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## The European Union's Quest to Become a Global Maritime-Security Provider

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## THE EUROPEAN UNION'S QUEST TO BECOME A GLOBAL MARITIME-SECURITY PROVIDER

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*Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds*

**T**he European Union (EU) is recognized increasingly as both a pioneer and a major international actor in maritime security.<sup>1</sup> It is one of the leading global contributors to maritime-security capacity building, with estimated investments of over €620 million (\$640 million).<sup>2</sup> It operates naval missions in the western Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, the Gulf of Guinea, and the Strait of Hormuz. The EU's ambitions in maritime security were underlined in its Global Strategy of 2016, which sets a vision for the organization as a leading "global maritime security provider."<sup>3</sup> The organization also is in the process of producing a new EU maritime-security strategy (EUMSS), and in summer 2022 the EU launched a public consultation process on the upcoming strategy and its action plan. Expected to be finalized in early 2023, the new EUMSS will add further impetus to the EU's already significant global ambitions in this area.

In this article, we review the EU's quest to become a global maritime-security actor, and we identify the strategic challenges that influence its maritime-security strategy process.<sup>4</sup> The EU's contribution to global maritime security has received growing attention in the policy community, but so far commentators have tended to focus on specific activities and operations rather than a broader strategic outlook of the EU's overall global maritime-security policy.<sup>5</sup> Key questions include

whether there is a distinctive and coherent EU approach to global maritime security and how the EU should address a growing range of maritime challenges, including a multiplication of seaborne risks and threats and the intensification of militarized competition in regions such as the Indo-Pacific.

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Our goal is to provide orientation to European maritime-security strategy makers and increase understanding among journalists and policy generalists of the novelty and complexity of the maritime-security agenda. We also aim to foster understanding of the EU's achievements and challenges for key international stakeholders, including the United States, other NATO members, and global partners such as Australia, India, and Japan.

We start by providing an overview of the EU's international maritime-security engagements, with particular focus on naval operations, security assistance, and capacity building. This reveals how substantial and complex the EU's activities have become. We then turn to a discussion of seven challenges and dilemmas that the EU faces in its quest to become a global maritime-security provider. We focus on the challenges of achieving coherence across this complex policy and operational space; of managing relations with key partners such as NATO and the United Kingdom; and of developing responses to emerging maritime-security issues such as environmental security, climate change, and the resilience of critical subsea infrastructures.

## EU GLOBAL MARITIME-SECURITY ACTIVITIES

The EU is one of the key global entrepreneurs of the contemporary maritime-security agenda. Maritime security is characterized by a holistic understanding of security at sea, it pays attention to both state and nonstate threats, and it includes issues of human and environmental security, as well as issues involved in the fight against transnational organized crime. In this sense, the contemporary maritime-security agenda comprises three key dimensions: first, an interstate dimension, which includes militarized confrontations at sea, naval diplomacy and deterrence operations, and disputes over boundaries and resources such as fisheries; second, a dimension of extremist violence at sea in the form of deliberate attacks on maritime installations or vessels, the movement of extremists or unlawful material by sea, and the spillover of violence from land into the maritime domain; and finally, a dimension of transnational organized crimes at sea, known as blue crimes, including piracy, smuggling of various types, and environmental crimes such as illegal fishing.<sup>6</sup>

As the following overview of the EU's external maritime-security engagements shows, the EU's approach to maritime security is anchored strongly in the third dimension: the fight against blue crime. Historically, the EU has prioritized blue crime in three key maritime regions: the western Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Guinea, and the Mediterranean Sea. Increasingly, however, the EU also is working to address extremist violence through dedicated projects on port security and a mission in the Strait of Hormuz. A more-recent focus on the Indo-Pacific and Arctic as key strategic spaces indicates a turn toward interstate concerns too. Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of these activities. In the next sections we

**TABLE 1**  
**THE EU'S GLOBAL MARITIME-SECURITY PROJECTS**

Acronym / Short Name	Full Name	Duration	Focus	Total Budget (millions of euros)
<b>Western Indian Ocean</b>				
MARSIC	Enhancing Maritime Security and Safety through Information Sharing and Capacity Building	2010–15	information sharing, training programs	6
CRIMLEA	Critical Maritime Routes Law Enforcement Agencies	2010–17	law enforcement, judicial sector	5
EUCAP Nestor	Regional Maritime Security Capacity Building Mission in the Horn of Africa and the Western Indian Ocean	July 2012–December 2016	law enforcement, information sharing, prisons, legal reform	121
EUCAP Somalia	European Union Capacity Building Mission in Somalia	2016–24	institutions, law enforcement, prisons, legal reform	135
MASE 1	Regional Programme for Promotion of Maritime Security in Eastern and Southern Africa and Indian Ocean 1	October 2013–October 2019	legal reform, coastal communities, regional coordination in information sharing and law enforcement	42
CRIMARIO 1	Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean 1	January 2015–December 2019	information sharing	5.5
MASE 2	Regional Programme for Promotion of Maritime Security in Eastern and Southern Africa and Indian Ocean 2	2019–23	regional coordination in information sharing and law enforcement	1.4
Port Security	Port Security and Safety of Navigation in Eastern and Southern Africa and Indian Ocean	2020–24	port security	28
CRIMARIO 2	Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean 2	April 2020–April 2024	information sharing	7.5
<b>Gulf of Guinea</b>				
CRIMGO	Critical Maritime Routes Gulf of Guinea	2013–16	institutional setup, regional cooperation, counterpiracy, law enforcement	4.5
GoGIN	Gulf of Guinea Inter-regional Network	2016–21	regional information sharing	9.285
SWAIMS	Support to West Africa Integrated Maritime Security	January 2019–January 2023	maritime law enforcement, legal reform, information sharing	6

