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**EU MISSION ASPIDES TO  
SECURE TRADE IN THE RED SEA:  
AN OPPORTUNITY FOR  
DECISIVE EU FOREIGN POLICY  
AND INTEROPERABILITY OR  
DOOMED TO FAILURE?**

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## Introduction

The military conflict that broke out in Gaza in October 2023 spread when, out of self-proclaimed solidarity with the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip (BBC, 2024), the Yemenite Shia Islamist Houthis began attacking civilian merchant ships in the Red Sea at the end of 2023. Due to Yemen's geopolitically significant location at the entrance to the Red Sea, the attacks led to a massive decline in trade through the corridor, which is of crucial importance for Europe. The US responded decisively in December 2023 with the naval mission Operation Prosperity Guardian, however, in contrast, the EU's own response, designated Operation EUNAVFOR ASPIDES, was slow to get off the ground. Notwithstanding, now that the EU's plans have been finalised, this InfoFlash aims to analyse the EU mission with regard to its operational realisation, its creation and mandate, what exactly the EU can achieve through it, and its risks and challenges. Moreover, this InfoFlash will delve into the international consequences of the mission, and how it may shape the perception of the EU on the world stage. In this respect, the mission has the potential to provide a wide array of opportunities to the Union. For instance, the EU could seize the opportunity to demonstrate to the world that it is an internally united global player who is prepared to effectively carry out risky missions in order to fulfil its foreign policy responsibilities by promoting security and stability in the world.

## Background: Houthi Attacks on Civilian Merchant Shipping in the Red Sea

To understand the significance of the current attacks, an overview of the situation in the Red Sea is essential. The Iran-backed Zaidi Houthi rebels control large areas in the west of the civil war-torn country of Yemen, including the Red Sea coast around the harbour city of Hudaida. At its narrowest, the Red Sea is only 27 kilometres wide in the Bab al-Mandab strait, a bottleneck through which an estimated 15% of world trade passes (UNCTAD, 2024). Almost all important maritime trade routes between Europe and Asia pass through this area. Disruption of maritime trade in this route has already proved to have significant ramifications. This was demonstrated by a cargo ship becoming stuck and blocking the Suez Canal and, therefore, access to the Mediterranean from the Red Sea in March 2021, greatly damaging world trade as a result (Stevens, 2021). In terms of its effect on maritime trade, there are clear parallels between this incident and the current situation in which the Houthis have been attacking merchant ships in the region since November 2023. Several ships have been hit and damaged by drones and missiles and one has been hijacked. Given that ships have been attacked indiscriminately (BBC, 2024), not only those with links to Israel, several of the world's largest shipping companies have opted to avoid the route, resulting in a 42% decrease in trade through the region. The longer alternative route around the Cape of Good Hope has increased costs and resulted in delivery problems (UNCTAD, 2024). The EU External Action Service estimates the resulting costs at €360 million per hour (Kempin & Schneider, 2024). To avoid this, Europe has a vital interest in ensuring that merchant shipping routes through the Red Sea return to normal (EEAS, 2023). However, it seems the situation will not resolve itself. The Houthis have so far shown no willingness to end the attacks, and there is no end in sight to the conflict in Gaza which could ostensibly ease the situation (Al-Muslimi, 2024). Hence, what remains is the option of enforcing the security of free shipping through military means, either passively by protecting the ships against intercepting threats such as missiles and intimidation through the sheer presence of Western warships, or actively through direct military strikes against Houthi military infrastructure in Yemen.

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## The EU Mission Eunav for Aspides

The possibility of an EU naval mission first emerged immediately in response to the first Houthi attacks in November 2023. For several weeks it was unclear whether a new mission needed to be created or if there needed to be an extension of the mandate of existing missions, such as the anti-piracy mission Atalanta off the coast of Somalia. Furthermore, disagreements between EU member states emerged quickly. While the Netherlands and Denmark promptly joined US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian, prepared to support and drive forward plans for an EU naval mission (Jones, 2024), other states put on the brakes. Spain generally opposed a mission in the region for domestic reasons and declared early on that it would not participate in any initiative (Marcos, 2023). Moreover, in the French case, support for a mission was tempered by a desire to avoid being placed under American command (Barigazzi et al. 2024). Accordingly, it took until 19 February for the EU to reach an agreement (Jones, 2024), an agreement which was only possible because Spain abstained rather than formally blocking the mission, allowing the other EU states to act without their involvement (Palma Hermann & Díaz, 2024).

