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**THE EUROPEAN UNION MARITIME SECURITY OPERATION 'EUNAVFOR
ASPIDES' IN THE NORTH-WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN, THE ENHANCED
ROLE OF THE HELLENIC REPUBLIC (GREECE), AND THE FUTURE OF
REGIONAL SECURITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC**

Georgios Koukakis

The European Union maritime security operation ‘EUNAVFOR ASPIDES’ in the North-Western Indian Ocean, the enhanced role of the Hellenic Republic (Greece), and the future of regional security in the Indo-Pacific

Georgios KOUKAKIS¹

Abstract

On *February 19th, 2024* the Council of the European Union (EU) launched ‘EUNAVFOR ASPIDES’, a maritime security operation aiming at the restoration and safeguarding of navigation in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, as it had recently been disrupted from numerous Houthi attacks on commercial vessels. This paper briefly presents the operating security framework of the EU, clarifies the concept of maritime security, analyses the EU Maritime Security Strategy, provides details on the ‘EUNAVFOR ASPIDES’ mission and the enhanced role of the Hellenic Republic, highlights the importance of the Indo-Pacific, and concludes by assessing the impact on regional security also addressing future considerations regarding regional and international security.

Key Words: European Union, Maritime Security, Terrorism, Red Sea, Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, Indo-Pacific, EUNAVFOR ASPIDES, Houthis

Introduction

Despite the fact that the *European Union* (EU) was initially founded in 1951 as an economic organization between six states, it gradually evolved to the contemporary political organization of 27 states,² being considered not only as regional but as one of the major international actors as well. Moreover, in 2003 it

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² European Commission. (No date). From 6 to 27 members. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/6-27-members_en (Accessed on February 22, 2024).

expressed its ambitions in becoming a security provider, initially at regional level and since 2016 at international level. To this end, the EU has emphasised ensuring maritime security, also defining the Indo-Pacific as a region of great geopolitical and geoeconomic interest. In this context, on *February 19th, 2024* the EU launched a maritime security operation entitled ‘EUNAVFOR ASPIDES’ (**Picture 1**), in order to restore and safeguard the freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, which had been disrupted from numerous Houthi attacks on commercial vessels.



Picture 1: The logo of the maritime security operation EUNAVFOR ASPIDES

Source: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eunavfor-aspides_en

The Hellenic Republic (Greece), being one of the *oldest member states* of the EU and a *historic maritime state*, recognising the importance of maritime security in addition to the fact that the contemporary security environment is an environment of polycrises and permacrises,³ has been implementing a multifaceted foreign policy based on the *2023-2026 Strategic Plan* of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,⁴ which aims inter alia at the ‘*enhancement of its international standing within the EU and around the world*’ (2nd Strategic Pillar) and the ‘*promotion of its foreign policy positions and international image*’ (4th Strategic Pillar). That is why

³ Koukakis, Georgios. (December 31, 2023). *Permacrises and Polycrises: Outlining the Contemporary Security Environment through References to Strategic Documents of Regional and International Actors*. HAPSc Policy Briefs Series, 4 (2). pp. 55-64. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.36661>. (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

⁴ Koukakis, Georgios. (December 31, 2023). *Το Στρατηγικό Σχέδιο του Ελληνικού Υπουργείου Εξωτερικών για την περίοδο 2023-2026 (The Strategic Plan of the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the period 2023-2026)*. Hellenic Institute for Strategic Studies. Book of Geopolitical Analysis and Studies No. 6. pp. 10-33. <https://elisme.gr/tetradio-no-6-dimereis-diokratikes-symfonies-tis-ellados/> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

Greece not only supported the EU's decision to launch the aforementioned maritime security operation, but also pursued and managed an enhanced role in its execution.

European Union as a security provider

In 2003 the EU published its first security strategy entitled '*European Security Strategy: A secure Europe in a better world*',⁵ stating that promoting global security and building a better world was Europe's responsibility too, as the EU had become a credible and effective actor. The key security threats identified in the 2003 official document included terrorism, proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), regional conflicts, state failure and organised crime; while the three *strategic objectives* comprised 'Addressing the threats', 'Building security in our neighbourhood' and 'An international order based on effective multilateralism'.

In 2007 the EU member states signed the 'Treaty of Lisbon',⁶ setting the foundations for the 'Common Foreign and Security Policy' (CFSP) which aims at the preservation of peace and the strengthening of international security.⁷ In 2011 the EU established the 'European External Action Service' (EEAS) –EU's diplomatic service– in order to implement the CFSP through the 'Common Security and Defence Policy' (CSDP),⁸ and in 2016 the EU published its second security strategy entitled '*Shared Vision, Common Action. A Stronger Europe: A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*',⁹ which set security as the EU's first priority emphasizing on countering external threats, counter-terrorism, cyber security, energy security and strategic communications. Moreover, the EU expressed for the first time its ambition to become a global security provider.

Since then, the EU has established several CSDP missions, while in 2022 it published its third security strategy entitled '*A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values*

⁵ Council of the European Union. (April 6, 2022). *European Security Strategy - A secure Europe in a better world*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/documents-publications/publications/european-security-strategy-secure-europe-better-world/> (Accessed on February 22, 2024).

⁶ European Parliament. (No date). *Treaty of Lisbon*. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/treaty-of-lisbon> (Accessed on February 22, 2024).

⁷ European Commission. (No date). *Common foreign and security policy*. https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/what-we-do/common-foreign-and-security-policy_en (Accessed on February 22, 2024).

⁸ European Union External Action. (August 12, 2021). *The Common Security and Defence Policy 12.08.2021 Strategic Communications*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/common-security-and-defence-policy_en (Accessed on February 22, 2024).