**TABLE 1 CONTINUED**  
**THE EU'S GLOBAL MARITIME-SECURITY PROJECTS**

Acronym / Short Name	Full Name	Duration	Focus	Total Budget (millions of euros)
WeCAPS	West and Central Africa Port Security	2019–22	port security	8.5
PASSMAR	Support Programme to the Maritime Security Strategy in Central Africa	July 2019–July 2023	maritime law enforcement, legal reform	4.7
<b>Mediterranean</b>				
EUBAM Libya	European Union Border Assistance Mission in Libya	May 2013–June 2023	capacity building	240
<b>Asia</b>				
ESCIWA	Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia	2020–24	policy dialogue on maritime security	n/a

Sources: *EU Marsic Project: Enhancing Maritime Security and Safety through Information Sharing and Capacity Building; Regional Cooperation for Safe Navigation* (Paris: FEI, [2013?]), available at [issuu.com/](#); Council of the European Union, *List of Commitments to Be Presented by the European Union at the "Our Ocean Conference" (Palau, 7–8 December 2020)* (15 October 2020), available at [data.consilium.europa.eu/](#); European Union Committee, Brexit: Common Security and Defence Policy Missions and Operations, 2017–19, HL 132 (U.K.), available at [www.publications.parliament.uk/](#); "Sécurité maritime (#Mase Programme)," *Commission de l'océan Indien*, [www.commissionoceanindien.org/](#); "CRIMARIO I—Background," *EU Crimario*, 2019, [www.crimario.eu/](#); "EU MASE Rider: Promoting Maritime Governance through the Regional Centres," in *EU-GMCP Partnership* (n.p.: European Union and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d.), available at [www.unodc.org/](#); "UNODC & Partners Launch EU-Funded Programme on Port Security and Safety of Navigation," *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime* [hereafter *UNODC*], 2020, [www.unodc.org/](#); "Commercialisation of a Recyclable and Innovative Manufacturing Solution for an Optimised Novel Marine Turbine," *CORDIS*, [cordis.europa.eu/](#); "Critical Maritime Routes in the Gulf of Guinea Project (CRIMGO)," *FIIAPP*, [www.fiiapp.org/](#); "GoGIN—Gulf of Guinea Inter-regional Network," *Expertise France*, 2019, [www.expertisefrance.fr/](#); "Strengthening Criminal Justice Systems in West and Central Africa (SWAIMS)," in *EU-GMCP Partnership*; "WeCAPS—Western and Central Africa Port Security," *Expertise France*, 2020, [www.expertisefrance.fr/](#); "Programme to Support the Maritime Safety and Security in Strategy in Central Africa (PASSMAR): Maritime Legislative Frameworks and National Regulations Are Adopted, and the Implementation of the Laws Are Strengthened," *UNODC*, [www.unodc.org/](#); "EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in Libya," *European Union External Action*, [eeas.europa.eu/](#).

**TABLE 2**  
**THE EU'S NAVAL OPERATIONS**

Acronym / Short Name	Full Name	Duration	Focus	Total Budget (millions of euros)
EUNAVFOR ATALANTA	EU Naval Force—Somalia, Operation ATALANTA	December 2008–December 2024	protection of humanitarian aid, counterpiracy	4.4
EUNAVFOR MED SOPHIA	European Union Naval Force—Mediterranean Operation SOPHIA	June 2015–March 2020	human smuggling, search and rescue	6
EUNAVFOR MED IRINI	European Union Naval Force—Mediterranean Operation IRINI	March 2020–March 2023	human smuggling, search and rescue, sanction enforcement	4.9
EMASoH	European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz	February 2020–present	surveillance and deterrence	n/a
CMP-GoG	Coordinated Maritime Presences in the Gulf of Guinea	2021–24	counterpiracy	n/a

Source: *European Union External Action*, [eeas.europa.eu](#).

discuss them in more depth to show the current complexity of the EU's maritime-security engagements and priorities.

