

# The EU's New Red Sea Naval Mission: Implications and Challenges

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Feb 16, 2024

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**The operation is a sign of Europe's willingness to take action against the current instability, though significant work is needed to coordinate with existing initiatives and convince regional officials of the mission's usefulness.**

**F**ebruary 19 [marks the launch \(https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/01/31/eu-naval-mission-to-protect-ships-in-red-sea-set-to-be-launched-on-19-february\)](https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/01/31/eu-naval-mission-to-protect-ships-in-red-sea-set-to-be-launched-on-19-february) of European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) Aspidos, a new maritime mission organized to address growing instability in the Red Sea and complement ongoing U.S.-led operations in the area. The operation's mandate balances different approaches among European countries, with some having participated in air and missile strikes against the Yemeni Houthis and others favoring a more defensive posture. Beyond the current crisis, the mission aims to bolster the EU's longer-term maritime strategy (for which the Northwest Indian Ocean has been a priority), as well as EU diplomatic efforts toward Arab countries and the emergence of a European defense.

## A Response to Houthi Attacks

**W**hile the EU is still relatively [divided \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/after-gaza-recalibrated-prospects-geopolitical-europe\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/after-gaza-recalibrated-prospects-geopolitical-europe) over the war in Gaza, member states reached a [consensus \(https://apnews.com/article/red-sea-houthis-naval-mission-trade-eu-9f779d51f6fe3ebd8df0032c92221817\)](https://apnews.com/article/red-sea-houthis-naval-mission-trade-eu-9f779d51f6fe3ebd8df0032c92221817) in January to create a naval mission amid mounting disruption of shipping in the Red Sea. Ships owned and operated by European companies (e.g., Denmark's [Maersk \(https://www.reuters.com/world/bab-al-mandab-strait-incident-under-investigation-ukmto-ambrey-2023-12-14/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/bab-al-mandab-strait-incident-under-investigation-ukmto-ambrey-2023-12-14/)) have been among those targeted by the Houthis since the war erupted (for a full listing of Houthi attacks before and during the war, see The Washington Institute's [interactive tracking map \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-maritime-attacks-middle-east-2019\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-maritime-attacks-middle-east-2019)). More generally, Red Sea routes account for around [12 percent \(https://www.bimco.org/news/priority-news/20231218-attacks\)](https://www.bimco.org/news/priority-news/20231218-attacks) of global trade and [40 percent](https://www.bimco.org/news/priority-news/20231218-attacks)

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2024/757606/EPRS\\_ATA\(2024\)757606\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2024/757606/EPRS_ATA(2024)757606_EN.pdf)) of trade between Asia and Europe, so ongoing disruptions could threaten European strategic interests.

Aspides has been tasked with strengthening deterrence in the area and defending commercial vessels against Houthi attacks. Greece will reportedly host

<https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/2024/02/15/aspides-eu-mission-red-sea-greece/>) and command (<https://twitter.com/GreeceInUSA/status/1757824712304943386>) the mission; France, Germany (<https://www.reuters.com/world/german-air-defence-frigate-leaves-port-join-eu-red-sea-mission-2024-02-08/>), and Italy should be key contributors as well.

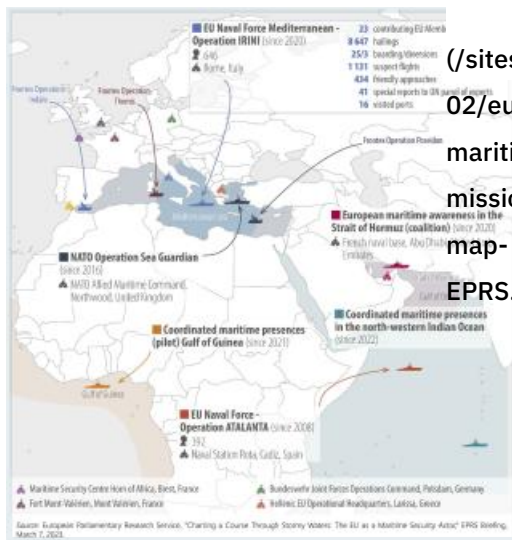
Aspides will complement the existing U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian

<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3624836/ryder-gives-more-detail-on-how-operation-prosperity-guardian-will-work/>), which includes several European countries, notably Denmark (<https://www.reuters.com/world/denmark-send-frigate-us-led-task-force-red-sea-2023-12-29/>), Greece (<https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1227720/greek-frigate-to-join-prosperity-guardian/>), and the Netherlands (<https://www.dutchnews.nl/2023/12/dutch-provide-two-staff-officers-to-red-sea-protection-plan/>). France and Italy are also among that mission's members, though they operate in the area under their national commands ([https://twitter.com/Mathieu\\_Droin/status/1738585711991726115](https://twitter.com/Mathieu_Droin/status/1738585711991726115)).

