

DECISION-MAKING AND CULTURAL FACTORS IN COMBAT: A STUDY OF NAVAL RESPONSES TO HOUTHI ATTACKS IN THE RED SEA

Fiona Simoneau-Byrne, French Naval Academy, fiona.simoneau_byrne@ecole-navale.fr

Virginie Saliou, French Naval Academy, virginie.saliou@ecole-navale.fr

Etienne Cadiou, French Naval Academy.

Marthe-Flavie Dulière, French Naval Academy.

Thomas Nègre, French Naval Academy.

Alexis Tachet, French Naval Academy.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60746/8_16_42457

ABSTRACT

The seizure of the Galaxy Leader by the Houthis in November 2023 triggered a high-intensity security crisis in the Red Sea, a strategic corridor for global trade. In response, international forces adopted distinct approaches: the United States-led military coalition Operation Prosperity Guardian, launched on December 18, 2023, to conduct offensive strikes, and the European Union's Operation Aspides, initiated in February 2024, with a strictly defensive mandate.

Beyond the political and strategic considerations shaping these operations, naval commanders and crews faced critical human and leadership challenges. The extreme time constraints of modern naval warfare, particularly in countering missile and drone threats, placed immense cognitive pressure on decision-makers at all levels. The necessity for immediate responses within seconds tested not only technological capabilities but also the adaptability, experience, and psychological resilience of personnel.

This study examines how differences in command culture, rules of engagement, and leadership styles influenced operational decision-making in high-risk combat scenarios. Based on an empirical survey among multinational naval forces, it explores how leadership structures, training, and personal judgment impacted real-time decisions to open fire. By analysing these human dimensions, the research provides insight into the balance between strategic directives and on-the-ground decision-making under extreme pressure.

Keywords: decision-making, naval warfare, command culture, rules of engagement, cognitive load, leadership.

1. INTRODUCTION

The ongoing Operation Prosperity Guardian was launched in December 2023 with the stated objective of addressing maritime security challenges in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The initiative aims to ensure freedom of navigation for all nations and to enhance regional security and economic stability.

In parallel, as Houthi attacks intensified, the United States, the United Kingdom, and several partner states initiated airstrikes against targets located on Yemeni territory. These actions, conducted under the auspices of U.S. Central Command's Operation Poseidon Archer, are distinct from Operation Prosperity Guardian. However, their execution led to tensions among the coalition of naval actors in the region. Notably, several European Union member states - including France, Italy, Germany and Greece - opted for a strictly defensive posture. Some of them, like France which is already operating in the region with the European-led EUNAVFOR Atalanta and Agenor missions, were clear that it would cooperate with Washington, but would make their own decisions. A number of European nations were already operating in the region

under the mandate of Operation Atalanta, which was primarily focused on counter-piracy efforts. Operation Atalanta aimed to deter, prevent, and repress acts of piracy and armed robbery at sea, with the possibility of extending its geographical scope to the northern Red Sea. It also sought to contribute to the implementation of the United Nations arms embargo on Somalia, to curb drug trafficking, and to support efforts against Al-Shabaab and its sources of financing, as well as to assist the progress made by the Somali government. Although Spain was the main contributor to Operation Atalanta, it chose not to participate in Operation Aspides, while nevertheless fostering synergies between the two European missions.

Thus, in response, the European Union launched Operation ASPIDES, drawing its name from the ancient Greek term for “shield.” A spokesperson clarified that EUNAVFOR Aspides would be limited to maritime operations conducted in a purely defensive manner, explicitly excluding any engagement on land. Although these European states support the foundational objectives of Prosperity Guardian, their establishment of Aspides reflected a concern that offensive operations onshore might provoke further escalation and potentially entangle them more deeply in the regional conflict.

In this paper, we will study the cultural factors that influenced decision-making in combat.

This study aims to:

1. Examine the strategic mandates and operational frameworks of Operation Prosperity Guardian and Operation Aspides.
2. Analyse the cultural and command differences among multinational naval forces participating in these operations.
3. Assess the cognitive load and decision-making processes of naval officers in high-threat environments.

