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Maritime security challenges in the southwestern flank of the European Union

Wyzwania związane z bezpieczeństwem morskim na południowo-zachodniej granicy Unii Europejskiej

Abstract
Currently, the maritime security of the European Union (EU) is being challenged by emerging threats in areas adjacent to its south-western border, in particular in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG). In recent years, in addition to incidents of piracy, that region has been affected by illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and irregular migration flows from African states using the Atlantic route to reach the Canary Islands.

Using a qualitative research strategy and inductive reasoning, this article analyses, on the basis of a case study, the maritime security challenges that the EU faces on its southwestern flank. The findings demonstrate that if IUU fishing in the GoG is not stopped, there could be an increase in piracy incidents in the region, which will likely result in an increase in irregular migration flows from Africa to the Canary Islands across the Atlantic, compromising maritime security on the EU's south-western border.

Keywords: European Union; maritime security; Gulf of Guinea; piracy; illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing; irregular migration

Streszczenie
Obecnie bezpieczeństwo morskie Unii Europejskiej (UE) jest kwestionowane przez pojawiające się zagrożenia na obszarach przylegających do jej południowo-zachodniej granicy, w szczególności w Zatoce Gwinejskiej (GoG). W ostatnich latach, oprócz przypadków piractwa, region ten został dotknięty nielegalnymi, nieraportowanymi i nieuregulowanymi połowami (IUU) oraz nieuregulowanymi przepływami migracyjnymi z państw afrykańskich korzystających ze szlaku atlantyckiego w celu dotarcia na Wyspy Kanaryjskie.

Wykorzystując jakościową strategię badawczą i rozumowanie indukcyjne, niniejszy artykuł analizuje, na podstawie studium przypadku, wyzwania związane z bezpieczeństwem morskim, przed którymi stoi UE na swojej południowo-zachodniej flance. Ustalenia pokazują, że jeśli połowy NNN w GoG nie zostaną powstrzymane, może dojść do wzrostu liczby incydentów piractwa w regionie, co prawdopodobnie spowoduje wzrost nielegalnych przepływów migracyjnych z Afryki na Wyspy Kanaryjskie przez Atlantyk, zagrażając bezpieczeństwu morskiemu na południowo-zachodniej granicy UE.

Słowa kluczowe: Unia Europejska; bezpieczeństwo morskie; Zatoka Gwinejska; piractwo; nielegalne, nieraportowane i nieuregulowane połowy; nielegalna imigracja

1. Introduction

The EU has been taking a critical look at the security of its maritime spaces since it launched the first naval operation under the EU Common Security and Defence Policy in late 2008 – Operation Atalanta[1] in the waters off the Horn of Africa. Since then, it has become an important coproducer of international maritime security. In 2014, it implemented its maritime security strategy, along with an action plan. It launched Operation Irini[2] in the Mediterranean Sea in 2020, and, in 2024, it launched its most recent maritime security operation – Operation Aspides[3] – in the Red Sea and Western Indian Ocean. Two of these operations are still active (the third has been terminated recently), which shows the EU's commitment to maintaining a safe environment in some of the waters closest to its external borders, especially on the south and southeast flanks.

However, this is not the case on the southwestern flank[4]. And what makes this issue even more relevant is the scale of the challenges that threaten maritime security in the EU's external southwest border, all of which originate in nearby maritime zones – especially the GoG. These challenges include: irregular migration flows; piracy; IUU fishing; and various types of illicit trafficking (especially in drugs and arms).

But why is security in the EU's southwestern flank so crucial? First, because of the heavy maritime traffic that passes through those waters, as figure 1 shows. The areas surrounding the Iberian Peninsula are some of the region's busiest shipping lanes, both in the north-south axis (Europe – Africa and Europe – South America) and in the east-west axis (Europe – North America). Second, because several EU member states are major_importers of oil and liquefied natural gas

[1] In December 2024, the operation's mandate was extended until February 2027. Its tasks are to protect the ships of the United Nations World Food Programme (and other vulnerable vessels) and to deter, prevent and repress piracy and armed robbery at sea. Other tasks that have been added to the mandate include: monitoring fishing vessels in the Horn of Africa and the Western Indian Ocean; combating drug trafficking; implementing the arms embargo on the Al Shabaab militia; and combating the illicit trade in charcoal and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. *Eunavfor Operation Atalanta*, 2025 https://eunavfor.eu/mission [date of access: 27.02.2025].

[2] The mission ended on 31 March 2025. Its mandate was to conduct inspections of vessels on the high seas off the coast of Libya that were suspected of carrying arms (or related material) to and from Libya. As secondary tasks, the mission was mandated to monitor and gather intelligence on illicit exports of oil and refined petroleum products from Libya, to help dismantle smuggling and human trafficking networks and to assist in capability building and provide training to Libyan law enforcement agencies. *Eunavfor Med Operation Irini*. 2025. https://www.operationirini.eu/about-us/, [date of access: 27.02.2025].