⁹ Publications Office of the European Union. (2016). *Shared vision, common action : a stronger Europe : a global strategy for the European Union's foreign and security policy*. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2871/9875> (Accessed on February 22, 2024).

and interests and contributes to international peace and security',¹⁰ which identified a variety of security threats such as terrorism and violent extremism, proliferation of WMD, climate change, environmental degradation, natural disasters, global health crises, and the use of hybrid strategies, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, direct interference, emerging and disruptive technologies. Moreover, it defined four work strands (**Picture 2**): clear goals, a variety of means and a specific timeline to achieve them, in order to guide and enhance the member states' actions regarding security and defence, making the EU a stronger and more capable security provider.



Picture 2: The four work strands of the 2022 Strategic Compass
 Source: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-eu-0_en

¹⁰ Council of the European Union. (March 21, 2022). *A Strategic Compass for a stronger EU security and defence in the next decade*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/21/a-strategic-compass-for-a-stronger-eu-security-and-defence-in-the-next-decade/> (Accessed on February 22, 2024).

The concept of Maritime Security

The first attempt to regulate maritime security was made in 1914 –two years after the sinking of the Titanic– by the signing of the Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS),¹¹ an international treaty addressing safety and security issues regarding merchant ships. The SOLAS Convention was updated in 1929 (2nd version), 1948 (3rd version), 1960 (4th version) and 1974 (5th version),¹² while in 1948 the adoption of the Convention on the International Maritime Organization¹³ gave birth to the International Maritime Organization (IMO),¹⁴ whose purpose was:

[...] to provide machinery for cooperation among Governments in the field of governmental regulation and practices relating to technical matters of all kinds affecting shipping engaged in international trade; to encourage and facilitate the general adoption of the highest practicable standards in matters concerning maritime safety, efficiency of navigation and prevention and control of marine pollution from ships.

In 1988, due to several past incidents regarding the kidnapping of crew members and the hi-jacking and/or damaging with explosives of ships, the most important of which was the hi-jacking of the Italian cruise Achille Lauro in Alexandria (Egypt) in 1985,¹⁵ the international community adopted the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation (SUA Convention) addressing for the first time issues regarding unlawful acts committed against ships.¹⁶ Moreover, in 2004 –as a response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 on US soil– the international community adopted the International

¹¹ The Library of the University of California. (January 20, 1914). *Text of the Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea*. <https://archive.org/details/textofconvention00inte/page/n6/mode/1up?view=theater> (Accessed on February 23, 2024).

¹² International Maritime Organization. (No date). *Maritime Security*. <https://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/Security/Pages/GuideMaritimeSecurityDefault.aspx> (Accessed on February 23, 2024).

¹³ International Maritime Organization. (No date). *Convention on the International Maritime Organization*. <https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/Convention-on-the-International-Maritime-Organization.aspx> (Accessed on February 23, 2024).

¹⁴ The initial name of IMO was *Inter-Governmental Maritime Consultative Organization* (IMCO) and it was changed in 1982.

¹⁵ Pallardy, Richard. (September 30, 2023). *Achille Lauro hijacking*. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Achille-Lauro-hijackin> (Accessed on February 23, 2024).

¹⁶ International Maritime Organization. (No date). *Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Maritime Navigation, Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Fixed Platforms Located on the Continental Shelf*. <https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/SUA-Treaties.aspx> (Accessed on February 23, 2024).

Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code,¹⁷ including it as a separate chapter (namely Chapter XI-2 on Special measures to enhance maritime security) in the SOLAS Convention which was amended in order to address the emerging threat of terrorism.¹⁸

As understood from the aforementioned presented information, the evolving maritime security concept is a broad term related to the maritime sector that deals with the protection of vessels against both internal and external threats and/or security risks regardless of the actors' intention (malicious or not). According to the 2022 National Strategy for Maritime Security of the United Kingdom,¹⁹ maritime security is defined "[...] in terms of upholding laws, regulations, and norms to deliver a free, fair, and open maritime domain", while the most important *challenges* that affect maritime security are pandemics, climate change, degradation of the marine environment and state-based threats, also identifying as the key maritime security risks:

- ✓ Terrorism (including attacks against cargo or passenger ships),
- ✓ Disruption to vital maritime trade routes (resulting from war, criminality, piracy, or changes in international norms),
- ✓ Attacks on maritime infrastructure or shipping (including cyber-attacks),
- ✓ Transportation of illegal items by sea (including WMD, controlled drugs, and arms),and
- ✓ People smuggling and human trafficking.

European Union's Maritime Security Strategy

As far as the EU is concerned, ensuring maritime security is of vital importance for the advancement of its economic, environmental and security interests not only in the maritime domain but also in land, air, cyberspace and outer space, as 90% of its trade exports are seaborne,²⁰ approximately 67% of the world's oil and gas supply is extracted at or transported by sea and almost all international data transfers and

¹⁷ International Maritime Organization. (No date). *SOLAS XI-2 and the ISPS Code*. <https://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/Security/Pages/SOLAS-XI-2%20ISPS%20Code.aspx> (Accessed on February 23, 2024).

¹⁸ International Maritime Organization. (No date). *International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), 1974*. [https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Safety-of-Life-at-Sea-\(SOLAS\)-1974.aspx](https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Safety-of-Life-at-Sea-(SOLAS)-1974.aspx) (Accessed on February 23, 2024).

¹⁹ Government of the United Kingdom. (August 15, 2022). *National maritime security strategy*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-maritime-security-strategy> (Accessed on February 23, 2024).

²⁰ Council of the European Council. (February 20, 2024). *Maritime security*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/maritime-security/#:~:text=The%20revised%20strategy%20on%20maritime%20security%20builds%20on%20the%20previous,sa%20guard%20interests%20at%20sea> (Accessed on February 23, 2024).

communications are done through a vast network of submarine cables.²¹ According to the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) which was established in 2002, “maritime security refers generally to measures taken for protection against unlawful acts such as piracy, armed robbery, terrorism and maritime violence”,²² while the Council of the European Union²³ defines that the areas covered by the concept of maritime security include:

- ✓ Security and defence (including cybersecurity),
- ✓ Critical infrastructure,
- ✓ Environmental protection,
- ✓ Fishing,
- ✓ Trade and shipping,
- ✓ Energy,
- ✓ Transport, and
- ✓ Tourism.