4. Evaluate the leadership and coordination mechanisms between EU missions and their impact on operational effectiveness.
5. Provide recommendations for enhancing the readiness and interoperability of multinational naval forces in future operations.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding the complexities of multinational naval operations in high-threat environments. By examining the cultural, operational, and human factors that influence decision-making, this research provides valuable insights for policymakers, military strategists, and naval commanders. The findings can inform the development of training programs, operational protocols, and strategic frameworks to enhance the effectiveness of naval responses to maritime security challenges.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 CULTURAL DECISION-MAKING IN NAVAL OPERATIONS

Cultural decision-making in naval operations refers to the influence of national, organisational, and individual cultural factors on the decision-making processes of naval commanders and crews. These cultural factors can include national doctrines, command structures, leadership styles, and operational practices that shape the strategic and tactical responses of naval forces.

Understanding cultural decision-making is essential for enhancing the interoperability and effectiveness of multinational naval operations. By examining the cultural dimensions of decision-making, this study aims to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities of coordinating diverse national forces under a unified command structure.

2.2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF NAVAL OPERATIONS IN THE RED SEA

The historical context of naval operations in the Red Sea provides a backdrop for understanding the current challenges and responses to Houthi attacks. The Red Sea has been a strategic maritime route for centuries, with various naval powers seeking to control and protect this vital trade corridor. The historical context includes:

- The role of naval powers in protecting trade routes and ensuring freedom of navigation.
- The evolution of naval doctrines and strategies in response to emerging threats and geopolitical tensions.
- The impact of historical events and conflicts on the development of naval capabilities and operational practices.

2.3 CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS IN THE RED SEA

The current geopolitical dynamics in the Red Sea are shaped by a complex interplay of regional and international actors, interests, and conflicts. Key geopolitical dynamics include:

- The role of regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt, in shaping the security and stability of the Red Sea.
- The impact of international actors, such as the United States, the European Union, and China, Russia and India on the geopolitical dynamics and naval operations in the region.
- The challenges and opportunities of coordinating multinational naval operations in a complex and volatile geopolitical environment.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a comprehensive qualitative approach to assess the dynamics of decision-making and cultural influences in naval combat operations. The methodology is structured into several interconnected components.

3.1 CONTENT AND STRATEGIC DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

A content analysis of key strategic documents, mandates, and public communications from both the European Union and the United States is conducted. This includes examining official texts, strategic guidelines, and public communications related to naval operations in the Red Sea. The analysis aims to identify overarching strategic goals, operational mandates, and official doctrinal positions that shape military decision-making in multinational naval operations. Key documents such as the White Paper on European Defence Readiness 2030 by the Senior Policy Officer Marcus Houben and relevant EU and U.S. strategic directives are reviewed to discern commonalities and differences in strategic objectives and the geopolitical context framing these operations.

3.2 OPERATIONAL REVIEWS OF COORDINATION MECHANISMS

A detailed review of the coordination mechanisms between Operation ATALANTA and Operation ASPIDES is conducted, focusing on the interoperability and operational synergy between these two multinational efforts. This includes examining how command structures, operational objectives, and communication channels are established and maintained. The analysis also evaluates tactical constraints and the real-time adaptability of these operational frameworks, especially under time-sensitive conditions.

3.3 EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS FROM INTERVIEWS AND QUESTIONNAIRES

The research integrates empirical insights from interviews and questionnaires conducted with naval officers from countries participating in the operations. These qualitative insights provide firsthand perspectives on leadership dynamics, decision-making under pressure, and the influence of cultural and national doctrinal factors on operational effectiveness. The survey data specifically addresses:

- Perceptions of leadership structure and command effectiveness during engagements.
- Decision latency and the cognitive strain officers experience when making real-time combat decisions.
- The influence of national doctrinal approaches on engagement thresholds and rules of engagement (ROE).

3.4 COMPARATIVE DOCTRINAL AND RULES OF ENGAGEMENT ANALYSIS

A comparative doctrinal analysis is undertaken to explore the differences and similarities in rules of engagement (ROE), command structures, and leadership training programs among participating nations. This analysis focuses on how different national doctrines shape operational outcomes, particularly in high-stakes, time-critical combat situations. Special attention is given to understanding how cultural factors influence decision-making processes in multinational environments.

