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The EU: from West Africa to the wider Atlantic

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EU AND THE SECURITIZATION OF THE MARITIME SPACE

It was not until the formation of the European Union (EU) with the 1992 Maastricht Treaty that security began to take shape in the agenda of the EU Member States. The Treaty built the EU in a three-pillar system: i) European Communities, ii) Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and iii) Judicial Cooperation (JHA), transferring to the CFSP pillar the attributions given to the Western European Union organization and committing Members to joint missions under the ‘Petersberg Tasks’².

In the wake of the Cold War and the emergence of a new global order, the EU was enhancing its structures in an attempt to reinforce its member’s cooperation in defence and safeguard stability in the old continent.

With a new transnational security framework and an ongoing globalization process, states’ interdependence became superior to homeland interests and it was on the face of this need to develop a stronger defence capacity, in particular after the

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² A set of military and security tasks (mainly peacekeeping missions) that the EU was empowered to deploy.

September 11 attacks in the United States, that the EU developed its own Security Strategy, under the coordination of the then High-Representative Javier Solana.

The European Security Strategy of 2003 already approaches security in broader terms. Climate change, famine and widespread diseases start being addressed as security challenges and global issues in the domain of human security become politicized... and securitized.

Widespread poverty, social and political inequalities, underdevelopment or poor health are primary causes of conflicts, migration crisis or terrorist insurgencies, and, thus, sources of “security threats”.

With the Treaty of Lisbon and the creation of the European External Action Service and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the EU connects security and development and aligns crisis management and conflict prevention tools with aid delivery and development actions – what comes to evidence in the EU’s “comprehensive approach to crisis”³.

Maritime security, in its global nature, entails multiple of these security threats.

The maritime space is stage for organized crime, human trafficking, drugs and arms trafficking, along with illegal fishing, waste disposal and heavy pollution.

Oceans are of great geopolitical relevance and the EU and its Member States depend “on open, protected and secure seas and oceans for economic development, free trade, transport, energy security, tourism and good status of the marine environment” bearing in mind the transnational nature of the maritime domain and that “no single actor can guarantee maritime security on their own”⁴.

³ The EU’s comprehensive approach to external conflict and crises, European Commission Joint Communication, 2013.

⁴ EU Maritime Security Strategy, Council of the EU, 2014.

Understanding that one cannot tackle the challenges of maritime security alone, and, at the same time, that problems at sea have their roots onshore, the EU's comprehensive approach revealed its effectiveness by acting on a holistic manner in the Horn of Africa.

In the wake of the collapse of the Somali government in 1991 and with the lack of an authority to survey its coastal area, the Horn of Africa grew to be a “no man's land” and a “no man's sea”, prompting illegal fishing, illegal shipping, as well as illegal waste disposal by foreign vessels. Local groups of Somali pirates responded with increasing attacks on these vessels, hijacking ships and kidnapping crews for ransom.

The Horn of Africa became a piracy “hotspot”, registering an unprecedented rise in maritime hijacking by 2008, with 111 incidents reported on the east coast of Somalia and the Gulf of Aden⁵. In the same year, the UN adopted Resolution 1816, giving a mandate for States to come together and repress crimes at sea.

Under this mandate, in December 2008, the European Union deployed its first military operation, Naval Force ATALANTA (EU NAVFOR), aimed at protecting aid vessels, deter piracy and armed robbery, and monitor fisheries while supporting other EU Missions.

Besides Atalanta, the EU has launched EUCAP Somalia and EUTM Somalia, the first with the objective of capacitation and law enforcement and the second as a training mission for the Somali National Armed Force. The EU has also increased cooperation with the United Nations and INTERPOL for judicial cooperation and coordinated criminal investigation or piracy crimes and, in 2012, launched EUCAP Nestor, in a regional approach to capacitate all states in the Horn of Africa with essential structures of maritime security.

⁵ 'Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships Report – January to December 2008', 2009 ICC-IMB.

From 49 actual and attempted attacks in 2012, Somalia registered only 1 in 2016, a decrease also seen in the Gulf of Aden (from 13 to 1 in the same period) and in the Red Sea (from 13 to none in the same period), where the origin of the attacks is attributed to Somali pirates⁶.

