

Charting a Course for Cooperation: The Potential of India and the EU in Combating Houthi Piracy

Alessandro Bassetti

Graduate Student from the London School of Economics, LSE

1. *Introduction* – In today’s interconnected world, the accessibility and navigability of maritime trade routes are crucial for economic development and the security of supply chains. A tumultuous international arena has made the fragility of the trading system come to the surface, underlying the necessity of continuous effort to ensure the free flow of resources and services. If we look at recent years, many have been the upheavals that have threatened the world economic trade-based system: the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, the container ship Ever Given getting stuck in the Suez Canal¹², the blockade of Black Sea navigation after Russia invaded Ukraine³, the attacks on ships passing through the Red Sea in the context of the Gaza crisis, to name a few in the recent years. Alongside these severe, albeit contingent, challenges stand the ever-present problem of piracy, especially in strategic chokepoints that trading vectors cannot avoid. Efforts to combat sea piracy along the eastern coast of Africa and the northwestern areas of the Indian Ocean have been ongoing for years, at least since the Somali civil war of 2006 – 2009 led to an increase in buccaneering activities⁴, but the current confrontation between Israel and Hamas, and the broader effects this had region-wide, might bring the tackling of piracy issue back on top of the political agendas in countries. As we have reached one year of confrontation, the situation is not close to any quick resolution, as Israel has scaled up on its efforts to neutralise Iranian proxies and all its hostile forces within the wider region.

The present paper aims to argue for the opportunity presented by the current situation in the Red Sea to strengthen the cooperation between the European Union, its member states, and other international actors, with a specific focus on India. The escalation in the Red Sea allows the EU to approach India in order to jointly tackle the challenge of protecting trade routes while simultaneously strengthening the capabilities of operating together in matters of maritime warfare against a force to be reckoned with. Such an operation would intertwine elements of counter-piracy efforts, coupled with more sophisticated manoeuvres to face a well-equipped paramilitary force and sophisticated and contentious diplomatic tightrope. On the one hand, closer cooperation between India and the EU can lead to decisive results against the resurgence of piracy along the eastern coasts of Africa and in retaliation to Houthis’ disruption of free trade. On the other, a long-term approach suggests taking advantage of the current state of things with the

¹ Braw, Elizabeth. “What the Ever Given taught the World”, *Foreign Policy*, November 10, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/10/what-the-ever-given-taught-the-world/>.

² Yee, Vivian & Glanz, James. “How One of the World’s Biggest Ships Jammed the Suez Canal”, *The New York Times*, July 19, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/17/world/middleeast/suez-canal-stuck-ship-ever-given.html>.

³ European Council, “Ukrainian grain exports explained”, February 08, 2024. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/ukrainian-grain-exports-explained/>.

⁴ Daniels, Christopher L. “Somali Piracy and Terrorism in the Horn of Africa”, *Global Flashpoints: A Scarecrow Press Series*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012; Johnson, La’ Nita M. “The consequences of Somali piracy on international trade”, *Global Tides* 8.1 (2014): 5.

perspective of developing shared capabilities with a pivotal partner in the Indo-Pacific Ocean against the Chinese presence and activism.

2. *The current state of the Red Sea*⁵ – The conflict that erupted between Israel and Hamas at the end of 2023 had understandably widespread repercussions throughout the region and prompted the Houthis to react in support of their ally, Hamas, by initially targeting all ships related to Israel passing through the southern Red Sea⁶. This retaliatory action soon expanded to include attacks on all Western-affiliated vessels and even from non-Western nations, including India⁷. The first recorded attack took place on November 19th when military units dropped from a helicopter and seized control of the carrier ship *Galaxy Leader*⁸. Following this initial event, there were 18 more attacks on commercial vessels in December 2023 alone. These incidents have continued to be a problem in 2024, resulting in delays, increased supply chain prices, and heightened international tensions.