3.5 THEMATIC CODING AND ANALYSIS OF KEY CULTURAL, OPERATIONAL, AND STRUCTURAL FACTORS

Using thematic coding techniques, the qualitative data obtained from interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis is categorised and analysed to identify recurring themes and patterns. This analysis focuses on the following key areas:

- Cultural influences on decision-making and leadership dynamics within multinational teams.
- The impact of operational structures on the efficiency of decision-making processes.
- Structural factors, such as command hierarchy and resource allocation, that shape engagement outcomes.

3.6 CASE STUDY ANALYSIS: OPERATION ASPIDES

The paper incorporates a detailed qualitative analysis of three core sources related to Operation ASPIDES:

1. Operational briefings from Captain Elia Cuoco's strategic presentation (ESDC 2025), outlining the mission objectives, force composition, and key tactical constraints of Operation ASPIDES.
2. Strategic framework analysis from the Marcus Houben White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030, which situates ASPIDES within the broader European defence posture and identifies capability gaps and investment mechanisms.
3. Doctrinal perspectives from Bernard Siman's "Eurasian Spine" which presents a conceptual framework for integrated maritime security across Europe-Asia trade corridors.

These sources provide a contextual foundation for understanding the strategic, operational, and doctrinal influences that shape naval engagement decisions in the Red Sea and the broader region.

This integrated methodology allows for a multidimensional analysis of the factors influencing naval decision-making, particularly in the context of multinational operations. The findings offer a nuanced understanding of how structural and cultural factors interact to influence real-time combat decisions, particularly under time pressure, and highlight the complexities of coordinating and executing multinational naval operations in volatile geopolitical environments.

3.7 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data collection for this study involved a combination of primary and secondary sources. Primary data was obtained through interviews and questionnaires with naval officers from various countries participating in Operations Prosperity Guardian and Aspides. Secondary data was gathered from strategic documents, operational briefings, and academic literature on naval warfare and decision-making.

The qualitative data from interviews and questionnaires was analysed using thematic coding techniques to identify recurring themes and patterns. Quantitative data from surveys was analysed using statistical methods to assess the significance of findings related to decision-making processes and operational effectiveness.

3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations were paramount in the conduct of this study. All participants in interviews and questionnaires were assured of anonymity and confidentiality in accordance with Chatham House rules. Informed consent was obtained from all

participants, and the study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects.

3.9 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The limitations of this study include:

- The challenges of obtaining comprehensive and representative confidential data from multinational naval forces operating in high-threat environments.
- The potential biases and subjectivities in the qualitative data obtained from interviews and questionnaires.
- The constraints of time and resources in conducting a detailed and nuanced analysis of the cultural, operational, and human factors influencing decision-making in naval operations.

4. RESULTS

4.1 DIVERGENCE IN STRATEGIC MANDATES

Operation Prosperity Guardian, though multinational, is led by U.S. naval command and includes active kinetic operations against Houthi missile launch sites. In contrast, Operation ASPIDES is governed by a purely defensive doctrine, operating under the EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC). As codified in the February 2024 operational plan, its Rules Of Engagement (ROE) authorise action only in direct defence of merchant vessels or EU naval assets.

This divergence in mandate resulted in national caveats affecting command unity. Officers from French and Italian vessels reported hesitation in combined operations with U.S. forces due to divergent ROE interpretations, even under coordinated maritime domain awareness (MDA).

4.2 CULTURAL AND COMMAND DIFFERENCES

Survey results revealed notable differences in the perceived flexibility of decision-making:

- Anglo-American crews rated their engagement autonomy higher, citing flatter command structures and pre-delegated authority.
- Southern European crews (notably Italy and Spain) described more centralized decision chains, with significant reliance on direct confirmation from national authorities.

Training backgrounds also influenced perceived cognitive preparedness. Officers with prior experience in NATO rapid reaction forces reported lower stress levels under immediate threat conditions compared to those whose experience was primarily in EU-led missions or national patrols.

4.3 REAL-TIME COGNITIVE LOAD

Respondents across all nationalities emphasized the intense time compression involved in drone and missile countermeasures. Decision windows for defensive fire were often under 5–8 seconds. Key stressors included:

- Ambiguity over threat identification (especially UAVs with unclear IFF signals).
- Lack of standardised escalation protocols across EU forces.
- Concerns over political ramifications of unintended engagements.

Officers reported that experience and prior exposure to simulated drills were more decisive in reaction accuracy than purely technical training.

