



## Enhancing Maritime Security at the Edges of Europe Seminar Report

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The world and Europe are transitioning to a new era and international order, leading to potentially unstable and threatening years ahead. In this context, as sea routes are vital to Western societies, it is essential to preserve maritime security. On 16 April 2024, under the Belgian presidency of the Council of the European Union, the Royal Higher Institute for Defence (RHID) and the Centre for Security and Defence Studies (CSDS) organised a seminar on maritime security focusing on the North Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea and the Gulf of Guinea, with an additional presentation on the Strait of Hormuz.

The panels emphasised the necessity of a regional approach, tailoring policies and capacities to each area's unique environment. Neighbouring countries, with their vested interests, are key to addressing regional issues. While other areas like the Malacca or Taiwan straits, the Baltic Sea or the Arctic are also significant, the seminar prioritised regions facing the most immediate dangers. Therefore, **this seminar report is structured around the North Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, the Gulf of Guinea and the Strait of Hormuz**, with each panel focusing on the prevailing issues specific to its region.<sup>3</sup>

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## NORTH SEA AND CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURES

### Targets

The North Sea, surrounded by Europe's major seaports, is a **crucial energy and communication hub** and a **transatlantic gateway**, housing **sensitive industrial infrastructures** needing robust protection. Key sectors like transport, energy, communication, fisheries and ecosystems depend on infrastructures in the sea, on the seabed and in coastal areas, including islands and estuaries. These significantly impact policies, strategic autonomy, the economy and populations.

**Maritime security** in this region **spans six dimensions: surface, subsea, air, low orbit** (surveillance), **cyber** (infrastructure systems and ship navigation) **and seabed**. Critical targets include harbours, offshore infrastructures, pipelines and communication systems, with about 98% of information traffic running through seabed cables.

In energy, particularly wind energy, the main vulnerability lies in the converters, not the turbines. Natural reserves and the environment could be targeted through pollution or damage to tankers or oil infrastructures, constituting elements of **ecologic warfare**. Oil and gas are vital for the economy, defence and society's energy needs. Fisheries, aquaculture and leisure infrastructures are also potential targets for terrorism or natural disasters.

### Threats

Threats range from acts of war to "grey zones", terrorism, "blue crime" and natural disasters. This includes armed conflicts, TESSOC (Terrorism – Espionage – Subversion – Sabotage - Organised Crime) and both human and natural disasters. Human threats from foreign states or organisations can use surface, underwater, cyber, air or ballistic capacities. The latter three (cyber, air, ballistic) are rapidly evolving with technology, making them difficult to follow and adapt to.

Targets may be attacked by Special Operation Forces (SOF), terrorist cells, ships or subsurface vessels (manned or unmanned), as well as cyber, missile and aerial attacks (including by unmanned aerial systems (UASs)). Warfare tactics are constantly evolving, potentially overwhelming security and defence capacities. These threats may also receive local assistance for information, planning, attacks or logistics. Finally, human errors or natural disasters are potential threats that must not be overlooked and require preparation.

### Responses

Building resilience and adaptability in maritime security requires considering the institutional and political framework, legal tools, doctrines, personnel and assets. **A regional approach is essential for protecting critical infrastructures**. Currently, **maritime security in the North Sea suffers from institutional fragmentation** (OSPAR, ICES, NEAFC, NACGF, MARCOM, EUMSS<sup>4</sup>). **Improved coordination between public and private sectors** through better policies, organisation, legal bases and

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<sup>4</sup> Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic ([OSPAR Convention](#)), International Council for the Exploration of the Sea ([ICES](#)), North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission ([NEAFC](#)), North Atlantic Coast Guard Forum ([NACGF](#)), NATO Allied Maritime Command ([MARCOM](#)), European Union Maritime Security Strategy ([EUMSS](#)).

standardisation is necessary. Steps like the North Sea Security Pact (9 April 2024<sup>5</sup>) and the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code, that came into force in 2004, are positive but insufficient.