By adopting a comprehensive approach to the maritime threats in the Horn of Africa, and responding both at sea and offshore, the role of the EU in the region has been crucial to contribute to securing these waters. It was a first affirmation of the EU as a consistent maritime security provider and development partner. The financial and technical support to Somalia's resilience building has not only improved at sea but on land in a long-term commitment that has translated into the extension of the EU missions' mandates.

THE EU AS A MARITIME SECURITY ACTOR IN THE GULF OF GUINEA

Covering the coastline between Senegal and Angola, the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) is a subregion of sub-Saharan West Africa composed by 17 coastal countries: the islands of Cape Verde and Sao Tome and Principe, and six landlocked states. This includes all 15 members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and eight from the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), all integrated on the African Union (AU).

Here are also located five of the ten biggest African oil producers: Nigeria, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Republic of Congo⁷. The exploration of oil and natural gas sources offshore through the last decade attracted private investment, turning the GoG into a major global energy supplier. This is especially true for the EU, that imports 7.1% of its crude oil from Nigeria alone. Even by shifting from crude to natural gas consumption in its efforts to fight climate change, the EU still relies on

⁶ 'Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships Report – January to June 2016', 2017, ICC-IMB.

⁷ Share of world crude oil reserves, OPEC, 2018.

the security in the region, as Algeria represents 11.3 % of its total natural gas imports⁸.

With 23 coastal states and 90% of its external trade being carried by sea, EU commercial fleets also depend largely on the stability of the GoG waters, in particular since it became an alternative for route cargo ships due to the instability in the Middle East and North Africa.

The Gulf of Guinea has also become one of the world's hotspots for piracy, with increasing records of piracy and armed robbery incidents. According to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), in 2020, the region registered the highest ever number of crew kidnapped. Out of the 135 crewmembers kidnapped from vessels around the world, 95% of these kidnappings took place in the Gulf of Guinea: 130 crew members were abducted in 22 separate incidents⁹.

Organized crime, with a hub in the Niger Delta, has also grown into a regional phenomenon¹⁰ and drug trafficking and illegal migration place the Gulf of Guinea in the “cocaine triangle”, connecting Europe and South America, turning the region into a main point of supply for African drug flows into Europe.

Another threat posing major security risks in the GoG is the Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated fishing (IUU), estimated between one third and half of the total regional catch¹¹, causing a significant drop in fish stocks and putting at stake entire ecosystems with invasive fishing methods.

Overall, the socio-economic conditions in the region, with widespread poverty and high unemployment rates, enhance criminality and prompt the rise in piracy activities and organized crime.

⁸ European Commission, 2018.

⁹ International Piracy Report 2020, IMB.

¹⁰ “Maritime Security Cooperation in the Gulf of Guinea: prospects and challenges”, Kamal-Deen Ali, 2014.

¹¹ Africa Progress Report, 2014.

International concerns over these interconnected and transnational threats resulted in the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution 2018, in October 2011. The resolution encouraged Gulf of Guinea Heads of State to promote a concerted action between the regional players of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC), and appealed to the international community to support regional efforts. Resolution 2039, which followed in 2012, specifically aimed at “Peace Consolidation in West Africa”.

This joint regional strategy came into effect on June 2015 at the Summit of the Gulf of Guinea Heads of State and Government on Maritime Safety and Security. Heads of State from ECCAS, ECOWAS and GGC came together in Yaoundé, Cameroon, to commit to the creation of a joint maritime architecture.

The Yaoundé Declaration and the adoption of a Code of Conduct draws on the prevention and repression measures for piracy, armed robbery (ARAS) and illicit activities in the West and Central Africa and the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the parties to follow up with the Code settled the interregional cooperation.

It established the creation of an Inter-regional Coordination Centre (ICC) on Maritime Safety and Security for Central and West Africa headquartered in Yaoundé and that would serve as an umbrella for the two regional coordination centres of CRESMAO (West Africa) and CRESCMAC (Central Africa) creating what is known as “the Yaoundé Process”.

These documents also proposed the support of external actors, and as we have previously seen, GoG is a region of major interest for the EU, that reinforced cooperation with the region.

For the EU and international partners in the region, this is, though, a different scenario than the one of the Horn of Africa.

