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TOWARD A RENEWED EUROPEAN UNION'S NAVAL POWER
LESSONS FROM THE BAB-AL-MANDEB STRAIT

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Introduction

In the past few years, the European Union has gone through some massive changes regarding its *foreign actorness*, first defined in the late 1970s by Gunnar Sjöstedts (1977) as "The capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system". For an organisation like the European Union, whose distinct legal nature and set of powers distinguish it from all other international realities, truly understanding the characteristics of this actorness has not been an easy task. This difficulty was further enhanced by its dynamism and peculiar responsiveness to regulatory and normative changes within the Union. In the early stages of the European Communities' evolution, the ECs were described as a "civilian power" with an international presence (Sjöstedts, 1977). This means that they were able to articulate and affirm the Member States' interest within the international community only in an incomplete manner. As a result, the Union stood as a defective foreign actor capable of moving independently in a limited number of sectors, above all in the purely economic. Cases such as the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) or the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol have been used to showcase the development of the Union's international actorness and the ability to overcome its own limits even when functioning in inter-governmental rather than supranational set-ups (Groenleer and Van Schaik, 2007). Notwithstanding these and many other studies (inter alia Bretherton and Vogler, 2006; Jupille and Caporaso, 1998; Cmakalova & Rolenc, 2012; Delaere and Schaik, 2012; Richard and Van Hamme, 2013), throughout its development the European Union's actorness maintained in the eyes of most academics a purely civilian demeanour. We believe that Ozer (2012, p. 89) perfectly sums up this point by maintaining that:

> "The EU does not seem to follow first and foremost geopolitical interests. Instead, it binds itself to international norms and promotes values it believes in (…) through its engagement in bilateral and multilateral settings. In this context, the EU seems not only to have an impact on the international system but also to have a somewhat particular impact. In the sense that primarily relying on civilian means provides just one element of being a civilian power, it might be argued that the EU is a 'civilian power' not only because of its emphasis on non-military instruments in international affairs, but also due to its civilising impacts (by pursuing the spread of particular norms) on the environment beyond its borders."

This analysis has been undoubtedly accurate for the most part of the Union's existence. Limited by its purely economic and normative origins, Brussels has failed time and time again to construct a full-fledged international actorness capable of effectively representing its Member States' interests in all aspects. While this is still partly true, we argue that in the past few years and especially since 2022 we have experienced some massive and transcendent changes.

Events such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, conflicts in Syria and Libya, the migratory crisis and the rise of international terrorism have brought about an unseen trajectory in Brussels. Since then, the European Union has gone through a political and security actorness "renaissance". This has been confirmed in March 2022 by the publication of the *Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*. In the document, the European Council signalled a new trajectory for the Union toward strategic independence and better capabilities in the field of security and defence. "We must act as a strong and coherent political actor to uphold the values and principles underpinning our democracies, take more responsibility for the security of Europe and its citizens and support international peace and security, as well as human security, together with partners" (EU Council, 2022, p. 2). The instability of the current geopolitical context has pushed the European Union toward advancements that it hadn't been able to make in 70 years of history. These developments, therefore, challenge the Union's role as a civilian power and its dependence, up until this point undisputed, on non-military tools and international values. Data by the 2024 *International Military Balance* also demonstrate this transformation (IISS, 2024, p. 64). In particular, between 2022 and 2023 the defence spending of the entire European continent has experienced an increment of 4% compared to the 2% of 2021. Crucially, in the region defence spending has been the highest across European Union Member States where in 2022 and 2023 we find an increase of 6% compared to the 4% of the previous year. The European Union has also heavily invested in several new defence initiatives, such as the Ammunition Initiative, the 2023 *European Defence Industry Reinforcement Through Common Procurement Act*, 11 new projects under the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) set-up, and the development of a new Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) by 2025, between others (IISS, 2024, p. 68). It is difficult to predict where this path will take the EU and its Member States. Historically, the development of a common European security and defence policy has been problematic and filled with setbacks. Moreover, it is undeniable that there are still many needed improvements. The European Union is far from having produced a full strategic

autonomy. However, we should carefully analyse the successes that we have been able to achieve so far and at least attempt to foresee where they will take us in the future. In the words of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell: "We have to become a hard power. (…) Hard power is having the power to coerce and we have done it. We have now to be prepared for the consequences. We have to be prepared to resist. We have to prepared to act, in the long term, with a clear understanding what the challenges and our capacities are" (Borrell, 2022).

This attempt at the creation of a new hard power has been particularly evident within the Union's maritime dimension. Indeed, Brussels was capable of creating in a little more than a decade a common European maritime strategy that fully captured what was happening at the defence and security level. Originally, the EU was focused on the purely economic aspect of the Member States' territorial waters and, to a lesser extent, of the high seas. Owing to the Union's priority given to commercial and trade aspects, the importance of blue and green waters was found in aspects such as fisheries, maritime infrastructures, and sea lines of communication. Moreover, at the time Brussels' actorness on the seas matched that of the normative and civilian power. Consequently, the first EU maritime operations were embedded in a rhetoric of humanitarianism, protection of global commons and strengthening of international values and norms. The materialisation of several threats against maritime security and Member States' interests led the European Union to change its perspective on sea power. Issues such as the migratory crisis and rising instabilities in Libya meant that EU naval forces had to be organised, deployed, and managed in a different manner from what was done in the past. This instability, therefore, led to the publication in 2014 of the *European Union Maritime Security Strategy* (EUMSS). This seminal document not only highlighted the economic importance of the high seas, but also recognised its security implications. Without relinquishing its normative role, the EUMSS stated: "Based on the EU's founding values of human rights, freedom and democracy, the purpose of this Strategy is to secure the maritime security interests of the EU and its Member States against a plethora of risks and threats in the global maritime domain" (EU Council, 2014, p. 3). Here, for the first time, the European Union asserted itself as a "global actor and security provider" (EU Council, 2014, p. 4), signalling the development of hard power objectives unseen up until this point.

The growing instabilities of the past years have also had deep effects on European naval forces and their functioning. The Strategic Compass of 2022 was closely followed by a revision of the EUMSS in 2023. An increase of challenges against maritime security, a

surge in strategic competition and the rise of hybrid and multi-layered threats necessarily led to the reconsideration of the role that sea power will play in the future of the European Union. As a result, the new EUMSS steered toward a security-focused approach based on hard power strategies and objectives. More recently, this development has been consolidated by the beginning of Operation EUNAVFOR Aspides. After the events of October 7th and the violent renewal of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Houthi rebels have begun targeting commercial ships in the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb. This in turn has partly blocked one of the most important commercial chokepoints in the world, seriously harming international and European maritime trade. Growing tensions in the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb, we argue, have sealed a "hard power turn" of the European Union within the maritime dimension. What we are seeing is a Union that is actively securitising its commercial interests through the creation of a new strategic independence. Operation Aspides, therefore, signals the first steps of a maritime hard power and, at the same, inaugurates a new role for European naval forces. Here too foreseeing the future impact of the Bab-al-Mandeb crisis and how it will shape Brussels' approach to maritime security is hard if not almost impossible. Nonetheless, we argue that this case-study represents a fundamental stepping-stone in European development that is worth analysing thoroughly.

The following analysis will be organised in four main chapters. Chapter 1 will provide a much-needed literature review on the huge amount of naval and maritime academia that has been theorised from the 19th century until today. After introducing some definitions on the concepts of *sea power* and *maritime security*, the remaining pages will be divided for the sake of clarity into three sub-sections. Firstly, we will consider theories centred on the hard power aspects of maritime studies, with a specific focus on the works of Alfred Thayer Mahan and Julian Stafford Corbett. Secondly, we will analyse soft power theories and consider different aspects of a field born during the Cold War and developed through the 1990s and early 2000s, namely *naval diplomacy*. The third part will lay the theoretical basis for our case-study, with an analysis of how international straits and hybrid threats have changed the maritime landscape.

With Chapter 2, instead, we will truly begin our examination into the development of a new European naval power. We study chronologically the numerous documents published by EU institutions on sea power and maritime security. In so doing, we will be able to analyse the development of the Union's approach to the maritime dimension, its changes, and its consequences on the Member States and their naval strategies. Moreover, we will investigate the recent rise of two fundamental sea powers, namely the Democratic

Republic of China and the Russian Federation, and how these have affected the Union's approach to the high seas. This will prove how the new European maritime strategy was not formulated in a political vacuum but, on the contrary, as a result of growing instability and competitiveness in the international order.

Chapter 3 will give a realistic application of the analysis made in Chapter 2. We will see how the theoretical developments delineated in the Union's documents have had practical effects in the real world. To do so, we will analyse the three main naval operations organised by the European Union: Operation Atalanta, Operation Sophia, and Operation Irini. By considering their mandate, organisation, and management we study how the development of a naval hard power has happened through different naval missions. This will show how the European Union has shifted with time from humanitarian and normative concerns to the military securitisation of its economic and political interests.

Finally, Chapter 4 will focus on our case study: the recent crisis of the Bab-al-Mandeb. First, we will consider the history that lies behind the infamous Gate of Tears and the interests that have intertwined within this crucial chokepoint. Secondly, and most importantly, we will analyse the first stages of Operation Aspides. As mentioned before, we will argue that this mission against Houthi forces signals the development of a hard naval turn never seen before in Brussels. The Union has shown its willingness and strategic ability of securitising the economic and political interests of its Member States. Its independence and active stance against commercial threats in Bab-al-Mandeb signal a new era for the Union's renewed naval power.

1. Sea power and international straits

There are many theories regarding maritime studies dating back at least to the 16th hundreds. Countless empires and kingdoms imposed their power through the seas and, as a result, statesmen and navy men thoroughly analysed the diverse characteristics of the sea domain, its advantages, and consequences for state power. Our analysis too, therefore, must begin by considering the fundamentals of political and strategic theories regarding maritime security and sea power. Firstly, it is important to provide a definition of these two concepts which, while often used interchangeably, represent two different elements of maritime studies. On the one hand, *sea power* can be defined as the extension of state power onto the maritime domain. More specifically, Admiral Pier Paolo Ramoino (2005) aptly defines it as "The power factor of a State or a coalition of States that allows to use

the sea for their own interests, thus being able to defend their activities from the opposition of rivals and be similarly able to prevent such use to their opponents." Sea power does not have to necessarily be militant but can, on the contrary, be articulated in a variety of practices. As a result, it may include interests of a diverse nature, including political, military, and commercial aspects. On the other hand, the concept of *maritime security* is linked to a distinct aspect of the maritime domain, namely that of national defence and security. While descriptive of a more limited and precise sector, maritime security still retains a multi-faceted nature. Consequently, this notion can be mentioned when speaking of diverse and numerous aspects such as, just to name a few, piracy, environmental degradation of the seas, illegal fishing, etc. More specifically, Keshk (2022, p. 24) argues that modern understandings of maritime security tend to highlight four macro-dimensions: firstly, "national security", understood as the projection of military power and national defence on the maritime domain. Secondly, "the marine environment", which includes aspects such as pollution, search and rescue missions, and climate change. Thirdly, "economic development", also referred to as the *blue economy*, which can include fishing, natural resources, and commercial routes. Finally, "human security", as it is the case for the protection of the livelihoods of those living on coastal areas.

While sea power and maritime security represent two distinct concepts, we may still draw a close connection between the two. Indeed, we often associate them in the sense that the first is used to assure, protect, and strengthen the second through a variety of operational strategies. In more detail, to assure maritime security sea power must be able to respond to two macro-challenges (Bekkevold & Till, 2016): on the one hand, to top-down issues such as changing in threat perceptions, in naval capabilities, or in the understanding or enforcement of the Law of the Seas. On the other hand, against bottom-up challenges, such as piracy, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and environmental degradation.

Now that we have provided some basic definitions, we shall consider the most influential theories on maritime studies and how these can help us to understand a multi-faceted understanding of the maritime dimension. The approaches that we consider will be divided, for the sake of clarity, into two main groups. The first group will examine hard power theories, focusing especially on the approach of American naval officer Alfred Thayer Mahan and British historian Julian Corbett. Both delineated in the late 19th century, these theories represent a view typical of that period, namely one dominated by rational states acting strategically in the pursuit of their national interests. Here, navies are understood as purely military tools. As we will see, hard power naval theories will

generally share many of the characteristics delineated by Clausewitz (Vego, 2023, p. 3) while, at the same time, tracing some fundamental exceptions linked to the specific characteristics of the sea against the land.

Subsequently, the second part of this chapter will focus on more recent maritime theories, namely those laid out by British naval academics Ken Booth and Geoffrey Till, between others. These approaches focus on navies' soft power role and their ability to project political influence without the direct use of military force. We will, therefore, question more traditional understandings of State power and, instead, draw an analysis from a more "liberal" perspective. Here, we will consider a multitude of actors, both public and private, acting for a multitude of purposes, be it diplomatic, economic, or purely politically influential.

Finally, the third part of this chapter will consider these theories in correlation with specific maritime spaces, namely international chokepoints. We will investigate how the evolution of the security and defence sector, especially the development of hybrid threats, has led to the overlapping of the two roles of navies – the hard and the soft power – within these specific spaces. In this first Chapter, therefore, we will lay the foundation for our subsequent analysis, presenting the necessary theoretical fundamentals to better understand our thesis and precise case study.

1.1 The navy as a hard power tool

The analysis of maritime wars on commerce as a tool in subduing the enemy while advancing one's political and economic objectives is not new but, on the contrary, dates back to the 19th century. One of the first academic trends to consider the commercial aspect of sea power was the so called *Jeune École*. Works such as Baron Richard Grivel's *De La Guerre Maritime* (1869) and Admiral Teophile Aube's *Le Guerre Maritime et les Ports Militaires de la France* (1882) argued for the importance of commercial war as one of the most effective means for the restoration of peace. Considering the strategy that France's much smaller navy was to take against British mighty maritime forces, these theories recognised the navy as fundamental in disturbing British international trade with the strategic objective of causing panic on its shores and forcing it into peace (Till, 2018, p. 92). Here we have a first delineation of the concept of *sea denial*. The disadvantaged French navy aimed at building fast and expandible ships to undermine the British ability to impose *sea control* through heavier and stronger vessels.

After a short period during which the Jeune École and its teachings lost their influence, in the late 19th century the idea of commercial war regained a crucial role in the solidification of State power. Within this evolution, Alfred Thayer Mahan is recognised by many as being one of the most influential naval academics of modern history. As an Admiral of the US navy, Mahan's most famous piece, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* (1890), upheld the maritime domain as a fundamental aspect of national power. As Mahan himself argued, in line with a hard power perspective, "The history of sea power, while embracing in its broad sweep all that tends to make a people great upon the sea or by the sea, is largely a military history" (Mahan, 1890, p.1). He argued that the success or lack thereof of sea nations on the maritime domain was not so much determined by the political and strategic ability of governments and navy officers but, rather, by natural conditions. These conditions, intrinsic to the very nature of each country, were summarised into five aspects: geographical position, physical conformation, extent of territory, size of population, character of the people, and, finally, character of the government (Mahan, 1890, pp. 28-29). More specifically, sea power is understood to be fundamental in the protection of a nation's international trade routes and it is the pursuit of this defence system that drives a nation toward strengthening its dominion of the sea. In his words: "The tendency to trade, involving the necessity of production of something to trade with, is the national characteristic most important to the development of sea power" (Mahan, 1980, p. 53). As a result, the natural conditions mentioned above are all strictly connected not only to the projection of state power onto the maritime domain but also to the ability of a country to trade internationally on the seas. That is why the best geographical position is that close to the high seas and in control of maritime trade routes; or why the character of the people plays a fundamental role when it shows a natural predisposition for travel and commercial pursuit; or, again, why it is necessary that a government is willing to strengthen its naval forces, both in times of peace and in times of war. However, it remains that in Mahan's eyes sea power is ultimately a military matter. Trade cannot exist without a military navy to protect and strengthen it. That is the extent where governments can play a fundamental role, thus favouring a country's natural conditions. A government can do so in three ways: by maintaining a navy with a strength proportional to the size and importance of national trade, by favouring the quick and healthy development of naval forces, and by military protecting the country's trade routes (Mahan, 1890, p. 82).

Born in the same years and as influential as Mahan, Julian Stafford Corbett also defined a naval theory largely based on the military instrumentalization of trade routes. His most famous work, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, was published in 1911 and thought at the Royal Naval College in Greenwich. Distinguishing himself from more classical academics, as Thayer and Clausewitz, Corbett was the first naval historian to openly analyse the numerous differences between the conquest of territory and the conquest of the sea. More specifically he identified the impossibility of ever fully owning the sea as the most fundamental divergence from land combat. Other academics, such as Castex (1911; taken from Wedin, 2016), later expanded on this theory arguing for the relative and incomplete nature of sea dominion. More specifically, sea control is limited on the basis of time, place, extent of use, and strategic consequence, making complete control over it practically impossible. Because of the unfeasibility of owning or of permanently settling one's navy on the sea, the only right that can be exercised or denied to others is the right of passage. As a result, in his own words, "Command of the sea means nothing but the control of maritime communications" (Corbett, 1911, p. 50). In more detail, Corbett sees the attack and/or defence of commerce as one of the three methods available to any nation to exert sea control. In times of war, this practice allows on the one side to exercise direct military pressure on one's enemies while, at the same time, preventing them to exercise that same pressure against one's national interests and objectives. This, in his view, is the maritime translation of occupying the enemy's territory. A second peculiarity of Corbett's theory is his view on the principle of the concentration of force. Other realists, like Clausewitz and Thayer, saw the maximum concentration of force as a fundamental factor in any military victory, be it on land or on the seas (Clausewitz, 1984, p. 195; Handel, 2000, p. 109). On the contrary, Corbett sharply disagreed with this view, owning to the fact that the maritime domain, differently from land, gave to the enemy more chances of escape (Corbett, 1911, p. 75). Moreover, the principle of concentration of force threatens a nation's ability of defending its commercial trade routes. If all ships are employed in the conflict, then it necessarily means that commerce is left unprotected. This, in turn, can jeopardise the country's economic stability and as a result strongly limit its military endurance.

A third principle delineated by Corbett in the field of maritime studies it's his understanding of the concept of limited war. As Handel (2000, p. 118) points out, Corbett takes Clausewitz's theory a step further, creating a new concept that proves fundamental in the analysis of the maritime domain. More specifically, he argues that because of the

very nature of the seas, more distant from a nation's heart and from its vital interest of survival, naval war has the great advantage of rarely escalating into a bloody and long-lasting conflict (Corbett, 1911, p. 30). This makes the seas the perfect environment for attaining political objectives and influence, while avoiding an escalation and, therefore, the possibility of complete defeat.

While Corbett realises that sea power presents some advantages that distinguish it from the use of land forces, he also understood that its influence cannot be exaggerated. In particular, he argued (1911, p. 12) that "Since men live upon the land and not upon the sea, great issues between nations at war have always been decided – except in the rarest cases – either by what your army can do against your enemy's territory and national life, or else by the fear of what the fleet make it possible for your army to do." In simpler words, sea power must rely to a certain extent on land forces to truly defeat one's enemy. Corbett's view was recently expanded upon by Jakub Grygiel (2021). In his analysis, he argues that sea power presents two fundamental weaknesses. Firstly, the influence of maritime blockade is directly proportional to the enemy's reliance on the seas. For example, continental powers that do not extensively rely on maritime trade will not be as damaged by a strong maritime power. Furthermore, while a naval blockade can have devastating effects on a nation and submiss it into a diplomatic negotiation, it however cannot militarily defeat it. A second weakness of sea power is that its inherent flexibility of movement, while as we will see in the following chapter makes it a particularly useful diplomatic tool, decreases the State's credibility of remaining in any given location. The so-called *power gradient* affects not only the ability of projecting power, but also the credibility to do so. Accordingly, while sea power undeniably plays a crucial role in the strengthening of State power, the extent in which it does so depends very much on its counterpart. This does not necessarily impinge on its defensive capacities, but it does limit its offensive efficiency.

Both Corbett's and Mahan's theories remain fundamental in understanding maritime studies and the role that the navy, today as much as in the past, can play on the stage of international relations. Within our analysis, what interests us the most is their view of sea power as intimately connected with commercial trade, and of maritime security as crucial for the protection and development of commercial routes. This view resonates with the contemporary geopolitical context, where the international community's interest in maintaining maritime lanes free and protected has led to a newly found interest in the power of the navy. Realist applications of naval power have not

disappeared with the 19th century. For example, as Cropsey and Milikh (2012, p. 88) highlight, the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative launched in 2013 resonates very much with the objective of securing sea lanes, chokepoints, and ports necessary for valuable commerce. And this is just one of many illustrations of this process. As a result, the ability to control the sea remains crucial for political and economic interests today as much as in the past.

Nonetheless, Mahan and Corbett's theories, while influential, do have some limitations. Indeed, many have criticised their excessive focus on the military dimension, thus ignoring other factors such as cooperation within the international community and the navy's diplomatic role (see for example Leorocha et al., 2023, p. 459). Most of all, these theories, as any other realist understanding of security, forcefully pits all nations against each other thus presenting the idea that the only way to protect one's own national interests is through armed conflict and military intervention. This view is not only dangerous, as it could lead to an arms race and from there to a vile cycle of political instability, but it is also in our contemporary context factually untrue. Protection of trade has often originated from a concerted effort by the international community, an effort that has attempted to steer clear as much as possible from armed conflict. The drafting of the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Seas (UNCLOS) in 1982 is a clear example of this. Moreover, the specific nature of sea power can represent an incentive for peaceful international relations. Blagden (2014, p. 56) argues that sea control minimises the security dilemma "as it generates security without threatening others' overall political survival". Indeed, large bodies of water present to coastal countries a defensive advantage that is not perceived by potential opponents as a danger to their sovereignty or security, contrary to other forms of defence spending that might lead to an arms race. Moreover, compared to land forces, naval assets usually represent a lesser threat against another State's borders and population. Consequently, sea power might by its own nature undo many realist assumptions, serving on the contrary as a perfect soft power tool for national and regional powers alike. As a result, we agree with the view that Mahan's and Corbett's theories do apply an overtly realist understanding of maritime studies. While more applicable in the 19th century, realism finds its limit in a contemporary context where cooperation and diplomacy play as fundamental role as antagonism and conflict. Therefore, it is essential for our analysis the study of more recent and, under many aspects, liberal understandings of sea power and maritime security.