Doctrines should shift **from “sea control” to “holding the sea”**, adapting principles from land operations. They should be preventive, proactive, multi-domain and emphasise intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR). **Immediate detection and pre-emptive response** to threats are crucial, with rapid dispatch to secure critical infrastructures and assess damages.

**Responses should rely on coordinated capacities**, including command & control (C2), intervention teams (SOF, boarding units), force protection (marines, police, coast guards, customs), security/emergency services (medical, CBRN, civil protection, fire service), technical experts, cyber-attack proof infrastructures, cyber operators, infrastructure redundancy (back-up), sensor networks, patrol ships and aircraft and unmanned systems. Capacities must also be adapted for **natural disaster response**.

## MEDITERRANEAN SEA AND IMMIGRATION

### Threats

The Mediterranean Sea, a **vital maritime corridor** with 46,000 kilometres of coastline connecting Europe, Africa, the Middle East and the Red Sea, has long been a conduit for trade, culture and migration. Migration, particularly **illegal migration** from Africa and the Middle East to Europe, brings significant security issues, including **geostrategic and criminal threats**. Drivers of these risks include rivalries, rising powers, spheres of influence, resource disputes, demographic changes, economic disparities, political instability, social violence and environmental factors.

There are **four main categories of threats from migration** across the Mediterranean: **socio-political instability, strategic instrumentalisation, crime and sea safety**. The diverse motivations and cultures of migrants pose significant integration and socio-economic challenges. Illegal migration exacerbates these threats, as foreign powers and non-governmental adversaries exploit migrant flows to weaken, destabilise and infiltrate European countries. This also facilitates criminal activities such as clandestine migrations, trafficking and smuggling of weapons, drugs and slaves. Additionally, the dangerous sea crossings threaten both navigation and the lives of migrants.

### Modus Operandi

Several trans-Mediterranean migration corridors lead to Europe, with the central axis from Sub-Saharan Africa through Algeria and Tunisia mainly to Italy becoming the most important since 2023. Migrants primarily converge in Algeria and then Tunisia, the latter becoming now the main embarkation point to Europe. Only a minority are Tunisians; most (80%) are from West Africa and Sudan, with many being young men. The number of unaccompanied, vulnerable minors is rising. Other migration routes from Libya and the Balkans also remain significant.

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<sup>5</sup> Belga News Agency, “North Sea countries sign pact to combat Russian sabotage,” *belganewsagency.eu*, April 9, 2024, <https://www.belganewsagency.eu/north-sea-countries-sign-pact-to-combat-russian-sabotage>.

Human smuggling and associated criminal activities are organised through networks, offering either cheaper or independent and more costly departures. Mass migrations see boats dispersed along coastlines, with a trend toward using low-cost, unsafe boats, leading to more shipwrecks and casualties. Organised crime and social media play a crucial role in spreading information on smuggling routes from the countries of origin, across the Mediterranean and within Europe.

## Response

**Mediterranean migration must be addressed regionally** but impacts all of Europe, especially Southern and Western regions. **European solidarity is essential.** European countries and EU institutions are increasingly cooperating, including cross-agency efforts (Frontex, EFCA, EMSA<sup>6</sup>). Institutional and legal frameworks are being developed, with security forces, agencies and NGOs deployed. **Cooperation with African and Middle Eastern authorities**, such as the Tunisian government, is also crucial. Key policies include the Pact on Migration and Asylum<sup>7</sup> (2020) and the Common European Asylum System<sup>8</sup> (CEAS, reformed in 2020) for **burden sharing** and security.

Operationally, **European naval forces enforce migration policies and counter criminal activities.** A significant operation is IRINI (Operation EUNAVFOR MED IRINI<sup>9</sup>), which enforces the arms embargo on Libya (UNSCR 1970), disrupts human smuggling, trains Libyan coast guards and gathers information on oil smuggling, in collaboration with NATO and the European Union Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM<sup>10</sup>).