[3] This EU military operation aims to protect freedom of navigation and maintain maritime security in the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden. It was launched on 19 February 2024, with a mandate of two years. *Eunavfor Operation Aspides*. 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eunavfor-aspides_en [date of access: 27.02.2025].

[4] Geopolitical designation that refers to the southwestern region of the European continent, a strategic region where Europe, Africa and the Atlantic intersect. The main areas that comprise it are Portugal and Spain's Atlantic coastlines – which include the Azores and Madeira, and, in the case of Spain, the Canary Islands.

from the GoG region[5]. And, finally, because the EU is a major trading partner for several nations on the west coast of Africa.

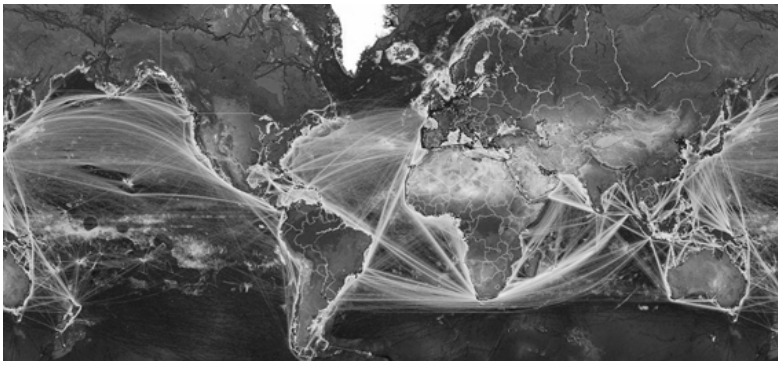


Figure 1. Global sea lanes

Source: Adapted from S. Puig, *La geopolítica del libre comercio*. Foro Económico Mundial, 31 jul 2017, https://es.weforum.org/stories/2017/07/la-geopolitica-del-libre-comercio/ [dostęp: 28.01.2026].

Another concern are undersea cable networks, which are vital infrastructures for data transfer and global communications. These networks are of the utmost importance because they carry more than 98% of international communications and data transfers. Several of these cables pass through the maritime spaces of southwestern Europe and many connect Europe to Africa (see figure 2).

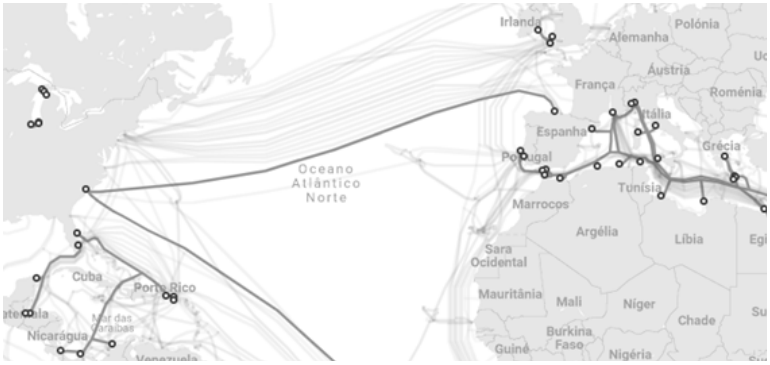


Figure 2. Submarine cable networks between North America, Europe and Africa

Source: Adapted from: TeleGeography. *Ready For Service In 2025*. *Submarine Cable Map*, https://www.submarinecablemap.com/ready-for-service/2025 (submarinecablemap.com) [dostęp: 28.01.2026].

[5] The EU imports about half of its energy needs. In 2021, approximately 13% of oil and 6% of natural gas were imported from the GoG. Nigeria, Angola, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon are important suppliers of crude oil to Europe, and Nigeria is also a major natural gas exporter. A. G. Alexandre, *A Relevância Geoeconómica e Geoestratégia do Golfo da Guiné.* Retrieved 16 April 2025, from OBSERVARE – Observatório de Relações Exteriores: https://observare.autonoma.pt/anuario/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2025/03/Janus-2024-%E2%80%93-Anto%CC%81nio-Gonc%CC%A7alves-Alexandre.pdf [date of access: 27.02.2025].

Finally, security is important because marine scientific research and prospecting is still underdeveloped, and the geological characterisation of the marine resources in those areas has not been completed. However, the data that was obtained through various research campaigns (some of which were carried out by Portugal, as these data are needed to support the Portuguese proposal to the United Nations for the extension of the national continental shelf) were used to identify areas with the greatest potential for studying and mapping these resources. Figure 3 shows areas where metallic mineral resources have been detected. A large part of the polymetallic nodules and sulphides, especially iron and manganese crusts, which have been discovered in oceanographic missions, are located outside the limits of the exclusive economic zone. However, many are within the extended limits proposed by Portugal to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf.