1.2 The navy as a soft power tool

As we have already mentioned, the views of Corbett and Mahan remain influential in today's understanding of the navy, although limited in their applicability within the current geopolitical context. Indeed, present-day navies are exercising functions that were unthinkable in the 18th and 19th century. This understanding is the underlying foundations of contemporary naval historian Geoffrey Till's theory. In his analysis of sea power, he argues that while realist theorists of maritime power have the value of highlighting the navy's specific importance and comparative advantage, still they focus too much on the purely military. This in turn has made these theories almost anachronistic as, on the contrary, "today's navies see themselves as agents of peacetime diplomacy" (Till, 2018, p. 86). Regardless of the difference between past and present maritime functions, the objective of sea control remains the same: the capacity to use the sea for one's objective while denying that same capacity to the enemy. More specifically, Till (2018, p. 232) describes two possible strategic uses of the sea: the sea as line of commercial trade and the sea as stage of military operations. Considering the first use, apart from functions that can be done during times of war such as the attack of military shipping, in peacetime the best form of strategic coercion is the control of maritime sea lines. Attacks of shipping lanes can be used not so much for militarily defeating the enemy but, rather, to advance specific political objectives and geopolitical interests. In maintaining this, Till makes the example of the Gulf Tanker War of 1980-1988, during which numerous attacks on the oil commerce passing through the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hurmuz highlighted the importance of maritime trade routes for strategic interests.

Importantly, Geoffrey Till's analysis of maritime diplomacy places a crucial focus on the collaborative nature of navies. As he defines it, "Collaborative naval diplomacy and coalition-building is a range of activity expressly intended to secure foreign-policy objectives not by threatening potential adversaries but by influencing the behaviours of allies and potentially friendly bystanders" (Till, 2018, p. 385). In the case of sea control of maritime trade routes, cooperation is encouraged by the fact that valuable SLOCs (sea lanes of communications) and choke points are usually not owned but, on the contrary, shared by the entire international community. In protecting international trade, numerous and diverse national interests can converge in one strategy, as it is often the case for maritime coalitions found in the NATO or EU's systems. The aims of naval coalitions can be different: to secure good relations with neighbouring countries, to avoid inadvertent military and political clashes on the sea, to reassure national support toward a specific

country or region, to deter hostile actions, to respond to common threats, or then again to improve military coordination. This explains the convergence of military practices and technologies that regional powers, such as the EU, are experiencing in recent years within the maritime domain. Hattendorf (2013, p. 293) too highlights the contemporary importance of cooperation between national navies. More specifically, he argues that the globalised nature of the international economy, and its passage through the world's SLOCs, necessarily requires a partnership between different national actors. In this sense, Hattendorf urges the US navy to move away from realist understandings of gaining command of the sea, focusing instead on cooperative modes of exercising such command once that it has been obtained. This especially because in today's world maritime insecurity, be it in terms of trade, fisheries, piracy, or terrorism, cannot be solved independently but, on the contrary, necessitates a concerted response.

Cooperation and coordination are needed not only between countries and regional powers but also between the different sections of the maritime sector. Navies, fisheries, coastguards are just some of the actors playing on the maritime stage, each responding to different hierarchies and necessities. Nonetheless, their functions often overlap, creating a certain level of ambiguity and, potentially, of bad budgetary decisions. As Till (2023, p. 117) argues, the creation of a synergetic system is complicated and requires strong institutions, procedures, and training. Before him, Henry Maydman (1691) analysed what he called the *oeconomy*, namely the intersection between the manufacturing, fishing, and shipping industries working within the maritime domain. In his view, all three are equally important as they force government institutions to maintain a good command of the sea both in times of peace and of war. While the potential of conversion from commercial ships into war vessels, as it was often done in the past, has been limited by divergence in technological requirements, the advancement of both sectors "can indeed be a critically important component of a country's maritime character and its economy" (Till, 2023, p. 157).

Geoffrey Till's analysis of maritime cooperation ultimately arrives at a conclusion that distances itself from a purely hard power understanding. He argues that because of the interconnection of international trade and the contemporary low level of threat against maritime trade compared to the 19th and 20th century, "Sea-based trade may well be assured less by the immediate defence of shipping at sea than it is by action ashore to protect the political, social and strategic circumstances which it can take place" (Till, 2018, p. 248). What this means in the practical world is that navies have more to gain in

performing soft power functions of maritime security and naval diplomacy, rather than from the use of direct force. This realisation came first during the Cold War, as can be seen from the change of perspectives at the US Naval War College in the 1970s. The rise of nuclear weapons and, as a result, the possibility of mutually assured destruction meant that countries could no longer rely on war as a continuation of national policy (Barber, 1977, p.73). Because of this change, navies begun to play a fundamental role in the advancement of political objectives. During this period, Hedley Bull (1976, p. 6) argued that navies as instruments of diplomacy gained three crucial advantages: firstly, they are flexible as they can quickly move and be transferred to different areas, depending on specific needs. Secondly, they are visible, thus being able to convey a message more easily and quickly. Thirdly, they are universal, as the seas touches all regions and continents.

Importantly, at this time, the analytical focus was put on the concept of "gunboat diplomacy", as defined by James Cable in 1971. This notion refers to a more aggressive form of diplomacy, one that is more linked to the threat of the use of force and to the show of strength before one's enemy. More specifically, Cable (1971, p. 15) defines it as "The use or threat of limited naval force, otherwise than as an act of war, in order to secure advantage or to avert loss, either in the furtherance of an international dispute or else against foreign nationals within the territory of the jurisdiction of their own state". When considering Cable's words, we must keep in mind the historical context from which they originated. The decades of the Cold War required a straight-forward approach against the enemy. At that time, diplomacy was inevitably and directly linked with military strength. Widen (2011, p. 720) better delineates the differences between naval diplomacy, as we will see it later, and gunboat diplomacy. Firstly, Cable's gunboat diplomacy takes place against others' interests and within their territory or jurisdiction, while naval diplomacy usually takes place in international waters. Secondly, more peaceful diplomacy usually involves the support of allies rather than the imposition of one's interests against others. "Hence, gunboat diplomacy is more one-sided, offensive, and aggressive in character, and aimed explicitly to intimidate, deter, and coerce an opponent" (Widen, 2011, p. 720). This coercive approach to diplomacy isn't always successful but, on the contrary, needs a certain set of prerequisites to achieve the desired effects. In this sense, Mandel (1986, p. 65) highlights two necessary characteristics for an advantageous gunboat diplomacy: the first is restraint. Missions under this approach must be quick, limited, and modest in the use of force so as to avoid provoking a counterattack from the opponent. A second

prerequisite is the credibility of the initiator's willingness to protect national interests and determination to use more force if necessary. Without credibility it becomes impossible to force the opponent into compliance. As a result, gunboat diplomacy might serve as an appealing tool for the maintaining of "peaceful" relations with one's opponents but nevertheless it does come with its limitations.

Subsequent analyses of navies as tools of diplomacy deviated from Cable's understanding of gunboat diplomacy toward more peaceful and two-sided efforts. Here two main authors must be cited: Edward Luttwak and Ken Booth. Edward Luttwak's most influential work, *The Political Uses of Sea Power* (1974), focused on the so called "theory of suasion". Against Cable's theory, this principle was understood to convey a more neutral and indirect image of peacefully persuading another party to act, or to refrain from acting, in a specific way. These acts of naval diplomacy could be either latent or active (1974, pp. 3-8). By latent he meant indirect consequences originating from the deployment of naval forces; these could be positive, in the sense of strengthening alliances, and negative, in the sense of limiting someone else's willingness to act in a certain way. By active, instead, he meant diplomatic actions organised with the direct intention of having a certain effect on others; in the same way as for latent actions, these could also be either positive or negative. Importantly, Luttwak placed the burden of proof of maritime diplomatic actions in the eyes of the spectator. Differently from naval warfare, whose success or failure is based on more objectively visible results, naval diplomacy is strictly linked to the perceptions of both enemies and allies (Luttwak, 1974, p. 6). This makes it more difficult to correctly predict the consequences of diplomatic functions, as their results depend very much on the reaction of others.

Finally, Lutwakk presented another theory that is worth mentioning, namely the "visibility/viability dilemma" (1974, p. 47). In his view and linked to the importance of the external perception, the image that a warship conveys to an enemy or an ally is more important than its actual military capacity. This is, for example, a strategy that was extensively used by the Soviet navy during the Cold War. Indeed, Admiral Gorshkov (1979, p. 248), Commander in Chief of the USSR's navy between 1956 and 1985, pushed for the use of demonstrative actions to assert Soviet dominance on the seas and on land, highlighting the diplomatic role of warships. The presence of a strong and fear-inducing army, not only on the coasts of the Soviet Union but also on the international seas, would have given the USSR a powerful and menacing image to allies and enemies alike. His efforts in convincing Krushev of the importance of a powerful navy ultimately proved to

be successful. Till (2023, p. 130), analysing his historical impact on naval diplomacy, argued that "The resultant flee was also able to achieve far more sea-days, conducts some of the biggest naval exercised ever seen, visit much more widely (…). Its naval power undoubtedly did help turn the Soviet Union, despite all its shortcomings, into a global superpower." Far from being characteristic only of the Soviet Union, the US Navy too quickly realised the importance of a powerful perception. As Captain James Barber (1977, p. 74) highlighted, teaching before the US Naval War College, others' perceptions of one's force are crucial, allowing navies to exert influence without the direct use of force.

Ken Booth, professor of International Politics at UCW Aberystwth and harsh critic of realism, is also an important theorist in the field of naval diplomacy. Much as his counterpart Edward Luttwak, he depicts a completely different understanding of the navy compered to more classical and orthodox academics.
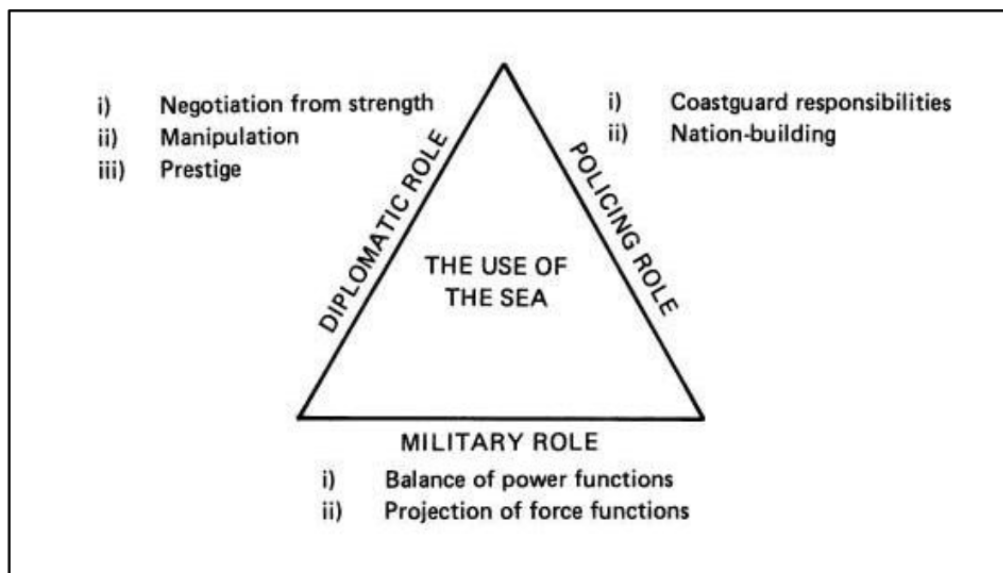

Figure 1. Ken Booth, 2014, p. 15.

In his book, *Navies and Foreign Policy*, he argues that rather than simply being a military tool, the functions of the navy can be understood as a trinity (Booth, 2014, p. 15). The navy's "diplomatic role", "policing role" and "military role" are subsumed under the more general concept of "the use of the sea"; depending on the use that a certain nation wants to make of the sea, it will delineate a maritime policy made of a mixture of these three functions, albeit with different forms and ratios of each. For our present purpose, the policing role, namely the function concerned with the coastguard or "brown water" responsibilities, is not of interest. We shall, therefore, focus on the military and diplomatic relations.

Importantly, the disposition of each function on the triangle is not random but, rather, has a very specific meaning. Indeed, Booth agrees with Thayer when he argued that the navy is largely a military matter. In his words, "It is appropriate that the military role forms the base of the trinity, for the essence of the navies is their military character. Actual or latent violence is their currency. It is a navy's ability to threaten and use force which gives meaning to its other modes of action" (Booth, 2014, p. 16). Nonetheless, of all functions the one which interests Booth the most is the diplomatic role of navies and their capacity to shape and influence one's geopolitical context. More specifically, the aims of naval diplomacy can be numerous: negotiation from strength to reassure allies and push enemies toward compliance, manipulation to change the perspectives of other actors, and/or prestige to project a desired image to the international community (Booth, 2014, p. 20). In its diplomatic role, the navy presents seven characteristics that distinguish it from other political tools (Booth, 2014, p. 33). It is versatile, as a single ship can perform various tasks, from humanitarian interventions, hostile missions or show of political and strategic preparedness. It is controllable since a ship can respond to both abrupt escalation and de-escalation. It is mobile both in the sense of its ability of quick withdrawal and of converging with other units when needed. It has a great projection ability by carrying a large number of weapons, aircrafts, tanks and men. It has a great access potential because of the principle of the freedom of the seas, allowing for travel without many restrictions. It has a symbolic role that clearly signifies a nation's interests and intensions. Finally, it has endurance by being able to remain active and maintain a specific position for an extended period of time. Thanks to all these characteristics navies are capable of imposing and protecting their nation's interests without necessarily recurring to the use of force but by simply showing that such force exists. "By threatening ultimately to use force at sea, or to project force ashore, such standing demonstrations seek to deter action inimical to the deploying State, and to encourage actions that are in the interest of itself and its allies" (Booth, 2014, p. 41). This is linked to what J. C. Wyle (1991, p. 41) called the *maritime presence*, namely the capacity of warships to be simultaneously tools of peace and of war and to limit international insecurity without necessarily using force or even impinging on a state's sovereign territoriality.

Theories of naval diplomacy are particularly interesting if applied to today's geopolitical context. After WWII and especially with the end of the Cold War, direct combat be it on land or on the seas has become increasingly rare. International law and multilateral fora have made war much more expensive and damaging than in the past.

This is particularly true if we consider international sea routes of commerce, whose interconnection with a multitude of countries and non-state actors has made them a target that many want to protect, and few want to jeopardise. Nonetheless, the decline of inter-State conflict has not necessarily made naval forces and their contribution obsolete. On the contrary, the diplomatic and influential role of the navy has remained an important soft power tool in the projection of national interests, both in a peaceful and in an indirectly hostile way. Indeed, as we shall see in the following chapters, many actors have proven to be unwilling to resort to open conflict on the high seas but defence operations and the use of sea power for the maintenance of maritime security has been frequently employed in recent years. As Booth argues, however, the diplomatic role of the navy necessarily stands on its military nature. It is difficult to influence others' actions without a demonstration of force.

The diplomatic role of navies has been further accentuated by the globalisation of international security and the end of the Cold War. As Hattendorf (2013, p. 298) argues, "The diplomatic function in this new era is quite different from that discussed by theorists in the Cold War era, when the issues of negotiation from strength, manipulation, and prestige were seen as the principal characteristics of naval diplomacy". In today's geopolitical context, the role of navies, short of the use of force, necessarily requires cooperation at the international level. This coordination will be based on a variety of measures, such as technological exchanges, shared education and training, up to interdependent institutional structures.

Cable, Luttwak and Booth's theory, while innovative in their analysis of the diplomatic and political role of naval forces, were theorised in a very specific historical context. As Larsson & Widen (2022, p. 6) argue, these academics experienced the world of the Cold War, characterised by a bipolar and state-centred system aimed at maintaining a balance between the US and USSR. As a result, although these theories remain fundamental in the understanding of a non-military vision of the maritime domain, they also occasionally misinterpret the importance of multilateralism and soft power.

This gap in literature was however filled by Kevin Rowlands and his book *Naval Diplomacy in the 21st Century – A Model for the Post-Cold War Global Order* (2018). His argument begins by reconsidering the purpose behind naval diplomacy. In the post-Cold War period, and at the time of Mahan and Corbett too, the realist understanding prevailed: the main foreign objective was to gain as much competitive advantage as possible. The international community played at a zero-sum game in the sense that whatever one wins

the other loses and vice versa. In the modern world, Rowland argues, this is not true. Diplomacy "is a multi-directional communicative tool and naval diplomacy (…) is the use of naval and maritime assets as communicative instruments in international power relationships to further the interests of one or more actors involved" (2018, p. 95). In this context, states, non-state actors, coalitions, international organisations, and the international legal system all play a fundamental role. Consequently, to truly understand the purpose of maritime operations, we need to ask ourselves three questions: what is the message? Who is conveying the message? And how is it doing so? We can understand from this model that in Rowland's view realist theories are too simplistic. There diplomatic objectives are passively passed from the conveyer to the target with no interreference from the outside. States are the only actors, and they perform logically in the advancement of their own self-interest, often to the detriment of others. On the contrary, by asking the three questions "What? Who? How?", Rowlands is able to consider a plethora of functions all falling under the wide spectrum of naval diplomacy. As a result, he can deepen even further the multiplicity of the roles of naval forces. While they do necessarily rely on military strength and the potentiality of attack and defence, navies cannot be limited to the simple use of force. On the contrary, today more than ever they are able to influentially project power through a plethora of messages and of modes of conveying them.
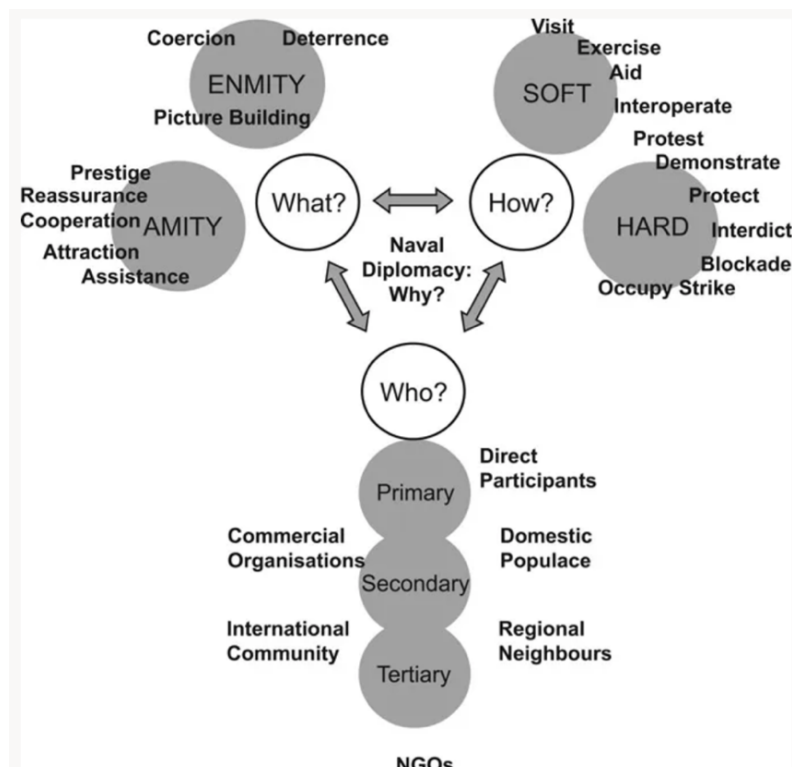

Figure 2. Kevin Rowlands, 2018, p. 109. "A foundational model of 21st-century naval diplomacy."

Finally, it is important to consider another aspect of naval power and that is the concept of *maritime domain awareness* (MDA). MDA was first delineated after the first acts of maritime terrorism in the early 2000s and, more specifically, after the attacks on the USS Cole. It can be defined as "The effective understanding of anything associated with the global maritime domain that could impact the security, safety, economy, or environment" (Homeland Security Department, 2005, p. 1). In today's age, MDA has become a fundamental soft power role of national navies centred on the gathering and sharing of information on a variety of sectors. More specifically, this concept is used to respond to a series of maritime security-concerns such as terrorism, illegal fishing, drug trafficking, piracy, illegal immigration, and so on. Recently, it has also been increasingly used for the protection and strengthening of SLOCs and maritime trade (Boraz, 2009, p. 141). In light of its rising importance, the international community has invested a huge number of resources in the creation of international MDA systems. The most prominent example is the *Automatic Identification System* (AIS), namely a signal obligatory on all ships of 300 tons and above that transmits and receives real time navigational information (Boraz, 2009, p. 142). Interestingly for our analysis, maritime domain awareness represents a sort of grey zone between maritime soft and hard power. Indeed, while MDA consists in the peaceful gathering of information this data is often used for the coordination and management of maritime security operations that might involve the use of force.

1.3 International straits and hybrid threats

Our analysis will focus not only on naval forces but, more specifically, on the employment of naval forces within international straits. Because of this, after having considered the development throughout history of maritime theories, we believe important to also provide a sound theoretical background on these maritime spaces. The creation of an international regime regulating international straits has historically been quite complicated. This is linked to what David Caron refers to as the "near-far clash of interests" (Caron, 2014, p. 11; see also Nilufer, 2019, p. 164). By this we mean that straits represent a peculiar connection of numerous and diverse interests: those of the States bordering the strait, and those of the States that rely on straits for the commerce of goods and resources. After a long judicial evolution, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (1982) maintains that through these areas of the high seas, as per Article 38,

"All ships enjoy the right of transit passage, which shall not be impeded". This right is defined as "The exercise in accordance with the Part of the freedom of navigation and overflight solely for the purpose of continuous and expeditious transit". The wording of the Conventions was decided as a compromise between the principle of navigation, supported by major powers such as the USA and the USSR interested in maintaining international commercial routes open, and the principle of innocent passage upheld by States bordering these international straits for the protection of their national sovereignty and security. Ultimately, the regime that was accepted after long negotiations in 1982 appears more favourable to user States, assuring above all the free passage of both military and commercial ships (Scovazzi, 1995, p. 138). As a result, free passage cannot be hampered and is enjoyed by all, including military forces, thus assuring a favourable environment for the transit of both goods and people.

