

EUNAVFOR ASPIDES: THE NEWEST EUROPEAN UNION MILITARY OPERATION

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Abstract: *The start of the Israel-Hamas war (October 2023) generated rather unpredictable consequences, one of them being the attacks of the Houthi rebels on commercial ships transiting the routes between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, thus putting the lives of the sailors at risk and restricting the freedom of navigation. The European Union responded in a military manner also, by launching a new naval operation: EUNAVFOR ASPIDES. Blending elements of qualitative data analysis with the case study research, this paper examines the legal framework and mission of operation ASPIDES, along with its assets and key accomplishments, thus fostering a greater awareness and a better understanding of the operation. Without a doubt, EUNAVFOR ASPIDES remains a crucial pillar in ensuring the stability of the region, by effectively enhancing maritime security and addressing the specific security threats.*

Keywords: EUNAVFOR ASPIDES, Houthis, military operation

1. Introduction

EUNAVFOR ASPIDES is a defensive maritime operation conducted by the European Union (EU), under its Common Security and Defence Policy. Although the newest, operation ASPIDES is actually the second ongoing naval operation of the EU in the region (as it succeeds EUNAVFOR ATALANTA, which was launched in 2008 in the Horn of Africa and the Western Indian Ocean) and the third ongoing naval operation of the EU around the world (as it also succeeds EUNAVFOR MED IRINI, which was launched in 2020 in the Mediterranean Sea).

EUNAVFOR ASPIDES represents the EU’s response to the degrading security situation in the region approximately comprising the Red Sea and the Persian

Gulf. Since October 2023, the Houthis have conducted numerous attacks on the ships that transit the navigation routes linking the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. Although the Houthis claim their attacks target Israel-bound ships, in retaliation for the ongoing Israel-Hamas war, the actual ships that have been hit had minimal, or no connection to Israel [1]. Instead, the attacks affected the freedom of navigation in the region and caused disruptions to the sea supply chains.

As a response, on 18 December 2023 the United States initiated, within the framework of a multinational coalition, an operation called Prosperity Guardian. But some United States allies, especially European countries, expressed reservations about this initiative and voiced concerns

regarding the conduct of airstrikes on Houthi positions [2].

Therefore, just two months later, the European Union initiated its own operation, named EUNAVFOR ASPIDES.

2. Scientific Literature Review

As it was launched just over a year ago, EUNAVFOR ASPIDES has not currently been that popular in the scientific or academic community. Therefore, the number of scientific papers written specifically on this topic is reduced; nevertheless, some of the works manage to highlight important aspects regarding the operation.

For example, in a 2024 paper [3], Piero Barlucchi describes some of the initial efforts to launch the operation, establishes similarities and differences between EUNAVFOR ASPIDES and EUNAVFOR ATALANTA and mentions some of the challenges the operation might face.

One can also mention another 2024 paper written by Ibrahim Jalal [4], in which he analyses the limitations of operation ASPIDES and discusses options for the EU with regard to the situation in Yemen.

And in a 2025 paper [5], Yf Reykers addresses, among other things, the difficulties the operation has encountered (such as aligning military efficiency with political interests), arguing for the overcoming of fragmentation of the EU naval operations in the region, as well as for emphasizing the “European approach” to maritime security.

Finally, many other scientific papers focus on the wider Common Security and Defence Policy or on the general security climate in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, mentioning operation ASPIDES only tangentially.

3. Scientific Methodology

The scientific methodology used in writing this paper combines elements of the

qualitative data analysis (as described in a 2022 book edited by Peter Stevens [6]) with the case study research (as described by Dawson Hancock, Bob Algozzine and Jae Hoon Lim in their 2021 book [7]). Thus, the objective of this research is to analyse the legal basis and mission of EUNAVFOR ASPIDES, as well as its assets and its major achievements, thereby contributing to a wider awareness and acknowledgement of the operation within the scientific and academic communities. Correlated with the research objective, the scientific hypothesis is the following: operation EUNAVFOR ASPIDES significantly contributes to a safe and secure environment in its Area of Operation.

4. Results and Discussion

4. 1. Legal Basis and Mission

The legal basis of EUNAVFOR ASPIDES generally lies in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2722 of 10 January 2024, which affirms that “the exercise of navigational rights and freedoms by merchant and commercial vessels, in accordance with international law, must be respected” and also takes note of “the right of Member States, in accordance with international law, to defend their vessels from attacks, including those that undermine navigational rights and freedoms” [8]. Also, the operation acts in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2768 of 15 January 2025, which reiterates the demand “that the Houthis immediately cease all attacks against merchant and commercial vessels [...]” [9].

But more specifically, the legal basis lies in the 9 Council and Political and Security Committee decisions outlined (in chronological order) in Table 1.

Table 1. Most relevant EU decisions regarding EUNAVFOR ASPIDES [10]

Type of act	Decision no.	Decision date
Council Decision (CFSP)	2024/583	8 February 2024
Political and Security Committee Decision (CFSP)	2024/644	14 February 2024
Council Decision (CFSP)	2024/632	19 February 2024
Political and Security Committee Decision (CFSP)	2024/1686	11 June 2024
	2024/2038	17 July 2024
	2024/2763	22 October 2024
	2025/199	28 January 2025
	2025/271	4 February 2025
Council Decision (CFSP)	2025/334	14 February 2025

For example, Council Decision (CFSP) 2024/583 of 8 February 2024 states the mission of the operation, which is “to safeguard freedom of navigation in relation to the Red Sea crisis”; also, EUNAVFOR ASPIDES “shall contribute to maritime security along the main sea lines of communication” in its Area of Operation, which comprises “the Baab al-Mandab Strait and the Strait of Hormuz, as well as international waters in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf” [11]. Finally, the same Council Decision states that the Operation Headquarters will be located in Larissa (Greece) and that the appointed EU Operation Commander is Commodore Vasileios Gryparis.