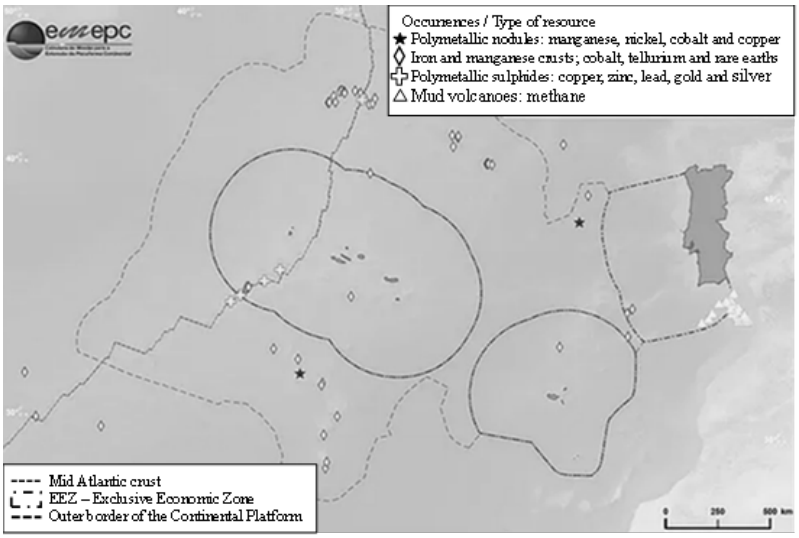


Figure 3. Mineral resources in maritime spaces adjacent to Portuguese territory
Source: Adapted from Portuguese Task Group for the Extension of the Continental Shelf. EMEPC. *Marine Resources on the Extension of the Continental Shelf*, https://en.emepc.pt/recursos-marinhos. (en.emepc.pt) [dostęp: 28.01.2026].

But to maintain security along the EU's southwest border, the waters adjacent to the area (which include the GoG) must also be safe for navigation, as some of the most relevant threats to Europe's maritime security originate from that region. This is, essentially, the application of what Basil Germond[6] wrote about the opening of the security studies agenda after the Cold War. According to Germond, this broadening meant that security stopped being the exclusive concern of States and went beyond

[6] B. Germond, *The Maritime Dimension of European Security,* Houndmills, Basingstoke 2015.

the defence of territory. The threatened objects (as well as the threatening objects) are no longer just States. The security of people (human security) is also included, and threats that emerge beyond the borders of States could have an impact (directly or indirectly) within the borders of those States. This principle is applicable to the challenges analysed in this study, as all of them can have consequences for the EU's security, even if the EU's territory is geographically distant from the GoG.

After establishing the need to maintain security on the EU's southwestern flank – which lends this study particular relevance –, the study's delimitations were defined: time, space and subject. The period under analysis is the 21st century; the geographical location is the maritime spaces adjacent to the EU's southwest border, including the west coast of Africa (specifically, the GoG); and the challenges are three of the most relevant threats mentioned above (irregular migration flows, piracy and IUU fishing).

The methodology used in the study was a subjective ontological perspective, in which the researcher looks at the reality under analysis – the maritime security challenges in the EU's southwestern flank – as a social construction. An interpretivist epistemological approach was used to understand how this social reality is created. A qualitative research strategy was chosen – as the study aims to provide deep, subjective insights into the object of study –, and an inductive reasoning process was used to draw broad inferences from particular observations. The research design was a case study, which provides an empirical and descriptive method to describe the object of study in a rigorous way.

The research problem was defined as the EU's response to the maritime security challenges at its southwest border. The research question that guided the study is: how can the EU tackle the maritime security challenges at its southwest border?

The article consists of this introduction, two chapters (the first contains the state-of-the-art on the object of study and the second describes the research findings) and the conclusions section.

2. State-of-the-art

This chapter contains a brief review of the state-of-the-art on maritime security challenges at the EU's southwest border.

Several studies (doctoral theses, master's dissertations and scientific articles) and institutional works (in Portuguese) address the maritime security challenges in the EU's southwestern flank, and particularly those facing Portugal due to the country's strategic location and to the vast areas of the ocean under its sovereignty and jurisdiction.

A master's thesis by João Gonçalves published in 2022 analyses Portugal's role in European maritime defence and security, listing the main actors, threats and risks to the EU's maritime security and Europe's security policies[7].

In his PhD thesis published in 2019, Rui Lampreia proposes a national maritime security concept for Portugal, identifying threats and challenges that the country could be facing as soon as 2030 – namely, the use of force against the rights and jurisdiction of national maritime spaces, terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, transnational organised crime, cybercrime and maritime piracy and armed robbery at sea[8].

Vitor Cavaleiro, in an individual research work for the Portuguese Military University Institute in 2108, analyses the EU's Maritime Security Strategy and Portugal's contributions, addressing the EU's policies and instruments – including the (Portuguese) Navy's Strategic Directive, EMSA[9], FRONTEX[10] –, as well as EU operations Atalanta and Sophia[11]. According to the author, Portugal faces several maritime security challenges in its areas of jurisdiction.

In his 2017 master's thesis on European maritime security policy, Bernardo Bock explores the EU's approach to maritime safety and examines the application of legal standards and international cooperation efforts. Bock also analyses the challenges the EU is facing in managing security at sea in the 21st century, asserting that international cooperation is the touchstone of European maritime security policy[12].

