GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL

EU Red Sea Mission: Strategic Autonomy Done Wrong

Article by Raluca Besliu
March 1, 2024

The possible return of Donald Trump to the White House is prompting the EU to rethink its foreign policy and achieve strategic autonomy from the US on defence. The Aspides naval mission in the Red Sea, however, is a step in the wrong direction.

On 19 February, the EU launched the Red Sea naval mission Aspides to defend commercial vessels from Houthi attacks. The Houthis claimed over thirty drone and missile strikes since November 2023 in retaliation for Israel's war on Gaza. Aspides, with an initial fleet of three frigates, reflects the EU's will to protect its trade interests in a vital commerce artery: nearly 40 per cent of its trade with the Middle East and Asia passes through the Red Sea.

The mission also signals the bloc's intention to gain strategic autonomy from the US. The EU decided to act independently despite the existence of a Washington-led coalition of around 20 countries, including EU member states such as Denmark and the Netherlands, aiming to secure Red Sea navigation. The possible reelection of Donald Trump, with his critical stance towards NATO, is prompting the EU to rethink its military ambitions.

By intervening to defend its commercial interests without calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, however, the EU is failing to truly distinguish itself from the US and address the root cause of the Red Sea instability. Worse, it exposes itself to the rising wave of anti-Western discontent sweeping Arab countries. Combined with the EU's limited grasp of the Red Sea's intricate dynamics, this discontent amplifies the risks associated with the mission. The region is a geopolitical powder keg, where even minor interventions could have substantial side effects.

> *By intervening to defend its commercial interests
> without calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, the EU is failing
> to truly distinguish itself from the US and address the
> root cause of the Red Sea instability.*

Red Sea effect

For the Houthis, a militia controlling Yemen's most populous parts, including the capital Sanaa, escalation is a survival tactic. In Yemen, discontent with their repressive methods of governance was growing. Their decision to forcefully challenge Israel in recent months has boosted their popularity internally and across the Middle East.

The Houthis' attacks considerably disrupted Red Sea trade, with the overall volume of commercial traffic passing through the Suez Canal falling by more than 40 per cent. Multiple sectors of the EU economy have been directly impacted. The automotive supply chain, for example, has been put to the test; several industrial plants announced temporary production shutdowns due to delays in getting car parts from

Asia.

The energy sector is also facing challenges. In mid-January, QatarEnergy, the second-largest exporter of liquefied natural gas, stopped sending tankers via the Red Sea to consider alternative routes to Europe, one of its largest customers. Some shipping companies have rerouted vessels via Cape of Good Hope in southern Africa, adding around ten days of sailing and an additional cost of up to 1 million dollars per round trip. Insurance costs are also rising. In Europe, this will not only result in delayed deliveries but also higher final prices, likely contributing to inflation.

Given these circumstances, the EU's decision to intervene is not surprising. But is sending warships a sound strategy?

Bigger fish

Unlike the US and China, the EU is a minor player in the Red Sea, lacking military bases or longstanding security relations that could provide vital on-the-ground information and some legitimacy.

The US remains the strongest military presence in the region. It has a military base in Djibouti, and its naval forces patrol the area to ensure safe navigation and combat piracy. The US has also been for decades a close security partner and supplier of arms for countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel.

China has a smaller military presence compared to the US, but its influence is growing. Much of its trade with the EU passes through the Suez Canal, which makes the Rea Sea a key transit point. Beijing has had a permanent naval presence in the Gulf of Aden since 2008, and in 2017 it established its first overseas military base in Djibouti.

Before the current crisis, the EU's largest Red Sea engagement was its operation Atalanta, launched in 2008 on the Somalian coast to prevent pirate attacks on merchant and commercial vessels. In 2022, the mission was extended until December 2024, expanding its scope beyond piracy deterrence to include implementing the UN arms embargo on Somalia, reducing drug trafficking, and supporting the fight against the Islamist militant group Al-Shabaab.

Even diplomatically, the EU strategy is less comprehensive in the Red Sea than in other parts of the world. It tends to categorise Red Sea countries based on continental divisions – Africa and Asia – or on ethnicity, such as in its cooperation with the Arab League. Yet, the Red Sea has complex and volatile dynamics, with interconnected crises and regional power interests. Intervening in the region without fully grasping those dynamics only risks escalating tensions.

