Original Contribution

NATO AND EU MARITIME MILITARY POLICY

Mariela L. Antonova[1], Emine A. Karatash[2]

[1]*DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION, QUALIFICATION, AND LIFELONG LEARNING, KONSTANTIN PRESLAVSKY UNIVERSITY OF SHUMEN, E-MAIL: m.l.ivanova@shu.bg*
[2]*DEPARTMENTS ALGEBRA AND GEOMETRY, FACULTY OF MATHEMATICS AND COMPUTER SCIENCE, KONSTANTIN PRESLAVSKY UNIVERSITY OF SHUMEN, E-MAIL: e.karatash@shu.bg*

ABSTRACT: *This article examines the strategic directions, institutional mechanisms and operational initiatives of the maritime military policy of NATO and the European Union (EU). It analyses the role of the two alliances in ensuring maritime security, protecting trade routes and countering new threats such as piracy, illegal migration and hybrid operations. It presents a comparative study of the concepts, naval capabilities and joint missions of NATO and the EU in the maritime environment.*

KEY WORDS: *Naval policy, Strategic defense, Collective security, Maritime strategy, Maritime stability, International defense.*

1. Introduction

NATO and the European Union (EU) maritime military policy is adapting to the growing threats in the maritime environment, including hybrid attacks, sabotage of underwater infrastructure and illegal activities related to the Russian "shadow flotilla".

CISE - Common Information Sharing Environment CISE is a decentralized platform bringing together over 300 national and European maritime surveillance agencies. The aim is to improve information exchange and ensure a rapid response to maritime incidents.

2. Theoretical overview
2.1. EU maritime security
2.1.1. Renewed Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS)

In October 2023, the EU adopted an updated European Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS), which aims to:

➢ Protect critical maritime infrastructure;
➢ Ensure freedom of navigation;

➢ Address emerging threats such as piracy, cyberattacks and environmental risks.

The strategy promotes cooperation between Member States, joining efforts to share information and coordinate actions.

2.1.2. Main operations:

➢ Operation Aspides: Launched in February 2024, this mission aims to protect shipping in the Red Sea from threats related to the conflict in Yemen.

➢ Operation EU NAVFOR "Atalanta": Since 2008, the EU has led this operation to combat piracy off the coast of Somalia. By Council Decision of 29 May 2009, Bulgaria has a mandate to participate in the Operational Headquarters of the operation with up to two military personnel.

2.1.3. Information Sharing Initiative: CISE (Common Information Sharing Environment): A platform that brings together over 300 national and European maritime surveillance agencies, facilitating rapid response to maritime incidents

Fig. 1. Ratio of member states, shared memberships, geostrategic alliances

2.2. NATO's Maritime Strategy

Main Missions:

➢ Operation Sea Guardian: Focused on counter-terrorism, counter-smuggling and the protection of critical infrastructure in the Mediterranean.

➢ Baltic Sentry: Launched in early 2025, this mission aims to protect undersea cables and infrastructure in the Baltic Sea from potential sabotage

2.3. Critical infrastructure protection

Following the sabotage incidents of gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea, NATO has stepped up its efforts to protect underwater infrastructure, including:

> ➤ Patrolling with over 100 ships and submarines.
> ➤ Establishing a dedicated center for the protection of underwater infrastructure in the United Kingdom.

Fig. 2. Infographics on EU strategic initiatives (e.g. "Black Sea Maritime Security Hub")

2.4. Russia's shadow flotilia

The EU and NATO are facing challenges related to Russia's "shadow flotilla" - a fleet of old, poorly insured tankers used to circumvent sanctions. These ships often make suspicious maneuvers near critical infrastructure, such as undersea cables and energy facilities. Poland recently responded to one such incident, preventing a potential threat.

The EU is planning sanctions against an additional 180 Russian tankers, part of the so-called "shadow flotilla", used to circumvent sanctions through flags of convenience. These ships account for up to 85% of Russian oil exports and are subject to increased surveillance by the Baltic states.