In a study for the University of Minho in 2017, José Palmeira examines Portugal's geostrategic position in the southwest of the European continent, "in the Iberian Peninsula, wedged between Spain and the Atlantic"[13]. Palmeira notes that maritime security is a major challenge for Portugal due to its vast maritime spaces, the threats and risks that can emerge there, and the country's limited resources to deal with

[7] J. M. P. Gonçalves, *O papel de Portugal na defesa e segurança marítima europeia*, dissertação de mestrado em Ciência Política e Relações Internacionais (especialização em Relações Internacionais), novembro 2021, https://run.unl.pt/bitstream/10362/136632/1/TESE%20MESTRADO%20-%20Jo%c3%a3o%20Gon%c3%a7alves.pdf [date of access: 27.02.2025].

[8] R. P. G. F. Da S. Lampreia, *Uma análise prospetiva sobre a segurança marítima nacional, no horizonte 2030*. Lisboa: Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, 2019. Tese (Doutoramento em Relações Internacionais, especialização em Estudos de Segurança e Estratégia), https://run.unl.pt/entities/publication/a837dfbe-8486-4f68-baff-841b7e776052 [date of access: 27.02.2025].

[9] European Maritime Safety Agency.

[10] European Border and Coast Guard Agency.

[11] V. B. C. Cavaleiro, *A segurança marítima na União Europeia, contributos de Portugal*. Pedrouços: Instituto Universitário Militar (Departamento de Estudos Pós-Graduados), 2018. Trabalho de Investigação Individual do CPOS-M (Curso de Promoção a Oficial Superior 2017/2018), https://comum.rcaap.pt/bitstreams/acfbd90a-8120-4236-af0c-a0e4bdcd00c6/download [date of access: 27.02.2025].

[12] B. d. C. Bock, *Política europeia de segurança marítima,* Lisboa 2017, https://repositorio.ulisboa.pt/entities/publication/ba96e040-da69-4e08-a574-2fe71becd0c9 [date of access: 27.02.2025].

[13] J. Palmeira, *Desafios da segurança marítima portuguesa: triângulos estratégicos*. 2017, p. 3, https://repositorium.sdum.uminho.pt/handle/1822/84691 [date of access: 27.02.2025].

them. Palmeira believes that, to minimise these vulnerabilities, Portugal must pursue a policy of alliances with what he calls "the EU-NATO-CPLP[14] tripod"[15].

The studies in English that address the same topic as this article include Sergio Carrera's work from 2007, which analyses the EU's border management strategy, specifically FRONTEX and the challenges created by irregular migration in the Canary Islands, relating them to the EU's common immigration policy. The study examines Operation Hera[16], which was tasked with preventing migrants from leaving their countries of origin (on the west coast of Africa) and attempting to reach the Canary Islands by sea[17].

In a work published in 2011, Luisa Marin examines FRONTEX's operations, providing an in depth analysis of the agency's creation, mandate, tasks and actions at the EU's southern maritime borders. Marin analyses the three phases of Operation Hera and raises questions about the legal framework governing FRONTEX's actions in those operations[18].

Dirk Godenau looks at patterns in irregular migration to the Canary Islands (since the 1990s) as a result of changes in border management introduced by the EU. Godenau said that what happened in the Canaries in the early 21st century (which he called "one-off aid" from the EU to solve a specific problem of a Member State) was part of the growing Europeanization in the management of the EU's external borders. The case of the Canary Islands was a testing ground for new forms of cooperation in the management of shared borders through the FRONTEX agency[19].

In 2021, Derek Lutterbeck defended the idea that border control – which had been declared increasingly irrelevant and even obsolete a few years before by several theorists[20] – was becoming more important[21]. Borders – particularly those

[14] Community of Portuguese Language Countries.

[15] J. Palmeira, *Desafios da segurança marítima portuguesa…*, op. cit., p. 4.

[16] Operation Hera was coordinated by FRONTEX. Its mandate to manage irregular immigration from West Africa to the Canary Islands was officially terminated in 2019. *Frontex written answer to parliamentary question E-002468/2023 to the Commission. Operational cooperation with Senegal following the termination of Operation Hera.* 19 April 2025, https://prd.frontex.europa.eu/document/frontex-written-answer-to-parliamentary-question-e-002468-2023-to-the-commission-operational-cooperation-with-senegal-following-the-termination-of-operation-hera [date of access: 27.02.2025].

[17] S. Carrera, *The EU Border Management Strategy: FRONTEX and the Challenges of Irregular Immigration in the Canary Islands*. CEPS Working Document No. 261. March 2007.

[18] L. Marin, *Policing the EU's External Borders: A Challenge for the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice? An Analysis of Frontex Joint Operations at the Southern Maritime Border,* "*Journal of Contemporary European Research"* 2011, vol. 7, no. 4, s. 468–487. Dostępne w Internecie: http://www.jcer.net/ojs/index.php/jcer/article/view/379/305 [date of access: 28.01.2026].