Between these international straits some can be categorised as "choke points". To be defined as such, they need to display certain characteristics (Alexander, 1991, p. 105): firstly, there is no readily available alternative passage if the choke point is restricted. Secondly, a choke point is usually narrower than other international straits, making it possible to block it purposely or unintentionally. Finally, it represents a crucial way for commercial and/or military traffic. Academics usually agree on the existence of seven international choke points: the Danish Straits, Dover, Gibraltar, Bab-al-Mandeb, Hormuz, Malacca, and Lombok.

Today, the maritime control of sea lines of communications and, especially, of international straits and chokepoints falls under a series of hybrid maritime tools that both State and non-State actors use to strengthen their interests while opposing those of their enemies. This means that, in the current geopolitical and warfare scenario, the maritime theories delineated above must be understood in a completely new context made of more indirect and technologically advanced threats. As Stavridis (2016, p. 94) notes, "The fundamental goal of hybrid warfare is to find the space short of obvious military action that nevertheless has direct and recognisable tactical, operational and strategic impact, and to compress hostile activities into a zone characterised by sufficient ambiguity to give an aggressor a better chance of accomplishing an objective without full-blown, overt offensive action." The concept of avoiding the use of direct acts of war against one's enemy is not new (see Sun Tzu, 2010). More recently, however, these low-intensity threats have gained a renewed importance in the modern geopolitical context. Frank Hoffman (2007) was the first to stress how conventional warfare and direct interstate

conflict are expected to decline in the future and be replaced by new methods of waging warfare. These methods will include different aspects, such as irregular tactics, terrorist attacks, unconventional confrontations, the control of (mis)information, and so on.

The maritime domain too has experienced the hybridisation of threats and conflicts, even though this process has only recently gained the attention of the international community. In this context, the disruption of SLOCs and chokepoints and attacks against maritime infrastructures, such as pipelines and underwater cables, can be a crucial tool in the advancement of political and economic interests. Terrorist attacks and cyber security threats have in the past years become more frequent in these maritime spaces. While it has not happened yet, a large-scale attack on shipping chokepoints might happen and would have devastating consequences on the international economy and, as a result, on regional geopolitical stability (Fenton, 2024). Importantly, we argue, the rise of hybrid threats is causing an overlap between the two main role of navies – the military and the diplomatic – making the control and protection of the maritime domain even more complicated. As Tutuianu (2022, p. 8) stresses, a plethora of tools will be used by maritime hybrid threats, be it military, diplomatic, and informational, thus closely interlinking both soft and hard power dynamics. These hybrid activities have the damaging result of impinging or limiting the freedom of navigation, thus disrupting international supply chains, and causing numerous security implications and repercussions. Furthermore, the hybridity of these threats makes accountability and reparation under international law much more complicated. On its side, the International Court of Justice in the *Oil Platforms Case* (2003) has created an international judicial system that, on the one hand, allows for hybrid naval warfare by setting the threshold for an armed attack too high and, on the other hand, limits the applicability of State responsibility (Lott, 2022, p. 245). In so doing, the ICJ has allowed both State and non-State actors the possibility of using these grey zones to their advantage.

Aggressive actors can use these gaps in regulation to indirectly attack others without incurring into sanctions or repercussion before either national or international tribunals. Nonetheless, they are required to perform operations that are short of the typical use of force and that have more to do with an ambiguously conflictual projection of national force. On the other side, their counterparts are also expected to strike a difficult balance in their response. Hybrid threats usually do not activate the right of self-defence, as specified by the *Oil Platforms Case*, thus making it necessary to affirm freedom of passage without an attack that might be considered too overt. The necessity of

maintaining this difficult and unstable balance is, we argue, part of what makes these maritime chokepoints so interesting for our analysis. The process of technological and warfare modernisation that we have experienced in the last two decades has already turned them into areas of new confrontation. How and to what extent the military and diplomatic are mixed depends on each geopolitical context. However, this overlap inescapably intertwines the realist necessity of protecting crucial sites of maritime trade, as delineated by Corbett and Mahan, and the diplomatic imperative of "peacefully" projecting one's power through naval forces, as maintained by authors such as Cable, Luttwak and Booth.

Furthermore, as we shall see, this situation is aggravated by the current political and security conditions that we are experiencing. A period of instability, both economic and political, is looming over the international community. What we are experiencing is what DiCicco and Onea (2023) call the *great-power competition*, namely "A permanent, compulsory, comprehensive, and exclusive contest for supremacy in a region or domain among those states considered to be the major powers in the international system". The rise of tensions in the Middle East, Indo-Pacific and even in the Artic, the quest for more power by China and Russia, the failures of peaceful diplomacy, are all signs of the deep crisis of a system that was once based on multilateralism and cooperation. Within this crisis, we argue, the maritime domain will play a fundamental role. This is especially true if we consider that we have shifted away from piracy and terrorism and we are returning on the seas too to direct competition between major maritime powers and inter-State naval conflicts (Lott, 2022, p. 247). As a result, we argue, the old differentiation between navies as military and as diplomatic tools has already and will continue to get more and more blurred, transforming the maritime dimension into a fundamental playing field for future competition and insecurity. This does not mean that maritime theories have become obsolete and meaningless but, rather, that they must be employed in a system where the old definitions of soft and hard power are being constantly re-examined.

1.4 Conclusions

The theories delineated in the previous pages will play a fundamental role in truly understanding our case study and thesis. It is crucial to highlight that their separation into two groups was made almost arbitrarily as these two functions co-exist and inter-change between each other constantly and in different ways. This is especially true within the maritime dimension where the lack of delineated national borders and the convergence of

a multitude of economic and political interests dictates a high level of flexibility between one function and the other. International straits and, we argue, the crisis of Bab-al-Mandeb in particular, provide a perfect example of this. Here, we have experienced in the last years the growing commercial importance of sea lines of communications coupled with an upsurge of political instability. This has meant that many State and non-State actors have felt the growing need of projecting their sea power in a variety manners. In this context, the dividing line between hard power and soft power will blur even further as a result of an international community that is not willing to directly attack others but at the same time is ready to protect national interests against its opponents. In this sense, it will be necessary to keep in mind Mahan, Corbett, Cable, Booth and Luttwak and the same time, all united by the understanding that the protection of maritime commerce lies at the centre of any form of sea power.

2. The EU's new era of global naval power

Recently, naval power has reclaimed a primary role in the geopolitical interests of the international community. Freedom of navigation and the protection of maritime resources and infrastructures, be it underwater cables, pipeline, or fisheries, have come to the forefront of both economic and political debates. It is not necessarily that naval forces did not matter in past decades. The Cold War, as we have seen, heavily relied on sea power, and the same can be said for the War on Terrorism and the peace-building attempts of the 1990s in the Middle East. Nonetheless, in the past the maritime domain was perceived as having the role of strengthening and bolstering land-interests rather than having a cruciality of its own. Today, and especially in the past five years, the situation has changed. The Covid-19 pandemic and the rise of political instability caused by expanding authoritarian powers have highlighted geopolitical threats that were underestimated until some years ago. The Ukrainian-Russian war, the contested area of Taiwan and the importance of underwater cables and pipelines in the Baltic and North Sea have clearly shown how contemporary wars are not just waged on land but, on the contrary, possess a fundamental maritime dimension (Economist, 2024). As a result, both State and non-State actors are experiencing a transformation within their maritime force and strategies, quickly grasping the contemporary importance of sea lines of communication in both the economic and political realm.

This has been especially true for the European Union, which has recently experienced a newly found interest in sea power and the role of the navies. 77% of foreign trade and 35% percent of goods moved on European territory are transported by sea (EU, 2023b, p. 2). Moreover, the EU imports 57,5% of its total energy consumption, of which a huge part comes from either sea commerce or underwater infrastructures. Despite the huge impact that the maritime dimension plays for the European Union's economic growth and security, the Union has established a cohesive and coordinated sea outlook only recently. A security approach to the seas was delineated even later, as the first phases of the European efforts were mostly focused on development of the EU's blue economy together with the protection of borders. Today, as a result of a changing and more unstable geopolitical context, the European Union has made impressive strides toward becoming a "global maritime security provider" (EU Council, 2014a). This process, which has arisen slowly and arduously, represents a striking change in the Union's foreign and security approach, signalling a fundamental development in the field of security and geopolitics.

We shall begin by considering the numerous documents published by the EU on the subject. Beginning in the early 2000s until present day, we shall see how the Union's perspective has significantly changed in the past 20 years. Subsequently, we shall consider the Chinese maritime rise and the Russian-Ukrainian war, and their influence on the Union's view on sea power. We will argue that Europe's trajectory toward the role of Sea Power has been a constant response to an increasingly unstable international context which has made the strengthening of a coordinated maritime outlook necessary.

2.1 The European Union and sea power

Having considered the two analytical macro-groups of maritime theories, it is this sub-chapter's aim to show how these can help us understand the European Union's view of sea power and maritime security. As we shall see, the EU maritime dimension was founded in line with liberal theories, highlighting the diplomatic and cooperative role of European navies. However, in more recent years the Union has been moving toward a more realistic and hard power approach to maritime power, focusing on the defence and protection of commercial sea lanes in the advancement of the EU's economic and political interests.

In the influential European Security Strategy of 2003 there was very little acknowledgment of the naval aspects existing within potential sources of insecurity (EU

Council, 2003). The first mention of an "EU Maritime Dimension" came in 2007, when a document of the EU Military staff maintained that the sea played a significant role in economic and security terms. More specifically, the document argued that "Maritime forces have a role to guarantee the free use of the sea, which is key to the EU's economic prosperity and access to areas of strategic interest. The utility of maritime capability is its ability to use the unique access provided by the sea to enable movement, concentration of combat power, surprise or overt presence and transportation" (EU Military Staff, 2007, p. 6). In this context, the Union wanted to highlight the importance of future maritime contributions to the sector of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The focus of this paper, nonetheless, was fixed on blue waters crimes, with specific reference to illegal activities on the seas. Two factors clearly demonstrated the "diplomatic" and soft power outlook that the EU took in the first steps of its maritime vision: firstly, the document expressly mentioned that "The early presence of a maritime force can be a significant factor in providing the necessary political and/or military leverage" (EU Military Staff, 2007, p. 9). Here, maritime power was depicted as a tool to influence or deter others from acting in a manner dangerous for EU's economic and political interests without the direct use of force. More specifically, in line with Booth (2014), the document highlighted how the flexibility of maritime forces made them a particularly effective diplomatic tool. European vessels can be moved quickly and deployed before escalation on the high seas where the principle of freedom of navigation prevails. They can provide a plethora of functions be it for the gathering of intelligence or for humanitarian purposes. Most of all, maritime forces contribute to the Union's power projection without a "irreversible commitment" to a specific operational and/or political plan. A second crucial factor that was specifically mentioned in the document was the need for a more coordinated multinational, inter-agency approach. This favoured the set-up of a more coherent military apparatus within the maritime dominion to better protect and strengthen common interests.

In that same year, the European Union also published its Integrated Maritime Policy (IMP), namely an inter-sectorial policy approach related to all sea-based activities of importance to the EU (EU Commission, 2007). The IMP covered 5 policy fields: blue growth, marine and data knowledge, maritime spatial planning, integrated maritime surveillance and sea basing strategy. Nowhere in the paper was the concept of "maritime security" or of "sea control" ever mentioned.

The European Union's interest in the seas was also confirmed in another study published in 2013. The main maritime challenges mentioned by this paper were five (European Parliament, 2013, p. 20): environmental security, illegal trafficking, illegal migration, piracy, international terrorism, and failed/collapsing states. Concerning this last matter, the General Directorate of External Policies highlighted how state failure, especially in the Middle East, had made sea-based power projection a fundamental tool to prevent war crimes, violation of human rights and consequent spillovers into European borders. Fundamentally, the European Union highlighted its preoccupation for a possible arms race. The paper mentioned that "Ambitious naval shipbuilding programs, whether for security or prestige reasons, are creating friction and undermining trust. (…) Although the prospects for a conventional maritime conflict remain low, this changing balance has affected the interaction between states and created new frictions" (European Parliament, 2013, p. 91). Importantly, this changing geopolitical context had the great disadvantage of making cooperation more difficult, undermining the Union's multilateral governance. The Union's was therefore expected to promote the pooling of maritime capabilities, while at the same time creating better and deeper connections between the CSDP and the IMP. The paper then dedicated an entire chapter to the analysis of the three fundamental sea lines of communication from and to the European Union: the Southern, Eastern and Northern Corridor (2013, pp. 40-61).

In 2010, the European Council published its conclusions regarding a common maritime strategy (EU Council, 2010). While only one-page long, the aim of this document was to include the maritime dimension that was missing in the original European Security Strategy of 2003. Fundamentally, the Council invited the figure of the High Representative to begin the necessary work for the delineation of a possible maritime security strategy, including the possibility of setting up a task force. This effort was completed in 2014, when the *EU Maritime Security Strategy* (EUMSS) was finally published, delineating a strategic framework for a coordinated response against numerous and diverse challenges on the seas. In the paper, maritime security was described as "A state of affairs of the global maritime domain, in which international law and national law are enforced, freedom of navigation is guaranteed and citizens, infrastructure, transport, the environment and marine resources are protected" (EU Council, 2014a, p. 3). This is the first time the EU openly recognised the need to become a "global maritime security provider". In this context, the Member State's armed forces were expected to play a fundamental role in assuring security on the seas to strengthen the Union's political and

economic interests (EU Council, 2014a, p. 10). The main objective of the EUMSS, therefore, was to prevent conflicts as well as protect the EU's critical maritime infrastructure. Time and time again the document mentioned the importance of SLOCs connecting Europe with international trade routes, thus considering the centrality of trade and energy imports.

The document itself was not particularly detailed. It envisioned the interests and objectives of the EU, without however specifying how these should be achieved. The lack of a specific strategy was linked to the difficulty that the Union had in creating the EUMSS. As we have already mentioned, efforts begun in 2010 during the Spanish EU Presidency but were immediately met with a high degree of suspicion from other countries. Important member states, most notably the UK and Germany, strongly opposed the idea of a common defence approach to the maritime domain. However, strongly supported by Spain, Italy, France and Greece, the Union managed to continue in its effort at the condition that the maritime strategy be kept under the strictly intergovernmental CFSP framework, thus effectively protecting the Member States' veto power (Riddervold, 2018). After four years of negotiations, the EUMSS was finally adopted at unanimity in June 2014. Importantly, as Riddervold (2018) maintains:

> "A new wave of geopolitical events affected member states' preferences in favour of the EUMSS, in line with a neo-realist proposition. From 2013, European states faced a number of new threats in their near abroad, ranging from the escalating conflict in Ukraine, civil wars in Syria and Lebanon, Islamic extremism close to EU neighbour Turkey's border, to a huge number of refugees coming to Southern Europe by boat due to these conflicts. (…) With this new wave of geopolitical issues, people suddenly realised that maritime threats and issues are very relevant."

As a result, Member States quickly comprehended the necessity of a security approach to maritime insecurity, slowly and gradually moving toward a hard power maritime vision. The geopolitical context of the time, and especially the Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014 just a few months before the adoption of the EUMSS, pushed the European Union to move from a liberalist understanding, as found in previous texts and documents, to a markedly realist position. Cooperation and coordination became important not only in making the navy an effective diplomatic actor for the prevention of crimes and projection of normative power on the seas, but also in making it a security provider capable of protecting the Member States' interests against external threats. The change of

approach toward maritime security and the necessity of exercising a higher level of sea control, therefore, was dictated by changes in the geopolitical scenario. Without the instabilities of the early 2010s, national governments would have remained too reluctant to cede part of their sovereignty. A hard power approach needed an environment of insecurity, both commercial and political, to settle permanently in the Union's mindset.

While the 2014 EUMSS decidedly displayed a different EU's perspective on the maritime dimension – and partly on the security sector – the European Union was at this time still divided between normative features and hard power ambitions. This became evident in the *Implementation Plan on Security and Defence* linked to the 2016 EU Global Strategy. The document too emphasises the need for a stronger Union in the defence and security sector, especially through the implementation of new CSDP missions to respond to external conflicts, enhance partners' capacities, and protect the Union and its citizens (EU Council, 2016). However, these missions were to be conducted through preventive and mediatory methods with a strong emphasis on the promotion of international law, human rights, and principles of democracy and good governance. The maritime dimension was defined as a "global common" (EU Council, 2016, p. 14) and CSDP missions implemented in this dominion should contribute "to maritime security/surveillance worldwide but most immediately in areas relevant to Europe in the context of specific security needs" (EU Council, 2016, p. 11). It became clear then that at this point the European Union was still reluctant to function as a global naval force, preferring instead to remain in waters close to the Union's borders. Moreover, naval missions were limited to security and surveillance tasks, thus narrowing their ability of acting in the protection of the Member States' direct interests. Clearly, Brussels was not yet ready to truly become a global security provider even though it was pushing for a wider European engagement.

More recently, the European Union has decided to modernise its external strategy and the EUMSS because of rising insecurity within the current geopolitical context. More specifically, the EU has been working hard to achieve a higher level of securitisation in its foreign action, moving away from diplomatic and policing roles toward a more realist and hard power approach. This has proven to be true particularly in the maritime domain. The first attempt in this direction was the revision of the *Action Plan for the European Union Maritime Security Strategy* in 2018. In the document, the Union underlined its normative role as promoter of maritime multilateralism and in the protection of international law, especially of the UNCLOS. The Plan aimed at operationalising the

EUMSS through four principles: a cross sectoral approach, functional integrity, respect for rules and principles, and maritime multilateralism (European Council, 2018, p. 6). Again, the Council highlighted the importance of becoming a "global maritime security provider", while however maintaining close links with the security apparatus of both the UN and NATO.

Let us now consider the *Strategic Compass for Security Defence*, published by the Council of Europe in March 2022. The entire document is specifically directed at making the Union into a more prepared, more capable, and stronger actor in the field of security and defence, moving away from a purely normative power. The document time and time again recognises the importance of the high seas to do so. In detail, the Union shows its objective of securing all contested domains: cyberspace, outer space, air domain and the maritime domain. Regarding the latter, the document maintains (European Council, 2022, p. 15):

> "With the maritime domain becoming increasingly contested, we commit to further asserting our interests at sea and enhancing the EU's and Member State's maritime security (…). Building on the ongoing experience in the Gulf of Guinea and in the North-West of the Indian Ocean, we will expand on our Coordinated Maritime Presences to other areas of maritime interest that impact on the security of the EU (…). We will also consolidate, and further develop as appropriate, our two naval operations which are deployed in the Mediterranean and off the Somali Coast – maritime areas of crucial strategic interest for the EU."

Apart from considering the development of existing operations on the seas and the creation of potential naval interventions on other maritime areas of interest, the Council aimed at modernising the EUMSS and investing in maritime security to "ensure unfettered access to the high seas and sea lanes of communication, as well as respect for the international law of the sea" (European Council, 2022, p. 24). This would be done by enhancing the collection and sharing of information and intelligence, developing the Coordinated Maritime Presences program, reinforcing interaction and coordination between naval operations created under the CSDP system, and organising naval exercises between Member States' navies. Here the document also indirectly mentioned the importance of external perception of naval forces, as found in Wyle (1991) and Booth (1994). Indeed, one of the objectives is "to increase the visibility of our naval presence within and beyond the EU" (European Council, 2022, p. 28), thus reassuring allies and

frightening enemies of the Union's potential military capabilities on the seas. Finally, the Union wanted to make the most of the Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund to modernise and strengthen its military technologies and systems (European Council, 2022, p. 32). In the case of the maritime domain, the Union would invest in unmanned systems for both surface and underwater control, with specific mention of the Modular and Multirole Patrol Corvette (see Figure 3).

The Strategic Compass of 2022 is without doubt a very ambitious plan. It aims at modernising the entire security and defence system of the European Union in response to what is perceived to be a dangerously unstable geopolitical environment. Most of all, the EU wants to impose itself as a security provider within the return of power politics, where actors like Russia and China endanger the Union's citizens, interests, and values. While partnerships with NATO and other regional organisations such as ASEAN and the African Union are mentioned, the European Union evidently aims at reinforcing, or some would say creating, its strategic and operational independence in the field of security. This eagerness comes hand in hand with the realisation that the EU cannot rely anymore on external partners for the defence of its economic and geopolitical interests.
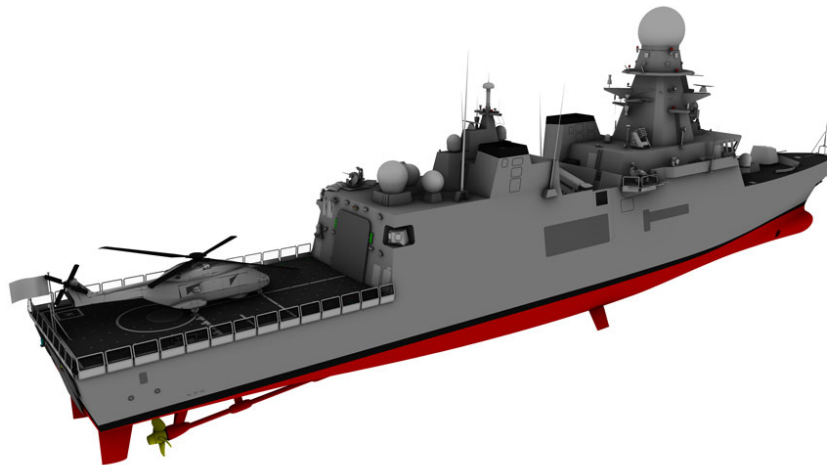

Figure 3: The Modular and Multirole Patrol Corvette (MMPC). It received another €200 million from the European Defence Fund after the publication of the Strategic Compass. It is a new class of combatants projected by PESCO, and especially by Italy and France.