In an effort to highlight the importance of maritime security, provide guidance and coordinate its member states’ actions related to addressing maritime security challenges, the EU published in 2014 its first EU Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS)²⁴ which defined four guiding principles, eleven strategic objectives, eight maritime security interests, and focused on five areas of implementation, namely (1) external action, (2) maritime awareness, surveillance and information sharing, (3) capability development, (4) risk management, protection of critical maritime infrastructure and crisis response, and (5) maritime security research and innovation, education and training. As far as maritime security risks and threats are concerned, it identified the following nine:

- ✓ Threats or use of force against Member States’ rights and jurisdiction over their maritime zones,
- ✓ Threats to the security of European citizens and to economic interests at sea following acts of external aggression,
- ✓ Cross-border and organized crime,
- ✓ Terrorism and other intentional unlawful acts at sea and in ports,

²¹ Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries. (March 2023). *EU Maritime Security Strategy [Factsheet]*. https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/document/download/1d19fdb0-0325-4836-ae8c-7ede53c968ff_en?filename=2023-eu-maritime-security-strategy-factsheet_en_0.pdf (Accessed on February 23, 2024).

²² European Maritime Safety Agency. (No date). *Maritime Security*. <https://www.emsa.europa.eu/we-do/safety/maritime-security.html> (Accessed on February 23, 2024).


²³ See, n. 18.

²⁴ Council of the European Union. (June 24, 2014). *European Union Maritime Security Strategy*. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST%2011205%202014%20INIT/EN/pdf> (Accessed on February 23, 2024).


- ✓ The proliferation of WMD,
- ✓ Threats to freedom of navigation,
- ✓ Environmental risks,
- ✓ Potential security impact of natural or man-made disasters, extreme events and climate change on the maritime transport system and in particular on maritime infrastructure, and
- ✓ Illegal and unregulated archaeological research and pillage of archaeological objects.

2
EU MARITIME SECURITY STRATEGY


6 strategic objectives

- 


1) Step up activities at sea:

 - organising an annual naval exercise at EU level
 - reinforcing existing EU naval operations
 - developing further coastguard in sea basins around the EU
 - expanding the Coordinated Maritime Presences concept to new maritime areas of interest
- 

2) Cooperate with partners by:

 - deepening EU-NATO cooperation
 - enhancing partnerships with likeminded countries, regional and international organisations
 - deploying EU liaison officers to maritime information centres in non-EU countries
 - promoting dialogue and best practices through the coast guard function forums
- 

3) Enhance maritime domain situational awareness by:

 - strengthening the Common Information Sharing Environment (CISE) and MARSUR
 - reinforcing coastal and off-shore patrol vessel surveillance
- 

4) Manage risks and threats by:


 - conducting regular live maritime exercises involving civil and military entities
 - monitoring and protecting critical maritime infrastructure and ships from physical and cyber threats
 - tackling unexploded ordnance and mines at sea
 - developing further awareness and preparedness to tackle threats linked to climate change and environmental degradation
- 

5) Boost capabilities by:

 - developing common requirements and concepts for defence technologies in the maritime domain
 - stepping up work on projects such as the European Patrol Corvette or improving anti-submarine capabilities
- 

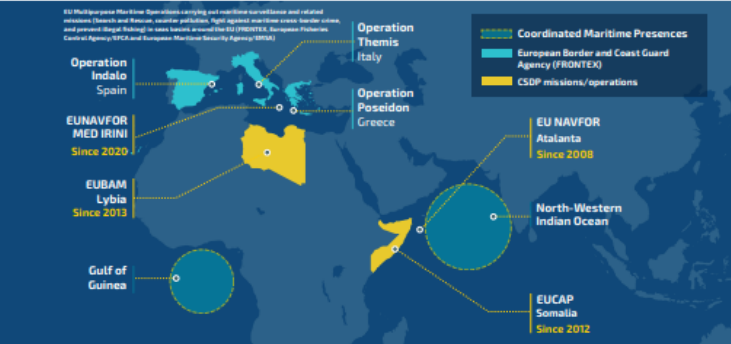
6) Educate and train by:


 - boosting hybrid and cyber security qualifications notably on the civilian side
 - conducting training and joint exercises open to non-EU partners



EU MARITIME SECURITY AROUND THE WORLD

EU Multipurpose Maritime Operations carrying out maritime surveillance and related missions (Search and Rescue, disaster relief, fight against maritime cross-border crime, and against illegal fishing) in sea basins around the EU (2019-2024). European Fisheries Control Agency (EFCA) and European Maritime Security Agency (EMSA).




STRATEGIC COMPASS

Picture 3: The six strategic objectives of the 2023 EU Maritime Security Strategy

Source: https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/publications/factsheet-eu-maritime-security-strategy_en

Finally, in 2023 the need for addressing new and evolving maritime security threats led the EU to publish its second EUMSS,²⁵ which defined six strategic objectives (**Picture 3**), ten maritime security interests, eleven tools and instruments to support the EU actions, proposed the establishment of an annual EU naval exercise, contained a variety of actions to tackle climate change and degradation of the marine environment, called for the development of a coherent framework to tackle unexploded ordnance (UXO), conventional and chemical weapons at sea, and addressed hybrid threats through a wide range of actions.²⁶

The roadmap to EUNAVFOR ASPIDES and its organisational details

The security situation in the North- Western Indian Ocean began to deteriorate after the outbreak of war in Gaza between Hamas and Israel in October 2023, when the Houthis –a Shia Muslim movement also known as Ansar Allah (supporters of God) operating in Yemen²⁷– attacked several vessels in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman (**Picture 4**) expressing their support for the Palestinians.²⁸ Since then, there have been numerous similar incidents,²⁹ leading the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on January 10th, 2024 to the adoption of Resolution 2722 (2024)³⁰ which inter alia stated that the UNSC:

[...] Demands that the Houthis immediately cease all such attacks, which impede global commerce and undermine navigational rights and freedoms as well as regional peace and security [...] Commends the efforts by Member States within the framework of the International Maritime Organization, to enhance the safety and secure transit of merchant and commercial vessels of all States through the Red Sea [...]