IRINI has the following priorities to fulfil:

- more capacities (only two ships for the moment), particularly in ISR, naval and air assets
- less restrictive legal frame and rules of engagement
- a more deterring perception
- a more significant support from the stakeholders (in priority from the most concerned countries in Southern and Western Europe)

**Permanent monitoring and a strong presence at hotspots** are essential, along with **legal and material capabilities for surveillance, inspection and interception.** Significant search & rescue (SAR) capacities are required to fulfil legal obligations to rescue distressed migrants at sea.

**Enhanced space-based ISR capacities**, such as satellite automatic identification system (S-AIS), synthetic aperture radar (SAR), optical imaging and global navigation satellite system reflectometry (GNSS-R), **would optimise surveillance and intervention against smuggling and trafficking, as well as rescue operations.** Promoting **collaboration among space agencies, security forces and governments** is crucial. Combining space-based assets with swarms of air and naval unmanned systems and their sensors would further enhance capabilities.

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<sup>6</sup> European Border and Coast Guard Agency ([Frontex](#)), European Fisheries Control Agency ([EFCA](#)), European Maritime Safety Agency ([EMSA](#)).

<sup>7</sup> European Commission, "Pact on Migration and Asylum," May 21, 2024, [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en).

<sup>8</sup> European Commission, "Common European Asylum System," last consulted on June 19, 2024, [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system_en).

<sup>9</sup> EEAS, "EUNAVFOR MED Operation Irini," last consulted on June 19, 2024, <https://www.operationirini.eu/> ("EUNAVFOR MED" stands for "European Union Naval Force Mediterranean").

<sup>10</sup> See <https://eubam.org/>.

## BLACK SEA AND MARITIME ROADS

### Geopolitical Environment

The Black Sea is a **strategic crossroad for European powers, Russia and Türkiye**, with significant NATO presence. Connected to the Eastern Mediterranean via the Bosphorus, this historically coveted region exemplifies **ongoing geopolitical tensions, highlighted by the war in Ukraine**. Since the end of the Cold War, the EU and NATO have admitted many Eastern European candidate countries without addressing the Southeastern flank and maritime perspective despite the Black Sea's importance both as a vital concern for Romania and Bulgaria and as the mouth of the Danube River, one of EU's main arteries.

**Russia** views the Black Sea as crucial for trade and strategic depth, ensuring 1/3 of its seaborne trade. Despite balancing efforts via the Arctic, the Black Sea remains vital for Russia's security and economic interests.

**Türkiye**, surrounded by sea on about two thirds of its border area, is reviving its strategic independence, aiming to re-establish influence without siding with other major powers. The Black Sea is central to Türkiye's "Mavi Vatan" (Blue Homeland) doctrine, as being the main maritime access to the Balkans and Central Asia. The Montreux Convention<sup>11</sup> (1936) ensures the control of ship movements in the Bosphorus and guarantees Türkiye's sovereignty on this strait, reinforcing its strategic non-alignment.

### Challenges

Resulting from this geopolitical environment and in the current strategic context particularly marked by the war in Ukraine and its consequences on international relations, the issues below are **the main European concerns** in maritime security:

- peripheric threat at sea and risk to spread inland
- economic crisis (increased by the threats on the economy by seas and rivers)
- freedom of navigation
- food supply
- energy supply
- collateral damages (to civilian shipping and critical infrastructures)

The related interests are increasingly endangered or restricted by multi-domain (not only naval, but also air, land, cyber and space-based) combat operations in and around the Black Sea, mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) at sea and on rivers, economic sanctions and the activation of the Montreux Convention.

### Response

According to the seminar's speakers, **three combined policies** could address the challenges to European maritime security in the Black Sea:

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<sup>11</sup> See the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits, signed on 20 July 1936 (<https://treaties.fcdo.gov.uk/data/Library2/pdf/1937-TS0030.pdf>).