[19] D. Godenau, *Irregular Maritime Immigration in the Canary Islands: Externalization and Communautarisation in the Social Construction of Borders,* "*Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies"* 2014, vol. 12, no. 2, s. 139.

[20] Joachim Blatter said in 2001 that "Territory is no longer the only imaginable basis for creating and defining primary political communities and institutions", J. K. Blatter, *Debordering the World of States: Towards a Multi-Level System in Europe and a Multi-Polity System in North America? Insights from Border Regions*, "European Journal of International Relations", 2001, 7(2), p. 201.

[21] D. Lutterbeck, *Blue vs Green: The Challenges of Maritime Migration*, "Journal of Borderlands Studies", 2021, 36(5), pp. 727-743.

between developed and developing countries – had become policy flashpoints. As Lutterbeck argued, contemporary borders had become more relevant because the laws aimed at keeping out "undesirables" (including irregular migrants) would have to be enforced[22].

More recently, in 2022, Laura Pereira and Daniella Melo asserted that, in the last decade, the EU has engaged in a "maritime pivot", as maritime issues became one of the central areas of the European security agenda. This elevated the EU's status as a relevant coproducer of maritime security on a global scale; that is, as a maritime power recognised by other States and international organisations such as China, India and the United Nations[23]. This article analyses the EU's maritime security challenges, including irregular migration and drug trafficking, especially through the Atlantic sea lanes – which affect Portugal and Spain – and discusses the EU's strategies for coping with those challenges.

For the most part, the literature consulted addresses only one of these challenges: irregular immigration to the Canary Islands from the west coast of Africa. The Portuguese-language literature emphasises the challenges facing Portugal in terms of maintaining the security of the spaces under its sovereignty and jurisdiction (even though some of those spaces are effectively the EU's southwest border). And even the articles that address the EU's maritime security strategy do so from a Portuguese perspective. The English-language literature focuses almost exclusively on the illegal immigration route to the Canary Islands from the west coast of Africa. The intervention of FRONTEX (and its various operations) is analysed in several works, while others address the need for more consistent models of cooperation in maritime border management. This is in line with the perception that there has been a "maritime pivot" in EU policy, which is reflected in the growing relevance of maritime issues in its security agenda.

In any case, the works above do not mention two of the maritime security challenges in the EU's southwest border which are included in the object of study: piracy and IUU fishing. Regarding the former, most studies focus on the impact of piracy on the security of the areas of the sea where it occurs (particularly in the GoG region). The issue has been addressed by African authors such as Kamal-Deen Ali and Lisa Otto. As for the second challenge, Ifesinachi Okafor-Yarwood, Dyhia Belhabib and Elei Green Igbogi are some of the African authors who have published works on the issue (which also focus on the waters off the coast of Africa where IUU fishing occurs).

[22] Ibidem, p.728.

[23] L.C. Ferreira-Pereira, D.S. Melo, *The European Union and Maritime Security: Origins, Developments and Latest Trends 2022*, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355168207. [date of access: 27.02.2025].

3. Findings

This chapter analyses the main maritime security challenges in the EU's southwestern flank and describe how the EU has attempted to deal with them.

3.1 Main maritime security challenges in the EU's southwestern flank

This subchapter addresses the main maritime security challenges at the EU's external borders on the southwestern flank, namely: irregular migration flows; piracy; and IUU fishing.

3.1.1 Irregular migration flows

The first reports of illegal immigrants arriving in the Canary Islands from the west coast of Africa date back to the last decade of the 20th century[24]. Since then, and especially in the 21st century, the route along the west coast of Africa has become one of the main illegal immigration routes to the European continent (through the Canary Islands), reaching an all-time record in 2024 (see figure 4). However, the trend was reversed in the first quarter of 2025[25].

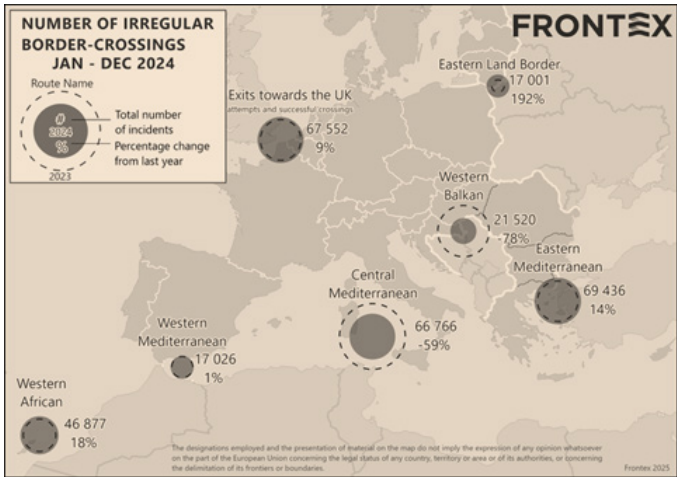


Figure 4. Number of illegal border crossings in 2024

Source: FRONTEX. *Irregular border crossings into EU drop sharply in 2024*, https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/irregular-border-crossings-into-eu-drop-sharply-in-2024-oqpweX. [date of access: 27.02.2025].