The European Maritime Security Strategy has been revised for a second time in October 2023, thus replacing the revision made in 2018. As it was the case for the 2022 Security Compass, the revised EUMSS is also a product of the unstable geopolitical context that has affected the EU in the last two years. The document mentions the EU

Threat Analysis, which stresses how strategic competition for power and resources is escalating. It also discusses the concept of Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP), introduced for the first time in 2021 (European Council, 2023a, p. 15). This new tool was built to increase the coordination between the Member States' naval forces and the synergy between Member States' maritime actions. Importantly, the CMP is implemented in *Maritime Areas of Interest*, namely spaces that the European Council recognises as of economic, political and security significance for the Union and its members. At this moment, the Council has approved two Maritime Areas of Interest in the Gulf of Guinea and in the North-western Indian Ocean with the resulting deployment of CMP forces.

More generally, in the document the European Council recognises a variety of fundamental interests in the maritime domain (European Council, 2023a, pp. 11-12). Between others, it highlights the preservation of free and open maritime routes, the protection of natural resources, the improvement of resilience of security networks and maritime infrastructure, the protection of the Union's external borders, and the development of an effective multi-domain approach. Compared to the 2014 EUMSS, the revised version of 2023 shows more initiative and organization in the creation of a strong naval strategy. Indeed, rather than delineating general values and goals for the European Union, the Council provides a detailed Action Plan with specific short and medium-term objectives.

Finally, one last document is worth mentioning when considering the European Union's trajectory within the maritime domain. This is a document entitled "*The EU: From Maritime Actor to Sea Power*" and drafted by the Analysis and Research Team of the EU Council. The title in itself is already striking: the Union, despite its huge coastline and numerous accesses to 4 seas and 2 oceans, has yet to become a sea power. It has largely ignored the importance of the sea for the security and economic development of its Member States and citizens, and it is now recognising that this must change. Importantly, the reason for this shift in trajectory is the increase in assertiveness and aggressiveness on the seas strongly fuelled by a process of general naval rearmament (European Council, 2023b, p. 6). By 2030, the largest naval powers after the US will be China, India, and Russia. Asia is hugely investing in the modernisation of naval forces, while Russia is deploying an astonishing level of new defence technologies within the maritime domain. As a result, the Union's maritime vision is changing not only in its own quest for becoming a global security provider, but also in response to other powers' development of naval capabilities. "European navies risk becoming operationally

obsolete, leading to a significant shift in the balance of power away from Europe" (European Council, 2023b, p. 7). We shall, therefore, now consider the influence that two major actors have had on the European Union trajectory toward becoming a naval power.

2.2 The Chinese influence

Chinese investments on the modernisation of their naval forces have pushed the European Union toward a new vision of the maritime domain and sea power. Understandably, the turn of such a crucial actor toward the sea was bound to create strong geopolitical effects and changes in perceptions within the international community. Indeed, while EU-Chinese relations remain peaceful and often cooperative, the Union looks with a certain level of mistrust toward its expansion on the sea. As a result, we argue that Beijing's development of sea power and maritime capabilities has played a role, albeit partial, on the development of the Union's own strategy.

Mao Zedong was the first Chinese leader to clearly recognise the importance of sea power. Having swept away the Kuomintang and Chiang Kai-Shek and forced them on the island of Taiwan, Mao invested on the cruciality of costal sea control against the Nationalist threat (Yoshihara, 2023, p. 1). The outlook on the South China Sea and the attempt to control the island of Taiwan limited for a long time the Chinese maritime strategy to the so-called domain of the *green waters*, namely the territory extending on relatively few nautical miles from the coasts. Furthermore, because of China's huge territorial expansion, the Chinese army focused for the most part on land forces for the protection of borders and expansion on the Asian continent (Ross, 1999, p. 93). As a result, during the Cold War the Communist Party failed to build, as many did, a powerful and influential military navy, limiting sea control to its territorial waters.

With the end of the Cold War, however, Chinese vision of its military forces changed, and new geopolitical concerns strongly shifted the attention toward the maritime dimension. In this sense, Admiral Liu Huaqing – Commander of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) between 1982-1987 and subsequently member of the Chinese Communist Party (CPP) between 1992 and 1997 – played a fundamental role in the creation of a new blue water navy (Levaggi, 2023, p. 92). More in detail, he maintained that Beijing's projection of sea power was to happen in a gradual manner. Firstly, the Chinese Navy was to exert control over the first island chain: namely the Aleutian Islands, Ryukyus, Kuriles, the Japanese archipelago, Taiwan, the Philippine archipelago, and the Great Sound Islands. Subsequently, China would expand its sea control to the second island chain: namely the

Bonins Islands, the Marianas, Guam and Palau. Finally, by 2050 Chinese naval forces were expected to possess the capabilities of a global navy. On the basis of Admiral Liu's project, President Hu Jintao articulated in 2003 the so-called *Malacca Dilemma*, bringing to the public's attention the increasing Chinese dependence on imports of energy resources coming for the most part from the Gulf States via sea lines of communication. President Hu claimed before the entire PCC that "Certain powers have all along encroached on and tried to control navigation through the Strait", stressing the need of a wider Chinese presence in the area. This meant that China had to invest more heavily on the modernisation of its naval forces, leading to a complete turn in defence spending. More specifically, the Malacca Dilemma highlighted "the requirement for the Navy to shift from a "green water" (primarily coastal defence) to a "blue water" (operations in deep ocean theatres) strategy" (Lanteigne, 2008, p. 147). During this period, therefore, China begun moving its first steps toward the creation of an independent naval power of great distances. The importance of the Malacca Strait because of the national demand of oil and gas necessary to move the enormous Chinese economic engine meant not only that sea power had now become a priority for the Communist Party. China's dependence on energy imports had turned from relative to absolute, which made SLOCs' protection against imperialist powers a matter of national survival. As a result, "It is imperative that China, as a nation, pays attention to its maritime security and the means to defend its interests through sea power" (Wenmu, 2006, p. 20).
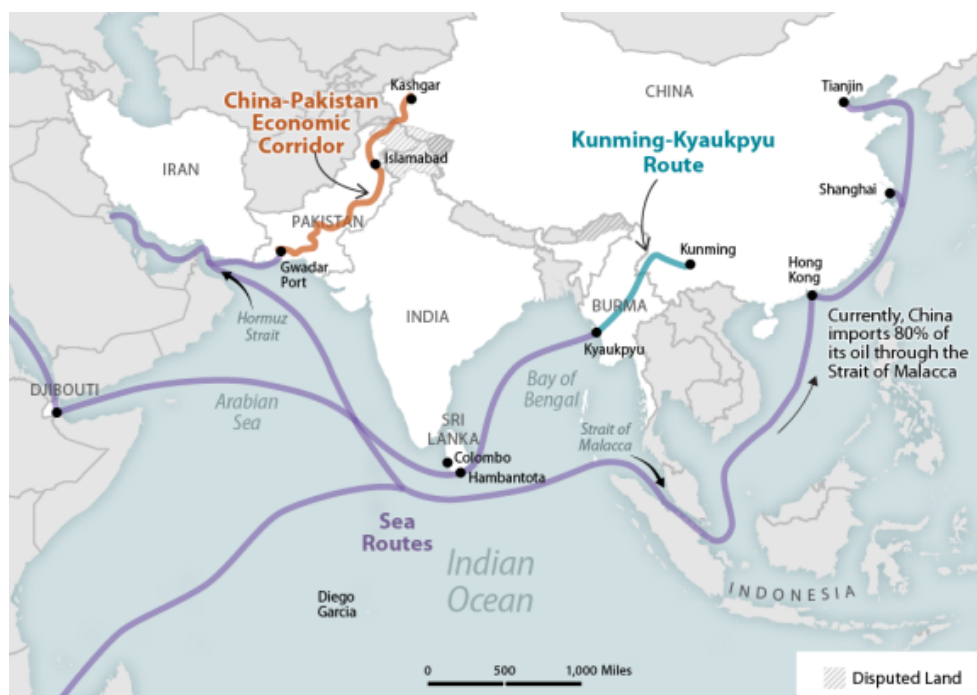

Figure 4. Chinese imports and exports to and from both Europe and the Gulf States necessarily pass through the Strait of Malacca.

Importantly, Beijing had to protect this fundamental maritime dimension also from potential national threats, in addition to piracy and other forms of blue crimes. Indeed, both the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait are crucial for the sea trade of numerous Asian States, such as the Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam, making them highly contested zones. The advancement of Chinese economic and political objectives, therefore, has often directly faced competing national interests within the Asian Continent.

The Chinese maritime dimension has gained further significance in the last decade, as the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) has played a fundamental role in consolidating Beijing's turn toward the high seas. Mentioned by President Xi Jinping for the first time in 2013, the MSRI can be associated with the ancient Silk Road that connected imperial China with Europe for the commerce of valuable goods. Today still the MSRI has been built to closely connect Asia with the Mediterranean and to numerous countries of Eastern Africa. Its aim, as specified by China, is not the conquest of hegemonic power but, rather, the boosting of world trade to the benefit of all involved (Blanchard & Flint, 2017, p. 235). At the centre of this project, we find what Wei and Ahmed (2018, p. 92; see also Wenmu, 2020) call "sea power with Chinese characteristics", namely a sea power that is based on peaceful cooperation and not aggressive confrontation, on socialism detached from exploitation, and on economic rather than military interests. This relates to the notion of Chinese multilateralism, perfectly summarised in Xi Jinping words as "dialogue without confrontation, partnership without alliance" (see Rudyak, 2021).

The strengthening of Chinese sea power can be deduced from two main factors. On one hand, the MRI has forced Beijing to intensify the process of modernisation of maritime infrastructures and technologies. Indeed, in the past thirty years the Chinese government has heavily invested in the Chinese Liberation Army Navy with the aim of building stronger blue-water forces. As it was emphasised by the 2015 White Book on Defence, "The traditional mentality that land exceeds the sea must be abandoned, and great importance should be attached to the management of seas and oceans and the protection of maritime rights and interests." The investments made toward naval forces have been astounding, characterised by a sharp increase in the number of multi-mission ships, frigates, and submarines at the disposal of Chinese interests. As Yung and Rustici (2014, p. 7) highlight, the modernisation of maritime forces is aimed at protecting Chinese economic and political interests outside of its borders. These forces are to be used to protect sea lines of communications through which both imports and exports move, while

projecting PCC's power in the economic zone extending at the centre of Asian trade. As a result, sea power has become a vital interest for Beijing, making it "no surprise that PLA strategists would view China's dependence on USN [United States Navy] protection of critical SLOCs as a source of frustration and motivation and would therefore seek to develop and independent means of security key energy supply routes" (Mulvenon, 2008, p. 5).

On the other hand, it is also indicative how and where these naval forces have been increasingly employed. Firstly, in the last years China was for the first time directly involved in various peacekeeping and anti-piracy operations. This is the case of the 2008 Chinese operation in the Gulf of Aden and the rescue mission of Chinese citizens from Libya (Wei & Ahmed, 2018). This shows a willingness to move away from purely coastal and green-water operations, bolstering a new role as a global maritime power. In so doing, the Chinese Navy aligned itself with other maritime nations to demonstrate not only the remodelling of its naval forces but, most of all, the achievement of a new dimension of strength. Another clear example of Beijing's achievements is the 2017 opening in Djibouti of its only military base outside of national borders. To justify the construction, the Chinese Government presented to the public diverse explanations (Styan, 2020, p. 11): to strengthen anti-piracy operations on the Red Sea and near the coasts of Eastern Africa to the benefit of the international community at large; to safeguard Chinese commercial infrastructures built in the area as part of the MSRI; to protect the growing number of nationals working in the area; and, finally, to support the numerous Chinese peacekeepers stationed in Africa. However, this cooperative image presented to the public does not truthfully represent the entire picture. As Cabestan (2020, p. 740) highlights, the outpost in Djibouti has a fundamental role in the securitisation of the Red Sea and of the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb, with the long-term objective of establishing a Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. This too is a fundamental ambition, especially when considering the worsening of relations between China and India and the growing distrust between these two powers in the past years.

Therefore, recent examples of Chinese operations in the maritime domain support the argument that the Chinese approach is based on a hard power rather than on a liberal and cooperative understanding of sea power and maritime security. The aim of the recent naval rearmament is the protection of Chinese exports and energy imports, with not much interest for the strengthening of the seas as a global common. This view is supported in the influential book *Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to US*

Maritime Strategy (2018) by Yoshihara and Holmes. Indeed, the two authors argue that China's approach to sea power is influenced by Mahanian principles, focusing on securing access to SLOCs, energy imports, and resources to support the national economy and its growth. This Mahanian logic is the primary motivation driving China's maritime strategies today (2018, p. 47). Additionally, the authors discuss the lexicon used by the Chinese government in describing their sea power, which refers to how China leverages all aspects of its national authority to establish control over maritime regions. This approach is rooted in China's unique maritime geography and strategic traditions. Moreover, the authors highlight the use of the anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategy, especially in the seas near its coast and the 'first island chain' extending from Japan through Taiwan to Southeast Asia, as a clear embodiment of China's sea power strategy (taken from Zhengyu, 2021, p. 4).

As we have seen, in the last 20 years the importance of maritime trade for the survival of this Asian giant has stressed naval forces past flaws and future needs. Importantly for our analysis, this change of harts was bound to have some implications for the European Union's understanding of maritime power. Within the international community, when a superpower like China moves it usually entices the attention of other actors. The *EU-China Strategic Agenda* of 2020 directly mentions the need to pursue and strengthen maritime security, especially for the projection of maritime routes and the preservation of working supply chain logistics (European Council, p. 4 and 8). More specifically, China is seen by the European Union not as an enemy but, rather, as a "partner for cooperation, an economic competitor and a systemic rival" (European Council, 2022, p. 8). Yet, in its Strategic Compass, the Union depicts the growing Chinese military presence on the seas, together with the modernisation of its forces, as a potential risk. The EU, therefore, must work to ensure that these processes will happen in the full respect of international law and in the less possible threating way to its Member States' economic and political interests. Regarding the South and East China sea, potential confrontation on maritime control is mentioned in the revised EU Maritime Security Strategy of 2023 (European Council, 2023, p. 8). Tensions in the Strait of Malacca and South China Sea, distinctively in the nature of infringements on other countries' sovereignty (see *Philippines v. China Arbitration*, 2016), have meant a renewed focus by the Union in the area. As the new EUMSS stresses (European Council, 2023, p. 8): "The display of force and increased tensions in regions such as the South and East China Sea and the Taiwan Straits affect global and European security and prosperity. Maintaining

stability and security along the shipping routes (…) requires the EU and its Member States to step up action". Moreover, in the same year the European Parliamentary Research Service published a study on Chinese operations in the South China Sea. The document stressed Chinese antagonism in the formation of its anti-access/area denial strategy in the SCS. More specifically, "China's claim to absolute control over large swaths of the SCS and its growing military capabilities underpinned by military outposts (…) may enable it disrupt freedom of navigation operations and to thwart US deterrence of potential invasion of Taiwan" (European Parliament, 2021, p. 2).

A similar message was openly presented by EU Institutions regarding the area of the Indo-Pacific. Tensions in the area and presence of Chinese ships endangering peace means that the European Union is working to secure and protect free and open sea lines of commerce crossing the Indo-Pacific. So worried is the Union that the European Parliament adopted a declaration on *The EU and the Security Challenges in the Indo-Pacific* in June 2022. Here, the major threat to stable security architecture is recognised to be the People's Republic of China, which has given rise to geopolitical tensions because of its steep military build-up. An entire section of the paper is dedicated to maritime security. More specifically, the European Parliament calls on Member States to increase their maritime capacities, "including by exploring ways to ensure a permanent and credible European naval presence in the Indian Ocean" while also stressing "the need to increase the EU's capacity as an effective maritime security provider" (European Parliament, 2022a, p. 17). The document goes on to praise the achievements of Operation EUNAVFOR Atalanta, hoping that its scope will be expanded to the detriment of Chinese aggression on the seas.

It is important to remember that, with the exception of Operation Atalanta, which however for the most part is focused on coastal policing rather than real military intervention, the European Union's action in the Indo-Pacific and the South China Sea has been limited to numerous declarations calling for the maintenance of peace and for the respect of national sovereignty and international law. The only exception to this is France, which has permanently stationed in the Indo-Pacific five military commands and two presence forces in the United Arab Emirates and Djibouti. By 2025, the country expects to have 10 patrol boats for the enhancement of surveillance and maritime situational awareness (Bondaz, 2023, p.1). Nonetheless, not considering single Member States' exceptions, European activities have been limited to the protection and strengthening of the blue water economy (see Nengye and Qi, 2018, p. 4). Still if we consider once again the Strategic Compass, the EUMSS of 2023 and the Strategy in the

Indo-Pacific of 2022, we can clearly see how the Union is attempting to move toward a major securitisation of the area. While respect for international law and national sovereignty are cited again and again, the focus remains on European strategic interests. The Chinese military build-up and excessive naval presence in these two spaces represent too big a threat to European economic and commercial interests to be ignored. In light of this, we argue that the PLAN investment in maritime power and sea control has played a role, albeit delimited, on the European Union's turn toward becoming an international maritime security provider.

However, China-EU relations in the field of maritime security do not necessarily have to be seen through a confrontational lens. China and the European Union have already cooperated, for example, in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, an area strategically crucial for the commerce of both powers. In this context, cooperation was strongly facilitated by the convergence of their economic and political interests for the benefit of both (Gurol, 2022, p. 104). On the one hand, for the European Union this meant sharing the cost of combatting piracy while leaving those operations that fell outside of the CSDP realm to multilateral agreements. On the other, for China acting in cooperation with the EU, rather than unilaterally, was more efficient. This is especially because of the vulnerable position on which China stands in the area. Operation Atalanta, therefore, is a clear example of how, when EU-Chinese interests converge, the two can successfully act cooperatively in the field of maritime security. Nonetheless, in most areas, such as in the South China Sea and Taiwan, the two actors present vastly different political objectives meaning that confrontation remains a very real possibility. The Union, and its view of the PRC as a systematic rival, does not forget this crucial aspect, and that is partially why assuring strategic and military independence on the sea has become a crucial aspect of European foreign view in the past decades.

2.3 The Russian influence

Another Power has exerted major influence on the ways the European Union understands security and defence, and that is undoubtedly Russia. This has been especially the case since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Far from being limited to the maritime dimension, Russian influence has been crucial for the advancement of the Union's foreign and security policies in general. This was stressed by the High Representative Josep Borrell (2022), who stated that "In the week since Russia's invasion, we have also witnessed the belated birth of a geopolitical

Europe. (…) We have now arguably gone further down the path in the past week than we did in the previous decade." Conflict on our borders gave us the necessary push to create a different EU, one more willing to act as a security and geopolitical actor. A clear sign of this is the drafting, just one month after the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, of the new Strategic Compass. The document begins by citing "the return of war in Europe" and the Russian aggression as the wake-up call for Member States. The Kremlin's violent turn has also had major influence on the maritime dimension. Russia has heavily relied on its naval forces to win this battle and to project its power outside of national borders. Worried by the possibility of direct conflict with Putin, European statesmen have quickly realised the importance of matching the Kremlin's military power, especially so on the seas.

Russia displayed strong naval forces already at the time of the Czarist Empire. The first modern warships were created already at the end of the 1600s reflecting the importance for the Muscovite empire of international trade through the seas (Phillips, 1995, p. 14). In the case of Russia, the manufacturing and use of strong naval forces, be it commercial or military, was strictly linked to its imperial power. As a result, the Russian navy played a fundamental role throughout the entire imperialist era, with 74 per cent of exports and 54 per cent of imports coming through maritime commerce (Papastratigatikis, 2011, p. 36). The same was true during the rule of the Communist regime. We have already mentioned the influence that Admiral Gorshkov, Commander in Chief of the Soviet Navy since from 1956 to 1985, exerted on the Kremlin. He transformed the Soviet Navy into a true political and diplomatic tool, providing the necessary modernisation to make it a blue-water force (Till, 2023, p. 125). Indeed, Gorshkov strongly believed that naval forces had the ability to shape and change the international community's perception of the URSS, supporting the Soviet Union's role as a global superpower before the eyes of enemies and allies alike. As he argued, "Demonstrative actions by the fleet in many cases have made it possible to achieve political ends without resorting to armed struggle, merely by putting on pressure with one's own potential might and threatening to start military operations. Thus, the fleet has always been an instrument of policy of state, an important aid to diplomacy in peacetime" (Gorshkov, 1979, p. 247). After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Soviet Navy, similarly to most of the ex-Communist State apparatus, went through a time of great crisis. This was infamously demonstrated by the incident of the cruise missile submarine Kursk, which because of mechanical failures sunk during a military drill killing the entire crew of 118 persons. The lack of proper funding and

training of military personnel shook the entire country and badly depicted it in front of the international community (Chuen, Jasinski & Lortie, 2001). The Russian Navy, once the second largest and most powerful after that of the US, had now fallen in total decay.

In modern times, the navy has regained a fundamental role in the projection of Russian power. President Vladimir Putin has recognised the importance of the navy for what he hopes will be the resurrection of the Russian Federation as a global power. The Maritime Doctrine published in 2001 showed the willingness to restore Gorshkov's *Ocean Strategy*. This Doctrine was subsequently revised in 2015. In the document, the Kremlin clearly demonstrated its willingness to build a strong ocean navy together with the creation and deployment of new defence technologies. Primary objective of the Russian maritime strategy was to implement and safeguard Russian interests, while strengthening the Federation's position and power between other maritime powers (Russia Maritime Studies Institute, 2015, p. 7). Importantly, while the 2015 *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* is based on a preference for diplomatic and non-military means to resolve challenges on the sea, it maintains the urgency of "possession of sufficient naval potential and its effective implementation when it is a necessity to apply force in support of maritime activities of the state, elimination of threats to national security of the Russian Federation from the ocean and the sea, and ensuring inviolability of the State borders of the Russian Federation" (Russia Maritime Studies Institute, 2015, p. 8). The entire document, therefore, is embedded in a conflictual and hard power rhetoric aimed at the protection of Russian interests, sovereignty, and borders if necessary with the use of force. Moscow's maritime strategy of 2015 alarmed many in the international community. Its investments in the creation of a 21st century Russian navy meant a renovated ability of maritime power projection compared to earlier Soviet forces (Sherman, 2015). Together with the development of new offensive capabilities, doubts arose on when and where this power projection would be deployed. In 2017, the Kremlin also published the *Fundamentals of the State Policies of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the Period until 2030* (Russia Maritime Studies Institute, 2017). The document highlighted how, in a geopolitical context of increasing instability and competition, Russia as a "great maritime power" must secure strong naval forces to achieve its national strategic objectives.