Regarding the mission's mandate, it is already clear that the EU is taking a different approach to the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian. The EU mission will be purely defensive (Council of the European Union, 2024), as is suggested by the mission name "Aspides," which means shield in Greek. As such, there will be no direct attacks on Houthi positions in Yemen (Bundeswehr 2024). On the one hand, the EU fears being drawn too deeply into the conflict or ultimately triggering a broader conflagration in the Middle East (Joyner, 2024). On the other hand, there are doubts about the effectiveness of direct attacks, as so far, there are no signs that the US and UK air strikes have had a significant impact in reducing Houthi capabilities (Childs, 2024). Moreover, the bombing of Houthi positions in Yemen by Saudi Arabia and the UAE over the span of years has not caused lasting damage to the rebel group or decisively limited its capabilities (Al-Muslimi, 2024). As a result, the plans for Eunavfor Aspides include the deployment of military vessels of EU member states to: 'accompany vessels in the Area of Operation; ensure maritime situational awareness [...]; protect vessels against multi-domain attacks at sea, in full respect of international law, including the principles of necessity and proportionality [...]' (Council of the European Union, 2024). The area of operations includes the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman, and the Persian Gulf (Bundeswehr, 2024). Furthermore, it has been outlined that the mission will be conducted in 'close cooperation with like-minded maritime security providers [...]', namely the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian (Council of the European Union, 2024).

The operational implementation of the mission presents serious risks. It can be assumed that the Houthis will target EU naval vessels in the same way that they have targeted civilian merchant shipping. In doing so, the Houthis can fall back on a broad spectrum of maritime cruise and ballistic missiles, drones and speedboats mainly provided by Iran (Hinz, 2024). The weapons, which are, in part, highly modern, present various defence challenges and are difficult to intercept (Hinz, 2024). The US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian has already been the target of direct attacks by the Houthis (Scott, 2024).

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Accordingly, the EU also assumes a dangerous mission with various scenarios of aggression, including direct attacks. The inspector of the German Navy, Jan Christian Kaack, recently described the mission as the 'most serious deployment of a German naval unit for many decades' (Reiche, 2024). The EU is also endeavouring to do justice to this threat scenario in its operational implementation. Germany, for example, is deploying the Frigate Hessen as part of the mission. The ship was specially designed for convoy protection and maritime surveillance. It is equipped with a radar that can monitor an airspace the size of the entire North Sea and anti-aircraft missiles with a range of more than 160 kilometres making it perfectly suited to the requirements of the mission on site. Germany has assured that the navy has no unit better trained and equipped for this scenario (Reiche, 2024). In addition to Germany, France, Belgium and Italy are also expected to provide ships, likely also frigates, for the mission. The command centre will be set up under Greek leadership in Larissa, Greece (Jones, 2024).

### **Operational Limitations and Challenges**

The question of what the EU can achieve with the mission is first and foremost of an operational nature. The clear objective of preventing attacks against merchant shipping and normalising shipping traffic in the Red Sea provides a clear benchmark against which the success of the mission will be measured. If the number of attacks decreases and the attacks are unsuccessful because missiles are intercepted, the mission will be a success. On paper, the mission benefits from extensive planning and is well and appropriately equipped in terms of materials, as demonstrated by the mobilisation of Germany's Frigate Hessen. However, it is important to note the constraining elements of the mission. The Hessen, for example, has never actually been battle-tested (Kempin & Schneider, 2024), which means some uncertainty remains in terms of the vessel's performance. Nevertheless, the question arises as to whether the mission can achieve its ambitious goals. Neither the presence of the American escort ships nor the direct attacks on positions in Yemen have so far deterred the Houthis from attacking shipping in the Red Sea. Of 44 recorded Houthi attacks in the Red Sea since mid-November 2023, 27 took place after the launch of Operation Prosperity Guardian in mid-December 2023, compared to just 17 before its launch (Raydan & Nadimi, 2024). While the mission has not yet been able to reduce the number of attacks, the damage caused has been reduced as British and American warships have stopped numerous attacks and intercepted missiles and drones before they were able to reach their targets (Raydan & Nadimi, 2024). This is an area where EU vessels can no doubt significantly contribute. By increasing the number of naval vessels with advanced defence capabilities against air and sea targets, the probability that more attacks can be repelled and more missiles and drones can be intercepted also increases.