### *Western Indian Ocean*

In the western Indian Ocean, the primary focus of EU activities has been on addressing piracy and, increasingly, on the broader spectrum of blue crimes. This is unsurprising given that the EU initiated its global maritime-security programs as a response to piracy off the coast of Somalia.<sup>7</sup> Its most significant naval operation continues to be European Naval Force operation ATALANTA, which has been active in counterpiracy since 2009.<sup>8</sup> During this period, the mission's mandate has been widened to incorporate the monitoring of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (i.e., IUU) fishing activities, as well as sanctions violations. ATALANTA is supported by a dedicated coordination center—the Maritime Security Centre—Horn of Africa—to align its operations with the shipping industry.

The EU also has launched a series of capacity-building initiatives in the region.<sup>9</sup> Originally focused on piracy, these initiatives have expanded since their creation to include other issues, such as smuggling. The first programs were established in 2010. The Enhancing Maritime Security and Safety through Information Sharing and Capacity Building (MARSIC) project was tasked with providing training for regional maritime-security actors under the Djibouti Code of Conduct process, while the Critical Maritime Routes Law Enforcement Agencies (CRIMLEA) initiative focused on supporting regional law-enforcement agencies. CRIMLEA was complemented in 2012 by Regional Maritime Security Capacity Building Mission in the Horn of Africa and the Western Indian Ocean, a more extensive civilian capacity-building and training mission targeted at law enforcement, courts, and prisons in countries across the region. In 2016, the mission's remit was narrowed to focus on Somalia only and renamed European Union Capacity Building Mission in Somalia (EUCAP Somalia). In December 2022, its mission was extended through 2024.

Two additional projects, the Regional Programme for Promotion of Maritime Security in Eastern and Southern Africa and Indian Ocean (MASE) 1 and 2, have provided support to regional maritime-security organizations through legal advice, training, and maritime domain awareness. MASE 1 (2013–19), in particular, led to the establishment of two centers tasked with maritime domain awareness and operational coordination; MASE 2 (2019–23) focused on operationalizing them, and an expected third iteration of MASE will maintain them. The Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO) 1 (2015–19) and 2 (2020–24) projects have complemented these activities through the development of an information-sharing platform for maritime-security actors in the region. Finally, in 2020, the EU launched a dedicated port-security program with the goal of ensuring compliance with international conventions and improving port-state control

inspections. Overall, the EU has invested an estimated €313 million (\$370 million) in maritime-security capacity building in the western Indian Ocean since 2011.<sup>10</sup>

In February 2020, EU states launched the European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) initiative to protect shipping and deter hostile activities by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy.<sup>11</sup> In 2022, it was expected that the naval component of the initiative, known as Operation AGENOR, would be complemented or replaced by a new type of naval mission under the new Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) concept.<sup>12</sup>

### *Gulf of Guinea*

Since 2013, a substantial array of EU work has focused on the Gulf of Guinea in response to piracy in the region, including a significant investment in capacity building. Critical Maritime Routes Gulf of Guinea (2013–16) was targeted at supporting regional collaboration under the agreement known as the Yaoundé Code of Conduct.<sup>13</sup> It was joined in 2016–21 by the Gulf of Guinea Inter-regional Network project on information sharing, then by the Support Programme to the Maritime Security Strategy in Central Africa project (2019–23) on legislation and law enforcement, and by the Support to West Africa Integrated Maritime Security project (2019–23) focused on criminal justice systems. It also launched the West and Central Africa Port Security project on port security in 2019, which ended in 2022.

Originally reluctant to deploy naval forces for counterpiracy in the region, the EU changed course in 2021 and launched its Coordinated Maritime Presences in the Gulf of Guinea (CMP-GoG). The CMP-GoG tested a new form of naval operation, with forces operating under a loose coordination structure rather than a shared operational command. Overall, the EU has invested an estimated €33 million (\$39 million) in maritime-security activities in the Gulf of Guinea, excluding the cost of its naval mission.<sup>14</sup>

### *Mediterranean*

In the Mediterranean, the EU's activities have focused on countering human smuggling. In 2015, it launched a dedicated naval mission, EUNAVFOR MED, modeled on its experience in the western Indian Ocean. This comprised two operations focused on human smuggling, search and rescue, and, latterly, sanctions enforcement: Operation SOPHIA (2015–20) and Operation IRINI (launched in 2020 and expected to run until 2023).<sup>15</sup> Both are integrated with the work of the EU's European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX), the broader neighborhood policy, and the strategic dialogue with Mediterranean countries. In addition, the EU launched the European Union Border Assistance Mission in Libya in 2013 (projected to run until 2023), a capacity-building program that aims to support the Libyan coast guard to prevent human smuggling.

### *Summary*

Taken together, these initiatives illustrate the growing significance of maritime security in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) portfolio. The primary focus of the EU's maritime-security work has been on countering blue crimes—in particular, piracy and human smuggling. The EU's ambitions to address interstate aspects of maritime security, while already prominent in the 2014 EUMSS and in its Horn of Africa and Gulf of Guinea strategies, have gained further impetus in its 2021 Indo-Pacific strategy. This has led to proposals to advance a CMP for the Indo-Pacific as well as a series of diplomatic dialogues with partner states, most notably the Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia project in Southeast Asia.