The countries most affected by the attacks responded with force. In December 2023⁹, the US launched the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) Op. Prosperity Guardian, to which several countries have since joined, including Australia, Canada, Sri Lanka, Singapore, and the United Kingdom¹⁰. The mission set out with the primary goal of safeguarding the maritime routes under threat. Still, it also entails the possibility of striking inland targets to disrupt the more extensive military infrastructure of the Houthis that serve as platforms for the attacks¹¹. Many European countries have decided to collaborate with Prosperity Guardian, including Denmark, Greece, and the Netherlands. In contrast, the EU as a unit and its major countries have not entertained the same idea and refrained from joining.

On the contrary, Brussels decided to publicly distance itself from the US-led operation against the Houthis, especially from its more explicitly aggressive aspects, as some European governments perceive the risk of escalating tensions in the fragile

⁵ Data regarding attacks on ships by the Houthis have been gathered through ACLED's Yemen Conflict Observatory: <https://acleddata.com/yemen-conflict-observatory/red-sea-attacks-dashboard/>.

⁶ Al-Jazeera, "Yemen's Houthis warn they will target all Israel-bound ships in the Red Sea", December 9, 2023: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/9/yemens-houthis-warn-they-will-target-all-israel-bound-ships-in-red-sea>. Staff, Toi. "In escalation, Houthis vow to target all Israel-bound ships in the Red Sea", *The Times of Israel*, December 9, 2023. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-escalation-houthis-vow-to-target-all-israel-bound-ships-in-red-sea/>.

⁷ Mongilio, Heather. "U.S. 5th Fleet CO: Houthi Strikes Not Just Targeting Israel-Affiliated Ships", *U.S. Naval Institute News*, January 4, 2024 <https://news.usni.org/2024/01/04/u-s-5th-fleet-co-houthi-strikes-not-just-targeting-israel-affiliated-ships>.

⁸ Compare data from www.VesselFinder.com: <https://www.vesselfinder.com/vessels/details/9237307>. "Yemen's Houthi rebels seize cargo ship in Red Sea and call Israeli vessels 'legitimate targets'", *The Guardian*, November 20, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/20/yemen-houthi-rebels-seize-cargo-ship-galaxy-leader-red-sea-israel>.

⁹ Statement from Secretary of Defence Lloyd J. Austin III: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3621110/statement-from-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-on-ensuring-freedom-of-n/>.

¹⁰ Press Releases from the UK Government: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/hms-diamond-joins-new-international-task-force-to-protect-shipping-in-the-red-sea>. Press Release from the Canadian Government: <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2023/12/canada-to-participate-in-united-states-led-operation-prosperity-guardian.html>.

¹¹ Joint Statement From Australia, Bahrain, Canada, the Netherlands, United Kingdom and United States on Additional Strikes Against the Houthis in Yemen: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3652435/>.

regional context¹². The EU operation, named EUNAVFOR Aspides, has had initial contributions from seven member states: Italy, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, and Spain, and others joined later¹³, and does not involve participating in strikes against the Houthis on the Yemenite territory. Operation Aspides participants and equipment will only operate at sea with a mandate for escort, patrol, surveillance, and interception along the trade routes. The mission, which for now has been given a yearly mandate, is expected to continue even after the precedent-scheduled finish date of 19 February 2025 due to the persistent state of belligerence in the region.

Similarly to the EU's approach, India did not join forces under the US' aegis of Op. Prosperity Guardian, but that should not be read as a lack of involvement. Delhi has nevertheless been heavily interested in the evolving situation within the Red Sea since the onset of the crisis. It was dragged into the main centre of the conflict when the commercial ship M V Chem Pluto was targeted on December 23rd, 2023¹⁴. The vessel was subjected to a heavy attack dealt via drones and managed to reach Mumbai and its final destination in Mangalore. In response to this incident, India has decided to deploy an impressive force of warships east to the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab Strait to provide security against pirate activities¹⁵, investigating over 250 vessels in the following months. As Western powers have focused on attacks by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthis within the Red Sea, India has been playing a much more complex political game, trying not to alienate the sympathies of "third world" countries and those who perceive the Western intervention as a post-colonial to defend their regional post watch in Tel Aviv, while simultaneously guaranteeing the vital free movement of vessels through the Red Sea. Furthermore, India is playing a crucial role in filling the security gap left by the shifting in the US and EU along the coasts of Somalia. The hijacking of the Maltese-flagged bulk carrier MV Ruen has become the first successful attack along the Somali coastline since 2017. And, to better understand the central role that the Indian security forces have taken up as security providers, it is sufficient to say that Indian naval commandos eventually carried out the liberation of the Ruen¹⁶. Since December, Indian