[24] D. Godenau, *Irregular Maritime Immigration in the Canary Islands: Externalization and Communautarisation in the Social Construction of Borders*, "Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies", 2014, 12(2), pp. 123-142.

[25] According to FRONTEX, in the first quarter of 2025 there was a significant decrease of about 30% in illegal immigrants entering Europe through the West African coast route (even so, 9205 people used that route in the first three months of the year). FRONTEX. *EU external borders: Irregular crossings fall by a third in Q1 2025*, https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/eu-external-borders-irregular-crossings-fall-by-a-third-in-q1-2025-k2RWuR [date of access: 27.02.2025]

In recent years, this route has created challenges mainly for the Canary Islands, but it could easily be used to reach mainland Europe. The pressure caused by the growth of these movements may lead some migrants to attempt to reach other destinations, and the Madeira archipelago is only a few hundred miles north of the Canary Islands (the more daring may even try to reach the Iberian Peninsula). The West African route is the only one that crosses the Atlantic Ocean, and migrants using this route usually come through countries such as Morocco, Mauritania, Gambia and Senegal. From there, they board vessels and travel as much as 1600 kilometres, in some cases, to reach the Canary Islands[26].

3.1.2 Piracy

Piracy in the GoG has evolved erratically in the 21st century, even if, from 2018-2020, the region was the most relevant global hotspot for piracy incidents [27]. *However, in recent years it has not posed a direct threat to the security of the EU's southwest* maritime borders, but rather to merchant ships flying the flags of EU Member States[28] travelling through the GoG. Figure 5 shows incidents of piracy (and armed robbery at sea[29]) in 2024.



Figure 5 Incidents in 2024
Source: International Maritime Bureau. *Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships – Annual Report 2024*.

[26] European Council. *Migration flows on the Western routes*, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/policies/western-routes/ [date of access: 27.02.2025].

[27] A. G. Alexandre, *Security in the Portuguese Atlantic* [In:] *The Azores, the Atlantic, and the Global Challenges: Geopolitics and Diaspor*, (eds.) D.M. Scott, D. Borges, A.M. Fonseca, A. Monteiro, Azores 2024, pp. 75-96.

[28] On average, 30 to 40 ships flying an EU flag (or owned by EU shipowners) cross GoG waters every day and are at risk of being targeted b y pirates. J. Ehle, *The Gulf of Guinea*, "Marine Forum" 2020, https://marineforum.online/en/the-gulf-of-guinea/ [date of access: 27.02.2025]

[29] The difference between piracy and armed robbery at sea against ships is the place where it occurs: incidents beyond 12 nautical miles measured from the territorial sea baseline are considered piracy, while armed robbery takes place within the 12 miles, that is, in the territorial sea of coastal states, A.G. Alexandre, *Security in the Portuguese Atlantic…*, op. cit., pp. 75-96.

That year, all incidents that occurred (and were reported to the authorities) on the west coast of Africa took place in the GoG region (see figure 5).

3.1.3 Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing

The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that about 94% of global fish stocks are fully exploited or overexploited. IUU fishing depletes fish stocks, posing one of the greatest threats to marine ecosystems, jeopardising sustainable fisheries management efforts and bringing some species to the verge of collapse.

The fact that IUU fishing in the Atlantic largely occurs in areas relatively close to the EU's maritime borders is another major challenge. It is estimated that West Africa loses about 790,000 tonnes of fish every year to IUU fishing by industrial fishing vessels, mainly from the distant water fleets of extra-regional powers, especially from Asia[30]. In the case of the GoG, illegal fishing accounts for 40% to 60% of the total fish catch, which is economically and ecologically unsustainable[31]. Lost revenue can reach three billion US dollars per year, but the most significant impact goes far beyond these figures. With seven million people depending on the fishing industry for their subsistence, the region is witnessing the collapse of a crucial economic sector (Maritimes Crimes, 2024).

If IUU fishing in the GoG is not stopped, piracy will surely increase in that region (due to lack of alternatives for legal fishers), as will irregular immigration from Africa to the Canary Islands through the Atlantic route (as many coastal communities will be forced to leave in search of better living conditions abroad), jeopardising maritime security at the EU's southwest border.

3.2 The European Union's measures to address these challenges

This subchapter outlines the measures that the EU has taken to tackle its maritime challenges (particularly on the southwestern flank), and what those measures have achieved.