²⁵ European Commission. (March 03, 2023). *JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL on the update of the EU Maritime Security Strategy and its Action Plan*. EUR-Lex. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52023JC0008> (Accessed on February 23, 2024).

²⁶ European Commission. (March 10, 2023). *Questions and Answers on the EU Maritime Security Strategy*. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_23_1482 (Accessed on February 23, 2024).

²⁷ Riedel, Bruce. (December 18, 2017). *Who are the Houthis, and why are we at war with them?*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/who-are-the-houthis-and-why-are-we-at-war-with-them/> (Accessed on February 24, 2024).

²⁸ Council of the European Union. (February 19, 2024). *Security and freedom of navigation in the Red Sea: Council launches EUNAVFOR ASPIDES* [Press Release]. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/02/19/security-and-freedom-of-navigation-in-the-red-sea-council-launches-new-eu-defensive-operation/?utm_source=dsm-auto&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Security%20and%20freedom%20of%20navigation%20in%20the%20Red%20Sea%3A%20Council%20launches%20EUNAVFOR%20ASPIDES (Accessed on February 24, 2024).

²⁹ The Iran Primer. (February 22, 2024). *Timeline: Houthi Attacks and U.S. Responses*. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2024/feb/01/timeline-houthis-attacks-and-us-responses> (Accessed on February 24, 2024).

³⁰ United Nations Security Council. (January 10, 2024). *Resolution 2722 (2024)*. <https://wwwcdn.imo.org/localresources/en/MediaCentre/HotTopics/Documents/Red%20Sea/SCR%202722%282024%29%20on%20the%20Red%20Sea%20adopted%20%28E%29%201.pdf> (Accessed on February 24, 2024).



Picture 4: The region where the Houthis' attacks have been taking place since October 2023

Source: <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/Arabia-Map.htm>

In addition to the aforementioned UNSC Resolution, the Department of State of the United States designated on January 17th, 2024 Houthis as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist Group in order to promote accountability for their activities, also stating that this decision will be reevaluated in case Houthis cease their attacks.³¹ As far as the EU is concerned, the Council of the EU approved a Crisis Management Concept on January 29th, 2024 in order to examine the possibility of deploying a maritime security operation in the aforementioned endangered area, establishing it on February 8th, 2024.³² According to the respective Decision (CFSP) 2024/583 of the Council of the EU,³³ the name of the operation is EUNAVFOR ASPIDES –a Greek word that means SHIELDS– and its organisational details are as follows:

³¹ Blinken, Antony. (January 17, 2024). *Terrorist Designation of the Houthis* [Press Release]. U.S. Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/terrorist-designation-of-the-houthis/> (Accessed on February 24, 2024).

³² See, n. 26.

³³ Official Journal of the European Union. (February 12, 2024). *COUNCIL DECISION (CFSP) 2024/583 of 8 February 2024 on a European Union maritime security operation to safeguard freedom of navigation in relation to the Red Sea crisis (EUNAVFOR ASPIDES)*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2024/583/oj> (Accessed on February 24, 2024).

✓ Its mission is to safeguard freedom of navigation in relation to the Red Sea crisis, in order to contribute to maritime security along the main sea lines of communication in the area, in cooperation with other major actors.

✓ The Area of Operation (AOO) shall comprise the Baab al-Mandab Strait and the Strait of Hormuz, as well as international waters in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf.

✓ Its strategic objective is to ensure a Union naval presence in the AOO with the aim of ensuring freedom of navigation for vessels, by accompanying vessels, ensuring maritime situational awareness, and protecting vessels against multi-domain attacks at sea.

✓ Its appointed Operation Commander is Commodore Vasileios GRYPARIS (Greece) and its designated Operation Headquarters (OHQ) are located in Larissa (Greece), its political control and strategic direction is exercised by the Political and Security Committee (PSC) under the responsibility of the Council of the EU and of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR), while its proper execution (military direction) will be monitored by the EU Military Committee (EUMC).

✓ It coordinates closely with EUNAVFOR ATALANTA and cooperates with Operation Prosperity Guardian of the USA, the Combined Maritime Forces, the Maritime Security Centre-Horn of Africa (MSCHOA) and EUTM Somalia, and is supported in terms of intelligence by the European Union Satellite Centre (SATCEN) and the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre.

✓ Its estimated duration is one year, while a strategic review is provided in good time before the expiry of the 2024/583 Decision.