More recently, the Maritime Doctrine was revised in July 2022. In the updated document, because of the depletion of land resources and the impact of human activities on the environment, the maritime dimension is defined as a crucial aspect for the successful and

sustainable development of the Russian Federation (Russia Maritime Studies Institute, 2022, p. 3). In this context, one of the objectives of this maritime policy is "maintaining the status of the Russian Federation as a great maritime power, whose activities are focused on maintaining strategic stability in the World Ocean, strengthening national influence and developing mutually beneficial partnership in the field of maritime activities in an emerging polycentric world" (Russia Maritime Studies Institute, 2022, p. 4). However, in the revised version we find a concept that was missing in the 2015 Doctrine: the World Ocean is viewed as a crucial aspect of endurance, be it economic or security, of the Russian Federation. The threat of vital maritime areas can, in the eyes of the Kremlin, jeopardise the very existence of the State. As a result, the 2022 Doctrine confers a new message: one of survival against external threats.

This perceived all-round threat to the State is a consequence of the geopolitical context in which Russia finds itself in, a context that has a deep connection to sea control and denial. Chiriac (2024, p. 90) argues that Russia has consistently made use of a form of gunboat diplomacy even after the end of the Cold War. In particular, naval forces have been often used for the projection of the Federation's strength against the perceived threat of NATO and EU expansion. Today's Russian vital interests remain strictly maritime: the Black Sea, the eastern part of the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, Baltic and Kuril Straits, and international SLOCs (Russia Maritime Studies Institute, 2022, pp. 5-6). Until the Arctic Route becomes more accessible, a prospect for which Russia is tirelessly working and preparing, the Black and the Baltic Sea remain the primary maritime interests for the Federation. Broadly speaking, these sea basins cover three fundamental concerns of the Russian Federation: the ability to project power over the Mediterranean, the necessity of marketing crude oil, and the requirement to secure Russian borders (Levagggi, 2023, p. 125). As a result, Russia has continuously securitised and militarised these areas wary of a European involvement that would limit its economic and political interests. Beginning in 2005, Moscow did not welcome the expansion of the Union's normative power through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Black Sea Synergy. This is also evidenced from the fact that Russia refused to participate in the ENP and demanded to be differentiated from other post-Soviet countries in its relations with the European Union (Freire, 2024, p. 377). Within the maritime dimension, Russian naval forces have historically concentrated in the Black Sea. Here, the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) has been deployed since the 2008 Georgia-Russia War. To maintain a strong naval presence in the area, the Kremlin revised a deal it had signed with Ukraine in 1997 to retain the

BSF in Sevastopol, located in the Crimean Peninsula (Srivastava, 2016, p. 5). In April 2010, then President Viktor Yanukovych, a candidate close to Putin, stroke a deal with the Kremlin extending to 25 years the lease on Sevastopol to the Russian Black Sea Fleet. As payment, the Federation supplied Ukraine with natural gas at a 30% discount. This caused a hugely negative impact on the Ukrainian ability of independently projecting power on its coasts, while at the same time broadening the Russian and BSF's control on the area (Sanders, 2012, p. 19). The deal did not include any provision regarding the type or size of naval forces that Russia could keep in the area. The situation worsened in March 2014, when Russia illegally annexed the Crimean region. In so doing, Putin assured its control over the Black Sea. Indeed, before 2014, Moscow's attempts to increase or technologically upgrade the BSF in Crimea were constrained by the 1997 and 2019 Russian-Ukrainian agreements (Delanoe, 2014, p. 375). With the acquisition of sovereignty, albeit internationally contested, on Crimea, Russia unilaterally solved the issue by annulling the validity of any former treaty.

Both sea basins, however, have become even more contested areas after the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Russia, the European Union, and NATO are all attempting to impose their sea control on the area to the detriment of the other and in protection of their security and national interests. This explains why Finland and Sweden applied to join NATO in May 2022. And why the Russian Federation has strongly increased its naval presence in both the Baltic and the Black Sea. These changes are perfectly in line with Putin's vision of the navy as presented in the 2022 Maritime Dimension. Now more than ever, sea power represents a matter of survival for Moscow. As a result, the Kremlin is taking inspiration from the once-great Soviet Navy and from the teachings of Admiral Gorshkov. Sea forces will continue to play a fundamental role in what is without doubt Vladimir Putin's main objective: the return of Russia to its era of global power. In this process, the Black Sea more than any other maritime basin will remain crucial as it represents the main theatre for power projection against the West. As Chiriac (2024, p. 95) aptly highlights: "On the one hand, the Black Sea is the space where militarily the Russian Federation can conduct deterrence operations and on another, it is the area where naval posture operations can reassert Russian importance in the context of great power competition with the US." As a result, in a geopolitical context where Russian competition with NATO and the European Union is bound to consistently increase, we expect that Moscow's expenditures in the development of its naval power will remain at the centre of its national interests.

The European Union and its vision of naval power has been strongly impacted by the image of near-by Russia. Its aggressive stance, in defiance of all dictates of international law, left the Union feeling threatened and in need of a stronger line of defence. This has been true in numerous sectors under the Union's competence, be it economic, political, or military. The same has been true concerning sea power. Indeed, in the 2022 Strategic Compass, the European Council stresses how Russian armed interference in Georgia and Ukraine constitutes a threat against European security. As a result, "Stability and security in the wider Black Sea region are severely impacted by the aggression of Russia against Ukraine with far-reaching implications in terms of security, resilience, freedom of navigation and economic development" (European Council, 2022, p. 9). The same context is also highlighted in the revised EU Maritime Security Strategy of 2023. The document maintains that the Russian aggression close to the Union's borders necessarily requires the transformation of the European Union into a "global security provider". More specifically, Moscow's attack against Ukraine is seen as having created an "increasingly contested maritime domain" (European Council, 2023, p. 3). The maritime areas close to Russian influence have also been of particular interest to the Union for the protection of maritime infrastructures. The 2022 attacks on the Nord Stream pipelines, located in the Baltic Sea, have pushed the European Union toward incrementing its maritime security action in this sector (European Council, 2023, p. 10). Nonetheless, when compared to areas such as the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific, the EU is still missing a precise maritime security strategy. Indeed, the Black Sea Synergy, drafted in 2007, contains no mention of the need to assure a certain level of maritime security. The same is true for the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, inaugurated for the first time in 2009. This is because, until recently, these two sea basins were controlled through NATO and its security system. In this sense, the turning point came with the Bucharest Formula of 2007, when the Alliance's intention to include Ukraine and Georgia, and as a result the area of the Black Sea, into its structure (Chiriac, 2024, p. 85).

The Ukrainian-Russian war is being, and will continue to be, fought on the seas, as we can see from the extensive use by Kiev of uncrewed surface vehicles and manned naval forces against Russian ships (The Economist, 2024). This has taken the international community by surprise as the Ukrainian navy has historically been weak and powerless in comparison to Russian technologies and investments. As a result, we argue that this conflict and the worsening of EU-Russian relationships will push the European Union toward adopting a specific maritime security policy because of three

fundamental factors. Firstly, as we have already mentioned, the invasion of Ukraine played a pivotal role in transforming the European Union into a global security provider. In the last two years, more than ever before, the Union has built and strengthened its defence and foreign role independently. As a result, we expect that the Union will do the same with the issue of maritime security in the Baltic Sea and, especially, in the Black Sea. The grant of the candidate status to Georgia in December 2023 and to Ukraine in June 2022 will seal this process even more. Once full Member States, the Union will have a much larger border overlooking the Black Sea and, as a direct consequence, much more interest in securitising the area. Secondly, as briefly mentioned before, the presence of crucial maritime infrastructures in this area will necessarily lead to a more active approach by the Union. Since 2015, EU and NATO forces have closely observed Russian submarine activities in proximity of EU cable routes (EU Parliament, 2022b, p. 31). These attempts have severely alerted both organisations, as fear rises that attacks on underwater infrastructures could be used as a powerful tool for hybrid attacks. As demonstrated by the Council Recommendation of 2022, the need of "increased protection of critical maritime infrastructure, including underwater, and in particular maritime transport, energy and communication infrastructure" (European Parliament, 2022b, p. 4), will force Member States to assume a more cohesive and coordinated security response for the protection of vital interests regarding the energy and communication sectors. Finally, this conflict has truly stressed the security implications of energy dependence. The February 2022 attacks have shown like never before the dire consequences that insecurity can have on the economy and general lifestyle of European citizens. Furthermore, within this context, Romanian natural gas extracted from the Black Sea represents a fundamental part in EU's quest for energy independence. Indeed, by 2027 Romania is expected to become the number one producer of natural gas in the EU (Apostol, 2024). As a result, we believe that energy consumption will play a pivotal role in pushing the Union even further toward the securitisation of the area.

2.4 Conclusions

As we have seen, the development of a European sea power has been a long and gradual process that is still largely in the making. In the early 2000s the high seas were viewed in a purely economic perspective. In a European Union that still lacked a common defence and security strategy, the main interest for Brussels was the protection and strengthening of the Member States' blue economies, with a particular focus on fisheries

and other maritime resources. As the Union begun achieving a true foreign actorness, its maritime strategy started to change as well. At first, the EU's maritime outlook was limited to a soft power rhetoric. Embedded in the values of cooperation and liberalism, naval forces were to be used for the strengthening of international law and values. The Union's role as a normative power was inevitably translated in a discourse of protection of the high seas as a global common. The first drastic change came in 2014, dictated by a new wave of geopolitical instabilities such as the beginning of the migratory crisis and the Russian annexation of Crimea. These events pushed the European Union toward the creation of a common maritime strategy cantered on security rather than economic concerns. A similar trajectory happened more recently, when the Russian aggression against Ukraine and Beijing's rise as an increasingly competitive actor led to the revision of the EUMSS. It has become clear, therefore, that the European Union is currently in the process of developing hard power resources and strategies in the maritime dimension like never before. By considering the historical process of this development and the influence played by Russia and China, we hope to show how this process has come about not independently but rather as a result of an increasingly unstable geopolitical context. The crisis of the so-called Pax Americana has pushed numerous actors toward naval re-armaments. In the case of the European Union, a more realist outlook and the rise of a new naval power has been dictated, we argue, by external exigencies and the necessity of protecting one's economic and political interests.

However, we should not over-exaggerate the achievements made by the Union, keeping in mind that improvements are still needed. In particular, and this can be argued for the security and defence sector in general, there are still many concerns on whether the European Union is able to set clear priorities, allocate the sufficient fundings and resources, and on the whole create a truly common maritime strategy (Bosilca and Riddervold, 2024, p. 216). Different European countries hold different views on a variety of issues, be it the migratory crisis in the Mediterranean or on the rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, after the post-Cold War armament downsizing, European naval forces are still largely unequipped to respond to these pressing maritime security issues. These matters can create heavily negative consequences on the Union's foreign and security action and its ability to respond to international threats in a concerted manner. In the naval sector, as much as in many others, Brussels needs to achieve a higher level of sovereignty if it wants to become a true naval power.

As we shall see in the following chapters, this development is also reflected in the evolution of EU naval operations. In this field too we can distinctly identify a development from humanitarian and soft power operations toward hard power and confrontational naval missions. The following analysis will therefore give a more practical understanding of the arguments made in the present Chapter, while also setting the scene for the latest EU naval operation and our case study on the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb.

3. EU naval operations – Between past and present

We shall now consider in depth the naval operations performed by the European Union and how these demonstrate a change in the Union's naval power. Naval operations are a manifestation of the Union's maritime actorness, which is uniquely prepared to engage in complex maritime challenges in light of its institutional capacities and operational expertise (Clapp & Pichon, 2021, p. 2). As we begun delineating in the second chapter, the EU's approach to the seas has starkly changed in the past years. Rather than being set in a context of realist advancement of national interests, early operations were conducted in opposition to non-State actors in the fight against illegal activities on the high seas. However, recent events in the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb have signalled a new shift in this trajectory. The EU is moving the first real steps toward a hard power understanding of its maritime capabilities. While policing activities remain at the core of its action on the seas, we are seeing a new drive toward the strengthening of one's economic and political interests against inter-State threats.

To support our thesis, the following chapter will be divided as follows. First, we will consider individually the three European naval operations conducted under the sphere of the Common Security and Defence Policy: Atalanta, Sophia, and Iris. We will analyse them individually in terms of their mandate and criticalities, highlighting along the way a specific trajectory in the development of the Union's naval power. Finally, the last part will draw the conclusions of our analysis, pointing out our argument and potential repercussions for the European Union.

3.1 Operation Atalanta (2008-ongoing)

Operation EUNAVFOR Atalanta was the first naval operation ever organised under the EU system. It was created under the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which was in turn established by the Lisbon Treaty of 2007. Under Article 42(1) of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), the CDSP "shall provide the Union with an operational capacity drawing on civilian and military assets. The Union may use them on missions outside the Union for peacekeeping, conflict prevention and strengthening international security in accordance with the principles of the United Nations." The decision to activate the CSDP was motivated by the deterioration of maritime security in the south of the Red Sea, in the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden. Beginning in 2006, the international community begun calling attention to the issue of piracy within the system of the United Nations. As a result, in 2008 the UN adopted four resolutions: 1801, 1814, 1816, and 1838. This last one played a fundamental role as it allowed all interested States to deploy naval and aerial forces off the coast of Somalia to actively fight against piracy. The EU quickly responded by creating an operation of its own and adopting Council Joint Action 2008/851/CFSP with the mandate of: providing protection to vessels of the World Food Programme (WFP) travelling to Somalia and to merchant vessels in general, patrolling off the Somali coast, deterring/preventing/intervening against piracy, and arresting and detaining persons that have committed acts of piracy. Through the years the operation has been renewed and its scope widened numerous times, more recently in January 2023. As of today, Atalanta has broadened its area of operation to the wider Red Sea and includes other tasks besides combating piracy, such as protecting international shipping, countering drugs trafficking, and strengthening the weapons embargo on al-Shabaab (EEAS, 2023). In the achievement of these goals, the European Union has not acted alone but, on the contrary, it has closely worked alongside NATO, China, Russia, India, and the Combined Task Force 151. This last mission was organised by the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), which is a 30 nation "naval partnership, which exists to promote security, stability and prosperity across approximately 2.5 million square miles of international waters" (CMF, 2024). CMF organisation is created on a purely voluntary basis and might have different nations operating under it depending on the nature of the mission. Coordination between the European Union, regional organizations and other national powers was achieved through the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) project, which allowed for an operational forum between all these actors (Trelawny, 2013, p. 50). Moreover, ships

passing through at risk areas were advised to register at the Maritime Security Centre, so that the EU naval forces could assess their level of vulnerability and keep an eye on those considered to be more likely to be attacked.

While Operation Atalanta undoubtedly symbolised a crucial step in the development of a newly found European sea power, it conveyed a normative humanitarian response rather than a realist projection of power. This is demonstrated by two main factors: the mandate of the operation and the dialectic used to justify such operation. The primary objective of Atalanta was to secure WFP shipments from being attacked in their journey toward Somalia – as it is specified in all documents published by the Council. As a result, the humanitarian aspect of the operation was given the highest level of importance in the realisation and management of the mission. This led numerous members of the European Parliament to complain because of Atalanta's limited focus on European economic interests (Riddervold, 2011, p. 396). Fundamental EU objectives, such as the protection of valuable fisheries in the area, were included in the mission only after stark protests through Council Decision 2009/907/CFSP. Moreover, the protection system set up in these waters was not limited to European ships but, rather, included vessels of any flag. Consequently, Brussels' aim was to protect international global trade rather than purely European economic interests. Finally, beginning in March 2012 due to Council Decision 2012/174/CFSP the operation was also strictly linked to the broader goal of stabilising Somali land territory. The Union quickly realised that it would have been impossible to deter piracy long-lastingly without providing a more economically and politically reliable State system. Operation Atalanta was then combined with a series of land-based projects, such as bilateral developmental agreements, the so-called Instrument for Stability in 2008, and the 2011 *Strategy Framework for the Horn of Africa* focused on strengthening political structures and promoting economic development (Arconada-Ledesma, 2021, p. 5).

A second factor that highlights the normative role of the European Union within Operation Atalanta is the dialectic used by Brussels to validate the operation. Dombrowski and Reich (2019, p. 874) argue that "Atalanta provided EU leaders with the continued ability to reinforce its image as global player for law and justice". Indeed, as we have already mentioned, the mandate only acknowledges the protection of humanitarian aid and the deterrence and repression of acts of piracy. There is no mention of the negative consequences of these acts on EU's economy and no comment on the necessity to preserve and strengthen the Union's interests. On the contrary, the European

Union exhibits its eagerness to act in conformity with international duties and pursuant to the values of the United Nations. This discourse is more in line with a normative rather than a realist understanding of power in the sense that the EU wants to be perceived as acting in the respect of the freedom of the high seas and in the preservation of a global common rather than in the self-serving protection of European trade against piracy. Indubitably, neither of these two factors can evidence that the Council didn't have other "secondary" objectives in mind when constructing Operation Atalanta. It is very well possible that the Union wouldn't have acted if international commerce was undermined in an area of less importance to the Member States. However, we must recognise the importance of actively deciding to formulate this discourse in a normative perspective. On this matter, Bellais (2013, p. 92) maintains that EUNAVFOR Atalanta represents an attempt to manage an international public bad, namely piracy, through cooperation and shared values. Part of the mission's failure, he argues, arises precisely from the coalition's inability to supply an international public good in an optimal manner. More precisely, this inability is a result of two factors: firstly, the mission's reliance on funding originating on a national basis rather than at the EU level. Secondly, the lack of international coordination with other regional and national operations. Consequently, Atalanta must be framed in the protection of a global common if it wants to bring about fundamental changes in the fight against piracy. This aspect is not per se limiting or damaging to the creation of a European naval power, but it does plant it in a dialectic that is not necessarily still valid today. We argue therefore that in these first stages EU naval forces were used in the furtherance of international rights and duties rather than of self-serving economic interests.

All in all, EUNAVFOR Atalanta has achieved some great results in its 15 years of activity. Data clearly shows that the number of pirate attacks off the Somali coast have quickly and consistently decreased since 2008 and the number of Member States involved in the operation has grown to reach 21 countries (Berdud, 2018, p. 166). Most importantly, Atalanta has been the widest and lengthiest force in the fight against piracy, outperforming in time and resources any other national or regional effort. It testified to the European Union's newly found role as a security and military actor, independent from other structures such as that of NATO. It remains, however, that the European Union's decision of framing Operation Atalanta as a deterrence peace mission, rather than an actively military one, has had a negative impact on its potential achievements. Novaky (2018, pp. 199-200) maintains that for Brussels ensuring the credibility of such an

operation is complicated because of two main factors. Firstly, collective actors like the EU lack forces and full sovereignty in the security and defence field, forcing them to rely on the resources, abilities, and willingness of its members. Secondly, these operations are deployed outside of the Member States' territories and tend to deal with "second core" national interests. Because of these factors, it becomes particularly difficult to ensure credibility to these operations, thus undermining long-lasting success and change. In the specific case of Operation Atalanta, its credibility is also limited by more practical factors, such as the exaggerated vastity of the area to be policed and the fact that the potential reward originating from piracy may still outweigh the negative consequence of being caught (Novaky, 2018, p. 209). As a result, while successful, Operation Atalanta paid the costs that come with a deterrence and humanitarian mission. We argue that this is linked to the fact at its inception Brussels was still in the process of affirming its naval role within the international community. As we have seen in Chapter 2, first mention of a European Maritime Dimension came only in 2007. That was also the first time Brussels highlighted a future naval dimension of the CSDP. However, up until this point the focus was fixed on blue crimes and a purely deterrence role. The Union's potential as a global security maritime provider was explored only beginning in 2014.

Nonetheless, in the years since 2008 Operation Atalanta has demonstrated the improvements that the EU has made in the field of naval forces and maritime power. Partly moving away from a purely humanitarian and deterrent operation, Atalanta has attempted to enlarge its scope and effectivity. Decision 2020/2188/CFSP had already extended the mission's tasks to monitoring of narcotics trafficking, arms trafficking, and illegal and unreported fishing off the coast of Somalia. The EU Council (2021) highlighted the crucial role that EUNAVFOR Atalanta has played in strengthening maritime security, which "aims to ensure a free and peaceful use of the seas and is a prerequisite for safe, clear and secure ocean and seas for all types of activities, and a clear priority for the European Union and its Member States for the protection of their strategic interests." Moreover, in 2022 the Council launched a Coordinated Maritime Presence concept and established a Maritime Area of Interest covering the Red Sea and part of the Indian Ocean. This meant that the Council has ensured a permanent maritime presence in the area, promoting enhanced cooperation of naval assets and sharing of information between Member States. However, differently from CSDP Operations, naval forces remain under national command and are deployed on a purely voluntary basis. Most recently, Council Decision 2022/2441 amended the Join Action presented in 2008.

Crucially the document changed the phrase "on a European Union military operation to contribute to the deterrence, prevention, and repression of acts of piracy and armed robbery off the Somali coast" with "on a European Union military operation to contribute to maritime security in West Indian Ocean and in the Red Sea". While the mandate remains somewhat the same, this change of wording depicts a crucial change in the Union's understanding of the mission between 2008 and 2022. The operation is now perceived as contributing to the more general concept of maritime security, not only in the Indian Ocean but in the Red Sea too, abandoning in part the humanitarian aspect that characterised the first phases of the mission. It is true that Atalanta remains for the most part an operation of deterrence but, nonetheless, we can see the first attempts at translating it under a perspective that is more interested in the protection of the Union's security and economic interests.