4.4 LEADERSHIP AND COORDINATION BETWEEN EU MISSIONS

The evolving cooperation between Operation ATALANTA and ASPIDES highlights a deliberate move toward greater European strategic coherence. Operational synergies have been established through:

- Interconnected Command Structures: ASPIDES and ATALANTA have installed each other's Command and Information Systems (CIS) in their respective OHQs and FHQs, enabling real-time data sharing.
- Weekly Coordination Meetings and shared user requirements in the Maritime Security Centre – Horn of Africa (MSCHOA) and the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction mechanism (SHADE).
- Integrated Maritime Situational Awareness (MSA) tools to harmonise decision-making under high cognitive load and short time windows.
- A common front with the maritime industry, especially regarding threat notification and protective corridors.

Survey responses emphasised that these leadership mechanisms, especially collaborative information architecture and routine multinational planning, enhanced confidence and reduced reaction time in ambiguous scenarios. Officers also noted the importance of Key Leader Engagement (KLE) coordination in the Area of Operations (AOO), currently under review as a formal synergy expansion.

4.5 CASE STUDIES

4.5.1 CASE STUDY 1: OPERATION PROSPERITY GUARDIAN

Operation Prosperity Guardian, led by the United States, has been characterised by its proactive and offensive approach to countering Houthi threats. The operation involves a coalition of nations, including the United Kingdom and several other allies,

conducting airstrikes and naval operations to degrade Houthi capabilities and protect maritime traffic.

Key findings from this case study include:

- The effectiveness of pre-authorized engagements and broader ROE in enabling rapid responses to Houthi threats.
- The challenges of coordinating multinational forces with differing national mandates and operational constraints.
- The importance of centralised command structures in facilitating decisive action and maintaining operational coherence.

4.5.2 CASE STUDY 2: OPERATION ASPIDES

Operation Aspides, led by the European Union, represents a defensive and multilateral approach to maritime security in the Red Sea. The operation focuses on protecting EU maritime interests and ensuring freedom of navigation through defensive measures and coordinated patrols.

Key findings from this case study include:

- The impact of restrictive ROE and legal frameworks on operational flexibility and deterrence.
- The role of collaborative information-sharing and joint planning in enhancing situational awareness and decision-making.
- The challenges of maintaining operational readiness and cohesion in a multinational environment with diverse national interests and doctrinal approaches.

4.5.3 CASE STUDY 3: FRENCH NAVAL OPERATIONS

France's participation in multinational naval operations in the Red Sea provides a unique perspective on the balance between national sovereignty and collective security. French naval forces have operated under both EU and U.S.-led missions, emphasizing the importance of maintaining national command and control while contributing to multinational efforts.

Key findings from this case study include:

- The significance of national caveats and operational autonomy in shaping French naval responses to Houthi threats.
- The role of interoperability and information-sharing in enhancing the effectiveness of French naval operations.
- The challenges of coordinating with multinational forces with differing strategic objectives and operational mandates.

4.6 CULTURAL DECISION-MAKING IN NAVAL OPERATIONS

Cultural decision-making in naval operations refers to the influence of national, organisational, and individual cultural factors on the decision-making processes of naval commanders and crews. These cultural factors can include national doctrines, command structures, leadership styles, and operational practices that shape the strategic and tactical responses of naval forces.

Key findings from the analysis of cultural decision-making include:

- The impact of national doctrines and command structures on the operational effectiveness and decision-making processes of naval forces.
- The role of leadership styles and operational practices in shaping the strategic and tactical responses of multinational naval operations.

- The challenges of coordinating diverse national forces under a unified command structure and the opportunities for enhancing interoperability and effectiveness.

4.7 ANALYSIS OF DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

The analysis of decision-making processes in naval operations provides insights into the cognitive, emotional, and psychological dimensions of decision-making under pressure. Key findings from this analysis include:

- The impact of cognitive load and time compression on the decision-making processes of naval officers in high-threat environments.
- The role of experience, training, and simulation in enhancing the adaptability and resilience of naval crews in responding to missile and drone threats.
- The challenges of maintaining situational awareness and effective communication in a complex and dynamic operational environment.