The first initiative is the European Union Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS), which was first adopted in 2014 and updated in 2023. The document serves as a guide for the EU's actions to protect its maritime interests. Its priorities include

[30] P. O. Nudzi, *West Africa loses about 790,000 tons of fish yearly to IUU, 2024*, https://accessagric.com/west-africa-loses-about-790000-tons-of-fish-yearly-to-iuu/ [date of access: 27.02.2025]

[31] Fish stocks, especially of pelagic species such as sardines and anchovies, have been declining steadily over the last three decades, endangering the livelihoods of millions of people, particularly on the west coast of Africa. See: Fishery News. *West Africa's Fishery Crisis: Illegal Chinese Trawlers, Climate Change, and Artisanal Overfishing Deplete Stocks*, https://www.fishery.news/west-africas-fishery-crisis-illegal-chinese-trawlers-climate-change-and-artisanal-overfishing-deplete-stocks/ [date of access: 27.02.2025].

the need to protect critical maritime infrastructure (such as submarine cables, harbours and sea lanes), improve ocean governance and combat threats such as piracy, smuggling and illegal fishing[32]. The updated version of the EUMSS also aims to help protect the EU's interests from the (ever-evolving) threats to its maritime security. The document describes how the EU will attempt to achieve six strategic objectives. However, due to space limitations, this article will only focus on two (the most relevant for the object of study): stepping up activities at sea and deepening cooperation with partners.

In 2021, the EU launched the coordinated maritime presences (CMP) concept in the GoG region (the EU's first area of interest in the maritime domain), a new tool to help coordinate the naval capabilities of the member states with a presence in the region, without launching a formal military operation. Its partial objectives are to increase the EU's visibility at sea, share intelligence between member states and protect merchant vessels (and crews) travelling through those waters. The following year, the initiative was extended to the Horn of Africa region, which was declared a new area of interest, to help combat illegal and illicit activities in those waters. According to the European Union External Action Service (EEAS)[33], the CMP have proved an effective and useful instrument that contributed to a 50% drop in maritime security incidents in 2021[34]. In any case, as the data presented in the previous subchapter show, maritime insecurity remains a problem in the GoG. As such, the CMP project cannot be considered a success in the region yet. Member states will need to deploy more naval capabilities to the region, for longer periods of time, to serve as a deterrent to illicit activities at sea.

On 21 March 2022, the Council of the European Union adopted its Strategic Compass, a document that outlines a common vision for the EU's role in security and defence. The document is essentially a roadmap that focuses on strengthening

[32] European Commission. *Joint communication on the update of the EU Maritime Security Strategy and its Action Plan: An enhanced EU Maritime Security Strategy for evolving maritime threats*, https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/publications/joint-communication-update-eu-maritime-security-strategy-and-its-action-plan-enhanced-eu-maritime_en [date of access: 27.02.2025].

[33] European Union External Action. *Maritime security: EU Coordinated Maritime Presences visits the Yaoundé Architecture*, 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/411057_fr [date of access: 27.02.2025].

[34] However, not only does the EEAS not provide any data to back up this claim, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were still felt in 2021, as well as its impact on international maritime trade. According to the United Nations Trade & Development report, international maritime trade fell by 3.8% in 2020 and, even though recovered in 2021, it did not reach pre-pandemic figures. See: United Nations Conference On Trade And Development. *Review of Maritime Transport*, Geneva 2022, https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/rmt2022_en.pdf [date of access: 27.02.2025]. According to Adekola Oyenuga the shipping sector was severely affected by the pandemic, and there were significant interruptions in maritime activity along the most important sea lanes, including those that cross the GoG. See: A. Oyenuga, *Perspectives on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global and African maritime transport sectors, and the potential implications for Africa's maritime governance*, "Journal of Maritime Affairs", 2021, 20, pp. 215-245.

the EU's security and defence policy by 2030. The aim is to make the EU a stronger, more capable security guarantor, allowing it to better protect its citizens and contribute to international peace and security[35]. Figure 6 lists the EU's missions and operations in 2024.

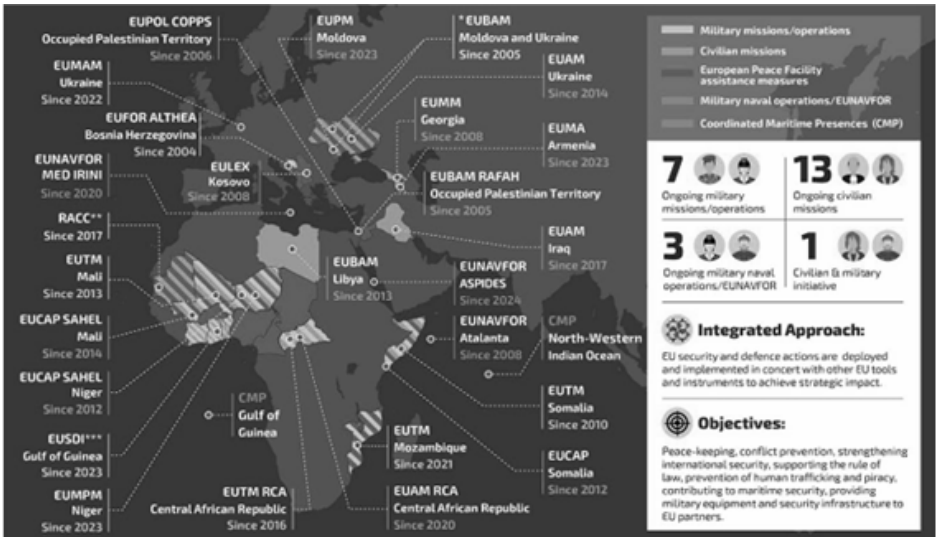


Figure 6 EU security and defence initiatives in 2024

Source: European Union External Action. *EU Missions and Operations*, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/EU-mission-and-operation_2024.pdf [date of access: 27.02.2025].