Then, through Council Decision (CFSP) 2024/632 of 19 February 2024, EUNAVFOR ASPIDES has been launched on the same day [12].

And since its adoption, Council Decision (CFSP) 2024/583 has been amended only once, a year later, through Council Decision (CFSP) 2025/334 of 14 February 2025. The

main change concerns the fact that, “in order to ensure maritime situational awareness in the Area of Operation, EUNAVFOR ASPIDES shall collect information, in addition to data necessary to protect vessels, on arms trafficking and on shadow fleets [...]” [13].

Regarding the Political and Security Committee Decisions, the first 5 of them refer to the successive appointments of the EU Force Commander for EUNAVFOR ASPIDES (Table 2), whereas through the 6th one (Decision 2025/271 of 4 February 2025), the contribution of Albania to the operation is accepted [14].

4.2. Force Commanders, Number of Contributing Nations and Assets

As can be observed in Table 2, until now, all the EU Force Commanders for EUNAVFOR ASPIDES originated from 3 EU Member States (Greece, Italy and Netherlands). Another interesting fact is the relatively short duration of their commands, which vary from approximately 2 months to 4 months.

Table 2. EU Force Commanders for EUNAVFOR ASPIDES [15]

No.	State	Rank	Name	Period
1	Italy	Rear Admiral	Stefano Costantino	14 Feb. 2024 – 14 Jun. 2024
2	Netherlands	Commodore	George Pastoor	15 Jun. 2024 – 7 Aug. 2024
3	Italy	Rear Admiral	Massimo Bonu	8 Aug. 2024 – 31 Oct. 2024
4	Greece	Commodore	Konstantinos Pitykakis	1 Nov. 2024 – 1 Feb. 2025
5	Greece	Commodore	Michail Pantouvakis	2 Feb. 2025 – present

And according to the latest available data [16], no less than 21 nations are contributing to the operation, which counts among its assets 3 naval units. The staff of

the operation is located in Europe (at the Operation Headquarters in Larissa, Greece) or in the region (at the Force Headquarters, embarked on a frigate).

4.3. Major Achievements

Once deployed in the Area of Operation, the troops and naval units involved in EUNAVFOR ASPIDES got straight to

work, and the results were quick to follow (Table 3).

Table 3. Achievements of EUNAVFOR ASPIDES (as of February 2025) [17]

Type of achievement	No.
Merchant vessels supported	640
Close protection missions for merchant vessels	370
Unmanned Aerial Vehicles destroyed	18
Unmanned Sea Vehicles destroyed	2
Ballistic missiles intercepted	4
Sailors rescued	50

A few examples of these achievements can provide a better understanding of the professionalism demonstrated by the troops taking part in EUNAVFOR ASPIDES.

Thus, in the morning of 27 February 2024, the German frigate “Hessen”, acting in self-defense, shot down 2 Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) that were coming from the Yemen territories controlled by the Houthis and were directly threatening the freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. This particular event actually followed two others, which involved assets taking part in the operation [18].

Then, on 20 March 2024, a French destroyer detected a Houthi UAV loitering and threatening commercial navigation. Initially, all nearby ships were informed to keep their distance from the area covered by the UAV; afterwards, the destroyer’s helicopter, patrolling in the area, neutralised the UAV [19].

One day later, on 21 March 2024, the German frigate “Hessen” destroyed an Unmanned Sea Vehicle (USV) originating from Yemen territories controlled by the Houthis. At that time, the frigate was conducting close protection for a merchant vessel, and the timely destruction of the USV prevented any harm to the sailors and the merchant shipping [20].

And on the same day of 21 March 2024, while providing close protection to another merchant vessel, a French destroyer intercepted no less than 3 ballistic missiles

that posed a direct threat to the freedom of navigation [21].

Finally, on 13 June 2024, an Air Medical Evacuation was conducted, to transfer a wounded Nepalese sailor, following a missile attack on his ship. The sailor subsequently underwent surgery on board of the “Karel Doorman”, a multipurpose ship (part of EUNAVFOR ASPIDES) equipped with advanced medical capabilities [22].

5. Conclusions

A UAV neutralised by a helicopter, a USV destroyed by a frigate or ballistic missiles neutralised by a destroyer – all these represent specific examples of how the EU’s military operation EUNAVFOR ASPIDES contributes to the freedom of navigation in its Area of Operation.

Indisputably, operation ASPIDES remains a key determinant in the stability of the region. And although its achievements are significant, the success of EUNAVFOR ASPIDES will certainly depend on the constant contributions of the Member States and other third States to the operation, as well as on the operation’s ability to adapt to the ever-changing regional security challenges.

At the same time, operation ASPIDES enhances the military profile of the European Union, highlighting its capacity to engage in complex international security

issues, thus reinforcing its position as an essential global actor.

Considering all this, it can be concluded that the objective of this research has been achieved, and that its scientific hypothesis has been validated.

Finally, with regard to future scientific research directions, a promising one would be the examination of the relationship between the European Union's EUNAVFOR ASPIDES and the United States-led Operation Prosperity Guardian.

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