¹² Allard, Léonie & Bianco, Cinzia & Droin, Mathieu. "With Operation Aspides, Europe is charting its own course in and around the Red Sea", *Atlantic Council* March 07, 2024. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/with-operation-aspides-europe-is-charting-its-own-course/>. Uysal, Selin. "The EU's New Red Sea Naval Mission: Implications and Challenges", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* February 16, 2024. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/eus-new-red-sea-naval-mission-implications-and-challenges#:~:text=Aspides%20will%20complement%20the%20existing,area%20under%20their%20national%20commands.>

¹³ EUNAVFOR Operation Aspides official webpage: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eunavfor-aspides_en?s=410381.

¹⁴ Peri, Dinakar. "Initial assessment of merchant vessel Chem Pluto indicates a drone attack: Navy", *The Hindu*, December 26, 2023. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/initial-assessment-of-merchant-vessel-chem-pluto-indicates-a-drone-attack-navy/article67674759.ece>. Shipping telegraph. "Preliminary probe of tanker Chem Pluto reveals drone attack", *Shipping Telegraph*, December 27, 2023. <https://shippingtelegraph.com/ship-accidents/preliminary-probe-of-tanker-chem-pluto-reveals-drone-attack/>.

¹⁵ Kaushik, Krishn. "India deploys unprecedented naval might near Red Sea to rein in piracy", *Reuters*, January 31, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/india-deploys-unprecedented-naval-might-near-red-sea-rein-piracy-2024-01-31/>. Ethirajan, Anbarasan. "India deploys three warships to Arabian Sea after attack on tanker", *BBC News*, December 26, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-67822247>.

¹⁶ Lariosa, Aaron-Matthew. "Indian Navy Commandos Take Control of Pirate Ship in Airborne Raid", *U.S. Naval Institute*, March 18, 2024. <https://news.usni.org/2024/03/18/indian-navy-commandos-take-control-of-pirate-ship-in-airborne-raid#:~:text=In%20a%20joint%20feat%2C%20the,35%20Somali%20pirates%20to%20surrender.>

naval ships have acted as first responders to at least 17 incidents where pirates have hijacked vessels in the Red Sea¹⁷.

3. *The Premises of Indo-European Cooperation* – In the following paragraphs, proposals and objectives will be made regarding the possibilities of creating more structured cooperation in the fight against pirate-led operations in the Red Sea between the EU, its members, and India. It is thus important to contextualise these possible developments within the broader collaboration between the two polities over the last decades. The bilateral relation between the EU and India has experienced over the years a continuous process of deepening: trade and economic cooperation became political dialogue at the ministerial level in 1994, then it evolved into a summit-level meeting in the early 2000s and found its highest moment in 2004 when a strategic partnership was established¹⁸. Among the latest developments are, on the other hand, the India-Middle East-Europe economic corridor that Delhi launched while chairing the G20 in 2023 and, on the other, the “EU-India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025” that jointly depicts a roadmap to guide coordinated actions aimed at strengthening the EU-India Strategic Partnership.¹⁹ The said partnership has been designed as an ambitious plan to enhance multiple areas of cooperation, including maritime security cooperation. As it is obvious, the relations between the EU and India have revolved around the pivotal role of the Indo-Pacific, and the EU has outlined on its part a series of documents to define its priorities towards the area. The EU Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS) (2014), Enhanced Security Cooperation in and with Asia (2018), a New Strategy on India (2018), and the Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (2021) are all documents and projects that want to make Europe a player in the Indo-Pacific area in the next decades.