As figure 6 shows, most missions on the west coast of Africa take place on land, in different countries. The only mission that takes place at sea is the CMP. The rationale behind the need to guarantee security on land is clear, as that is where threats originate and develop before they become maritime threats. However, there is a perception that the measures taken on land (through the missions and operations in the states shown in figure 6) have not done enough to solve the issue of insecurity at sea, and that more needs to be done, or done differently (by involving other stakeholders, both regional and extra-regional).

With regards to FRONTEX, this agency conducts frequent operations to control EU borders and combat crime at sea. It coordinates with the European Fisheries Control Agency and the European Maritime Safety Agency in operations to combat cross-border crimes at sea – including migrant smuggling, trafficking in human beings, marine pollution and illegal fishing – and conducting maritime surveillance

[35] European Union External Action. *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*., 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en [date of access: 27.02.2025].

in various sea basins around EU waters, and especially in the Mediterranean. Once again, the Atlantic (and, consequently, the maritime areas close to the EU's southwest border), have been neglected – especially when compared to other areas such as the Mediterranean. However, the European Commission has already mentioned the possibility of adding new areas of interest where the CMP concept could be implemented to step up the efforts to combat illegal and illicit activities at sea[36]. Extending FRONTEX's area of intervention to Atlantic regions such as the Canary Islands and broadening the agency's mandate could help to reduce illegal crossings from the African continent and combat other illicit activities at sea (such as IUU fishing).

Conclusion

The main maritime security challenges in the EU's southwest border include piracy, IUU fishing and irregular migration flows. These challenges originate and develop in nearby maritime spaces such as the GoG. A qualitative research strategy, inductive reasoning and a case study research design were used to analyse the three challenges addressed in this article. The findings show that, if IUU fishing in the GoG is not stopped – reversing a trend that will result in the extinction of several species, especially pelagic fish, which are an important food source for coastal populations in that region – and people are no longer able to support themselves (and their families), they could seek employment in activities related to transnational organised crime, and piracy may be one of the most enticing – this happened in the east coast of Africa in the beginning of the 21st century, when there was a surge in piracy incidents originating in Somalia. If this happens, irregular migration flows to Europe will likely increase – especially from Africa to the Canary Islands through the Atlantic route –, which could threaten maritime security along the EU's southwest border.

Therefore, it seems clear that the EU's actions to contain the threats that compromise maritime security in the areas adjacent to its southwest border have not been sufficient. It is not enough to create initiatives such as the CMPs without providing the capabilities they need to meet these challenges. The EU is a major trading partner with the African continent and several EU member states import a significant part of their energy from the GoG. Therefore, it is vital that those shipping lanes are safe to navigate. But FRONTEX can also extend its area of

[36] European Commission. *Joint communication on the update of the EU Maritime Security Strategy and its Action Plan: An enhanced EU Maritime Security Strategy for evolving maritime threats*, 2023, p. 6, https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/publications/joint-communication-update-eu-maritime-security-strategy-and-its-action-plan-enhanced-eu-maritime_en [date of access: 27.02.2025].

operation to more peripheral regions of Europe's Atlantic spaces by intervening in the Canary Islands, helping to combat the irregular migration flows that could jeopardise security in those spaces, and, ultimately, in the European continent, if the phenomenon continues to develop as it has in recent years. Finally, the EU will have to take a different approach to address the challenge of IUU fishing off the west coast of Africa (especially in the GoG), which cannot be treated as an exclusively regional phenomenon. Its impact on the adjacent regions (such as Europe's southwest border) will become increasingly more significant, as there will be fewer fish stocks available for fishers who engage in legal fishing off the west coast of Africa. Europe must put mechanisms in place to help African coastal States combat IUU fishing in the region. This is of the utmost importance, especially since it is known that one of its consequences is an increase in other illicit activities in the maritime domain – many related to transnational organised crime.

The above analysis provides an answer to the research question "How can the EU tackle the maritime security challenges at its southwest border?" The study showed that the initiatives implemented in the GoG region will have to be strengthened (namely the CMPs and FRONTEX, particularly in terms of capabilities and area of intervention, which should be extended to the Canary Islands). Other mechanisms must be created to deal specifically with the phenomenon of IUU fishing.

The limitations of this study are the fact that, due to lack of space, it was not possible to address all the challenges facing maritime security adjacent to the EU's southwest border and all the strategic objectives set out in the EUMSS. Other studies should be conducted to assess the impact of the other security challenges in the EU's southwestern flank, namely, those created by illicit trafficking of arms and drugs by sea. Such studies should focus on the actions taken by the EU to pursue the four strategic objectives that were not addressed in this study – enhancing maritime awareness, managing risks and threats, boosting capabilities, and educating and training.

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