Somalia is still today seen as a “failed state”, but in the Gulf of Guinea, coastal states have both the authority and ownership over the maritime security architecture and the response to these increasing threats. Regional organisations are already acting together (ECCAS, ECOWAS and GGC) and the different nature not only of piracy attacks (that more than ransom, foresees oil theft)¹², but the social, economic and legal fabric of these different countries make both the problem and the solution different and complex in its nature.

There is no “size fits all”. By addressing the root cause of the threats posed to maritime security, the EU has taken a “comprehensive approach” to maritime security threats, but this time under the umbrella of the existing Yaoundé architecture, with no mission similar to the EUNAVFOR, and with a renewed commitment to integrated cooperation.

The EU strategy for the Gulf of Guinea was adopted in 2014, followed by a corresponding Action Plan (2015) for 2015-2020, with the goal of assessing the scale of the threat in the region; reinforcing regional and national organisations working to improve maritime security in the region; cooperating with international partners and working to strengthen regional economies.

At the core of this strategy is the overall goal to “contribute to the sustainable development of West and Central African coastal States’ economies by promoting the significance of a well-governed, safe and secure maritime sector”¹³.

This includes a series of programmes financed by the EU across sectors: from the monitoring of critical maritime routes (CRIMSON) to improving port security

¹² Differences and Similarities between Gulf of Guinea and Somalia Maritime Piracy, Devotha Edward Mandanda, GUO Ping, 2016.

¹³ EU Strategy for the Gulf of Guinea, Council of the EU, 2015:16.

(WeCaps) to reinforcing criminal justice cooperation (CRIMJUST) and fighting illegal trafficking (SEACOP) or tackle illegal fisheries and promote sustainable use of marine resources (PESCAO).

Since recently, and given the rise in the number of pirate attacks in the region and the eagerness for the EU to affirm itself as a maritime security provider, the EU strategy for the region also encompasses a pilot project: the Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP).

The CMP envisages greater synergy and engagement by EU Member States, on information sharing but also in operational terms, ensuring a continuous presence of the EU in Maritime Areas of Interest, to which the Gulf of Guinea is the first.

Member States preserve ownership over their naval and aerial assets while benefiting from an exchange of information and analysis that has advantages for all. Without duplicating its efforts, the EU is building up on the already strong presence of Member states at sea and promoting greater international cooperation with international and regional partners, such as the coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea.

FROM THE GULF OF GUINEA TO THE WIDER ATLANTIC

The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, classified a safe maritime environment a “public good”¹⁴ and the EU’s path towards the role of a maritime security actor in the world stage has grown until today in the basis of a multilateral order at sea.

From Somalia to the Gulf of Guinea, to the Coordinated Maritime Presence project, the EU makes a clear commitment towards increased engagement both at home and internationally, adjusting to new security threats as it pursues a “strategic autonomy”.

¹⁴ “Why the EU needs to be a global maritime security provider”, Josep Borrell 2021.

The EU “strategic autonomy” is the basis of the ongoing discussion towards the future of the EU in the world, especially in the field of Security and Defence: how the EU can increase its resilience; its crisis-response capabilities and deliver as a coordinated bloc to enhance its security provider role in the world. It is the key for the EU’s Strategic Compass, an initiative that started under the German presidency of the European Council and that is now part of the priorities of the Portuguese presidency.

A document to be adopted 2022, its ambition is to define “policy orientations and specific goals and objectives in areas such as crisis management, resilience, capability development and partnerships”¹⁵, that will bring a common defence agenda to all Member States.

The idea of strategic autonomy is, according to Josep Borrell “fully compatible with a stronger transatlantic bond and even a precondition for it”.¹⁶

The Council Conclusions of October 2017 on the EU Global Strategy already refers to the intention of the EU to enhance its strategic autonomy and, by doing so “strengthening its ability to act with partners”.¹⁷ This means that by increasing its capabilities, the EU reaffirms itself as a reliable partner, especially to NATO in what comes to Defence.

NATO and the EU share both objectives and challenges, as they share the overall purpose of securing the Euro-Atlantic space. Maritime security is one of the fields of cooperation between organisations and, even though questions arise on the future of this cooperation and the extent to which the scope of this strategic autonomy will affect EU-NATO relations, the partnership has revealed essential at sea: countering piracy off the coast of Somalia, tackling the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean or the rising crime in the Gulf of Guinea.