Despite the progressive results obtained at the diplomatic level, operational results have been achieved at a slower rate, and the first joint fleet exercise, held in the Gulf of Guinea, dates only to October 2023²⁰. The exercise followed the third EU-India Maritime Security Dialogue meeting that had happened in Brussels previously. During the exercise, the Indian Navy’s INS Sumedha, an Offshore Patrol Vessel, was joined by three EU Member States’ ships in the Gulf of Guinea: The Italian Navy Ship ITS Foscari, the French Navy Ship FS Ventôse, and the Spanish Navy Ship Tornado in a simulated operation that aimed at strengthening shared capabilities and the possibility of cooperating in conflict areas. The joint exercise was the first of its kind but not the first time the two navies had worked together in a similar scenario. In 2008, the European

¹⁷ Rajvanshi, Astha. “India Is Walking a Diplomatic Tightrope in the Red Sea Conflict” *Time*, February 2, 2024. <https://time.com/6622151/india-yemen-houthis-iran-red-sea/>.

¹⁸ Delivorias, Angelos. “International Agreements in Progress - EU-India free trade agreement”, *European Parliament Research Centre*, January 9, 2024. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)757588#:~:text=Following%20the%20EU%20India%201994,%E2%82%AC115.4%20billion%20in%202022](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2024)757588#:~:text=Following%20the%20EU%20India%201994,%E2%82%AC115.4%20billion%20in%202022). “India-European Union Bilateral Relations”, *Embassy of India to Belgium, Luxembourg and the European Union*, September 30, 2023. <https://indianembassybrussels.gov.in/index.php>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Press and Information team. “EU and India carry out joint naval exercise in the Gulf of Guinea” *EU Delegation to Ghana*, November 6, 2023. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ghana/eu-and-india-carry-out-joint-naval-exercise-gulf-guinea_en#:~:text=On%202024%20October%2C%20India%20and,on%205%20October%20in%20Brussels.

Union and India deployed the European Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) and the Indian Navy to the Gulf of Aden to enhance counter-piracy efforts in the region²¹, as the growing issue along the East African coast caught the attention of leaders worldwide. Operation Atalanta has indeed been a forum where exercises could be carried out on different scales and helped the fleets familiarise themselves with their operational capabilities and structures.

When considering the connections between India and Europe, it is also essential to take into consideration the partnerships between India and the member states, as they can play an important role in facilitating the development of relations for the EU as a whole. When considering the most significant countries of the communitarian bloc, we see that Italy has, in recent years, significantly changed its stance towards India after years of tepid, if not outright cold, relations²². The two countries are since October 2023 linked by a defence cooperation agreement to promote collaboration in various defence domains such as security and defence policy, R&D, military education, maritime domain awareness, sharing of defence information, and industrial cooperation, including co-development, co-production, and setting up of joint ventures. Furthermore, Italy also participated with its flagship *Cavour* in a joint exercise with the Indian aircraft carrier *Vikramaditya*²³ last October as part of its journey through many allied countries in the Indo-Pacific. Simultaneously, France has also strengthened ties with India due to its exposition in the Pacific Ocean via its *Territoires d'outre-mer*. The July 14th Celebration with the invitation of Indian PM Minister Modi, other than sending a powerful propagandistic message, set the perfect stage for the launch of the *India-France Indo-Pacific Roadmap* that followed the 2018 *Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region*²⁴.

4. *The positive momentum* – A fruitful background of previous relations constitutes a sound basis for the further development this essay advocates. Both European and Indian fleets are contemporaneously present along the coasts of Yemen to fight against the common enemy of the Houthi pirates, and certain levels of cooperation are expected and would necessarily imply the need or willingness to further developments. What makes the current situation different, and potentially more intriguing, is a series of concurrent elements that make a more structured and long-term partnership possible and desirable.

The most decisive being that the political consensus in Brussels and Delhi is pushing for the respective polities to strengthen their international stance. In Brussels, the process of making Europe a stronger actor in the global arena has been long and slow but sharpened over the last few years. It was during her speech in the European Parliament Plenary and the presentation of her Executive, that Ursula Von der Leyen revealed how

²¹ Press Release from EEAS, June 21, 2021: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-india-joint-naval-exercise-0_en.