3.2 Operation Sophia (2015-2020)

Beginning in the 2010s, illegal migration toward EU borders quickly became a humanitarian crisis of huge impact. Nations overlooking the Mediterranean, especially Greece and Italy, begun bearing a huge weight in terms of arrivals and loss of life at sea from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In the beginning it proved particularly challenging to conciliate the Member States' views on the matter and, as a result, the first responses to the crisis were largely regulated on a national basis. This was the case of the Italian operation Mare Nostrum, which managed to rescue almost 150,00 people and seize 366 traffickers in less than a year (Peruzzi, 2016). Despite its successes, the operation was soon dismantled as Italy did not receive any assistance from the Union and believed that the expensive effort of saving migrants' lives was incentivising rather than curbing illegal migration toward its borders (Neve, 2015). A first albeit small-scale European response came in November 2014 when Frontex coordinated Operation Triton in support of the Italian mission. Importantly, Triton did not have a search and rescue mandate, but it set up a limited budget to facilitate the fulfilment of Member States' international duties to assist persons in distress (EU Council, 2014b). As the Council openly maintained "Triton is intended to support the Italian efforts and does not replace or substitute Italian obligations in monitoring and surveying the Schengen external borders and in guaranteeing full respect of EU and international obligations, in particular when it comes to search and rescue at sea" (EU Council, 2014b).

The drowning of more than 800 people off the coast of Lampedusa in April 2015, and its effects on the European public, pushed the Union to take a more active stance in the crisis. Therefore, an EU naval operation focused on the fight against illegal migration came in May 2015 with Council Decision 2015/778/CFSP. As it was the case for Operation Atalanta, EUNAFVOR MED, also known as Operation Sophia, found its basis in a United Nation Resolution – to be specific UNSC Resolution 2240 (2015). Its mandate was divided in three phases: in the first, the Union would gather and share information on the detection and monitoring of migration networks. In the second phase, it would conduct, search, and seize vessels suspected of being used for human smuggling according to UNCLOS and other applicable international law in the high seas and in territorial waters (where given consent by a UN Security Council Resolution or by the coastal State concerned). In the third phase, the Union would dispose or render inoperable any vessel suspected to have been used for human smuggling or trafficking. No mention was ever made of a search and rescue mandate. On the contrary, the new CSDP Operation was focused on stopping illegal migratory flows rather than on saving lives. Importantly, in 2016 the operation mandate was widened to include two additional duties: training the Libyan coastguards and navy and contributing to the implementation of the UN arms embargo on Libya. Council Decision 2016/993/CFSP resulted from the understanding that without a stabilisation of the Libyan crisis it would have been almost impossible to successfully curb illegal migration and human trafficking in the long run.

This new mandate, as much as the migratory issue, had an exceptionally divisive effect on the European Union and on its relationship with NATO. As Dombrowski and Reich (2019, p. 881) stated, "Reflecting a habitual EU problem, in the absence of any consensus, the EU policy position remains minimalist – focusing on a low-risk, lower-cost, and low-conflict mission at sea rather than a high-risk, expensive, and potentially conflictual one on land." The Union unwillingness to act directly on the Libyan crisis led to an indirect, and in the eyes of many largely unsuccessful, operation on Libyan shores which failed to effectively stop the flow of migrants. The reason behind EUNAFVOR MED's uncertainty and division is largely due to its impact on the Member States' national policies. While Atalanta relied on voluntary contributions and on humanitarian goals largely detached from European interests and security, Sophia required large funding and shook the Union's domestic constituencies to the core (Dombrowski and Reich, 2019, p. 882). This profound impact on national politics is ultimately what doomed the operation. In 2019, few months before its final dismantlement, EU leaders renewed the operation for another

six months and simultaneously deprived it of its naval assets. With NGOs no longer allowed to patrol the Mediterranean and EU assets halved, the Union came to lack an official and communitarian response to the migratory issue (Mantini, 2019). National interests prevailed over the mission's ratio and left the European Union divided.

If we look at the rhetoric behind Operation Sophia, we can see a shift toward a more realist and hard power understanding of European naval forces for a variety of factors. Firstly, as we have briefly considered before, the focus of the mission had a much larger impact on the EU than piracy. As a result, illegal migration was immediately translated into a security issue rather than a humanitarian matter. Operation Sophia was only one of the many examples of this process of securitisation. As Dimitris Avramopoulos, European Commissioner for Migration, stated at the time: "One of the biggest threats to Europe's unity and its future is the rise of populism, nationalism, and xenophobia. In that sense the issues of migration and security are threatening the fundamental values on which the EU is built". Therefore, when the crisis was presented as a security issue a security solution inevitably followed.

A realist understanding of naval power was also evident in the mandate. On the one hand, as we have mentioned before, the Council's decision focused on dismantling illegal migration routes rather than on a search and rescue mission or on the protection of migrants' lives and human rights. While these two last factors definitely played a role in the operation's ratio, they gained only secondary importance in its functioning. On the other hand, Tardy (2015, p. 3) highlights how the mission's mandate provided for the possibility of resorting to the use of force like was never seen in a previous CSDP mission. This relates to the Council (2015, p.3) concession to "take all necessary measures against a vessel and related assets, including through disposing of them or rendering them inoperable". As a result, for the first time in the EU's external action, EUNAVFOR MED allowed for the possibility of going beyond the principles of consent and limited coercion within a naval mission. This was not the case for Operation Atalanta, where forces were not allowed to proactively target individuals that did not threaten the actual functioning of the operation (Tardy, 2015, p. 3). We can therefore state that Operation Sophia undoubtedly embodied a first clear sign of a shift in the EU's understanding of its maritime power. The reason behind the organisation of this naval operation was the protection of European economy and political interests against what was perceived to be a direct threat to the Union's values. Compared to Operation Atalanta, whose entire focus was the fight against piracy in the protection of humanitarian aid flowing toward Somalia,

in the case of Sophia military equipment and personnel was used in the pursuance of interests much closer to Brussels. As Larsson and Widen (2022, p. 14) clearly stated, "EUNAVFOR MED seemed more closely linked to European security interests of protecting borders and gaining control in the region and territorial waters, whereas EUNAVFOR Somalia is more connected to maritime security and to serve a global common in close collaboration with other sovereign nations and organisations."

Nonetheless, we should not excessively inflate the changes brought about by Operation Sophia. As we have seen in Chapter 2, at the time the European Union was only in the very first phases of the making of its role as a global maritime security provider. The Union was still lacking the willingness and capabilities to organise a truly military naval operation and EUNAVFOR MED bears the signs of this. Even though the mandate never openly sustained a mission of search and rescue, this is nonetheless what European forces did between 2015 and 2020. Indeed, if we consider its actual functioning, we can see how Sophia was for the most part relegated to policing rather than military activities. This can be observed in two characteristics of the operation. Firstly, in the performance of their duties EU ships closely interacted with coastal police forces such as Europol and Frontex. These, respectively the European Police Office and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, played a fundamental role in the 2015 migration crisis working side by side with first Operation Triton and then Operation Sophia for the registration of migrants and the gathering of necessary intelligence (Leonard and Kaunert, 2022, p. 1432). Indeed, the necessity of controlling national borders was a function more typical of these bodies rather than Member States' navies, which therefore had to learn and adapt from the knowledge of coast guards. Secondly, regardless of its mandate Operation Sophia was still performed predominantly as a humanitarian mission. In interviews with senior officers occupied in EUNAVFOR MED, they mentioned that EU forces never returned fire against human traffickers and that they "worked as a police force and coast guard, which had very little resemblance to a naval operation" (cited in Larsson and Widen, 2022, p. 16). European navies never engaged in acts of direct violence against traffickers, nor did they perform purely military activities. As a result, we claim that while Operation Sophia compared to Operation Atalanta did represent a step forward in the assertion of the Union as a global maritime security provider, it nonetheless failed to provide a truly hard power understanding of EU naval forces. The national repercussions of the migration crisis of 2015 did push Brussels into a new path but were not enough to cement a new vision.

3.3 Operation Irini (2020-ongoing)

The requirement of consent from either the UN Security Council or the coastal State to operate in Libyan waters under Operation Sophia pushed Brussels toward the formation of Operation Irini in March 2020 (Berdud, 2024, p. 58). Irini's mandate focuses on the activities that EUNAVFOR MED performed in relation to the Libyan crisis with a higher level of independence. Council Decision 2020/472/CFSP establishes EUNAVFOR MED IRINI's mandate as divided into four objectives: firstly, to contribute to the implementation of the UN arms embargo on Libya through the gathering of information, inspections of vessels, and seizure of all necessary ships and items. Secondly, to contribute to the implementation of the UN measures against illegal transport of oil originating from Libya through monitoring and surveillance. Thirdly, to train the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy, the same way as it was conducted during Operation Sophia. Finally, to contribute to the disruption of human smuggling and trafficking, once again only through information gathering and patrolling. As we can clearly understand from the mandate itself, Irini is exceptionally dependent from the system of the United Nations and, more specifically, from UN Security Council Resolutions 2146 (2014), 2240 (2015), 2292 (2016), and 2509 (2020). The operation was organised after the Berlin Conference on Libya, held in January 2020, highlighted the critical situation in the country and the necessity for the establishment of a new, stable, government. More specifically, it was argued that "The conflict in Libya, the instability in the country (…) continue to be a threat to international peace and security by providing fertile grounds for traffickers, armed groups and terrorist organisations." In light of the situation, the Conference called for a ceasefire, an arms embargo and the return to a political process.

Crucially, the vocabulary used in the operation's mandate distances Irini from both Operation Atalanta and Sophia. Firstly, Council Decision 2020/472/CFSP defines it as a "military crisis management operation", putting it in a different light as compared to the preceding humanitarian and peace-keeping operations established by the Union. Moreover, while the mandate mentions the objectives of training the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy and of disrupting human smuggling and trafficking, these are explicitly referred to as secondary tasks. In the latter case, and compared to the preceding Operation Sophia, the fight against human trafficking is relegated in two short paragraphs and, most importantly, to the indirect use of force. Indeed, from 2015 to 2020 European naval forces had the capability of directly intervening in cases of suspected human trafficking through

the seizure and diversion on the high seas and, when allowed, in territorial waters, and were allowed to take all necessary measures against such vessels. With the activation of Operation Irini, on the contrary, this task was to be performed only through information gathering and aerial patrolling of the high seas. The Council Decision nowhere mentions a search and rescue mandate against the loss of lives on the Mediterranean. Importantly, the direct use of force is allowed in the implementation of the UN arms embargo, in which case EU navies have the power to inspect, seize and dispose of vessels carrying arms or related materiel. Finally, Article 8(3) states that the Political and Security Committee, which exercises the control and strategic direction of the operation, "shall prolong the operation unless the deployment of maritime assets of the operation produces a pull effect on migration". We can then see how the Council feared the possibility of incentivising illegal migration toward European borders through the patrolling of the Mediterranean, the same possibility that was highly criticised during Operation Sophia. The fight against human trafficking not only is of secondary importance to the Union but, even worse, is depicted in a security rather than a humanitarian dialectic.

Operation Irini's successes in the last four years have been rather limited. It has successfully seized only a small number of vessels in its upholding of the UN embargo, while the Central Mediterranean route has once again become the deadliest in the world and allegations of human rights abuses on migrants from Libyan forces have surged (Berdud, 2024, p. 59). This is linked, on the one side, to a still very much divided European view on the migratory issue and, on the other, to a general hesitancy by Member States to actively participate in the mission. Concerning the fight against human trafficking, the vacuum left by the European Union has been filled by non-governmental actors who have taken upon themselves the duty of patrolling these waters (Pricopi, 2020, p. 304). For the purpose of our analysis, however, what is interesting is the fact that the humanitarian aspect of migration has been given only secondary importance compared to the upholding of the UN embargo on Libya. As Klocker (2020, p. 13) mentions, "What becomes apparent right away is that the new operation is tailored to the preceding UN Security Council Resolutions (…) and presents the operation as contributing to the fulfilment of the UN mandate within a circumscribed scope and accepting the UN's lead in the overall operation." Thus, we argue that Operation Irini represents a clear example of Brussel's willingness to become a global security provider while upholding the values and views of the United Nations. As specified in the Berlin Conference of 2020, the grave situation in Libya is perceived as representing "a threat to international peace and security"

by incentivising the escalation of terrorism and illegal migration for the most part toward EU Member States. As a result, Operation Irini gives only secondary importance to humanitarian aspects, such as search and rescue missions of migrants, or to peace-keeping efforts, such as the training of Libyan forces against human trafficking. On the contrary, the maritime dimension of European intervention focuses on blocking the transport of arms to Libyan territories with the aim of undermining the current government and stabilising the country. European naval forces, therefore, have acted as protagonists in the embargo on Libya, assuming a central role in the enforcement of international security and acting as the United Nations' "operative arm" (Soler Garcia, 2022). We maintain that this is a response to the revision of the EU Maritime Security Strategy just two years before the creation of EUNAVFOR MED Irini, which repeatedly mentioned the need of enhancing the Union's maritime role as a security provider in cooperation with relevant international organisations, such as the UN and NATO (EU Council, 2018). This role is further accentuated by the fact the EU was the only regional organisation to take on this role in the embargo on Libya.

3.4 Conclusions

EU naval operations, from Atalanta to Irini, clearly exhibit a development in line with that seen in Brussels' Documents regarding the Union's maritime strategy. We begin in the early 2000s with a naval deployment focused on humanitarian objectives. The European Union, embodying its role as a normative power, becomes guarantor of international values and norms. In the fight against piracy, the Union is upholding the UNCLOS, the principle of freedom of navigation and, most of all, aid flowing toward underdeveloped countries. As the issues to be tackled change and as they become more impactful on Member States' interests and their constituencies, EU naval operations also change. Naval forces are now allowed a wider use of force in the battle against illegal migration and human traffickers. Finally, in Operation Irini the European Union becomes the security provider in the fulfilment of the United Nation's peacekeeping system. The fight against illegal migration, a subject historically divisive within Member States, becomes of secondary importance before the Libyan crisis – a crisis that may have dire consequences on European security and stability. As we shall see in the final chapter the most recent EU naval operation, Operation Aspides, takes this process to a whole new level. Nonetheless, a development is evident already at this stage. The European Union is moving toward the formation of a hard naval power as European vessels are used to

impose the Member States' security concerns. Operation Irini exhibits the necessity to protect national and regional interests, rather than supporting humanitarian principles or strengthening the high seas as a global common. In these phases, the shift is still somewhat subtle but nonetheless very present.

Most of all, by analysing EU naval operations we can see how the theoretical development of a new maritime strategy has had very concrete consequences in the way Brussels sees and organises its naval forces. Indeed, Atalanta, Sophia and Irini suggest three general traits characterising European naval power (Larsen, 2019, pp. 25-30). Firstly, the EU as a *first responder*. Particularly in the case of Atalanta and in the first phases of Operation Sophia, other actors such as NATO or the Combined Maritime Forces were the obvious choice for the organization and management of maritime missions. This is especially true if we consider that in both cases Brussels was only at the beginning of the formation of a European naval power. On the contrary, however, the EU acted first and with the widest deployment of forces, highlighting the importance that the maritime domain could play in the future of the organisation. A second trait of European naval power has been the EU as a *broad responder*. In all three operations, European naval forces have applied a wide range of policy instruments, be it MDA, information-sharing, deterrence, and training. All of this has been coupled with land-based development projects that have attempted to tackle the causes of maritime insecurity. A final trait is that of the EU as a *legitimate responder*. The Union's ability to provide diverse policy instruments and to maintain political negotiations with third countries in the name of its Member States provided it with wide legitimacy in the eyes of the international community and the participants to the mission. This was accentuated by the organization's reliance on democratic values and human rights. As a result, numerous countries such as France and Germany decided to act under the scope of the European Union rather than under the more experienced NATO system. That is also why non-EU countries, such as Norway, took part in Operation Atalanta. It is therefore true that the EU has still much room for improvement but, nonetheless, these naval operations have showed not only that it can succeed in the maritime domain but also that it can succeed as an international security provider. As Larsen (2019, p. 33) argues: "A strategic focus on the maritime domain may thus be a productive way for the EU to gain legitimacy as a security provider and promote its core principles from its foreign policy based on human rights through the integrated approach." Member States, we argue, are gaining a deeper understanding of the positive effects that investments in the maritime domain may have. That is why they worked on the revision

of the EUMSS. That is also why they have decided to invest in a new naval mission: Operation Aspides.

4. The Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb and Operation Aspides – Toward a new EU naval power

Figure 5. EIA (2019).

Transnational commercial interests rely on the stability of a variety of sea lines of commerce. It is estimated that between 80 and 90 per cent of world trade is transported through the seas, that two thirds of the world production of oil is either extracted or transported by sea, and that almost 99% of data in transmitted by undersea infrastructures (EU Council, p. 5, 2023a). As a result, in the era of globalised markets and distant chains of productions the protection of the maritime dimension stands out as a priority for both national and regional actors. More recently, this duty has focused on specific spaces of sea trade, namely chokepoints. As we have already mentioned in Chapter 1.3, there are seven international chokepoints, namely the Danish Straits, Dover, Gibraltar, Bab-al-Mandeb, Hormuz, Malacca, and Lombok. To be considered as such, these points must respect three characteristics (Alexander, 1991, p. 105): there is no viable alternative of passage if the chokepoint is restricted, they are narrow and capable of being blocked either

intentionally or unintentionally, and they have an important commercial and/or military value. Because of these factors, chokepoints represent perfect case studies for our analysis, in that they highlight the importance of securitising and protecting valuable sea lines of communication through the use of sea power and control. Here, the soft and hard power roles of naval forces are combined requiring an active involvement of numerous State and non-State actors.

Bab-al-Mandeb is located in the waters between Yemen on one side and Djibouti and Eritrea on the other, bordering the Gulf of Aden. Its central position, at one end of the Red Sea, makes it a crucial waterway for the commerce between Asia and the European continent, connecting the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean through the Horn of Africa. Between 2020 and 2023, an average of 20,000 ships has passed annually through the strait transporting each year circa 1.6 billion tons of cargo (IMF, 2024). Moreover, because of its location near the biggest world producers of oil and natural gas, in 2023 Bab-al-Mandeb also accounted for 12% of seaborn oil trade and 8% of liquefied natural gas (EIA, 2024). As a result, this chokepoint is generally considered to be of the outmost importance for transnational trade, coupling the energy and commercial interests of numerous and diverse actors.

Aptly translated in English as the Gate of Tears, Bab-al-Mandeb is one of the most unstable and worrying cases of current geopolitics. Bordered by insecure and weak nations, it has experienced for decades high levels of insecurity especially in the form of piracy and maritime terrorism. The situation, however, has recently worsened with a sharp increase of attacks on commercial ships and the resulting decline of peaceful and uninterrupted passage through the strait. Beginning in November 2023, Houthi's targeting on commercial trade from Yemeni territory has caused waves of insecurity that have been felt far and wide. As a result, major commercial and energy companies are avoiding Bab-al-Mandeb and instead pass through the Cape of Good Hope, at the extremity of the African continent, adding between 15 and 20 travelling days and enormous costs in terms of fuel, personnel, and insurance (EIA, 2024). In January 2024, the Combined Maritime Forces warned all shipping companies to steer clear of the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait because of drones and vessel attackers. As a result, large firms – such as Maersk, Equinor, Euronav, QatarEnergy, Torm, Shells, Reliance – have suspended or limited their passage through the Strait (EIA, 2024).
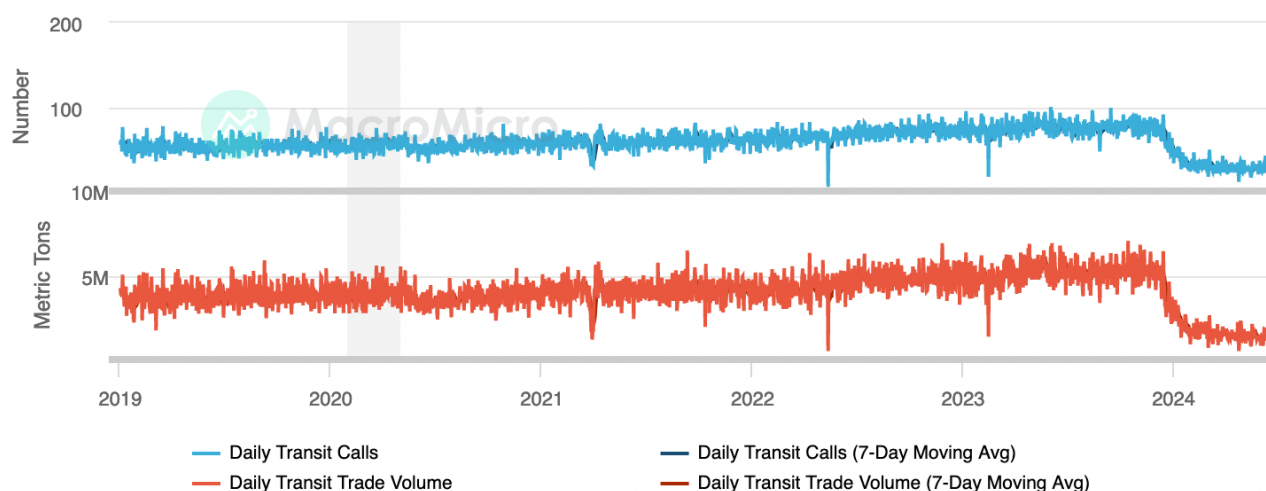
Figure 6. IMF (2024) data showing a sharp decline of transit through the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait beginning from early 2024.

