterranean and the Gulf is unlikely to leave the Europeans the luxury of neglecting it. Arms proliferation, trafficking of clandestine migrants, piracy and interstate rivalries will test the stability of the region. In that context, Europeans are hardly prepared to act as credible naval players. Even though the US may refocus its forces to the Indo-Pacific, most of the European countries lack the means to replace them. For the most part, they could secure their coastal shores but would struggle to monitor

the high seas and would simply be unfit for high-intensity conflict.

Addressing this shortcoming will take time and resources. It may be compensated by exploring the benefits of new regional partnerships in the Mediterranean and the Gulf, be it through mechanisms such as the "co-ordinated maritime presences" or enhanced consultations with local navies. But, eventually, the disconnect between Europe's strategic rhetoric and its operational limitations must be addressed through the procurement of new platforms that can provide the critical mass necessary for European naval forces. In the end, this is a process that can only be successful and sustainable as a collective effort.

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