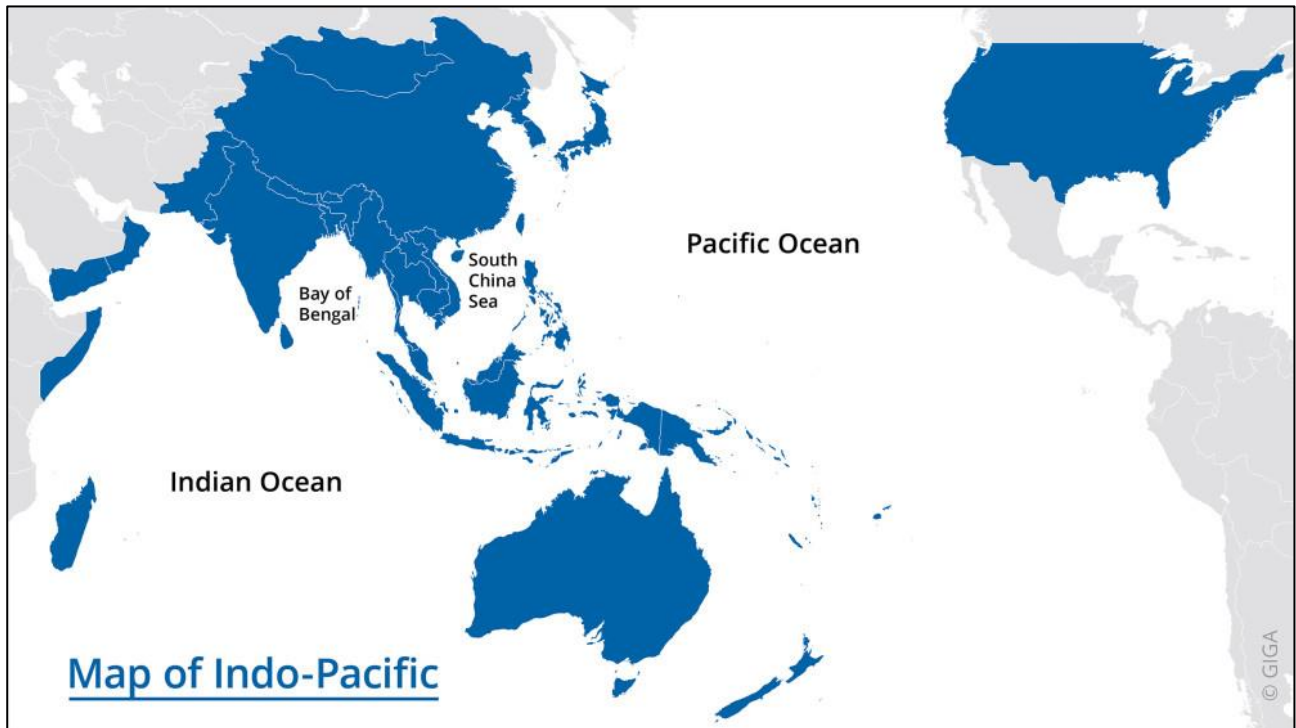
It must also be stressed that the enhanced Greek participation in EUNAVFOR ASPIDES –in addition to the Greek Operation Commander and the OHQ, Greece is also providing the Frigate ‘HYDRA’ and its ‘S-70 Aegean Hawk’ Helicopter³⁴– was pursued by the Hellenic Republic (Greece), as the Greek Minister of National Defence (Nikos Dendias) had proposed the establishment of the OHQ in Greece, during a meeting with his counterparts in Brussels.³⁵ The reason behind this initiative –as stated by the Greek Minister of National Defence³⁶– is that:

³⁴ According to Greek media the rest assets include the Italian destroyer ‘CAIO DULIO’, the German frigate “HESSEN”, and the French frigate ‘LANGUEDOC’. For further information see: Protagon. (February 20, 2024). *Επιχείρηση «Aspides»: Φεύγουν τα πολεμικά για την Ερυθρά Θάλασσα* (Operation Aspides: warships depart for the Red Sea). <https://www.protagon.gr/epikairota/epixeirisi-aspides-fevgoun-ta-polemika-gia-tin-erythra-thalassa-44342885585> (Accessed on February 24, 2024).

³⁵ Nedos, Vassilis. (February 01, 2024). *EU Red Sea operation HQ to be in Larissa*. Ekathimerini. <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1230550/eu-red-sea-operation-hq-to-be-in-larissa/> (Accessed on February 24, 2024).

³⁶ Ministry of National Defence of the Hellenic Republic. (February 12, 2024). *Minister of National Defence Nikos Dendias Meets with Minister of State for the Armed Forces of the United Kingdom James Heapey in*

[...] Greece, the country with the biggest merchant fleet, cannot stand idly by and allow acts of terrorism and will protect free shipping and ensure the safety of seamen, in cooperation with its allies and partners.



Picture 5: The imaginative geopolitical space of the Indo-Pacific

Source: <https://www.sciencespo.fr/cei/en/content/observatoire-de-l-indo-pacifique.html>

The importance of the Indo-Pacific for the EU and Greece

Although the Indo-Pacific is an imagined geopolitical space that combines the geographical regions of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean (**Picture 5**),³⁷ it has been under the spotlight during the last decade due to its great geostrategic importance which stems from several factors (**Picture 6**) such as the vital trade routes that pass mainly through the South China Sea leading to the Mediterranean Sea through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal (**Picture 4**), the increasing power –in terms of population, military and economic growth– of several major actors (mainly China and India), the rivalry between China and the United States regarding the Taiwan issue, and the aggressive foreign policy of North Korea.

London. <https://www.mod.mil.gr/en/minister-of-national-defence-nikos-dendias-meets-with-minister-of/> (Accessed on February 24, 2024).

³⁷ Udayan, Das. (July 13, 2019). *What Is the Indo-Pacific? Like every imaginative space, the Indo-Pacific is a construct of contested interpretation.* The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/what-is-the-indo-pacific/> (Accessed on February 23, 2024).



Picture 6: The importance of Indo-Pacific in numbers

Source: <https://lki.lk/blog/is-sri-lanka-engaging-with-the-indo-pacific/>

Despite the large geographical distance between Europe and South Asia, the EU has recently expressed its interest in the latter through several official documents. The 2022 Strategic Compass stresses that the ongoing conflicts and continuing instability in the Middle East and the Gulf Region put the EU's security and economic interest at risk, while major concerns are rising due to the situation in Afghanistan regarding terrorism, drug smuggling and irregular migration in addition to the aggressive actions and the development of nuclear and ballistic programmes of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).³⁸

As far as the Indo-Pacific is concerned, the EU has been implementing since 2021 a separate 'EU Indo-Pacific Strategy',³⁹ aiming inter alia at the promotion of an open and rules-based regional security architecture that includes secure sea lines of communication, capacity-building and enhanced naval presence through the conduction of joint naval exercises and port calls with regional actors.⁴⁰ The EU has also developed the 'Critical Maritime Routes in the Indo-Pacific' (CRIMARIO) project, in an effort to support like-minded partners