As noted in this section, the EU's maritime-security activities are substantial but also overlapping and complex. For the most part, the immediate demands of crisis response have driven the creation and implementation of these activities. Such missions, once established, have tended to endure. This raises the question whether the EU has a coherent and strategic approach to its larger, global maritime-security activities. In the following sections, we address this question in more detail. We argue that a range of unresolved challenges continue to impede the EU from reaching its strategic goals.

## STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

### *An Abundance of Strategies*

The 2014 EUMSS and its supplementary action plans of 2014 and 2018 detail the EU's main sources of strategic direction for maritime security.<sup>16</sup> They lay out key interests and a series of concrete actions and projects by EU bodies and member states, many of which focus on intra-European problems and issues such as fisheries inspection or marine safety. However, the EUMSS is not the only EU strategy that addresses maritime-security issues; indeed, in recent years EU foreign and security strategies have proliferated.

The EUMSS first is nested in the more encompassing global security strategies of the EU. The 2014 document was written against the backdrop of the 2003 European Security Strategy, which does not prioritize the maritime domain and mentions the threat of piracy only in passing.<sup>17</sup> The 2003 strategy has since been replaced by the 2016 Global Strategy in which, by contrast, the oceans feature heavily and maritime security is assigned more importance.<sup>18</sup>

The 2016 Global Strategy and its implementation plan set out the role of the EU as a "global maritime security provider." It lists maritime security alongside other issues, including hybrid threats, migration, ocean-life protection, disarmament, nonproliferation, organized crime, and terrorism.<sup>19</sup> The accompanying implementation plan highlights the importance of maritime-surveillance



operations. Since 2020, the strategy has been complemented by the EU Security Union Strategy, which focuses on terrorism, crime, and infrastructure, including in the maritime domain.<sup>20</sup> Complementing these efforts, the EU also published its Strategic Compass initiative in early 2022, which aims to provide direction for the organization's military ambitions, including capability development.<sup>21</sup>

Second, the EU has a series of strategies and policies that focus on ocean governance more generally. These documents lay out the EU's approach to the maritime space and tend to foreground economic and environmental concerns. The EU's Integrated Maritime Policy of 2007, supported by its 2012 Blue Growth strategy, for example, emphasizes the importance of marine spatial planning and marine surveillance with a global outlook. The EU's joint communication of 10 November 2016 entitled "International Ocean Governance: An Agenda for the Future of Our Oceans" identifies blue crime as a major challenge for ocean governance, lays out the global maritime ambitions of the EU, stresses the need for integrating different policies, and calls for international cooperation and capacity building.<sup>22</sup> The June 2022 update of the International Ocean Governance policy reemphasizes these ambitions and includes maritime security as one of its four objectives.<sup>23</sup>

Third, the EU has concluded a series of regional strategies, many of which also have a maritime dimension.<sup>24</sup> Regional strategies aim to develop a coherent approach to a particular political region in the world and provide overall strategy for EU agencies and member states in those regions. Examples include the EU's Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region of 2009 and the 2011 Atlantic Maritime Strategy. Maritime security is a key dimension in the 2011 European Union Strategic Framework for the Horn of Africa and the 2014 European Union Strategy on the Gulf of Guinea, both of which identify piracy and blue crime as core concerns. The European Union Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, together with its updated Arctic policy, both concluded in 2021, emphasize interstate dimensions of the maritime-security agenda.

This proliferation of strategies risks pulling EU maritime-security policy and actions in diverging directions and raises the question of how the different priorities outlined in each document relate to each other. It also raises the risk for *forum shopping*—that is, that concerted action may be undermined by member states, directorates, or agencies engaging only with those strategies that best fit their own interests while sidelining or even deliberately undermining others.

The EU needs to work harder to clarify the relationship among its various current and future strategies that address aspects of maritime security, negotiate the trade-offs, and even address the contradictions among them to enable the effective employment and prioritization of its resources. It also may need to rethink the purpose of such strategies to provide coherence and monitoring in light of their growing abundance.

### *Interagency Coordination and Competition*

Maritime security cuts across different issue domains and institutional responsibilities and raises challenges of interagency coordination and competition. The number of European agencies involved in some aspect of global maritime security is substantial, owing to the diversity of member states' organizational structures. This structure implies building bridges between security and development professionals, between military and civil law-enforcement agencies, and also among implementation, administrative, and political levels. This challenge can be especially acute in activities that incorporate multiple, sometimes conflicting, problems and tasks. An example is the tension between border protection and saving lives at sea visible in the EU's operations in the Mediterranean.<sup>25</sup> Such problems may be aggravated by interagency rivalries or competition for resources—for instance, among navies, coast guards, police, and other agencies at the national level; or, at the EU level, between military structures and civil entities such as FRONTEX.