### **The EU's Role on the World Stage and Consequences for the EU's Reputation**

In addition to its main objective of protecting merchant shipping, Eunavfor Aspides also fulfils other purposes. The mission contributes to the EU's long-term strategy to establish a presence in the region and expand cooperation with Arab countries, especially the Gulf states (EEAS, 2022). The EU hopes that the defensive nature of the European mission will be more palatable to states in the region, thereby increasing cooperation with actors in the vicinity.

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Egypt, for example, relies heavily on trade through the Suez Canal and therefore has a vital interest in a safe sea route through the Red Sea (Al-Muslimi, 2024). However, open support for the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian is unthinkable for the country and for many countries in the region as well due to its offensive characteristics. As the Houthis have publicly linked their attacks to the ongoing conflict in Gaza, openly supporting US strikes against the Houthis would not be popular with a domestic audience for countries in the region, as it could potentially give the impression of alignment with US or even Israeli interests (Al-Muslimi, 2024).

Regarding the US, the EU is trying to make it clear that its mission is not in competition with Prosperity Guardian, but that both parties intend to cooperate closely to achieve common goals despite their different approaches (Council of the European Union, 2024).

With this mission, the EU also wants to set an example in terms of foreign policy and prove on the world stage that it takes responsibility and can assert its interests independently (Uysal, 2024). Seen in this light, from an EU perspective, the external impact of the mission is ultimately almost more important than its operational success. In contrast, the mission has already demonstrated the very clear limits of the EU in the realm of foreign policy action. While barely a month lapsed from the start of the Houthi attacks in November 2023 until the genesis of the US-led mission, the EU took three times as long and only agreed on a mission towards the end of February 2024. This cannot be explained by the fact that the US already had a military presence in the region before the start of its operation, as the EU also had military vessels operating both at the Horn of Africa as part of Operation Atalanta and as part of the French-led mission AGENOR in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH/AGENOR, 2024). Unsurprisingly, this led to a debate as to whether an expansion of one of the existing missions would make more sense than establishing a new one (Kempin & Schneider, 2024), however, this did not materialise due to the EU's second major problem: internal disagreement. Once again, this issue shows that not all EU member states agree in the realm of foreign policy. Not only does this weaken interoperability between EU member states, but it also makes the EU seem like a fragmented entity from an outside perspective. Ultimately, in this case, Spain impeded the expansion of Operation Atlanta and a quick EU response as a result (Marcos, 2023).

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## Conclusion

Through the mission EUNAVFOR ASPIDES in the Red Sea, the EU is proving that it is prepared to take foreign policy risks in order to achieve its international goals. However, in contrast to the resolute US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian, the EU has presented itself as a more cautious player in the international arena, demonstrating its reservations in blindly falling in line with Washington's foreign policy directives. Moreover, the mission has also demonstrated once again that the EU is not in a position to react quickly and decisively to dynamic international developments due to fragmented national interests and the long and difficult decision-making processes associated with it. The mission will show the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of the EU approach, which is now in the spotlight. Regardless, the mission presents the EU with a number of potential risks. If the mission falls short in protecting trade vessels or suffers losses itself, failing to normalise shipping in the region, the EU could well take a hit to its international reputation and will no doubt have to question its strategy. After all, it is EU member states that will be the first to feel the effects of potential failure in the form of higher prices and supply shortages. At the same time, it may be better for the EU to appear somewhat hesitant rather than risk a conflagration by taking overly offensive measures in an unstable region full of colliding interests and considerable potential for escalation. Concurrently, here lies an opportunity for the EU to demonstrate enhanced interoperability between the participating member states at an operational level while cooperating with regional actors.

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