Vicious circle

A telling example of interconnected crises was the resurgence of piracy parallel to the Houthis' attacks. Observers suspect a collaboration between the groups. The shift in focus away from counter-piracy operations towards addressing the Houthi threat may also have created a security vacuum off the Somalian coast, enabling pirates to resume their activities.

The swift resurgence of piracy suggests that its root causes were never properly tackled, and could further disrupt international trade. The pirates may also help Al-Shabaab gather financial resources, and smuggle weapons and ammunition into Somalia (they faced similar accusations in 2017). To further complicate the picture, in recent years al-Shabaab has been strengthening its ties with Iran, another key

actor in the Red Sea and backer of the Houthis. The Somalian group supplies Iran with uranium for its nuclear programme, in exchange for material and logistical support.

Tehran has been vocal against Israel's actions in Gaza, and is reportedly sending the Houthis increasingly sophisticated weapons, including drone jammers and long-range rockets and missile components. This creates a destructive vicious circle, where Iran bolsters the Houthis, the Houthis bolster the Somalian pirates, and so on.

Regional powers

Through its influence in the Red Sea, Iran aims to project its interests into the Middle East and Africa. During the last decade, Iran has expanded its naval activity in the Red Sea and Suez Canal, and reinforced its presence in Port Sudan. Tehran sees African countries and actors as allies against the colonising West. Al-Shabaab is just one example.

Tehran has already rejected the US and UK's calls to end its support for the Houthis, and praised the armed militia for their "brave actions". Iran's Ambassador to Belgium has also condemned the EU and the US over their "double-standard approach to the Israeli regime's ongoing war of genocide against the besieged Gaza Strip".

Israel's war on Gaza is driving the EU and Iran further apart. In November 2023, EU High Representative Josep Borrell met with leaders from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan, but omitted Iran. The EU also considered further sanctions against Iran for its support of Hamas. Now, Tehran is likely to view the EU's Red Sea mission as unwarranted interference.

With many issues at play, the EU's Aspides mission might amplify existing tensions.

Saudi Arabia, usually more aligned with Western powers, is also unlikely to embrace the EU's Red Sea presence. Riyadh has silently sided with Iran on the Houthi attacks. This could partly reflect Saudi public opinion, largely opposed to Israel's Gaza actions, and partly an effort to continue rapprochement with Iran and precarious peace talks with the Houthis. Despite its close ties with the US, Saudi Arabia took a stance against Israel's Gaza intervention. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman called for a halt to arms exports to Israel and suspended the US-facilitated diplomatic warming with Israel.

Saudi Arabia is interested in securing peace in the Red Sea to pursue its Vision 2030, designed to diminish its reliance on oil and diversify the economy. Central to Vision 2030 is the development of Red Sea tourism infrastructure to attract international visitors, but this will not be possible as long as there are active conflicts in the region.

Way forward

With many issues at play, the EU's Aspides mission might amplify existing tensions. Plus, as Red Sea piracy shows, issues that are not tackled at their root are quick to reemerge. In this case, tackling the root cause of instability while taking a step towards strategic autonomy from the US in the region would entail pushing for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and taking a firm stance against Israel's actions. This way, the EU would also demonstrate a commitment to the values it professes, beyond the protection of its commercial interests. Such a stance would resonate across Arab countries, helping the EU establish

its position in the Middle East.

The EU has several tools at its disposal to achieve these objectives. As Israel's largest trading partner, it could exert influence on Netanyahu's government, for example by reviewing the EU-Israel Association Agreement or imposing targeted sanctions.

Brussels should also pressure EU member states to halt arms sales to Israel. The Italian government claimed to have ceased exports since 7 October, but major exporters like Germany and France have not followed suit, reflecting divisions within the EU on the situation in Gaza. However, a failure to take decisive action risks fuelling anti-European sentiments across the Red Sea, leaving the EU in deep water.

Raluca Besliu is originally from Romania, but currently lives in Belgium. She is interested in Romanian and Eastern European affairs, human rights issues, and global governance.