¹⁵ Council Conclusions on Security and Defence, 2020.

¹⁶ Why European Strategic Autonomy Matters, Josep Borrell 2020.

¹⁷ Council Conclusions on the EU Global Strategy, 2016.

This Transatlantic partnership is by default bound to the North Atlantic space, as are transatlantic relations by default associated with EU-US relations. The Atlantic, though, comprises four continents and currently its main security challenges go well beyond the Gulf of Guinea.

To start with, human security is often at stake with irregular migration flows of Central America, Venezuela and the Mediterranean¹⁸, giving place to humanitarian crises at sea, and shedding light on the desperate situation migrants face at home. Organized crime and migrant smugglers find a hub to prosper in each of these regions.

Energy security is also a major security challenge in the Atlantic. Not only Nigeria and Angola became huge oil exporters, but on the other side of the Atlantic, Brazil and US grow exports of their oil reserves while Venezuela became an important supplier of natural gas. The trade movement of energy supplies expanded from the North Atlantic to the Atlantic Basin.¹⁹ The Atlantic has increasingly become an important trade corridor for energy supplies across countries, in particular, EU countries that rely on a small number of suppliers to meet their energy needs. In this context, piracy and organized crime become a threat to energy security.

As well as energy, commercial trade has also increased in the Atlantic, not only due the EU-US trade relationship, but also due to the economic development of the two BRIC countries in the Atlantic, Brazil and South Africa.

Thirdly, the protection of natural resources and regulation of fisheries becomes more and more urgent. Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fisheries are a problem not only in West Africa but in particular in the Southwest Atlantic, off Patagonia, where fishing vessels act illegally and using destructive practices like bottom trawling²⁰ putting at risk the survival of entire ecosystems.

¹⁸ Connecting Shores: Migration and Human Security in the Atlantic Basin, Susana Ferreira, 2019.

¹⁹ Energy Security in the Framework of Human Security, Basterra, Pelegry and Sánchez, 2019.

²⁰ The Wild West Atlantic, Greenpeace 2019.

Even though there is a large scale of common interests at stake, the fact that Atlantic States have deep economic, political and social differences makes it hard to define a common ocean governance agenda and cooperate internationally within a transatlantic partnership in its broader sense.

The EU has proven to be a key maritime security actor in the Gulf of Guinea, and it did so by acting together with regional and international partners, recurring to a “comprehensive approach” that did not require a naval operation per se, but an holistic approach to off and onshore problems.

The potential of a wider Transatlantic Partnership relies strongly on the willingness to Atlantic States to tackle the disintegrated scenario in the Atlantic and align a maritime agenda – which also involves:

“adopting an expanded mind-set of “transatlanticism” that encompasses all four continents surrounding the Atlantic Basin is becoming increasingly useful to understand growing Atlantic interdependencies. Traditional forms of cooperation as well as broad partnerships will become increasingly critical to the future of wider transatlantic relations.”²¹

The EU has a close cooperation with Africa, at the top of the agenda of the current Commission that commits to supporting African states on a green transition, a digital transformation, and a path to peace, good governance and consolidated democracy. The EU has also delivered on the Post-Cotonou negotiations, reaching a cooperation agreement with 79 members of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS).

At the same time, and under the EU Global Strategy, the EU invests in the “wider Atlantic” partnerships, mainly advancing on cooperation with Latin America and the Caribbean. This also involves close cooperation on “blue economy”.

²¹ “Addressing the Atlantic’s Emerging Security challenges” Bruno Lété, 2015.

Furthermore, the new US Presidency under Joe Biden presents an opportunity for a renewed partnership on pressing issues like climate, COVID recovery, security and defence. To which multilateralism and international cooperation are key. To the EU, the first guiding principle for a new transatlantic agenda is “providing a solid base for stronger multilateral action and institutions. It will support like-minded partners to join”²².

Like-minded partners can be found on both sides and all continents of the Atlantic and a closer cooperation between them, benefiting from the fact that the EU can be a reliable maritime security provider, is crucial for the development of wider Transatlantic relations.

²² “A new EU-US Agenda for a global change”, European Commission Joint Communication, December 2020.