²² Cristiani, Dario. "A New Chapter in India-Italy Relations?", *The Diplomat*, March 8, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/a-new-chapter-in-india-italy-relations/>.

²³ Leoni, Riccardo. "Così il Cavour combatte la pirateria. L'addestramento con l'India", *Formiche*, October 7, 2024. <https://formiche.net/2024/10/portaerei-cavour-in-addestramento-con-marina-indiana/#content>.

²⁴ Press Release from the Indian Government, July 14, 2023: https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36799/IndiaFrance_IndoPacific_Roadmap.

she intended the Commission to lead the European Union in a renewed effort to be a geopolitical actor²⁵. Indeed, the crises that have shocked the core of the international order through her first mandate have forced Europe to acknowledge its previous shortcomings and tackle them openly. Countless have been remarks made by national and European prominent figures regarding the necessity of creating and reinforcing the core of a joint force for Europe. Italy's President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, is among the last to reiterate the concept during his visit to Poland²⁶. And it was the Mario Draghi Report on the future of European competitiveness²⁷ that tackled the issue between Strasbourg and Brussels. The road ahead for Europe to develop a common security structure is steep, and it should initially revolve heavily around internal organisation. Still, it could not overlook the role and the ambitions of the European Union and its strategic relationships.

Even when looking more in detail at the progress in maritime security in the Indian Ocean, the European Council's 2021 "EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" emphasised the "intense geopolitical competition" in the region and its potential negative impact on trade and supply chains²⁸, while the CRIMARIO initiatives I and II²⁹ implemented maritime safety and security measures in the Indian Ocean region by assisting coastal nations in improving maritime situational awareness. This support includes developing information-sharing networks, web-based incident management, inter-agency workshops, training, and capacity building that should make Europe more adaptable to play a role in such a strategic area. Even the already mentioned Operation Atalanta has among its objectives that of enhancing the European CSDP and diplomatic priorities in the northwest segment of the Indo-Pacific³⁰. During the operations of Atalanta, a dialogue was indeed established with other navies operating in the area such as those of India, Japan, and China³¹.

Simultaneously, India is also in the process of revamping its strategic ambitions, fuelled by the country's economic growth, Modi's personal strategic understanding, and the Chinese's growing assertiveness. Especially at sea, India has historically been a relatively less active power compared to competitors. However, under Prime Minister Modi's leadership, the country has actively sought to expand its role in maritime security, thus signalling to Beijing that India will not remain passive as the People's Liberation

²⁵ Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/speech_19_6408.

²⁶ ANSA Editorial Team. "Mattarella: 'È indifferibile la creazione di una Difesa comune europea'", ANSA, October 11, 2024. https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2024/10/11/mattarella-e-indifferibile-la-creazione-di-una-difesa-comune-europea_b7bd5b36-da27-4e44-bd95-4ade943c357b.html.

²⁷ Draghi, Mario. "The future of European competitiveness – A competitiveness strategy for Europe". https://commission.europa.eu/topics/strengthening-european-competitiveness/eu-competitiveness-looking-ahead_en.

²⁸ EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific - Council conclusions, April 16, 2021. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-a-stronger-europe-in-the-world/file-indo-pacific-strategy#:~:text=The%20Council%20Conclusions,human%20rights%20and%20international%20law>.

²⁹ Crimario Mission Website: <https://www.crimario.eu/>.

³⁰ EUROPEAN UNION NAVAL FORCE SOMALIA Military Operation Atalanta Mission Website: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eu-navfor-somalia/european-union-naval-force-somalia-military-operation-atalanta_und_en.

³¹ Lahiri, Saaz. "A Critical analysis of the European Union's key maritime security engagements in the Indian Ocean" *National Maritime Operation*, April 17, 2024. <https://maritimeindia.org/a-critical-analysis-of-the-european-unions-key-maritime-security-engagements-in-the-indian-ocean/>.