**1. Political Balance of Power:** Establish a balance of power that respects the core interests of European powers, Türkiye and Russia. This would create a safer strategic environment through treaties and regional mechanisms. Achieving a fair end to the war in Ukraine is a prerequisite. The EU should lead this effort, aiming for a sustainable and peaceful solution that enhances Europe's credibility and stature.

**2. Türkiye as a Buffer:** Recognise Türkiye's independent power as a (self-declared) non-aligned buffer and counterbalance to Russia. It could serve to secure European interests, if Türkiye serves as a buffer between European powers and Russia. The Montreux Convention should be maintained or modified with all signatories' agreement, ensuring Türkiye's role in the balance of power and respecting all parties' core interests.

**3. Enhanced Politico-Military Capacities:** Strengthen European politico-military capacities to secure interests in the Black Sea, moving towards regional balance. While the US maintains its "nuclear umbrella," European powers should develop their conventional defence capacities, focusing on maritime security. This long-term effort requires immediate action. Key geostrategic guidelines include:

- upgrading naval and maritime security cooperation between EU Black Sea littoral countries (Romania, Bulgaria) and major European maritime powers (France, Italy);
- enhancing cooperation on the Danube River between Black Sea littoral countries and major European powers (Germany);
- prioritising Romania as a key player on the Black Sea, boosting its maritime security and naval forces with support from France, Italy and Germany;
- cooperating to clear mines and UXO on the European side of the Black Sea, potentially involving Türkiye and Russia after new post-peace agreements have been signed.

These policies would **develop a coherent maritime and Southern security approach**, ensuring each country's interests align with broader European goals. The EU should facilitate this coordination.

## GULF OF GUINEA AND PIRACY

### Changes

The **accelerating geostrategic switches** between Europe and West Africa, as well as within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), are favouring **new dynamics**, which in turn are impacting piracy. These changes are due to the **European withdrawals**, on the one hand, and to the **rising of regional African powers** (e.g., Nigeria) and of **fearsomely competitive external proxies** (China, Russia), on the other hand. New regional powers and proxies offer **security alternatives** to the countries of the Gulf of Guinea. The usual European approaches are no longer sufficiently adapted to these evolutions, even for dealing with piracy.

### Threats

The **illegal activities by pirate groups** are diversifying beyond piracy itself to expend their business and to compensate their losses in classic piracy (affected by the anti-piracy operations). Moreover, pirates could be used by governments (African or external proxies) as assets, contributing to transform the geostrategic situation. The piracy continues to be seaborne but has also developed its activities inshore and ashore (i.e. in the Niger delta).



Currently, their criminal scope includes:

- ship piracy (which is diminishing for the moment)
- oil piracy (attacking vessels to empty the oil cargo)
- human trafficking
- arms smuggling
- narcotics
- political destabilisation (including electoral violences, instruments in insurgencies, etc).
- counterfeiting

Many of these activities are linked to the problems associated with the aforementioned migration in the Mediterranean Sea (human trafficking, arms and drugs smuggling throughout migration from the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa to Tunisia and Europe).

## Response

These evolutions would at least suppose the following **European measures**:

- **adapting to the geostrategic changes** in which the European powers are no longer preponderant, by developing more indirect and horizontal approaches;
- **anticipating the diversification of piracy activities** and diversifying the anti-piracy capacities to efficiently counter these evolutions;
- **actively supporting the coastal states** of the Gulf of Guinea and **ECOWAS** in their policies and capacities against piracy, and to create a greater synergy;
- **integrating external partners**, such as Brazil, India or the US (USAFRICOM);
- **encouraging multi-domain operations** to adjust to the evolution of the activities and assets of the piracy, including the importance of monitoring with ISR capacities;
- **coordinating with multiple stakeholders**, such as governments, security forces, private companies (trade, shipping), harbour authorities, judicial actors and NGOs;
- **assisting NGOs and local governments** to reduce poverty and other causes of piracy;
- **developing more EU-funded initiatives**. Some actual examples are Enhanced Maritime Action in the Gulf of Guinea<sup>12</sup> (EnMAR GOG), Gulf of Guinea Inter-Regional Network<sup>13</sup> (GoGIN II), Seaport Cooperation VI (SEACOP VI), Support to West Africa Integrated Maritime Security (SWAIMS), or the upcoming Enhancing Maritime Security in Africa (Safe Seas for Africa) building bridges and cooperations between partners with EPF and West Africa Sustainable Ocean Programme (WASOP);
- **implementing a tailored regional approach** but which could in some regards be transregional when it connects with external issues (such as migration in the Mediterranean Sea);
- **modifying the position of “EU Senior Coordinator”**, created in 2021 in the European External Action Service (EEAS), in accordance with the previous points.