The analysis of the origins and consequences of instability in this maritime space are difficult to summarise as they are numerous and different for each actor. In this sense, Bab-al-Mandeb perfectly depicts David Caron's (2014, p. 11) principle of the "near-far clash of interests" demonstrating the convergence, and often conflict, of the interests of States bordering the strait and of those using the strait for commercial reasons. The result is that different national interests are mashed in a single, narrow space creating the perfect conditions for a dangerous and wide-ranging ticking bomb. The response has been the steep securitisation of the Strait, accompanied by NATO and EU naval operations, the set-up of many national military bases principally in Djibouti, substantial investments in the Horn of Africa, and a newly found interest in the Yemeni crisis. Recent events, therefore, have demonstrated two crucial aspects of modern geopolitics: firstly, the protection of commerce remains a crucial aspect in when and how processes of securitisation happen. Secondly, and most importantly for our analysis, we find in the securitisation of the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb the signal of a crucial change in the trajectory of current maritime perspectives, especially so in the case of the European Union. The Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb is just the more recent example of the resurgence of naval forces and maritime power within the international community. We are leaving behind the days when navies were used mostly for policing activities and, instead, we are moving toward a comeback of inter-State naval conflict. This trajectory, while common to many, will be translated in different strategic responses and military activities but, nonetheless, will play a fundamental role in the future of security and geopolitics.

The present Chapter will be divided as follows. Firstly, we will look at the history of the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait, principally focusing on the Yemeni crisis and the failure of its State. We will understand the reasons for Houthi hostility on the Red Sea and its consequences. Following this, we will attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of the many interests at play in Bab-al-Mandeb. For the sake of clarity, this will be divided on a national basis. More specifically, we will consider: Saudi Arabia, Iran, China, Egypt, the United States, and the European Union. In so doing, we hope we will allow for a deeper understanding of the "near-far clash of interests" of international straits, thus also setting the scene for our final part. Finally, we will consider the EU's naval deployment in the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb under Operation Aspides. While we understand that Operation Aspides is just in its initial phases, we believe that the events that have occurred until today can provide for a crucial understanding of the Union's future direction on the seas. Furthermore, we also postulate that this analysis will help us to better understand the future not only of EU's sea power but more generally of its security policies.

4.1 A history of insecurity

Even before the beginning of the Yemeni crisis and the intensification of Houthi attacks on commercial ships, the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb has historically been at the centre of diverse challenges to maritime security. Beginning in the early 2000s, Yemen and the Gulf of Aden received great attention in the context of the War on Terror, providing the first clear cases of maritime terrorism. In October 2000, two Yemeni nationals, affiliated to the organisation Al-Qaeda and trained in Sudan, attacked the *USS Cole* with a boat carrying 200 kg of explosives. The attack left 17 dead and 39 wounded. Two years later, a similar suicide attack was launched against the French oil tanker *Limburg*, killing 1, wounding 12 and spilling 90.000 barrels of oil in the Gulf (Lott, 2022, p. 125). These cases instilled fear not only in the United States but within the international community at large. After the events of 9/11 the horrible consequences of terrorism were made clear to all, but maritime terrorism had up until that point remained unknown. However, with SLOCs becoming more and more important for global commerce, the possibility of terrorist attacks on maritime trade became another reason of instability for the Gulf of Aden and Bab-al-Mandeb. As Farrel (2007) argued, only few terrorist groups had the abilities of performing attacks on the seas and, even when they were, the majority were using ships to support land-based terrorism rather than as weapons or targets on their own. Nonetheless, it remains that a governance vacuum such as the one present in Bab-

al-Mandeb creates dangerous conditions that are often exploited by terrorist organizations and violent non-State groups. These insecurities become even more worrying when they play out within crucial sea lines of communication for energy exports. As Ulrichsen (2011, p. 131) highlights, "The rise of transnational and non-state threats operating across often-porous boundaries like the Horn of Africa and Yemen (…) has necessitated a rethinking of both the concept of energy security and the means required to address its challenges."

Maritime terrorism was not the only source of insecurity afflicting the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden. Indeed, beginning in 2005, pirate attacks increased exponentially and continued to escalate until 2011. Clive Schofield (2014, p. 280; see also Modarres, Ansri, and Thies, 2012) stated that "In the 2009-2011 period Somali pirates were responsible for over half of the global piracy attacks, making these waters the most dangerous in the world in terms of the threat of attacks against shipping." Together with piracy, this also became the central stage for many other illegal activities such as arms and people smuggling and illegal fishing. As a result, the international community found itself in the unconformable position of experiencing wide-spread insecurity in an area crucial for transnational maritime trade. The response was swift and, in the short-term, quite effective. On the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 1816 (2008) and Resolution 2316 (2016), which called upon a higher level of international cooperation to prevent and suppress acts of piracy, the European Union launched in 2008 Operation Atalanta in the Gulf of Aden. Within the NATO security system, another three missions were launched in Bab-al-Mandeb and the Gulf: Allied Provider (2008), Allied Protector (2009), and Ocean Shield (2009-2016). These missions were successful in limiting pirate attacks on commercial shipping. However, as Lott (2022, p. 126) highlighted, "The threat of pirate attacks in the Gulf of Aden was minimised in 2014, only to be replaced with a new menace to the stability of international shipping through the Bab-al-Mandeb – the intensification of the Yemeni armed conflict in 2015."

Let us know consider the Yemeni crisis and the resurgence of instability in the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb (taken from Kadri, 2023; Lott, 2022; Riedel, 2020). In November 2011 the Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, pressured by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and especially by Saudi Arabia, stepped down and left the central government in the hands of his vice-President, Abdrabbuh Hadi. During Hadi's transitional government, the objective was to draft a new Constitution and push the country toward a democratic future through general elections. However, the Yemeni people did not perceive favourably Hadi, seeing him as a puppet for US and Saudi interests. Popular support further declined

when American drones' attacks increased in Yemen in the pursuit of the War on Terror. As a result, Houthis begun gaining popularity within the Yemeni people, stirring up anti-Saudi and anti-American sentiments within the territory. The United Nations stepped-in to broker as peaceful a transition as possible and avoid further instability in the region, establishing in March 2013 a committee named the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). When in January 2014 it became clear that a crucial part of the NDC's transition would have centred on the division of Yemen in a federated State, leaving to the central government ownership of the huge majority of the country's natural resources, the situation quickly degenerated and sparked the current conflict. In January 2015, Houthi forces with the name of the Supreme Revolutionary Committee (SRC) took control of the capital Sanaa and forced Hadi to his resignation. Houthi rebels quickly advanced until they took control of the port of Al-Hodaydah near Bab-al-Mandeb. Hadi escaped Yemen and settled in Saudi Arabia, where he publicly retracted his withdrawal from the country and condemned the coup d'état carried on by the Houthi faction. As of today, the SRC still controls the capital and the northern and western parts of Yemeni territories, while Hadi's government crucially controls the seaport of Aden, the east and the south of the country. The Arab allies (Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Bahrain), led by Saudi Arabia and with the logistical support of the United Sates, begun a bloody air campaign named Operation Decisive Storm against the Houthi in March 2015. Saudi Arabia also implemented a strict naval blocked, still ongoing, in Yemeni waters causing one of the deadliest famines in modern politics. In response to the Saudi-led operation, the Sanaa government begun launching anti-ship missiles and surfaces drones against the Arab allies causing high tensions for international trade passing through the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait. Attacks were carried on through remote-controlled boats, manned boats and through naval mines placed in the Red Sea. The situation was further complicated by the creation in 2017 of the Southern Transnational Council (STC), a new secessionist group supported by the United Arab Emirates. Importantly, the STC took control of the seaport of Aden in 2018.

The situation managed to gain some stability in the early 2020s. In 2021, US President Joe Biden made clear that American support for Saudi operations in Yemen had come to an end. This was quickly followed by a truce negotiated by the UN with Houthi forces in April 2022. Nonetheless, the renewal of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in October 2023 led to a sharp escalation in the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait and the intensification of Houthi attacks beginning in November of that same year. As a result, with the onset

of 2024, the crisis quickly deteriorated once again. Houthi's representatives stated on several occasions that they intended to target any ships owned, controlled and/or manned by the Israeli State passing through the Red Sea until aggression against Gaza stops (Britzky, 2023). More recently, Brigader General Yahya Saree, representative of Houthi forces, has stated that "Sinking the enemy ships is the present of the Yemeni armed forces to the Palestinian nation and the resistance" (Mehr News, 2024). These attacks provide Yemen and the SRC with a valuable grey zone in the imposition of their sea power. Up until now, the response by the international community has been largely reactive rather than proactive as the right of self-defence is limited by the requirements of necessity and proportionality. This has meant that Houthi's enemies can only respond in a purely defensive way to avoid retaliation, without the possibility of directly attacking and dismantling any military base within the Yemeni territory. However, this situation is about to change. A joint statement by Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore, United Kingdom, and United States has stated that:

> "Ongoing Houthi attacks in the Red Sea are illegal, unacceptable, and profoundly destabilising. There is no lawful justification for intentionally targeting civilian shipping and naval vessels. Attacks on vessels, including commercial vessels, (…) are a direct threat to the freedom of navigation that serves as the bedrock of global trade in one of the world's most critical waterways. (…).
>
> Let our message now be clear: we call for the immediate end of these illegal attacks and release of unlawfully detained vessels and crews. The Houthis will bear the responsibility of the consequences should they continue to threaten lives, the global economy, and free flow of commerce in the region's critical waterways."

It has become clear, therefore, that an influential part of the international community is ready to act in the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb in a decisive manner. Detached from political and strategic considerations on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Red Sea must remain open to commerce and international shipping. While these have always been unstable waters, past cases of piracy and maritime terrorism were easier to face and suppress through policing activities and naval cooperation. On the contrary, today's situation has all the characteristics of an inter-state naval conflict, demanding from the international community a wider and better organised military response.

4.1.1 Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran has historically supported Houthis in their quest for the control of Yemen. This situation is set in the context of the new "Cold War of the Middle East", namely the confrontation between, on the one hand, the Shiite allies represented by Iran and, on the other, the Sunni allies led by Saudi Arabia (Soage, 2017, see Alexandre). Since 2003 and the US invasion of Iraq, Iran has been attempting to expand its influence as far as possible within the MENA region against Sunni power. In the case of Yemen, when in 2012 the GCC coalition pushed for Saleh's resignation and the rise of Hadi, the Islamic Republic worried of potential Saudi influence on the area begun funding, supporting, and training the northern rebels (Koshaimah and Zou, 2023, p. 259). Numerous accounts maintain that the Islamic Republic did not agree with the Houthis' decision of attacking and occupying the capital Sanaa for fear of serious retaliation. Iran was not yet ready for the beginning of an open conflict. However, after the deposition of Hadi, the Islamic Republic begun to publicly support Houthis' power within Yemeni territories. This reveals a clear difference between Iranian actions in Yemen and in other allied countries like Iraq, Syria, Gaza, and Lebanon. Indeed, Teheran has often acted through the political and logistical support of allied proxies, as it was the case in Lebanon through Hezbollah, in Syria through Shiite militias, and in the Occupied Palestinian Territories through Hamas. However, Houthi forces always maintained a higher level of independence within their movement and, rather than being created by Iran, they were exploited for the widening of Shiite political influence against Saudi Arabia (Vatanka, 2020, p. 149). This, as Al-Qhadi (2017, p. 27) highlights, is to be linked to the fact that:

> "Iran's regional and international isolation contributed to creating an everlasting feeling of threat and insecurity, given that Iran is surrounded by ideological, historical, and sectarian rivals. Based on these assumptions, Iran feels his geographic sphere is a constant source of threat and danger for its existence and national interests, which drives it to enforce its security and restrain all existing and potential threats."

Importantly, the expansion of Iranian influence in the MENA region has often been exercised through the control of the Red Sea and the securitisation of crucial waterways and chokepoints, as it was the case for the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb. Gaining control on the maritime traffic moving between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean became a

powerful weapon in the hands of the Islamic Republic (Al-Qhadi, 2017, p. 31; Koshaimah and Zou, 2023, p. 263). In what is perceived to be an international community based on a zero-sum game, the securitisation of the Bab-al-Mandeb through Houthi proxies played a fundamental role in reviving political influence and Shia control throughout the Middle East. As a result, and as stated in 2016 by the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Army, control of this maritime chokepoint has gained more importance than the development of new nuclear technologies (Reuters, 2016). While Iranian forces have been reluctant to actively take part in the attack of ships passing through the Gulf of Aden and the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGC-N) have assisted Houthi rebels through intelligence, training, and funding. For instance, UAE intelligence reported that Iran had transferred to Houthi rebels unmanned boats, anti-ship missiles, surface-to-surface rockets, and sea mines (Rezaei, 2018). More recently it was confirmed that since 2020 hundreds of rebels have been trained at the Khameini Academy of Naval Science and Technologies (Swan, Sheridan and Coen, 2024).

4.1.2 Saudi Arabia

Riyad has huge economic and political interests in the Red Sea through which it exports its reserves of natural resources. In an area historically characterised by political instability and insecurity, the Islamic kingdom has been more than ready to intervene militarily for the advancement of its national interests. The protection of sea lines of communication, therefore, has become a crucial aspect in its foreign policy approach for the expansion of Sunni political influence throughout the Middle East. Yemeni-Saudi hostility was already very much alive in the early 2000s, when Riyad had two main enemies in the country: President Abdullah Saleh and the Houthis (Riedel, 2020, p. 115). During the first phases of the crisis, Saudi King Abdullah, together with the support of the Gulf Cooperation Council, was fundamental in ousting Saleh and creating the transitional government headed by the ex-vice-President Hadi. Interested in the stabilisation of the area, especially because of its proximity to the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait, Saudi Arabia was also the first country to actively intervene when Houthi forces took control of the capital Sanaa. With the support of a coalition made of UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, Qatar, Senegal, and Sudan, Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015 with the objective of restoring Hadi in the central Yemeni government (Rezaei, 2018). Finally, it was mostly Saudi forces that maintained a strict blockade against Yemen, causing widespread famine and loss of life.

It is true that for the most part Riyad acted with the support of the international community. UN Resolution 2216 (2015) by the Security Council provided complete legitimacy to Saudi military intervention, "reiterating its support for the efforts of the Gulf Cooperation Council in assisting the political transition in Yemen and commending its engagement in this regard". However, Saudi actions were linked to national interests and the affirmation of Sunni power in the region, rather than to principles of democratisation and national sovereignty.

Indeed, part of the decision to militarily intervene in Yemen was also linked to the battle for influence against Iran, Riyad's main counterpart in the Cold War of the Middle East. If Iranian-Saudi hostility has its origin in religion, it became a full-fledged rivalry for power after the Iran-Iraq conflict of the 1980s, when the GCC sided with Saddam Hussein to manipulate the price of oil and limit Tehran's power (Rezaei, 2018). While diplomatic relationships between the two Arab powers improved after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, political ties were irreversibly cut after the American invasion of Iraq. Hostile political relations between the countries played a crucially influential role in the Yemeni crisis as well. As Riedel (2020, p. 122) argues, "Saudi leadership was terrified that the Houthi takeover of most of Yemen would lead to an Iranian-controlled puppet regime on their southwest border with control of the Bab-al-Mandeb." However, Sunni-Shiite enmity cannot be overexaggerated when analysing Saudi interests in this area. More than any religious and political rivalry, Riyad's preoccupations were focused on stabilising the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden as a fundamental aspect of the country's neo rentier economy. This resonates with the fact that the Iranian threat has often been exaggerated with the objective of justifying a military intervention against Houthi forces for the "pacification" of the area. As Walsh (2023, p. 391) highlights, Houthi's control of Yemeni territories was a threat to three crucial Saudi interests: economy, security, and geopolitics. Iranian involvement in the conflict wasn't extensive enough to require a military operation by itself. As a result, "The Saudi propaganda machine emphatically over-exaggerated threat of the Houthis and their connection to Iran to western audiences. A key goal here was to convince the US to classify the Houthis as a terrorist organisation, against which more severe actions could be taken" (Walsh, 2023, p. 391).

4.1.3 Egypt

Unsurprisingly, the Egyptian Navy was also very active during the military operations in and around Yemeni waters. As it was the case for both Iran and Saudi Arabia,

the Egyptian intervention too can be linked to the importance of the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait. If we consider again Figure 6, we can see how the Red Sea is enclosed by Bab-al-Mandeb on one side and the Suez Canal on the other; if one is closed, the other inevitably suffers. This is particularly crucial for Egyptian economic interests if we consider that the revenues from the Canal account for 2% of the national GDP (Chorev, 2023, p. 6). As of January 2024, revenues from the Suez Canal have experienced a decrease of 40% compared to those of 2023, a situation that is further worsened by the fact that these fees are usually paid in US Dollars needed to keep the rate of inflation stable (EU Parliament, 2024, p. 3).

As a result, the potential closing of Bab-al-Mandeb was seen by Egyptian authorities as a direct threat to national security. That is why Egyptian forces were between the firsts to directly intervene in Yemeni and international waters in 2015. Apart from providing support to Saudi air operations, Cairo sent two gunboats and two destroyers in the waters of the Strait (Kais, 2015).

4.1.4 China

Beijing established economic relations with Yemen beginning in the early 2000s. Similarly to other Middle Eastern countries, China's objective was to promote bilateral trade, infrastructure investments, and access to oil supplies (Chang, 2020, p. 98). At the time of Saleh's presidency, China had already supplied the country with extensive investments in a variety of sectors but mainly in energy exploration and development. After the beginning of the Arab Spring and Saleh's ousting in 2011, China largely supported the work of the G10 and of the NDC in the attempt of maintaining a certain level of continuity with previous investments during Hadi's Presidency. Development and funding efforts stopped in 2015 with the rise of Houthi forces. The political instability of the country and the beginning of the civil conflict led Beijing to interrupt any operation and to evacuate all Chinese nationals present on the territory (Gresh, 2017, p. 41).

While the limited Yemeni oil basins were not worth the effort of operating in such uncertain conditions, the surrounding waters, however, remained fundamental for the development of the Maritime Belt and Road Initiative (see Chapter 2.2). The reason behind this interest is without doubt not so much the oil coming from Yemen but rather the energy resources that had to pass through Yemeni waters and the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb. Instability in the area, therefore, threatened the achievement of energy security crucial to the development of the Chinese huge production engine. This trajectory is

destined to remain unaltered since demand for energy resources by the world's second-largest consumer of oil have seen a 10% rise in 2023 compared to 2022, with Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran as the top crude oil exporters (EIA, 2024). As a result, it is clear that the protection of the sea lines of communication connecting Asia with the Gulf Countries and the MENA region is of the outmost importance for the Chinese economy. This has led the government to invest in the securitisation of SLOCs and in a blue water strategy for its navy outside of the bordering South China Sea and into the Gulf of Aden and the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb (Chinese Maritime Strategy, 2015; Chaziza, 2021, p. 239; Alexandre, 2021, p. 66).

Beijing's interest in these waters has also been signalled by the expanding diplomatic and political relations with Djibouti, which geographically sits right next to Bab-al-Mandeb at the conjunction between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Not for nothing, the first Chinese active naval operation outside of its territorial waters was the participation in the Combined Task Force 150 (CTF-150) in 2008 as part of the suppression of piracy in the Horn of Africa. Since 2013 Chinese investments toward Djibouti and, especially, its maritime and port infrastructures have also been major (Gresh, 2017, pp. 44-45). Most importantly, here China opened its first overseas military base in 2017. Beijing has justified this choice because of its battle against illegal activities and instabilities in the Horn of Africa, arguing that the military base has been used for the logistical support of peacekeeping and anti-piracy operations by Chinese forces. However, it is widely believed that the real strategic interest is the protection of maritime trade and exports travelling through the Red Sea and the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait against national threats (Styan, 2020, p. 9). As Cabestan (2020, p. 720) argues, "Djibouti's PLA outpost has a role to play in securing China's Maritime Silk Road (…). This role goes far beyond anti-piracy operation and is also a part of a strategy aimed at increasing China's naval presence in the Indian Ocean and balancing other navies' activities and especially India's own ambitions there."

4.1.5 United States

The United States has had an eye fixed on Yemen and the Bab-al-Mandeb since the beginning of maritime terrorism in this area in the early 2000s. Since then, Washington launched a series of missile strikes in Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen in the furtherance of the War on Terror. Toward the end of its mandate, the Bush administration was already mistrustful of President Saleh and, as a result, it begun preparing for a change of

government. With Barack Obama at the White House, the US gave its support to the GCC process and selected Hadi as interim President (Day, 2020, p. 55). Hadi's presidency until 2015 proved to be particularly beneficial to Washington as it allowed numerous foreign military interventions on Yemeni territory. Consequently, the US was able to continue its attacks on Al-Qaeda and those thought to be affiliated with terrorist cells without much restraint. While successful at first, this state ultimately proved to be the beginning of the end for Hadi's presidency. As Day (2020, p. 56) maintains, "Hadi's domestic base was extremely weak, and due to his over-confidence in Obama's support, he did virtually nothing to develop local alliances (…). As a result, Yemen's interims president became increasingly isolated and ineffective." When Houthi rebels took control of the capital and initiated the first phases of a bloody civil conflict, the US continued in their support to Saudi Arabia. They actively took part in Operation Decisive Storm for the furtherance of counter-terrorism operations, the fight against Iranian power projection in the Middle East, and the preservation of freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. Beginning in January 2017, American support for the Arab coalition's stance in the Yemeni crisis further developed under the Trump administration. At this time, the primary motif behind the American policy in Yemen remained the protection of national security and economic concerns accompanied by a blunt disregard for the humanitarian crisis that was ensuing (Day, 2020, p. 67). Donald Trump decision of stepping up arms sale to Saudi Arabia was to be linked to his desire of undermining as much as possible Iranian influence on the Middle East while strengthening economic ties with the Gulf Countries.

On the contrary, the Biden administration attempted to detach itself from the Saudi campaign in Yemen. Just one month after the beginning of its mandate, President Biden declared the end of American support for the Arab coalition's military campaign in Yemen calling for the end of the conflict (Landay and Renshaw, 2021). The following year the United Nations was able to broker a truce between the internationally recognised government and Houthi forces, pausing the naval blockade on the country and aiding the humanitarian crisis. Unfortunately, this truce was short-lived and the renewal of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in October 2023 led to the abrupt worsening of Yemeni attacks on the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb. This prompted Washington to take once again an active position in the Red Sea waters. Beginning in early 2024, American naval forces have first intercepted and subsequently engaged in firefight with Houthi forces. Moreover, together with the United Kingdom, the US has launched a series of attacks on Houthi radar and missile launching sites (Aftandilian, 2024). We can, therefore, argue that the prospect of

a blocked Bab-al-Mandeb Strait and the resulting negative effects on international trade has been the push needed for the Biden Administration to actively engage in the Yemeni crisis. Before the attacks on commercial vessels threatened global trade, support to the Saudi campaign was perceived as an unnecessary involvement in a bloody and publicly damaging conflict. On the other hand, the worsening of Houthi attacks in the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb led to a quick and complete shift in the American policy toward Yemen. This change in perspective was also exacerbated by the fact that all of this happened during the re-election period, which forced Biden into taking a stronger stance against these attacks. Now that the United States finds itself in a moment of great change, the future of Washington's posture on the Yemeni crisis lies in the hands of the future Presidency.