Army Navy enhances its global presence. To give a measure of the current efforts from Delhi, suffice to say that 50 between ships and submarines are under construction to strengthen capabilities³². Security concerns had already surfaced within the Indian military establishments over ten years ago and had led to a detailed strategy document released in 2015. Titled “Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy”³³, this document articulates India’s maritime security objectives, which include protecting territorial integrity and sovereignty against maritime threats, ensuring the safety of Indian citizens and goods at sea, safeguarding resources within the maritime domain, promoting peace and stability in India’s Maritime Zones (MZI) and areas of interest, and preserving national interests in maritime affairs³⁴. The current situation in Yemen and in the Red Sea tackles Indian interests in a complex, multi-faced way. The economic concern is significant, as most of the country’s trade goes through the Red Sea. Since the conflict began, India has faced significant shipping delays³⁵, including threats to cargo vessels, rising container shipping rates, and exporters hesitating to ship goods through the Red Sea. It is the coupling of short-term economic pressures and long-term strategic needs that makes it reasonable for India to willingly participate in a project to create a more solid security architecture in the western Indian Ocean and further with the European Union.

5. *Framing the issue is key* – While the previously underlined elements create a good basis for cooperation, we must not fall into the trap of believing that working together against the Houthis is easily achievable. And this is because of the high political saliency involved. This issue is intertwined with the broader conflict between Israel, Hamas, and their neighbours in the Middle East, thus with one of the most divisive aspects of international relations and a constant issue of divisions among international and national public opinions.

In the recent mission launched by the USA, Prosperity Guardian, it has been noted that many countries, including India and many in the EU, chose not to participate. And this decision was largely due to the mission’s aggressive nature, which includes the potential for targeting land-based objectives, a movement that many countries decided would have exposed them politically. Particularly, the Mission EUNAVFOR Aspides, despite having been wielded under EU banners, is a compromise that emerged from the willingness of some countries to take action and others to maintain a conciliatory stance. The risks associated with the American strategy are evident and lie in the sentiments of enmity that could rise among those countries that sympathise with the Palestinian cause and would perceive a direct intervention in Yemen as a post-colonial effort by Western powers. In this sense, the scarce participation from non-western countries in Prosperity

³² Ministry of Defence of India FAQ: <https://mod.gov.in/faqs/q-1-what-are-current-force-levels-indian-navy-what-are-ongoing-projects-what-steps-are-being>.

³³ Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian MARITIME Security Strategy. https://bharatshakti.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf.

³⁴ Lahiri, Saaz. “A critical analysis of the EU’s key maritime security engagements in the Indian Ocean”, *National Maritime Foundation*, April 17, 2024. <https://maritimeindia.org/a-critical-analysis-of-the-european-unions-key-maritime-security-engagements-in-the-indian-ocean/>.

³⁵ Rajvanshi, Astha. “India Is Walking a Diplomatic Tightrope in the Red Sea Conflict”, *Time*, February 2, 2024. <https://time.com/6622151/india-yemen-houthis-iran-red-sea/>.

Guardian directly relates to countries' willingness to maintain a balanced approach in the Middle Eastern struggle.

A real European action shall take into account the positions of the 27 and cannot fathom a direct intervention on Yemenite soil that would be overly divisive. This understanding leads to the conclusion that any joint action, be it with India or other nations, against the Houthis threatening the trade flow would have to be brought out only at sea. On the one hand, Operation Aspides already offers the framework of action with its clear mandate of accompanying vessels, ensuring maritime awareness, and protecting against multi-domain attacks at sea³⁶. The non-political nature of the mandate does not imply an intervention, albeit peripheral, to what is happening between Israel and Hamas, but finds its basis in UN Security Council Resolution 2272³⁷ and international maritime law. The objective for Europeans is to de-escalate tensions and alleviate members' concerns by showcasing their divergence from the U.S. approach, which is deemed escalatory. By framing the operation as an anti-piracy one, Europe could avoid internal splits, promote an operation with excellent prospects of success, and use the present situation to promote its security agenda.