4.8 EVALUATION OF LEADERSHIP AND COMMAND STRUCTURES

The evaluation of leadership and command structures in multinational naval operations highlights the importance of effective leadership in shaping the strategic and tactical responses of naval forces. Key findings from this evaluation include:

- The impact of leadership styles and command structures on the operational effectiveness and decision-making processes of naval forces.
- The role of leadership in fostering trust, cohesion, and confidence among multinational crews in high-threat environments.
- The challenges of maintaining effective leadership and command structures in a complex and volatile geopolitical environment.

5. DISCUSSION

The ongoing coordination between Operations ASPIDES and ATALANTA, and their coexistence alongside Operation Prosperity Guardian, provides a unique lens through which to examine the role of culture, leadership, and structural variation in naval decision-making. Together, these missions form a rare real-world experiment in how different political mandates and institutional norms shape behaviour under high-risk conditions.

5.1 DISTRIBUTED COMMAND CULTURE AND OPERATIONAL SYNERGY

The collaboration between ASPIDES and ATALANTA represents an emerging model of European distributed command culture. Despite originating from distinct mandates—ATALANTA focusing on anti-piracy and ASPIDES on defending commercial traffic against aerial and missile threats—their convergence demonstrates increasing operational integration:

- Their information systems are interoperable, with ATALANTA’s Command and Information System (CIS) installed in ASPIDES headquarters and vice versa.
- Regular joint planning meetings, shared maritime situational awareness (MSA), and common engagement with industry stakeholders have fostered technical and procedural trust.
- Leadership routines, such as weekly coordination and shared intelligence platforms like MSCIO and SEA DJI, reinforce tactical cohesion and a culture of mutual reliance.

While options are being explored in Brussels—ranging from maintaining separate operations to full unification under the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC)—each alternative reflects deeper choices about how the EU should structure

authority and risk in combat zones. A fully unified operation could enhance rapid response but would require high degrees of political trust and institutional coherence.

5.2 JUXTAPOSITION WITH U.S.-LED OPERATIONAL DOCTRINE

In parallel to the EU’s maritime missions, the U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian operates under a very different philosophy. Although both coalitions seek to ensure freedom of navigation and deter threats, the U.S. approach integrates offensive and defensive actions more seamlessly. Under this framework:

- Engagements are often pre-authorised, with broader rules of engagement (ROE) allowing for immediate kinetic responses.
- Commanders operate with greater latitude, guided by strategic intent rather than narrowly defined national constraints.

In contrast, ASPIDES embodies a “shield-first” doctrine, shaped by Europe’s emphasis on legal proportionality, multilateral consensus, and strategic de-escalation. These cultural underpinnings are not simply philosophical; they produce tangible differences in engagement thresholds, response timing, and mission interpretation. This divergence has practical consequences. For example, while ASPIDES has succeeded in protecting merchant vessels and avoiding escalation, its deterrent value may be limited—particularly against non-state actors like the Houthis, whose actions fall outside classical models of deterrence.

5.3 COGNITIVE AND HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF COMBAT DECISION-MAKING

In both frameworks, the human element remains central to naval effectiveness. High-threat zones such as the Red Sea impose immense cognitive load on decision-makers.

Naval officers must interpret ambiguous sensor data, assess threats in seconds, and often make life-or-death choices with incomplete information.

Under the ASPIDES model, where actions must comply with a more restrictive legal and political framework, this pressure is compounded. The emotional and psychological strain of maintaining a defensive posture—knowing that an attack may come without pre-emption—requires more than technology:

- Clear chains of authority are essential to prevent hesitation.
- Rehearsal and scenario-based training build the reflexive competence needed under extreme pressure.
- Trust within and across national crews enhances unit cohesion and reduces the risks of miscommunication.

The U.S. system, with more centralized authorization and operational discretion, tends to prioritize speed and initiative. However, this can introduce challenges in multinational coordination, particularly when partners operate under more restrictive mandates.

5.4 STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS AND CULTURAL NEGOTIATIONS

The ASPIDES–ATALANTA experience underscores the EU’s ability to operate complex, multi-nation security missions, albeit within a framework still negotiating its collective military identity. The possible future consolidation of EU maritime operations points toward a more coherent strategic posture, but would also require addressing:

- Differing national legal frameworks for use of force.
- The tension between political control and operational flexibility.
- Variations in leadership expectations, mission tempo, and ROE interpretation.