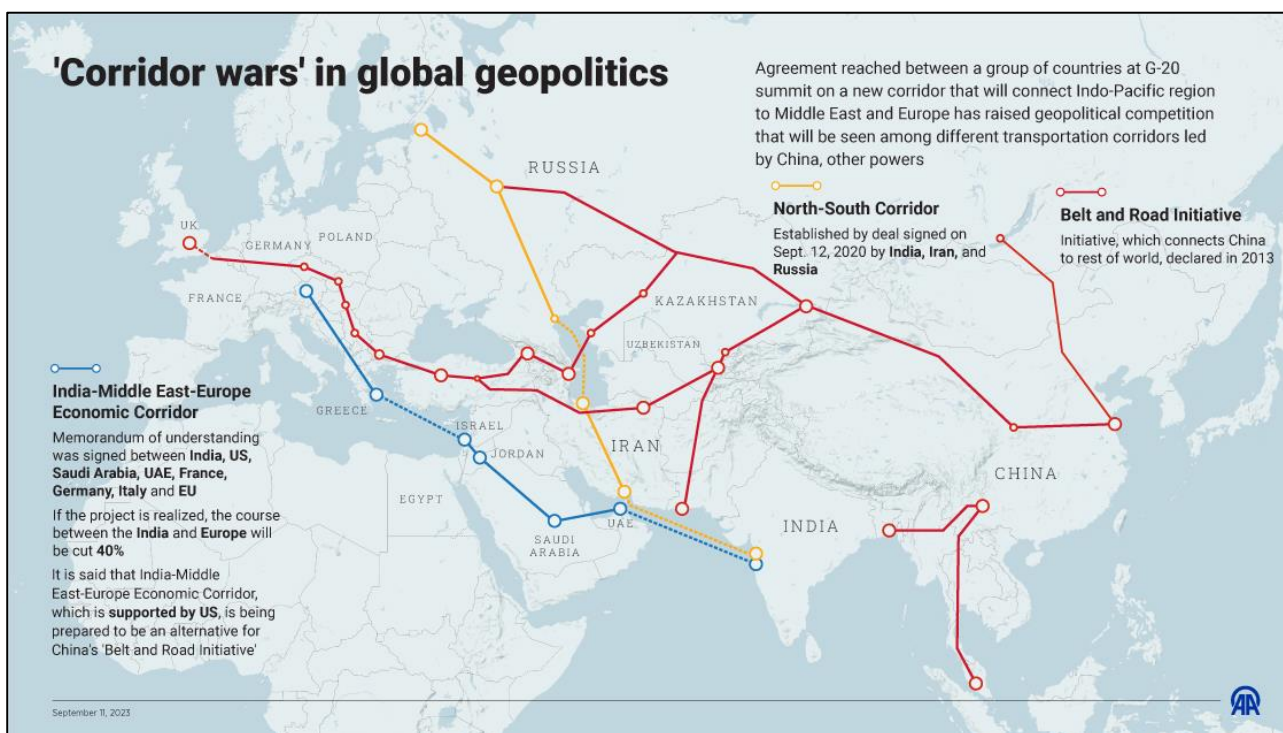
³⁸ See, n. 8, p. 20.

³⁹ The policy fields of cooperation between the EU and the Indo-Pacific countries include: (1) Sustainable and inclusive prosperity, (2) Green transition, (3) Ocean governance, (4) Digital governance and partnerships, (5) Connectivity, (6) Security and Defence, and (7) Human Security. For further information see: European Union External Action. (January 30, 2024). *EU-Indo Pacific Strategy*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-indo-pacific-strategy_en#:~:text=The%20European%20Union%20and%20Indo,responsible%20cooperation%20in%20international%20relations. (Accessed on February 24, 2024).

⁴⁰ See, n. 8, p. 57.

in the Western Indian Ocean in governing their maritime spaces.⁴¹ Moreover, the aforementioned 2022 Strategic Compass identifies the Indo-Pacific as a region of crucial geopolitical and economic interest for the EU, also characterising it as the new centre of global competition,⁴² stating that:

We will therefore protect our interests in the region, also by ensuring that international law prevails in the maritime and other domains. China is the EU's second biggest trading partner and a necessary one to address global challenges. But there is also a growing reaction to its increasingly assertive regional behaviour.



Picture 7: The main trade and economic corridors that connect South Asia to Europe

Source: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/corridor-wars-in-global-geopolitics/2989608#>

It must also be noted that the Indo-Pacific became more important to the EU, after the announcement of the future creation of the 'Indian-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor' (IMEC) (**Picture 7**) at the 'Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment' (PGII) event that took place during the 18th G-20 Summit in Delhi

⁴¹ European External Action Service. (February 08, 2024). *CRIMARIO II - Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific Project*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/primario-ii-critical-maritime-routes-indo-pacific-project_en#:~:text=CRIMARIO%20is%20an%20EU%2Dfunded,focus%20on%20Maritime%20Domain%20Awareness%20 (Accessed on February 23, 2024).

⁴² See, n. 8, p. 20.