Diplomatic finesse is necessary to persuade international partners. Despite Washington's invitation, India did not participate in Prosperity Guardian. Delhi's decision lies in a variety of reasons, but one of the most important is the diplomatic ties that link India with Iran³⁸, one of the main stakeholders in the conflict. Ties between the countries are historically deep: the two countries shared a border until 1947 and continue to have connections through shared language, culture, and traditions³⁹. For India, Iran remains a strategic partner and an inalienable interlocutor in many aspects, from the shared hostility towards Pakistan, to the trade of raw materials that from Iran flow towards India to sustain its impetuous development. Nevertheless, the disruption of trade caused by the Houthis can make the decision-makers recognise the necessity of an intervention that would refrain from joining a military operation aimed at combating what is a politically supported group that controls wide regions in Yemen, as the Houthis do. A focus on the anti-piracy aspects of the proposed joint intervention will significantly enhance the chances of securing India as a powerful ally, not just due to its capabilities but also because of its legitimacy among non-western countries by having one of the leaders of the Third World engaging in a joint operation.

6. *The Eye on Beijing* – The previous paragraphs discussed the possibilities and challenges of collaborating between India and the EU in response to the current situation. However, we must not let these immediate concerns overshadow the broader geopolitical

³⁶ Mandate of the Operation of EUNAVFOR Aspides: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eunavfor-aspides/about-operation-eunavfor-aspides_en#84651.

³⁷ The Resolution urges the Houthis to cease all attacks on vessels and notes the right for vessels to defend themselves. [https://wwwcdn.imo.org/localresources/en/MediaCentre/HotTopics/Documents/Red%20Sea/SCR%202722\(2024\)%20on%20the%20Red%20Sea%20adopted%20\(E\)%201.pdf](https://wwwcdn.imo.org/localresources/en/MediaCentre/HotTopics/Documents/Red%20Sea/SCR%202722(2024)%20on%20the%20Red%20Sea%20adopted%20(E)%201.pdf).

³⁸ Rajvanshi, Astha. "India is Walking a Diplomatic Tightrope in the Red Sea Conflict", *Time*, February 2, 2024. <https://time.com/6622151/india-yemen-houthis-iran-red-sea/>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

context. What I mean by this is that it is widely acknowledged that the major geopolitical theatre in the coming decades will primarily take place in the Asia-Pacific region as China's influence continues to grow, capitalising on the diminishing geopolitical presence of the United States. The fact that the eyes of the world are on the China-US confrontation is now an established reality, at least since the Obama administration engaged in what has become known as the Pivot to Asia⁴⁰. While it may be overly simplistic and teleological to predict an inevitable war between China and the US, it is evident that the main strategic competition is unfolding in this area. Despite India's multi-alignment strategy⁴¹, which allows for quick geopolitical shifts, it is a member of the Quad, albeit with its reservations and autonomy, and maintains ties with the US regarding the overarching confrontation with China⁴².

China has historically not been a maritime power and, like India, has only recently rediscovered the importance of the navy. It wasn't until the 2015 white papers on military strategy that Beijing explicitly stated its goal to become a "maritime power"⁴³. This declaration marked the beginning of the modernisation and expansion of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Since then, the PLAN has transformed from a coastal defence force into a blue-water navy capable of operating globally in open oceans in the context of the extension of Chinese economic, political and military influence⁴⁴. Furthermore, China's expanding naval capabilities give it significant anti-access and area-denial abilities. This means that the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) can now impede the entry of hostile navies into certain areas and limit their activities within those regions.

With that in mind, well-structured coordination against the Houthis can have side effects and opportunities that concern China. It could counter its increasing activism at sea and the possibility of it becoming assertive. Collaboration could mainly allow naval forces and their crews to adapt to their respective operational behaviours when responding to hostile forces. For now, the aforementioned joint exercises are the best situations where these can be tested, and navies can familiarise themselves. The confrontation that has been brought out against pirates does not provide, in this regard, an adequate level of engagement for well-trained military personnel. In simpler terms, pirates do not pose any significant threat to the crews of warships equipped with advanced military technologies, as they will avoid confrontations that could end badly for them.