## Advancing Maritime Strategy, Regional Cooperation, and Defense

**F**reedom of navigation has long been an EU priority (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/24/maritime-security-council-approves-revised-eu-strategy-and-action-plan/>). With chokepoints and essential sea-lanes increasingly contested, the EU designated the Northwest Indian Ocean as a “maritime area of interest (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/02/21/coordinated-maritime-presences-council-extends-implementation-in-the-gulf-of-guinea-for-2-years-and-establishes-a-new-concept-in-the-north-west-indian-ocean/>)” in 2022, covering a large perimeter from the Strait of Hormuz to the Tropic of Capricorn and from the Red Sea toward the center of the Indian Ocean. This entails increased European naval coordination through a mechanism called “coordinated maritime presence ([https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/coordinated-maritime-presences\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/coordinated-maritime-presences_en))” (CMP).

The designation also aligns with the EU's constant interest in the Northwest Indian Ocean since the outset of its maritime integration efforts. In 2008, amid increased threats and instability in the Horn of Africa, the EU launched Operation Atalanta (<https://eunavfor.eu/mission>), a naval mission whose current mandate is to counter piracy, fight drug and weapons trafficking, and protect World Food Programme deliveries and other vulnerable shipping.



(/sites/default/files/2024-02/eu-maritime-missions-map-EPRS.jpg)

In the Persian Gulf, France led eight other European countries (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, and Portugal) in launching an ad hoc **maritime monitoring mission** (<https://www.emasoh-agenor.org/>) in 2020 aimed at ensuring safe transit in the Strait of Hormuz. Headquartered at the French naval base in Abu Dhabi, the initiative includes a diplomatic track (EMASoH) and military track (Operation Agenor). Paris has sought to play a more active role in regional maritime security since as far back as the “Tanker War” of the 1980s, when it independently deployed a **carrier strike group** (<https://journals.openedition.org/rha/7896#ftn18>) in the Gulf, so its leadership in EMASoH/Agenor and **other initiatives** ([https://twitter.com/Mathieu\\_Droin/status/1736154304237482109](https://twitter.com/Mathieu_Droin/status/1736154304237482109)) is par for the course.

Aspides is an additional piece in this growing patchwork of European efforts to become more active and present in the area. It aligns with Europe’s regional diplomacy as well, particularly its use of maritime security as **a key area of cooperation with Gulf countries** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-respond-chinas-growing-influence-gulf>) and, hopefully, other Arab states such as Egypt and Jordan. The mission will also deliver a timely signal on the international front as the debate on European strategic autonomy **heats up** ([https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/02/13/after-trump-s-statements-on-nato-france-germany-and-poland-try-to-close-ranks\\_6521048\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/02/13/after-trump-s-statements-on-nato-france-germany-and-poland-try-to-close-ranks_6521048_4.html)) again.

## Challenges Ahead

**R**ules of engagement could pose difficulties to the new mission. Aspides, which means shield in Greek, will uphold de-escalation and freedom of navigation with a predominantly defensive mandate. This reflects widespread European wariness about the cost-benefit ratio of “controlled escalation” in the region, which they believe may not succeed in establishing deterrence. Tellingly, the Netherlands **is the only EU country** (<https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3665864/joint-statement-from-australia-bahrain-denmark-canada-the-netherlands-new-zeala/>) to take part in U.S.-led strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen, which were conducted under a different framework from Prosperity Guardian.

Yet wariness about escalation does not preclude the use of force: on December 10, the **French frigate Languedoc** (<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231210-french-frigate-downs-drones-over-red-sea-military>) shot down several Houthi drones. The mission will have to maintain a delicate balance between its de-escalatory aim and potential use of force.

Coordination is another operational challenge for Aspides, since participants will have to liaise with two other European naval missions in the area (Atalanta and Agenor) as well as U.S.-led initiatives. The creation of Aspides stems partly from **Spain’s reluctance** (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/spains-pm-says-he->

[doesnt-oppose-new-red-sea-mission-instead-of-using-eus-atalanta/](#)) to extend Atalanta to the Red Sea in the current context of regional crisis. Once the situation abates and the political stakes decrease, it will be easier to [reorganize existing initiatives \(https://www.mei.edu/publications/joining-pieces-together-toward-comprehensive-eu-maritime-approach-northwestern-indian\)](https://www.mei.edu/publications/joining-pieces-together-toward-comprehensive-eu-maritime-approach-northwestern-indian) and, perhaps, merge Atalanta and Aspides.

Securing Middle Eastern participation in Aspides would be a substantial diplomatic success—many regional governments have been cautious about getting involved in maritime security since October 7 for fear they might be seen as betraying the Palestinian cause or antagonizing Iran, with whom they still seek to defuse tensions. Convincing reluctant regional countries and EU member states of the mission’s usefulness beyond the current crisis would make it a real milestone in the effort to strengthen Europe’s diplomacy toward its Arab partners, its naval presence in the Northwest Indian Ocean, and its fledgling strategy for the Indo-Pacific.

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