(India) on September 9th, 2023.⁴³ IMEC is a major infrastructure project comprising railroads, shipping routes, underwater electricity and telecommunications cables, and natural gas pipelines connecting India and Greece through the Arabian Peninsula, moving on to Central Europe. As understood, IMEC will boost not only the economies of the countries involved, but also contribute to the development of both Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Some analysts though, express the opinion that it might provoke China's reaction, as IMEC is considered by some as a US counter-measure to the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI).⁴⁴

The 2023 EUMSS also underlines the need for stepping up action in terms of presence, partnership and cooperative initiatives in the Indo-Pacific in order to maintain stability and security along the Malacca and Singapore Straits, the Horn of Africa, the Indian Ocean and other important shipping routes, as not only European but global security and prosperity as well is greatly affected by the on-going display of force and tension in the Indo-Pacific region, especially in the South and East China Sea and the Taiwan Straits.⁴⁵

As far as the Hellenic Republic's national interests in the Indo-Pacific are concerned, they are mainly expressed through its bilateral relations with key actors such as China, India, Japan and Australia. It must be noted that Greece is a member of the BRI and the 'Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries' (CEEC),⁴⁶ has established a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China, while the Greek Prime Minister visited China in November 2023 responding to the Chinese President's visit in Greece in November 2019.⁴⁷ The Greek-Indian political relations are also excellent,⁴⁸ a fact that is confirmed by the visit of the Prime Minister of India to Greece in August 2023 and the respective visit of the Prime Minister of Greece to India in February 2024 (**Picture 8**), during which the two leaders characterised the multifaceted⁴⁹ partnership between their countries as strategic.⁵⁰

⁴³ The White House. (September 9, 2023). *FACT SHEET: World Leaders Launch a Landmark India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/09/fact-sheet-world-leaders-launch-a-landmark-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor/> (Accessed on February 23, 2024).

⁴⁴ Koukakis, Georgios. (November 2023). *The 9th Trilateral Summit of Cyprus, Greece and Israel: Türkiye's struggle for power in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Competition between India and China in the Middle East, and the New Era of "Economic Peace"*. "HERMES" Institute of International Affairs, Security & Geoeconomy. Occasional Paper 1/2023. pp. 21-22. <https://www.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.18271.84645> (Accessed on February 23, 2024).

⁴⁵ See, n.23, p. 8.

⁴⁶ The aim of CEEC is to promote cooperation in the fields of infrastructure, connectivity and economy.

⁴⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Hellenic Republic. (No date). *Greece's Bilateral Relations-China*. <https://www.mfa.gr/en/blog/greece-bilateral-relations/china/> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

⁴⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Hellenic Republic. (No date). *Greece's Bilateral Relations-India*. <https://www.mfa.gr/en/blog/greece-bilateral-relations/india/> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

⁴⁹ The two countries cooperate in the fields of security and defence, economy and trade, migration and mobility, culture, global issues, etc.

⁵⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of India. (August 25, 2023). *India-Greece Joint Statement*. https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37043/IndiaGreece_Joint_Statement (Accessed on February 25, 2024) & Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic. (February 22, 2024). *India-Greece Joint Statement*. <https://www.primeminister.gr/en/2024/02/22/33735> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).



Picture 8: State Visit of Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic to India (21-22 February 2024)

Source: <https://www.indiaingreece.gov.in/>

Moreover, the Prime Minister of Greece visited Japan in January 2023 where he met his Japanese counterpart and signed a Joint Declaration establishing a strategic cooperation between the two parts,⁵¹ an action that upgraded their long-standing good bilateral relations especially in the field of maritime technology and industry where they had already signed a Memorandum of Cooperation in 2019.⁵² Finally, Greece's bilateral relations with Australia –the fourth major actor of the Indo-Pacific– are characterised as cordial, mainly because of the strong historical, cultural and religious ties between the two countries and the large number of Greeks living in Australia.⁵³ In this context, the Governor General of Australia visited Greece in May 2023

⁵¹ Greece in Japan. (February 02, 2023). *Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis' statement after his meeting with the Prime Minister of Japan Fumio Kishida (Tokyo, 30.1.2023)*. <https://www.mfa.gr/missionsabroad/en/japan-en/news/prime-minister-kyriakos-mitsotakis-statement-after-his-meeting-with-the-prime-minister-of-japan-fumio-kishida.html> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

⁵² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Hellenic Republic. (No date). *Greece's Bilateral Relations-Japan*. <https://www.mfa.gr/en/blog/greece-bilateral-relations/japan/> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

⁵³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Hellenic Republic. (No date). *Greece's Bilateral Relations-Australia*. <https://www.mfa.gr/en/blog/greece-bilateral-relations/australia/> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

upon invitation of the President of the Hellenic Republic,⁵⁴ while the latter has scheduled a visit to Australia in November 2024.⁵⁵

Future considerations

As demonstrated through the information presented in this paper, maritime security is closely related to several sectors –such as security and defence, critical infrastructure, environmental protection, fishing, trade and shipping, energy, transport, and tourism– that contribute to regional and international economic development. It is therefore of great importance not only for maritime states but for every state as well. It must also be underlined that terrorism, proliferation of WMD and organised crime –which are the key threats for maritime security– are some of the major threats against (national) security that are defined by several actors in their respective strategic documents, such as NATO’s Strategic Concept,⁵⁶ the National Security Strategy (NSS) of the USA,⁵⁷ Japan⁵⁸ and Germany,⁵⁹ the National Strategic Review (NSR) of France,⁶⁰ the

⁵⁴ Greek City Times. (May 03, 2023). *Greek President Meets Visiting Governor General of Australia*. <https://greekcitytimes.com/2023/05/03/greek-president-meets-visiting-governor-general-of-australia-photos/> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

⁵⁵ Neos Kosmos. (February 09, 2024). *Greek President, Katerina Sakellariopoulou, to visit Australia in November*. <https://neoskosmos.com/en/2024/02/09/news/australia/greek-president-katerina-sakellariopoulou-to-visit-australia-in-november/> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

⁵⁶ Koukakis, Georgios. (February, 2023). *The Evolution of NATO’s Strategic Concept*. NRDC-GR HERALD, Issue 19 (July-December 2022), pp. 34-40. <https://nrdc.gr/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NRDC-GR-Herald-Magazine-Issue-19-LQ.pdf> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

⁵⁷ Koukakis, Georgios. (2022). *The National Security Strategy of the USA: Background, Recent Developments and Future Considerations Regarding the International Security Environment*. HAPSc Policy Briefs Series, 3(2), 122–132. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.33792> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