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<sup>12</sup> See [https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-05/Annex\\_C2022\\_2301.PDF](https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-05/Annex_C2022_2301.PDF).

<sup>13</sup> See European Commission, “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on the update of the EU Maritime Security Strategy and its Action Plan – An enhanced EU Maritime Security Strategy for evolving maritime threats,” March 10, 2023, [https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/document/download/7274a9ab-ad29-4dae-83fb-c849d1ca188b\\_en?filename=join-2023-8\\_en.pdf](https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/document/download/7274a9ab-ad29-4dae-83fb-c849d1ca188b_en?filename=join-2023-8_en.pdf).

## EUROPEAN MARITIME AWARENESS IN THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ (EMASoH)

The West-Indian Ocean impacts European maritime security via the Mediterranean, Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Key sea lines of communication (SLOC) crucial for European trade and energy face **threats from the Houthis, Iran and piracy in the Horn of Africa**. Rising tensions in the MENA region further endanger these routes, with the Strait of Hormuz stable but unpredictable and therefore requiring protection.

**To secure the Strait of Hormuz**, the EU launched Operation EMASoH/AGENOR<sup>14</sup> in 2020. Led by an EU senior civilian representative and a naval fleet based in Abu Dhabi, this operation ensures navigation freedom, reduces tensions and upholds the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS<sup>15</sup>). The fleet comprises 28 ships from nine EU Member States.

While the Suez Canal and the Red Sea can be circumvented, the Persian Gulf cannot, making EMASoH/AGENOR essential. In case of major conflict, **Europe must maintain neutrality and enhance security measures through cooperation with regional actors and the UN**, with diplomacy playing a crucial role.

### GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- The **transformation of the international order should be taken into consideration to adjust most appropriately and efficiently our maritime security policies** to the emerging new realities.
- The **regional approach is indispensable** to adapt the measures to the specificities of the various environments, interests and priorities of the countries.
- Nevertheless, in some cases **transregional cooperation** would partly be necessary. An example is the connection between some activities of the Gulf of Guinea's piracy in smuggling and trafficking with the migration issues in the Mediterranean Sea.
- A **"grand diplomacy" based on pure geopolitics**, motivated by the various key interests and the balance of power, should wheel the strategic policies and explore all the rationally possible ways for peaceful solutions before any potential use of force.
- Maritime security should be focused on the **protection of our societies and economic lifelines**, as well as on a **diplomatic projection**.
- **Diversified measures** should be implemented and anticipatively modified to deal with a diversified spectrum of threats.
- **Multi-domain capacities** should be provided to counter the diversified threats and the multiple domains in which they operate: not only sea, but also land (littorals, islands, rivers, "sea-holding" for critical infrastructures), air, space and cyber.
- **ISR capacities** are the backbone for all the other capacities to detect, anticipate and overcome the threats.

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<sup>14</sup> See EMASoH HQ, "European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz," last consulted on June 19, 2024, <https://www.emasoh-agenor.org/>.

<sup>15</sup> See the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, signed on December 10, 1982 ([https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos\\_e.pdf](https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf)).



- **Unmanned systems** in multi-domain operations are essential auxiliaries for maritime security.
- The **conventional capacities** of the European powers required for maritime security **should be increased** in the coming years to reach as soon as possible a strategic autonomy.
- **Cooperation between public and private sectors is key.**