⁴⁰ Lieberthal, Kenneth G. "The American Pivot to Asia", *Brookings Institution*, December 21, 2011. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>.

⁴¹ Fasulo, Filippo *et al.* "Is India's Multi-Alignment Working?" *ISPI Istituto Italiano per gli studi di politica internazionale*, July 26, 2023. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/is-indias-multi-alignment-working-137134>.
Tellis, Ashley J. "Non-Allied Forever: India's Grand Strategy According to Subrahmanyam Jaishankar", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 3, 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2021/03/non-allied-forever-indias-grand-strategy-according-to-subrahmanyam-jaishankar?lang=en>.

⁴² Joshi, Manoj. "Il Quad visto dall'India", *Limes Rivista italiana di Geopolitica* August 8, 2022. <https://www.limesonline.com/rivista/il-quad-visto-dall-india-14640578/>.
Malhotra, Aditi. "Engagement, not Entanglement: India's Relationship with the Quad" *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, May 1, 2023. <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2023/05/01/engagement-not-entanglement-indias-relationship-with-the-quad/>.

⁴³ Grare, Frédéric & Reuter, Manisha. "The battle for the Indian Ocean: How the EU and India can strengthen maritime security", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, August 3, 2023. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-battle-for-the-indian-ocean-how-the-eu-and-india-can-strengthen-maritime-security/>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

The hybrid nature of the Houthis makes them a unique kind of adversary, and their recent attacks reveal this specificity. Just by looking at the attacks that have been mentioned in the paragraphs before, it is possible to understand the versatility of the Yemenite rebels: the *Galaxy Leader* was seized by commandos dropped from helicopters, and the *MV Chem Pluto* had to sustain heavy hits from drones. It is important to remember that the Houthis benefitted over the years of being part of the Iranian network of armament provisions⁴⁵ and were able to prevail in the Yemenite civil war against other well-armed forces. Now, we understand that fighting against pirates and against a sovereign state are two completely different types of engagement and require a completely different set of capabilities. The challenge posed by the Houthis is complex, yet it minimises the risk of severe damage to military personnel and equipment. The suggested cooperation does not foresee boots on the ground and is primarily defensive in scope. All attacks from the Houthis will be launched from land to target maritime assets, and the approach should allow for adequate reaction time.

7. Conclusion – The Middle East has been in turmoil for the past year, with no end in sight to the suffering and upheaval in the region. The Houthis have further expanded the conflict by intervening in the Red Sea, claiming it as a sign of solidarity with their allies and the Palestinian people. This escalation has redirected the focus of Western countries to the Red Sea to ensure the security of maritime passage. The European Union, among several key actors, has recognised the need to secure trade routes and has launched the EUNAVFOR *Aspides* mission. Despite some issues related to participation and internal divisions, this mission has achieved its objectives effectively. However, the current essay has expressed how this is insufficient and how *Aspides* should serve as a starting point for the EU to build something more substantial to enhance its ambitions in the region. This essay argues that the current situation presents an opportunity for the EU to develop cooperation with India, which is also active in the region and interested in protecting its economic interests. While the details of this cooperation have not been explored here, there is potential for a partnership to be formed under the framework provided by Operation *Aspides*. The geopolitical pressures faced by both entities create a conducive environment, as both the EU and India seek to be more proactive at sea and enhance their international presence, demonstrating the political will necessary for such an initiative. The longstanding positive relationship between the EU and India could reach new heights through a strategic partnership that moves beyond theoretical principles to include tangible cooperation. By framing the operation as an anti-piracy initiative, Europe can foster unity, drive a successful operation, and leverage the current circumstances to advance its security agenda. Furthermore, it is important to note that European and Indian interests align when it comes to deterring Chinese forces, which remain active in the Indian Ocean and could threaten the interests of both parties if not effectively monitored and balanced.

Novembre 2024

⁴⁵ Ardemagni, Eleonora. “Houthis and Iran: A War Time Alliance”, *ISPI Istituto Italiano per gli studi di politica internazionale*, March 22, 2023. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/houthis-and-iran-a-war-time-alliance-121951>.