
Holy Land and the Red Sea: Europe's foreign policy is put to the test

The Middle East and the Red Sea: the European Union is hoping for a united front on the international stage. The EU-27 foreign ministers discussed the issue at the EU Council meeting on Monday. Policy orientations and “actions on the ground” are on the agenda, suggesting a new path for a “common European defence”, as advocated by Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani. The situation in Ukraine over the past two years has demanded - and to some extent achieved - that the EU-27 speak (and act) with one voice. Humanitarian, economic and military aid is being provided to Kyiv, despite mounting protests from Hungarian Prime Minister Orban. But now the challenges are multiplying. With regard to the Holy Land, after initial hesitation, the approach outlined by Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, has prevailed, namely: Israel's legitimate right to self-defence, the fight against Hamas terrorism, an immediate ceasefire and an end to the massacre of the defenceless population of Gaza. It includes a long-term solution, finally entrusted to the 'Two Peoples, Two States' proposal, despite the unreasonable objections of Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu. The latest challenge, however, concerns the stretch of waters between the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, in a region already fraught with tensions and latent or declared conflicts (including the terrible civil war between the Yemeni government and the Houthi 'rebels' that has been raging for years). It is in this context that the nascent naval mission called *Aspides*, promoted by Germany, France and Italy, which aims to protect commercial vessels in the Red Sea from attacks by Houthi vessels and ensure freedom of navigation, is taking shape. It should be remembered that these rampaging armed groups are already being heavily bombed by the US-UK coalition aircraft. An EU naval mission with an exclusively defensive mandate may prove legitimate in the Red Sea area, notably to secure maritime transit and to prevent terrorism from gaining a foothold. It is likewise important to ensure that this measure complies with international law and that it respects the civilian population in the area, which is not involved in the armed attack on European and other countries' ships. A broad consensus within the EU must be reached to prevent “precipitous moves” by certain countries, which risk undermining European unity once again. A genuine common foreign and security policy requires, above all, a broader and more explicit agreement on the rules (the treaties) and values (peace, international cooperation) that the European Union ultimately stands for.

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