⁵⁸ Koukakis, Georgios. (December 23, 2022). *Η νέα Στρατηγική Εθνικής Ασφάλειας της Ιαπωνίας: Ο ρόλος που καλείται να διαδραματίσει στον Ινδο-Ειρηνικό, η στήριξη των ΗΠΑ και η εκτιμώμενη αντίδραση της Κίνας (Japan’s new National Security Strategy: The role it is called upon to play in the Indo-Pacific, US support and China’s estimated reaction)*. Foreign Affairs The Hellenic Edition. <https://www.foreignaffairs.gr/articles/73958/georgios-koykakis/i-nea-stratigiki-ethnikis-asfaleias-tis-iaponias> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

⁵⁹ Koukakis, Georgios. (June 18, 2023). *Η πρώτη «ιστορική» Στρατηγική Εθνικής Ασφάλειας της Γερμανίας: Πώς βλέπει το Βερολίνο τον εαυτό του στον 21ο αιώνα και τι σημαίνει αυτό για τον κόσμο και την Ελλάδα (Germany’s first “historic” National Security Strategy: How Berlin sees itself in the 21st century and what it means for the world and Greece)*. Foreign Affairs The Hellenic Edition. <https://www.foreignaffairs.gr/articles/74201/georgios-koykakis/i-proti-%C2%ABistoriki%C2%BB-stratigiki-ethnikis-asfaleias-tis-germanias> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

⁶⁰ Koukakis, Georgios. (December 12, 2022). *Η νέα Εθνική Στρατηγική Αναθεώρηση της Γαλλίας: Οι προκλήσεις ασφάλειας, οι στρατηγικοί στόχοι, και η εκτιμώμενη αντίδραση των περιφερειακών και διεθνών δρώντων (France’s new National Strategic Review: The security challenges, the strategic objectives, and the estimated response of regional and international actors)*. Foreign Affairs The Hellenic Edition. <https://www.foreignaffairs.gr/articles/73942/georgios-koykakis/i-nea-ethniki-stratigiki-anatheoisi-tis-gallias> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

Integrated Review Refresh (IRR) of the United Kingdom,⁶¹ the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation,⁶² and the Annual Risk Analysis of FRONTEX.⁶³

In addition, the Indo-Pacific plays a vital role in the world economy due to its aforementioned geographical location, its unique characteristics and the existence of several major international actors, whose power has increased during the last years. In this context, the EU's new maritime security operation 'EUNAVFOR ASPIDES' in the North-Western Indian Ocean and the European security and defence policy implemented in the Indo-Pacific, is considered to be a rational choice that ensures the EU interests and enhances regional security. However, due to the fact that the aforementioned strategic documents also highlight the increased interest of several actors in the Indo-Pacific providing for relevant actions, it is assessed that China might view these actions as a threat to its national interests in the region, a scenario that will further increase tension in the region.

Moreover, the war in Gaza between Hamas and Israel which has been characterised by Houthis as the reason for their attacks in North-Western Indian Ocean, is estimated to not end soon despite the strong efforts of the international community.⁶⁴ Therefore, Houthis terrorist activities in the region will most probably continue to take place for a long time, not only threatening maritime security but endangering regional peace and stability as well. The fact that the security situation in Yemen is still fragile,⁶⁵ in addition to the fact that the duration of the maritime security operation 'EUNAVFOR ASPIDES' is defined by the EU as one year, further enhances the probability of this assessment.

⁶¹ Koukakis, Georgios. (May 15, 2023). *Η στρατηγική εθνικής ασφάλειας και διεθνούς πολιτικής του Λονδίνου: Πώς βλέπει το Ηνωμένο Βασίλειο τις μεταβολές στο διεθνές περιβάλλον* (London's national security and international policy strategy: How the UK views changes in the international environment). Foreign Affairs The Hellenic Edition. <https://www.foreignaffairs.gr/articles/74157/georgios-koykakis/i-stratigiki-ethnikis-asfaleias-kai-diethnoys-politikis-toy-lond?page=show> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

⁶² Koukakis, Georgios. (April 10, 2023). *Πώς βλέπει η Μόσχα τον κόσμο: Το νέο δόγμα της εξωτερικής πολιτικής της Ρωσίας* (How Moscow sees the world: Russia's new foreign policy doctrine). Foreign Affairs The Hellenic Edition. <https://www.foreignaffairs.gr/articles/74100/georgios-koykakis/pos-blepei-i-mosxa-ton-kosmo?page=shown> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

⁶³ Koukakis, Georgios. (September 25, 2023). *Η Ετήσια Ανάλυση Κινδύνου του FRONTEX για το 2023-2024: Διδάγματα και προκλήσεις στην ΕΕ και την Ελλάδα για τις μεταναστευτικές ροές και το διασυνοριακό έγκλημα* (FRONTEX Annual Risk Analysis 2023-2024: Lessons and challenges in the EU and Greece on migration flows and cross-border crime). Foreign Affairs The Hellenic Edition. <https://www.foreignaffairs.gr/articles/74304/georgios-koykakis/i-etisia-analysi-kindynoy-toy-frontex-gia-to-2023-2024?page=show> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

⁶⁴ Miller, Aaron David. (January 24, 2024). *Why an End to the War in Gaza Is Still Far Off*. Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/24/israel-hamas-war-palestinians-biden-netanyahu-two-state-solution/> (Accessed on February 26, 2024).

⁶⁵ BBC. (February 13, 2024). *Yemen country profile*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14704852> (Accessed on February 25, 2024).

Conclusion

In any case, it needs to be stressed that maritime security –due to the new and emerging threats of the maritime security environment and the long-standing advantages provided by maritime transportation– is gradually becoming more important for regional and international actors, leading them to the formulation of new strategies that focus on the Indo-Pacific and other ‘maritime transportation hubs’. This new trend, in addition to the vital geopolitical and geoeconomic role of the Indo-Pacific and the existing regional security challenges –mainly posed by China and North Korea– indicate that the Indo-Pacific is becoming the new centre of global competition.