Ultimately, the juxtaposition of ASPIDES and Prosperity Guardian reveals not only contrasting military doctrines but also contrasting worldviews. The EU's model favours legal clarity and defensive proportionality; the U.S. approach privileges initiative and deterrent signalling. These differences, while operational, are also deeply cultural.

Yet despite their divergence, both systems recognize that effective command in combat cannot be improvised. It must be rooted in shared values, rehearsed interoperability, and resilient leadership—qualities that become most evident when facing adversaries in real time.

5.5 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MULTINATIONAL NAVAL OPERATIONS

The comparative analysis of multinational naval operations in the Red Sea highlights the complexities and challenges of coordinating diverse national forces under a unified command structure. Key findings from this analysis include:

- The impact of cultural and doctrinal differences on operational effectiveness and decision-making processes.
- The role of leadership and command structures in shaping the strategic and tactical responses of multinational forces.
- The challenges of maintaining operational readiness and cohesion in a high-threat environment with diverse national interests and operational mandates.

5.6 LESSONS LEARNED AND BEST PRACTICES

The lessons learned from the multinational naval operations in the Red Sea provide valuable insights for enhancing the readiness and interoperability of naval forces in future operations. Key lessons and best practices include:

- The importance of interoperable training environments and cross-national command exchange in fostering operational cohesion and effectiveness.
- The role of unified escalation protocols and standardised operational procedures in enhancing decision-making and response capabilities.
- The significance of leadership and command structures in shaping the strategic and tactical responses of multinational forces.

5.7 CULTURAL DECISION-MAKING IN NAVAL OPERATIONS

Cultural decision-making in naval operations refers to the influence of national, organisational, and individual cultural factors on the decision-making processes of naval commanders and crews. These cultural factors can include national doctrines, command structures, leadership styles, and operational practices that shape the strategic and tactical responses of naval forces.

Key findings from the analysis of cultural decision-making include:

- The impact of national doctrines and command structures on the operational effectiveness and decision-making processes of naval forces.
- The role of leadership styles and operational practices in shaping the strategic and tactical responses of multinational naval operations.
- The challenges of coordinating diverse national forces under a unified command structure and the opportunities for enhancing interoperability and effectiveness.

5.8 ANALYSIS OF DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

The analysis of decision-making processes in naval operations provides insights into the cognitive, emotional, and psychological dimensions of decision-making under pressure. Key findings from this analysis include:

- The impact of cognitive load and time compression on the decision-making processes of naval officers in high-threat environments.
- The role of experience, training, and simulation in enhancing the adaptability and resilience of naval crews in responding to missile and drone threats.
- The challenges of maintaining situational awareness and effective communication in a complex and dynamic operational environment.

5.9 EVALUATION OF LEADERSHIP AND COMMAND STRUCTURES

The evaluation of leadership and command structures in multinational naval operations highlights the importance of effective leadership in shaping the strategic and tactical responses of naval forces. Key findings from this evaluation include:

- The impact of leadership styles and command structures on the operational effectiveness and decision-making processes of naval forces.
- The role of leadership in fostering trust, cohesion, and confidence among multinational crews in high-threat environments.
- The challenges of maintaining effective leadership and command structures in a complex and volatile geopolitical environment.

6. CONCLUSION

As the Red Sea remains a flashpoint in global maritime security, the experience of Operation ASPIDES highlights both the promise and limitation of EU-led defence

responses. Cultural factors—ranging from command doctrine to national legal constraints—profoundly shape decision-making under fire.

This study suggests that future European operations must address these disparities by fostering interoperable training environments, cross-national command exchange, and unified escalation protocols. Only then can naval forces respond not just with legality, but with speed, cohesion, and confidence.

The findings of this study underscore the complexities and challenges of multinational naval operations in high-threat environments. Key findings include:

- The impact of cultural and doctrinal differences on operational effectiveness and decision-making processes.
- The role of leadership and command structures in shaping the strategic and tactical responses of multinational forces.
- The challenges of maintaining operational readiness and cohesion in a high-threat environment with diverse national interests and operational mandates.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for enhancing the readiness and interoperability of multinational naval forces in future operations:

- Foster interoperable training environments and cross-national command exchange to enhance operational cohesion and effectiveness.
- Develop unified escalation protocols and standardized operational procedures to improve decision-making and response capabilities.
- Strengthen leadership and command structures to shape the strategic and tactical responses of multinational forces.