4.1.6 European Union

The European Union has been actively engaged in the Yemeni crisis since its inception. As the Arab Spring was extending toward Sanaa, in 2011 the EU took part in the so-called Group of Ten Ambassadors (G10) together with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and the GCC to mediate a pacific change of government in Yemen. During the early phases of the crisis, however, the EU's role was purely diplomatic, with the objective of reaching those groups that had been excluded from the negotiations such as the Houthis (Girke, 2015, p. 9). The Union went on to provide its support to the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), the transitional forum held between March 2013 and January 2014. In this context, the European Parliament recognised the critical presence of both indigenous and exogenous problems within Yemen. The complete failure of State institutions, the ethnic and political fragmentation, and the self-serving intervention of external actors – especially in the case of Saudi Arabia – undermined any accomplishment achieved by the NDC (EU Parliament, 2015; Eshaq and Marani, 2017).

The international community's approach toward the Yemeni crisis begun moving toward a process of militarisation when Houthi forces took control of Sanaa and ousted President Hadi in January 2015. However, within the EU defence and foreign system, as it has often happened, member states were divided on the type of response needed. The difficulty of coming up with a communitarian response was mostly a result of the divergence between France and Germany. Beginning from 2016, France provided huge material support to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the suppression of the Yemeni conflict while, on the contrary,

Germany was much more wary of taking a military stance (Ramani, 2022, p. 84). France was at the centre of many criticisms as French patrol boats sent to Saudi Arabia were implicated in the blockade of Hodeidah port and, consequently, in the famine that ensued (see Disclose, 2019). On the contrary, Germany blocked arms sale to Saudi Arabia for use in Yemen in 2018, while most EU countries decided to follow the French trajectory. More generally, the Union's response to the Yemeni crisis was divided between two contradictory viewpoints: on the one hand, the importance of maintaining economic and trade ties with the Gulf Countries, especially with Saudi Arabia and the UAE; on the other hand, the Union's normative nature and its reliance on the protection of human rights. "In the end, the lack of coordination of peace initiatives was symptomatic of foreign policy inconsistencies among EU member states due to broader limits of European construction" (Benefoy, 2020, p. 76). During this phase of the crisis, therefore, the European Union was unable to delineate a unified political response to the conflict, thus taking only a secondary and ambiguous stance toward the belligerents. As a result, while some single Member States became more actively involved, the Union maintained a more detached and diplomatic role. This direction can be examined in the EU Resolution 2015/2760, where the Parliament – briefly recognising the risks that the conflict would have on the Horn of Africa and Red Sea – maintains that "There can only be a political, inclusive and negotiated solution to the conflict" urging Yemeni actors "to work towards resolving their differences through dialogue, compromise and power-sharing". The same ratio was adopted in Resolution 2018/2853, which stressed that "Only a political, inclusive and negotiated solution to the conflict can restore peace and preserve the unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Yemen".

The European Union's approach has just recently become much more active in Yemen and its bordering waters. Beginning in the early 2000s, and especially with the creation in 2008 of the EU Operation EUNAFVOR Atalanta, European naval forces have been occupied in the south of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden in anti-piracy activities. However, up until this point there was no direct military involvement against Houthi rebels and, more generally, the fall-out of the Yemeni crisis. EU operations were more focused on maintaining and strengthening maritime security rather than responding to national and regional threats. The situation changed in December 2022, when the European Council maintained in its conclusions that "The EU's engagement with Yemen is linked to core interests and commitments of the EU, including: (…) the importance of Yemen for key sea-based supply lines of energy and other commodities, the objective to

ensure the security and stability of the Gulf region as well as the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa" (EU Council, 2022b). Furthermore, it stated that "The EU is ready to step up its efforts to build confidence and promote maritime safety and security in the wider Gulf and the Red Sea" (ibid). As we can see, Brussels highlighted how freedom of navigation through Bab-al-Mandeb undoubtedly represented a fundamental interest for the Union. Nonetheless, maritime force was at this point to be used to promote maritime safety rather than to actively intervene against Houthi forces. This situation took a different turn from November 2023 when, as we have seen already, Houthi militias begun attacking commercial ships in solidarity with the Palestinian people. Crucially, in this case the Union distanced itself from the purely diplomatic and mediating position of the early phases of the crisis. Indeed, the Resolution 2117/2023 adopted by the European Parliament stated that the Union:

> "Condemns the illegal, unacceptable and profoundly destabilising Houthi attacks against commercial vessels transiting the Red Sea, using missiles, small boats, and attempted hijackings; stresses that these have caused significant disruption to global trade, as shipping companies are forced to reroute much of the Red Sea's traffic around the southern tip of Africa; calls for collective action and encourages enhanced EU engagement and international cooperation; welcomes, in this context, the decision of by the Member States to launch a maritime CSDP operation, under the name ASPIDES, to protect merchant vessels to deter attacks and ensure freedom of navigation on one of the world's most critical waterways."

Let us for now ignore mention of the Operation ASPIDES, which will be considered in depth in the following part. The vocabulary itself used in the Resolution signals a complete change of the Union's trajectory. Most of all, the EU calls its member states for collective action as they witness in the attacks in the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb a threat to global trade and to the Union's economic interests. There is no mention of diplomatic debate, no reference to specialised Commissions of inquiry, no acknowledgment of a pacific resolution. Houthis' illegal attacks are harmful and must be stopped to ensure freedom of navigation. This is in line with the development of hard power naval forces delineated before. Member States are expected to actively engage in the stabilisation of the crisis and in the protection of the Union's sea trade. This is strictly linked to the creation of a new European naval operation, focused on forcefully ensuring freedom of navigation through the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait.

4.2 Operation Aspides (2023-ongoing)

As we have seen, the normative role of European navies has been a distinguishing factor of more recent maritime operations launched by the EU under the CSDP system. Larsson and Widen (2022), analysing EUNAVFOR Somalia of 2008 (Operation Atalanta) and EUNAVFOR MED of 2015 (Operation Sophia), arrive at the conclusion that the deployment of naval assets during these operations did not represent the use of a military approach. Indeed, they argue (2022, p. 6) that "Despite the use of military equipment and personnel, these operations may be more in line with international maritime security than a realist power projection upon third states disrupting the interest and agenda of the EU." The same, we argue, can be said of Operation Irini. All operations strongly relied on non-EU partners and security systems, such as the UN, NATO, third State allies and NGOs. None ever used direct force but, rather, performed policing activities with the aim of countering piracy and illegal trafficking. The main "enemies" were not states but rather non-state actors involved in illegal activities and blue crimes on the high seas. All were adopted with a more human-oriented goal, in the case of Operation Atalanta for the protection of vessels of the World Food Program and of the African Union directed toward Somalia, and for Operation Sophia for the protection of victims of human trafficking. EUNAVFOR Irini, the most recent UE operation, was the first one to act in a more realist context in the support of the arms embargo on Libya. Nonetheless, its reliance on the UN system stripped the Union of its independence in the defence sector, undermining its role as a self-sufficient security provider. As a result, we can see how in the first phases of the EUMSS European forces were still devoted to more diplomatic and policing roles. The main objective of the EU was not to impose its economic and political interests outside of its borders and against inimical actors. Its aim was to support the international community in the protection and strengthening of the high seas, seen as a global common belonging to all. As a result, in these initial phases, the EU was for the most part still acting as a normative actor, rather than as the "global maritime security provider" that it wanted to be.

Nonetheless, this analysis must not completely overlook the progress that these three operations demonstrate. They do indeed show the first steps, albeit shy, toward a very sought-after process of securitisation. For example, Riddervold (2011) argues in her analysis that the EU did use Operation Atalanta for two additional purposes: on the one hand, the Union wanted to show a certain level of defence independence from the US and

the NATO structure, especially so after the events in Bosnia and Macedonia. On the other hand, the EU acted for the protection of sea lanes of commerce, fully understanding the damaging consequences of piracy on international trade. In the case of Operation Irini, instead, the Union became the only regional organisation to coordinate a naval operation in the maintaining of the UN peace and security system. Moreover, while it remains that the crucial aim of the operations was the promotion of international norms and duties, Dombrowski and Reich (2019, p. 883) emphasise another important aspect of EU naval operations, namely "an increasing willingness to employ coercive tactics – against pirates, people smugglers, and arms runners – while often leaving the search and rescue operations to select Member States and oft-criticised NGOs." As a result, while Brussels has continued to maintain its humanitarian role, this aspect has been weakened by an indisputable process of militarisation.

EUNAVFOR Aspides is the most recent naval operation organised by the European Union and, compared to the preceding three conducted between 2008 and 2020, it is different in form and importance. Throughout this analysis we shall keep in mind that the operation is just a few months old and, consequently, an analysis of its successes and/or failures is at this stage limited. Nonetheless, we believe that Operation Aspides already represents a big step forward in the creation of a European naval power and is thus worth of a thorough study.

As we have already analysed, its necessity originated from the sharp increase of armed attacks in the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb and in the Gulf of Aden as a result of the exacerbation of the Yemeni crisis and of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Similarly to other EU operations, Aspides too emerged after a Resolution of the United Nations, more precisely Resolution 2722 (2024), which demands Houthi forces to cease any attack on commercial ships and affirms the freedom of navigation and "the right of Member States to defend their vessels from attacks, including those that undermine navigational rights and freedoms." The strategic and economic importance of Bab-al-Mandeb, effectively connecting the European Union with the Gulf Countries and the Asian continent, led Brussels to quickly act on the words of the United Nations. The original idea was to expand the mandate of Operation Atalanta to include the defence of trade passing through Bab-al-Mandeb. However, Spain – who at the time held the command of the Atalanta – wasn't in favour of the idea arguing that the operation had neither the characteristics nor the nature required to intervene in the Red Sea (Reykers & Rieker, 2024, p. 14). A month later, the EU decided for the organisation of an entirely new mission and adopted Council

Decision 2024/583/CFSP establishing "a military European Union maritime security operation to safeguard freedom of navigation in relation to the Red Sea crisis. That operation shall contribute to maritime security along the main sea lines of communication". To do so the mandate of the operation allows for three tasks: accompanying vessels, ensuring maritime situational awareness, and protecting vessels against attacks in full respect of international law. Importantly, Operation Aspides is the first naval mission to clearly mention the applicability of the international law of self-defence and the principles of proportionality and necessity. This, together with the definition of the operation, namely "a military EU maritime security operation", provides us with a clear understanding of Aspides' particularity. The mission, albeit purely defensive, takes an openly military stance in the protection of sea lines of communications. Compared to Atalanta, Sophia, or Irini, there is no mention of any humanitarian or peace-keeping objective. On the contrary, the European Union finally acquires the role of a global maritime security provider through a realist projection of hard power. Moreover, compared to piracy and illegal immigration, Aspides fights against qualitatively different threats, namely against maritime terrorism used in the pursuance of political goals (Barlucchi, 2024, p. 3). The final aim of Houthi forces is not financial gain but, rather, the disruption of their regional context for the projection of power. This is why, we argue, Aspides represents a fundamental step in the Union's development as it delineates an independent actor shaping its geopolitical context rather than policing against illegal activities. This aspect becomes even more clear if we consider the comments made by the High Representative Josep Borrell. In March 2024, the HR justified the necessity of the mission, and the speed with which it was organised, purely from an economic point of view. He cited the negative impact that Houthi attacks have had on the number of ships transiting through Bab-al-Mandeb, the doubling of the cost of shipping from China to Europe, and the increase of insurance costs. As for the importance of Aspides, Borrell (2024a) did not mince his words maintaining that: "The mission is a clear evidence of our will and our capacity to strengthen international security, to protect global public goods, to protect transportation routes, and to defend the European Union's interests. It is a concrete example of the European Union acting as a maritime security provider." And again, in July 2024 Borrell stated that "This Operation is a concrete evidence of our will, our capacity to strengthen international security, to defend the European Union and global interests, and safeguard the universal right of freedom of navigation" (Borrell, 2024b).

It becomes clear, then, that the European Union is engaging in a process of securitisation of sea lines of commerce and communication. Moreover, Houthi attacks on commercial ships are justified by Sanaa as a retaliation against the Israeli aggression on Palestine and, therefore, the emergency in Bab-al-Mandeb is a symptom of a larger crisis within the Middle East. This is exactly how the Union is approaching the issue. Nathalie Tocci (2024), director of the Instituto Affari Internazionali, provides an interesting view on this matter. She argues that Aspides will serve a meaningful purpose beyond assuring freedom of navigation, namely it will prove that the EU exists as an international actor, that it has achieved a unity of vision on the Middle East, and that it supports US led deterrence in the region. However, while she maintains that the operation is unlikely to contribute in a meaningful way to maritime security, it won't be understood as a neutral endeavour but rather an escalatory operation in light of the ongoing conflict. This analysis helps us truly understand the importance that EUNAVFOR Aspides holds in the evolution of the Union's military power. Brussels is letting go of a maritime power that was limited to policing and humanitarian tasks. The protection of humanitarian aid flowing toward third countries, the fight against blue crimes such as piracy and illegal fishing, the control of borders, and search and rescue missions of migrants constrained European naval forces in a normative role. Today, as geopolitical insecurity rises and the protection of one's economic and political interests becomes crucial, the EU is beginning to assert a realist projection of power on the seas. We can argue, therefore, that Operation Aspides is a symptom of a larger change happening in the EU's understanding of naval power and the security of the international system. As Koukakis (2024, p. 19) argues, while a European Army and/or Navy remains a far-fetched theory, recent instabilities such as the on-going conflict in Ukraine have had an enormous role in enhancing the Union's defence capabilities in the form of military operations like Aspides. The Strategic Compass of 2022 signalled this shift by highlighting the importance of hard power as a consequence of "growing strategic competition, complex security threats and the direct attack on the European security order" (EU Council, 2022, p. 5). Moreover, this new strategic document highlighted how the economic interdependence that inevitably comes with globalisation is increasingly weaponised by inimical actors. This change in trajectory was translated in the maritime domain during the revision of the EU Maritime Security Strategy in 2023. Even though in the document the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb is not explicitly mentioned, the EUMSS 2023 highlights the creation of new maritime power for the strengthening of EU security interests. Between these interests, the upholding of

the UNCLOS and the protection of maritime shipping routes are featured as primary objectives. The particularity of the Bab-al-Mandeb crisis, compared to much more "straight-forward" issues such as the Ukrainian conflict, is that it forces the European Union to thoroughly consider the dilemma between its normative power and its geopolitical interests (Helwig, 2024, p. 7). The decision in favour of Operation Aspides, rather than intervening more forcefully in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has showed how in certain contexts the Union's realist reflex might triumph over its values and norms. Moreover, it has also proved a new level of independence for the European Union in the field of defence. While Brussels has for the most part adopted Washington's views and strategies against Houthi forces, Aspides has demonstrated the Union's willingness adopt a distinct line from US-led mission Prosperity Guardian or from plans created under the Coordinated Maritime Presence (Barlucchi, 2024, p. 2).

Conclusions

In the last few years, the European Union has gone through some major changes. We have experienced multi-layered insecurities, rising competition, increasing militarisation of major powers, together with a wide-spread crisis of multilateral fora. In response, Brussels has worked for the creation of a higher level of defence capabilities and strategic independence to protect the Member States' and the Union's interests. As we have seen, what we can call the European Union's "hard power turn" has had deep effects on a verity of sectors. We have reinforced both military and civilian CSDP missions, increased the collection and sharing of intelligence, developed the EU Cyber Defence Policy, strengthened financial tools such as the European Defence Fund, and reinforced both regional and bilateral partnerships (EU, 2022, pp. 3-4). Most of all, Member States have made some improvements in producing a common foreign and security strategy. While this is clearly still incomplete and underdeveloped in many aspects, it must be recognised as a huge accomplishment for an entity that incorporates 27 countries with different economic foundations, demography, constituencies, political objectives, and geographical location. We argue that this milestone has been particularly evident in the maritime domain. In less than two decades the European Union has been able to assert itself as a strategically and operationally independent actor not only in its territorial waters but, most importantly, on the high seas. It has organized and managed a variety of naval operations together with a maritime strategy that has consistently

responded to an erratic – and often outright unstable – geopolitical environment. Operation Aspides has partly sealed these achievements. To the damaging crisis in the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait the European Union was able to respond quickly, efficiently, and collectively. It recognised a threat to its commercial interests and it responded accordingly, without shying away from the use of military force and truly acting as a global maritime security provider.

These achievements, however, must not blind us to the improvements that we still have to accomplish. The path toward the creation of a European naval power is still long and undoubtedly full of setbacks. We must capitalise on the momentum that Operation Aspides has created so that we can reach new hights. In May 2024 the European Council highlighted five priorities for the Union's future in the field of defence and security: continuing support to Ukraine, better and higher investments, increasing the Union's ability to act, strengthening EU's resilience and securing access to strategic domains, and improving partnerships (EU Council, 2024). The maritime dimension is often mentioned, especially in terms of maintaining fundamental naval missions in the Red Sea, Northern Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean. However, the Council does not provide any specifics on how these priorities will be maintained. At the more practical level, we argue that the European Union must work toward achieving necessary improvements. Firstly, Member States must pursue a common procurement of armaments and defence technologies. As Chinn and Lavandier (2024, p. 8) show, since the early 1990s the EU has displayed a fragmented procurement environment which makes the management of the European Defence Fund and, more generally, cooperation between different national naval forces very complicated. Interoperability, joint operations, and training are all damaged by a system where the acquisition of armaments is made at the State level rather than in a communitarian way. Moreover, "With less cooperation and collaborative procurement, there are small program sizes implied, duplication of R&D efforts, and limited economies of scale, which in turn contribute to the comparatively high cost of the European defence industrial ecosystem and might limit also the defence industry's international competitiveness" (Mc Kinsey & Co., p. 9; see also Draghi, 2024, p. 51). As a result, initiatives such as the Italian and French-led FREMM Programme must be incremented, incentivising collaboration and information-sharing in the development of new defence technologies. Secondly, European naval forces must work on their ability to respond quickly to high-intensity crises. That is why the *2024 Military Mobility Pledge* is so important. As the EU Council (2024, p. 33) itself recognises, the unimpeded

movement of military forces through land, air, and sea is vital for European security and in providing credible responses to threats against the Union's stability. Finally, the European Union must invest more in innovation (Draghi, 2024, p. 51). The hybridisation of threats and the development of new defence technologies will require more funds going into the R&D sector. Once again, this effort must be conducted at the Union's level rather than on a national basis, allowing for valuable spillovers not only between Member States but also between different sectors of the economy. At the operational level, these improvements will create an EU naval force that is more integrated, cooperative, prepared, and effective, thus strengthening a sector that already demonstrates a huge potential.

At the political level, the European Union must embrace the trajectory that it has taken toward the formation of a hard naval power. Since 2008 we have proven we can be a strong maritime security provider, not only in the furtherance of our economic and political interests but also in the protection of international values and norms. To continue on this path, it is necessary to make some changes at the institutional level, which will be possible only if all Member States consent to relinquish some part of their sovereignty in the defence and security field to the Union. A Treaty change introducing the qualified majority voting at the Council level, thus practically eliminating the Member States' veto power, is at this time inconceivable. The same is true, we believe, regarding the creation of a common European Navy. However, recent instabilities such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine or Houthi attacks in the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait have shown the huge accomplishments that Brussels can achieve when united in purpose and vision. Moreover, the US strategic shift away from Europe and toward the Pacific will force the European Union to achieve a higher level of independence in the security and defence sector (Draghi, 2024, p. 46). Since the end of WWII, the Union has been able to develop socially and economically thanks to the protection of the United States. Those days are over, and we must now create a new global geopolitical influence detached from transatlantic considerations.

We hope that this analysis has showed however that upon times of crisis the European Union has managed to make huge improvements that were unimaginable until a decade ago. Operation Aspides has proved that Member States, regardless of national differences, can delineate a communitarian defence strategy quickly and efficiently when the situation requires it. While, therefore, wide-ranging institutional changes in the defence and security sector are still far-fetched, we argue that what we have presented in the previous pages shows some interesting and possibly very impactful changes coming

our way. Most importantly, the maritime dimension will potentially continue to play an increasingly influential role in the upcoming years. As we have seen the European Union is not the only actor that is investing in sea power but, on the contrary, other crucial competitors are doing the same. Moreover, a wide-ranging process of hybridisation of security threats will require further investments in the maritime dimension. Other than the high seas, current academic and institutional debates are also focusing on the deep-sea and the seabed, especially regarding sea cables and underwater extraction of natural resources. As a result, continuing instabilities on the high seas will necessarily push the Union's Member States toward a communitarian hard power turn in the maritime dimension. In this sense, whether Operation Aspides succeeds or fails will have a fundamental impact on the Union. The achievements, or lack thereof, made in the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb will be a crucial lesson for the European Institutions and the way in which they regulate the defence and security sector. If successful, we might expect that Aspides will act as the first stepping stone toward a change in the way the European Union is willing and able to securitise its interests. At this time, it is impossible to say with certainty whether this renewed European naval power will continue to grow but we can confidently say that all the necessary premises are there. As a result, it is this analysis's argument that if the tendencies identified at this stage continue, reinforced by an increasingly unstable geopolitical scenario, we could witness the gradual crystallisation of this "hard power turn" at the institutional level, especially so in the maritime dimension. Sea power, therefore, could initiate a crucial domino effect in the formation of a true communitarian security and defence strategy, bringing about a transformative evolution for the European Union. Current geopolitical instabilities are telling us that it is time for change and this change might be travelling by sea.

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