Coordination is complicated further by the fact that EU member states often have fundamentally different approaches to how they organize their maritime-security agencies.<sup>26</sup> Five EU member states are landlocked (Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Luxembourg, Slovakia) and do not operate dedicated agencies. Some states operate under sole-agency structures, as in Denmark and Portugal, whereby one maritime agency—usually the navy—takes responsibility for military, coast guard, and law-enforcement tasks at sea. Other states, such as Sweden and Germany, adopt a dual-agency structure with a clear division of organization and labor between military (naval) and law-enforcement (coast guard) tasks. Still others, such as Italy, operate multiple-agency structures incorporating several different maritime law-enforcement agencies alongside the navy.<sup>27</sup> Such diversity can complicate strategic and operational coordination among countries and presents a challenge for effective information sharing.

Clear political leadership, well-defined and transparent mandates, and avoidance of duplicated efforts—for instance, in maritime surveillance—provide avenues for partial solutions. Yet overcoming the tensions among the different understandings of, and organizational priorities in, maritime security will remain an ongoing task.<sup>28</sup> Providing a framework under which the EU's diverse range of maritime-security actors can coordinate their activities effectively will continue to be a challenge.

### *Command Structures: Headquarters and Coordination Cells*

A pivotal question for the EU is how to organize command structures under the CSDP. While the possibility of establishing a permanent military headquarters is debated frequently, the EU has not yet done so.<sup>29</sup> The Military Planning and Conduct Capability established in 2017 provides some continuity, yet military

command-and-control (C2) structures remain organized on a bespoke basis for specific operations.<sup>30</sup>

The EU's first naval operation, ATALANTA, established a mission-specific headquarters with unique features in which, for example, each participating nation would assign a liaison officer. Originally based in Northwood, U.K., within walking distance of the NATO Maritime Allied Command, the headquarters was relocated in 2019 to Rota, Spain, as a consequence of the Brexit process. Given the longevity of ATALANTA, which as of 2023 has been active for more than thirteen years, it has bequeathed the EU a de facto standing naval headquarters. Yet, for its SOPHIA and IRINI operations in the Mediterranean, the EU established a separate headquarters structure in Rome.

In 2021 the EU introduced a new concept, the CMP, for which the Gulf of Guinea operation is the pilot case.<sup>31</sup> Under the CMP, naval forces remain under national command, and coordination is on a voluntary basis and is organized through a Maritime Area of Interest Coordination Cell in Brussels. The CMP approach presents a more flexible model of coordination than that of the ATALANTA or SOPHIA operations. While this approach is still relatively novel, there are concrete plans to employ it for a new mission in the western Indian Ocean and a debate on how to adopt it for the broader Indo-Pacific.<sup>32</sup>

The EU thus currently operates different C2 models for its naval operations. This operation-by-operation approach has the advantage of flexibility and enables EU maritime-security interventions to adapt to different circumstances, whether operational or political, but it creates risks by adding further complexity to operations. It risks duplication of effort and complicates continuity in coordination among deployed forces, between political and military levels, with international partner navies, and with external stakeholders such as the shipping industry.

### *Data and Expertise Gaps*

Knowledge of operations in the maritime domain is often more limited than it is with land-based operations. Developing a unified approach to maritime surveillance, data collection, and information sharing is a vital component of maritime-security efforts that will help to identify threats and operational priorities. In line with the focus on surveillance of the EUMSS and the Global Strategy, the EU has advanced its capacity in maritime surveillance substantially.

The core actor in this regard is the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA), which develops satellite imagery and ship-positioning data with a global outlook. This maritime-domain picture is shared across Europe for coast-guard, fishery, and border-control functions. EMSA primarily has been used for intra-European purposes, but it also has started to provide imagery and position data for EU naval operations. EMSA also sits alongside a multiplicity

of other sources and platforms, many of them operated by individual member states. The EU has an ambition to fuse these under a common information-sharing environment (CISE); CISE also has a military component, known as the Maritime Surveillance (MARSUR) project, that the European Defence Agency has been developing since 2006.

In areas such as the western Indian Ocean, EU naval forces draw on a bespoke information-sharing platform, known as Mercury, which coordinates EU counterpiracy activities with its key partners in the region. Part of the capacity-building work of projects such as MASE and CRIMARIO is to develop maritime-domain technology and information-sharing tools for the western Indian Ocean region. These are freestanding initiatives and do not contribute directly to the EU's maritime situational awareness picture.

Moreover, current efforts toward generating knowledge for global maritime security are very narrow. While there are substantial data in some areas such as ship-positioning data, incident data on illegal fishing, or piracy events, the sharing and analysis of data on other issues, particularly environmental crime, are less available. These data gaps derive from several factors. Some may be explained by political or commercial ignorance or disinterest. Certain blue crimes, such as piracy, are prioritized by the shipping industry—meaning that data collection is relatively easy to monetize and consequently prevalent.<sup>33</sup> Others—such as waste smuggling, illegal mining, dredging, or oil bunkering—attract less commercial interest, and therefore data collection is sparse in these areas.<sup>34</sup> Gaps also may result from the difficulty of collecting reliable data on self-consciously clandestine activities taking place in the relatively surveilled expanses of the oceans, or from deliberate nonreporting by states or other maritime actors. Even where data are collected, problems of interpretation and information sharing can occur because of inconsistency in reporting criteria or because of a bias toward quantifying incidents over more-detailed qualitative analyses.<sup>35</sup>