2.5. NATO: strengthening maritime defense

Baltic Sentry Mission in January 2025, NATO launched the Baltic Sentry mission to protect critical underwater infrastructure in the Baltic Sea. The mission includes frigates, maritime patrol aircraft and naval drones for enhanced surveillance and rapid response to threats.

Task Force X Initiative NATO is developing a fleet of autonomous systems under the name Task Force X, designed to continuously monitor and detect threats in the underwater environment. These systems use artificial intelligence to improve maritime situational awareness.

Bulgaria plays a key role in NATO and the EU's maritime and defense policies, especially in the context of security in the Black Sea. As a member

state of both organizations, the country actively participates in initiatives aimed at strengthening regional stability and defense.

2.6. Contribution to NATO initiatives

Multinational exercises and joint operations.

In September 2025, Bulgaria will host the 20th NATO contingency management exercise, called "BULGARIA 2025". This exercise will include simulations of various crisis response scenarios and will test the Allies' joint response capabilities.

In addition, Bulgaria participates in joint naval exercises in the Black Sea, such as "Sea Shield 25", which aim to improve the Allies' interoperability and readiness to respond to hybrid threats.

2.7. Regional command for special operations

In 2024, Bulgaria and Romania signed a memorandum to establish a Regional Command for Special Operations in the Black Sea (HQ R-SOCC). This command will coordinate the special forces of both countries and play a key role in planning and managing special missions in the region.

2.8. Maritime security initiatives in the Black sea

In March 2025, Bulgaria proposed the establishment of a multinational maritime security coordination center in the western Black Sea. The center's goal is to improve monitoring of the marine environment, provide early warning of potential threats, and protect critical underwater infrastructure.

Fig. 3. Map of the Black Sea with sea routes, bases and zones of influence

2. 9. Modernization of defense capabilities

Bulgaria is undertaking significant efforts to modernize its armed forces, including the acquisition of F-16 Block 70 fighter jets and the modernization of its fleet. These steps are aimed at increasing interoperability with NATO and meeting collective defense requirements.

2.10. Cooperation with regional partners

Bulgaria, Romania and Greece have signed an agreement to improve military mobility, which includes the creation of transport corridors and the facilitation of the movement of troops and equipment. This agreement is part of efforts to strengthen the defense capability of NATO's eastern flank.

Through these initiatives and participations, Bulgaria demonstrates its commitment to strengthening regional security and stability within the framework of NATO and the EU.

2.11. Coordination centers

Critical Undersea Infrastructure Coordination Cell: Established in Brussels to improve interaction between allies and the private sector. Maritime Undersea Infrastructure Security Centre: Located in the United Kingdom, this centre improves intelligence sharing and incident response.

2.12. Cooperation between EU and NATO

The EU and NATO are strengthening their cooperation in the field of maritime security through:
  ➢ Information exchange and coordination of actions;
  ➢ Joint exercises and operations;
  ➢ Establishment of joint monitoring and response centres.

This partnership is essential to address the growing threats in the maritime environment and ensure the security of critical infrastructure.

NATO and EU maritime military policy is in the process of adapting to new realities and threats. Through enhanced cooperation, modernization of strategies and operational actions, the two organizations work together to ensure security and stability in the maritime environment.

3. Comparative analysis

Aspekt	NATO	ES
main goal	collective defense	integrated security and crisis management
naval capabilities	joint flotillas, SNMG	national fleets with coordinated operations
geographic focus	global	Mediterranean and European basin
tools	military and intelligence	political, diplomatic and military
interaction	joint missions and data exchange	PESCO, strategic autonomy

4. Conclusion

NATO and EU maritime policy is a key factor for the stability of the Euro-Atlantic area. While NATO provides the defense backbone and global force projection, the EU is developing a comprehensive approach combining military, economic and political instruments. In the context of new hybrid and cyber threats, synergy between NATO and the EU will continue to be critical for maintaining security in Europe's maritime spaces and beyond.

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