The implications of this study for policy and practice are significant. The findings highlight the need for policymakers, military strategists, and naval commanders to

consider the cultural, operational, and human factors that influence decision-making in multinational naval operations. By addressing these factors, future operations can be designed to enhance the readiness and interoperability of naval forces in high-threat environments.

Future research directions could include:

- Further exploration of the cultural and doctrinal differences among multinational naval forces and their impact on operational effectiveness.
- Analysis of the role of leadership and command structures in shaping the strategic and tactical responses of multinational forces.
- Investigation of the challenges of maintaining operational readiness and cohesion in high-threat environments with diverse national interests and operational mandates.

In conclusion, the experience of Operation ASPIDES and the broader context of multinational naval operations in the Red Sea provide valuable insights into the complexities and challenges of coordinating diverse national forces under a unified command structure. The findings of this study underscore the importance of cultural, operational, and human factors in shaping the strategic and tactical responses of naval forces in high-threat environments. By addressing these factors, future operations can be designed to enhance the readiness and interoperability of naval forces in responding to maritime security challenges.

We extend our sincere gratitude to the many officers who kindly agreed to participate in this study and respond to our inquiries.

REFERENCES

Allard, L., Bianco, C., & Droin, M. (2024). *With Operation Aspides, Europe is charting its own course in and around the Red Sea*. Atlantic Council. Retrieved from [Atlantic Council] (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org>).

Beales, E. (2025). *Operation Poseidon Archer: Assessing one year of US and UK strikes on Houthi targets in Yemen*. International Institute for Strategic Studies. Retrieved from [IISS] (<https://www.iiss.org>).

Cuoco, E. (2025). *Operational briefings from Captain Elia Cuoco's strategic presentation*. European Security and Defence College.

European Defence Agency. (2023). *Enhancing EU Naval Capabilities: A Strategic Assessment*. EDA Publications.

European Union External Action Service. (2024). *EUNAVFOR ASPIDES: Mission Objectives and Framework*. European Union. EEAS.

Evans, P. (2024). *Royal Navy reveals more details of HMS Diamond's epic deployment in the Red Sea*. Navy Lookout. Retrieved from [Navy Lookout] (<https://www.navylookout.com>).

French Ministry of Defence. (2024). *Publications*. Ministère des Armées.

German Federal Ministry of Defence. (2024). *Reports*. Bundesminister der Verteidigung.

Houben, M. (2024). *White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030*. European Union Commission.

International Maritime Organization. (2024). *Current Awareness Bulletins*. IMO Reports.

Irish, J., & Saul, J. (2024). *France patrolling with US-led Red Sea mission, focused on own ships*. Reuters. Retrieved from [Reuters] (<https://www.reuters.com>).

Italian Ministry of Defence. (2024). *Publications*. Ministero della Difesa.

Maillot, H. (2024). En mer Rouge, les Houthis font preuve d'une violence désinhibée: le commandant de la frégate Alsace. *Le Figaro*. Retrieved from [Le Figaro] (<https://www.lefigaro.fr>).

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (2023). *NATO Review*.

Rédaction Mer et Marine. (2025). *CV Forissier: les marins déployés en mer Rouge ont été confrontés quasiment à toutes les menaces que l'on peut rencontrer à la mer*. Mer et Marine. Retrieved from [Mer et Marine] (<https://www.meretmarine.com>).

Royal Navy. (2024). *HMS Diamond Deployment: Lessons and Insights*. Royal Navy Reports.

Siman, B. (2023). *Eurasian Spine: A Conceptual Framework for Integrated Maritime Security*. Egmont Institute.

Stenzel, J., & Posey, M. (2024). *Analyzing the German Frigate Hessen's Near-Miss of a U.S. Drone in the Red Sea*. U.S. Army War College.

U.S. Central Command. (2023). *Operation Poseidon Archer: Strategic Overview*. U.S. Department of Defense.

U.S. Naval Forces Central Command. (2024). *Operation Prosperity Guardian: Coordination and Execution*. U.S. Navy Reports.

Villanueva Serrano, I. (2025) *EUNAVFOR ATALANTA presentation*. European Security and Defence College.