Without such data, the effective and efficient employment of resources to address maritime security is difficult to achieve, and the way to address this challenge is not straightforward. Some possible responses to the issue are broadening data-collection efforts across different forms of blue crime, harmonizing classification systems, and introducing obligatory reporting requirements of incidents. The EU has made strides in this direction by developing the (voluntary) CISE and MARSUR, encouraging collaborations among FRONTEX, the EMSA, and the European Fishery Control Agency in regard to surveillance and intelligence networks, and incorporating increased global-surveillance capabilities of the European Space Agency. However, data gaps persist and information remains dispersed.

At the same time, the novelty and complexity of the maritime-security agenda mean that overall knowledge and understanding of its challenges are

comparatively low, including among journalists and the policy generalists in governments, parliaments, and diplomatic services. This means that the pool of experts on which decision makers can draw to assist in making informed policy choices is often very small. It also implies insufficient public attention to the importance of maritime-security responses and a lack of subject-matter experts who are available for the implementation and evaluation of policies and projects. Further education, training, and awareness-raising initiatives are required in this area to address these deficiencies.

### *Capacity Building*

The EU's main responses to maritime-security issues beyond its borders are capacity-building and security-assistance programs. These missions with partner states incorporate multiple objectives, such as strengthening maritime law enforcement through maritime-security sector reform initiatives; supporting the development of legal, judicial, and penal infrastructures to help countries tackle blue crimes effectively; and assisting in the creation of regional and national maritime-domain-awareness and information-sharing mechanisms. EU capacity-building work in these areas includes training courses, mentoring and technical advice, and the provision of equipment and infrastructure, but also programs with a human-security focus targeted at coastal communities.<sup>36</sup>

The sheer number of capacity-building projects initiated and funded by the EU is impressive, but the impact of these investments continues to be somewhat limited. Capacity building is often not well coordinated, which can lead to duplication both within EU projects and with the activities of partner states and organizations. The western Indian Ocean region alone currently hosts or until recently hosted three dedicated maritime-security capacity-building programs—EUCAP Somalia, MASE 2, and CRIMARIO 2—alongside multiple national-level initiatives by EU members.<sup>37</sup> Many activities focus on easily implemented initiatives with short time horizons, such as equipment donations or training programs; these types of initiatives struggle to tackle longer-term challenges of organizational reform or the root causes of maritime insecurities.<sup>38</sup> Often straightforward and easy-to-measure indicators, such as the number of people trained or the amount of equipment provided, are used to determine success, rather than how well a reform process is being instituted or whether lasting structures are being established. Programs sometimes struggle to secure local buy-in and commitment to their activities, which raises questions about their future sustainability.<sup>39</sup>

The EU also has put a strong emphasis on building capacities on a regional level. This entails further challenges, and especially raises the question of what regional scope can deal best with what are generally transnational maritime-security issues. Since regions are always political constructs, there are often

several competing and overlapping endeavors.<sup>40</sup> For example, should Somali piracy be approached as a problem of the Horn of Africa, eastern Africa, the western Indian Ocean, or the Indian Ocean? In practice, the EU tends to work with competing regional constructs. It simultaneously supported the region established by MASE (centered on East Africa and the western Indian Ocean islands), but also the Djibouti Code of Conduct region through MARSIC (which, in addition to the MASE region, includes the entirety of southern Africa, the Red Sea, and Arab states), as well as the broader Indian Ocean region through its CRIMARIO 2 program. The regional focus is also problematic because the operation of regional cooperative maritime constructs is slow and often implies processes that take decades, but the majority of the supporting projects have much shorter time spans of three to five years.

There is a risk of conflating output with impact in EU maritime-security capacity building. A systematic and reflexive evaluation of what such programs need to do to succeed over the long term will be critical if the EU is to turn its capacity-building investments into sustainable maritime-security gains.

#### *NATO, Brexit, and the EU*

NATO and the EU share many of the same security concerns, including the need to fight terrorism on land and at sea, to prevent the proliferation of weapons, to deter and contain Russia, and to respond to the rise of China. The relationship between the EU, including its Common Foreign and Security Policy, and NATO always has been complex. This complexity applies to maritime security as well.<sup>41</sup> At stake is a tension between the EU's desire for strategic sovereignty and autonomy on the one hand, and reliance on the United States for key military resources on the other. The difference in membership between the two organizations complicates this picture further. Six EU states are not NATO members at this writing: Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Ireland, Malta, and Sweden; Finland and Sweden recently have applied to join the alliance. In addition, the ongoing dispute over Cyprus creates a delicate relationship between the EU and NATO member Turkey. Operationally, this implies that many of the capabilities of the twenty-one EU member states that are part of NATO may be bound by tasks set by the alliance, which in turn poses restrictions on the kind of naval operations the EU can run without undermining NATO objectives and plans.

However, NATO and the EU have made a number of efforts to align their security activities in recent decades. Among these efforts is the so-called Berlin Plus Agreement (2002), which guaranteed that the EU can draw on NATO assets and infrastructures, as well as a series of joint-partnership declarations in 2010, 2016, and 2018. Counterpiracy operations off the coast of Somalia provide a paradigmatic example of partnership; between 2009 and 2016, both the EU and NATO ran operations that worked hand in hand, facilitated by the geographic

proximity of their headquarters.<sup>42</sup> NATO and the EU have run simultaneous coordinated operations in the Mediterranean too, where the EU focuses on border protection and countering human smuggling, while NATO's Operation SEA GUARDIAN, launched in 2016, emphasizes nonproliferation, counterterrorism, and capacity building.

There is an implicit consensus that NATO should focus on tasks such as deterrence, collective defense, and counterterrorism operations while the EU deals with maritime-policing and crime-fighting tasks. Yet even if all EU member states were to agree to this division of labor, drawing clear boundaries around these tasks is not always easy. It has become more difficult still both because of the growing military and geopolitical ambitions of the EU but also because of its changing relations with the United Kingdom. Whether and how aggression by the Russian government will reshuffle the separation of labor between the EU and NATO also remains an open question.

A telling example is the failure to respond to incidents in the Strait of Hormuz through a joint operation. When two tankers were attacked in the summer of 2019, the United States and the United Kingdom led the establishment of a multilateral mission named the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC). Lithuania also joined the IMSC—the only EU state to do so. Other EU member states declined to participate and instead initiated their own EMASoH mission, which consists only of EU naval contributions. While some of these disagreements can be linked to the difficulties in the transatlantic partnership under the administration of U.S. president Donald J. Trump and its Iran policy, no agreement to move to a NATO mandate has been reached since and the EU intends to continue its mission in the region under the CMP concept. One of the reasons for this strategic choice lies in the EU's difficult recent relations with the United Kingdom.

The Brexit process has created significant new uncertainties for the EU and its relationship to NATO. The EU lost one of its most capable navies and gained a series of new maritime borders when the United Kingdom voted to leave. With the United Kingdom in the process of reregulating the governance of its own waters, its relations with the EU at sea are increasingly complicated, as struggles over fisheries governance and small-boat migration demonstrate.<sup>43</sup> The United Kingdom also shows a strong preference for developing new minilateral agreements such as the AUKUS arrangement with Australia and the United States.<sup>44</sup> These have the potential to challenge EU relations with key allies further, such as those among France, the United Kingdom, and Australia in the Indo-Pacific. Continuing uncertainties around the strategic priorities and interests of the United Kingdom and how these relate to those of the EU will be challenging for the EU to manage, both within and also outside NATO.

### *Addressing Emerging Maritime-Security Challenges*

The maritime-security environment is dynamic, with existing threats and risks continuing to evolve even as new challenges emerge. In the main, the EU has been adaptable in the face of these changes. It established the EMASoH mission in the face of asymmetric threats to shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, for example, while the EMSA has played a pioneering role setting standards in response to the rise of cyber threats to shipping and ports. In other areas, however, there is still significant work for the EU to do.

Environmental issues increasingly are of central importance to maritime security. Environmental degradation at sea can impact the food and economic security of coastal populations dependent on fishing or other maritime activities for their sustenance or livelihoods. Conservation and sustainability initiatives, such as conducting marine spatial planning and establishing marine protected areas, necessitate the enforcement of laws and regulations if they are to be viable. This is perhaps most apparent in the case of preventing illicit fishing, but it also concerns the policing of various forms of pollution crimes, including illicit disposal of oil, waste, and ballast water.

Such issues illustrate the central importance of environmental issues in EU maritime security. They suggest the need to ensure not only that such concerns are integrated better into the EU's strategic thinking but also that maritime-security work is coordinated better with other EU ambitions, such as the sustainable economic development of the marine environment.<sup>45</sup> They also imply a need to link actions at home with those abroad—for example, in managing and regulating the activities of EU fishing fleets in the waters of the “global South.”<sup>46</sup>

Climate change also may lead to a wider spectrum of tasks for maritime-security forces, including new patterns of blue crime requiring a law-enforcement response. With migratory species moving into new areas, illicit fishing will occur elsewhere and new patterns of human smuggling might occur. A growing range of environmental regulations will criminalize new activities in the future and create new demands for policing compliance with those rules. Lastly, increased extreme weather events also will mean new demands for search-and-rescue operations and naval humanitarian and disaster-relief operations.<sup>47</sup>

The likelihood of more extreme weather events and higher waves will increase the seakeeping demands on boats and ships, while sea-level rise will increase the flood risk to key installations such as harbors and naval bases. The U.S. Navy, which so far is the only maritime-security force that has investigated seriously the potential impact on maritime infrastructure, concluded that a majority of its facilities are at risk in this way.<sup>48</sup>

The EU is making substantial efforts to address and tackle climate change under its so-called European Green Deal. However, these efforts have not trickled



down to the maritime-security agenda. Whether and how the EU will be affected by these developments calls for a systematic review of how different climate-change scenarios will impact maritime insecurity and forces going forward.

Another issue domain new to the maritime-security agenda is the protection of critical subsea infrastructures. The sea is not only the main conduit for international transport; it also is essential for data transmission and, increasingly, that of electricity. These “invisible infrastructures” are critical to the EU economy. Up to 95 percent of all global communications, including e-mails, conference calls, and financial transactions, transit via the global submarine data cable network. Europe’s digital economy and its military operations are heavily dependent on this cable network.

This makes the protection of the cable infrastructure a vital maritime-security issue that to date has not featured strongly enough on the EU agenda.<sup>49</sup> The 2014 EUMSS includes the protection of infrastructure as one of its key interests, but the organization is far from having a concerted approach to the issue. Some states, such as France and Portugal, indicate a high level of awareness of the issue, but this has not yet influenced thinking in Brussels. Subsea cables are a potential target of gray-zone warfare, terrorism, and crime. While no incident in which cables have been targeted deliberately is known so far, reports indicate that intended gray-zone campaigns may include doing so.<sup>50</sup> The attack on the Nord Stream pipelines that occurred in the Baltic Sea in September 2022 reinforces this interpretation and indicates how vulnerable underwater infrastructures are.

The EU has made a considerable effort to enhance its visibility and profile as a maritime-security actor. As our review has shown, the range of actions the EU has taken as a collective-security actor is impressive and ambitious. Ongoing naval operations in different maritime regions and substantial investments in capacity building for maritime security around the world, as well as growing geopolitical ambitions reflected in the organization’s Global Strategy and the Indo-Pacific strategy, demonstrate that maritime security is a priority in the EU’s foreign and security policy. The importance the organization has given to maritime security under the EU presidencies of Portugal (2021) and France (2022) and also the preparations for revising the 2014 Maritime Security Strategy indicate that the EU is destined to continue on this path.

Yet the EU’s quest to establish itself as a global maritime-security provider remains unfulfilled and, as we have argued, a series of obstacles stand in its way. These obstacles present ongoing challenges and also might imply that international naval actors perceive the EU as a weak or unreliable partner. The first set of challenges concerns coherence and coordination at the level of strategies and operations. Here the EU clearly will have to identify whether maritime security has

become primarily an attempt to participate in strategic competition with global powers, or whether instead it should continue to prioritize advancing the rules of global ocean governance and the fight against blue crime. Given the complex organizational structure of the EU and the diversity of its member states, inter-agency coordination both internally and globally always will be a difficult challenge; harmonization, transparency, and information sharing arguably will be the key to addressing it. In terms of C2 structures, there seem to be few prospects for centralization, which in principle could lessen the coordination problem. Here, the EU will have to evaluate carefully whether its new naval coordination tool, the CMP, actually works as well as intended.

Maritime domain awareness and information sharing are both important potential force multipliers for the EU in maritime security. Efforts to strengthen intra-European architecture in these areas are under way, but governments must work to fill gaps in data and expertise. Capacity building, along with naval operations, remains the key instrument in the EU's global maritime-security repertoire. Yet, as we have argued, EU programs have yet to fulfill their full potential, and sometimes they even risk having contradictory or conflicting objectives. The EU also must make a greater effort to order its relations with NATO, the United States, and with its most important neighbor, the United Kingdom, and ask when and how coordination and an appropriate division of labor is possible. Finally, while the EU has been agile and responsive to emerging challenges in the past, it must continue to be so in finding appropriate answers to the problems of environmental security at sea, climate change, and critical infrastructure at sea.

If the EU can address these challenges, it has the potential to cement its position as one of the world's leading maritime-security providers. The new EU maritime-security-strategy process that began in 2022 offers a key moment of opportunity for it to do so. If it is to be effective, it will require an honest reflection on the strengths and limitations of EU maritime-security activities to date, a willingness to tackle problems and contradictions where they exist, and a coherent sense of strategic purpose across and between different foreign- and security-policy priorities.

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#### NOTES

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  2. Authors’ estimate, drawing on the available budgets and documentations. See table 1 for further details.
  3. *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe; A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy* (n.p.: [European Union], 2016), p. 41, available at [www.eeas.europa.eu/](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/).
  4. Our focus is explicitly on the global role and external dimension of the EU, not on intra-European maritime-security provisions or the work of agencies such as the European Maritime Safety Agency, European Border and Coast Guard Agency, or the European Fisheries Control Agency. A useful recent overview of the activities of these entities is provided in European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint Staff Working Document: Report on the Implementation of the Revised EU Maritime Security Strategy Action Plan*, SWD (2020) 252 final (2020).
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  10. Authors’ estimate, drawing on the available budgets and documentations. See table 1. This calculation excludes programs that target maritime security indirectly, such as ocean conservation or fishery management and marine-spatial-planning initiatives.
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