

The Republic of Cyprus and the European Union's Maritime Security: A Case Study on Diplomatic Leadership and Strategic Influence in Maritime Affairs

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Abstract

This article explores the Republic of Cyprus' multi-faceted contribution to European Union (EU) maritime policy, naval operations, and the humanitarian component of maritime security operations as of EU accession. The research questions focus on Cypriot participation in EU maritime security operations between 2008 and 2024, the rationale for these deployments, and the implications of its contributions. Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources to examine Cypriot engagement in maritime policy, diplomatic initiatives, and four naval operations. Despite the country's modest size and limited capabilities, this research has found evidence of proactive and influential actorness in EU maritime policy and affairs. Findings reveal Cyprus showing unexpected leadership during the 2012 Presidency of the European Council, marked by the landmark Limassol Declaration, which revitalised the EU's sustainable maritime agenda. Similarly, the country's strategic engagement in four missions underscores its commitment to collective defence. Finally, their most recent initiative, Amalthea, addressed the Gaza humanitarian crisis with a maritime corridor, highlighting Cypriot diplomatic potential beyond the EU. Overall, the research concludes that the Cypriot case study serves as a compelling example of how small island States can exert significant influence within supranational organisations like the EU, shaping maritime policies and driving diplomatic agendas.

Keywords: Republic of Cyprus; European Union; maritime security; Common Security and Defence Policy; maritime strategy

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Introduction

On 1 May 2004, ten countries joined the European Union (EU) in the largest enlargement to date. On the 20th anniversary, President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, defined this historical moment as ‘the birth of a new era’ in her address to the European Parliament.² The majority of the new Member States were located in Central Europe and had been part of the Soviet sphere of influence during the Cold War.³ Three other countries were the Baltic States—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—which were also former republics of the Soviet Union.⁴ Finally, the two remaining States were Mediterranean island-States, Malta and the Republic of Cyprus (hereafter, Cyprus), located respectively in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean regions.

This research article explores Cyprus’ multi-faceted contribution to EU maritime policy, naval operations, and the humanitarian component of maritime security operations in the country’s first 20 years of membership. Two central research questions investigate the Cypriot—operational and policy-relevant—contribution to EU maritime security:

- What was the extent of Cyprus’ participation in EU maritime security operations between 2008 and 2024?
- How did Cyprus contribute to EU maritime policy since its accession as a Member State?

In answering these questions, this research article employs a qualitative methodological approach. Discussions with officials at the European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU’s diplomatic body, as well as with Cypriot and Greek military personnel were conducted anonymously between February and April 2024. These discussions can shed light on the role of Cyprus in EU maritime security as they were carried out with professionals who had expertise in operations, policy, and strategy. The article also reflects on the Cypriot National Guard’s participation in Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions within the first 20 years of joining the EU.

² European Commission, *Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament formal sitting on the 20th anniversary of the 2004 EU Enlargement* (24 April, 2024), available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_24_2282

³ EUR-LEX, *The 2004 enlargement: the challenge of a 25-member EU*, available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/the-2004-enlargement-the-challenge-of-a-25-member-eu.html>

⁴ Baltic Defence College, *Restoration of Independence in the Baltics*, available at <https://www.baltdefcol.org/1243>

The role of small States in the EU has been widely explored within the broader field of international relations and European integration. Traditional realist perspectives argue that power in supranational organisations is predominantly exercised by larger States with greater economic and military resources. However, scholarship on small States has challenged this assumption, demonstrating that influence is not solely dependent on material power but also on factors like institutional positioning, diplomatic skill, and niche expertise.⁵ Within the EU, small States can exert influence despite their structural disadvantages. As Grøn and Wivel argue, small States often rely on coalition-building, norm entrepreneurship, and institutional leadership to shape policy outcomes.⁶ In this context, the 'smart state' theory, proposed by Panke, suggests that small States can maximise their impact by specialising in specific policy areas, leveraging their expertise, and engaging proactively in agenda-setting processes.⁷ Cyprus' role in EU maritime security aligns with this framework, as the country has capitalised on its maritime knowledge and geopolitical position to contribute strategically to European policy debates.

On this matter, literature on small States in the EU further highlights the importance of the rotating Presidency of the European Council as an opportunity for influence. Various scholarly works suggest that holding the Presidency enables small States to shape policy discussions, provided they focus on well-defined priorities.⁸ In this regard, Cyprus' 2012 Presidency exemplifies the ways a small State can exercise leadership by focusing on niche areas of expertise. Finally, recent studies on diplomatic agility suggest that small States can play a significant role in crisis management and policy coordination in a major crisis.⁹ In this instance, the Cypriot diplomatic initiative in leading the Amalthea humanitarian corridor for Gaza further supports this argument.

⁵ Robert Steinmetz, *Small states in Europe: challenges and opportunities* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016); Baldur Thorhallsson & Anders Wivel, 'Small states in the European Union: what do we know and what would we like to know?' (2006) 19(4) *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, [page number].

⁶ Caroline Howard Grøn & Anders Wivel, 'Maximizing influence in the European Union after the Lisbon Treaty: From small state policy to smart state strategy' (2011) 33(5) *Journal of European Integration*, [page number].

⁷ Diana Panke, 'Small states in the European Union: structural disadvantages in EU policy-making and counter-strategies' (2010) 17(6) *Journal of European Public Policy*, [page number].

⁸ Simone Bunse, *Small States and EU Governance: Leadership through the Council Presidency* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁹ Kristi Raik & Merili Arjakas, 'Grasping the opportunity for small state leadership: Estonia's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine' (2024) [Volume number](issue number) *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, [page number].

Overall, recent scholarship on small-State influence in EU policymaking highlights the complexity of strategies employed by these States to shape European policies despite structural constraints. Högenauer and Mišík emphasise that small States are most effective when they engage in coalition-building, anticipate major economic and security developments, and develop specialised expertise in niche policy areas.¹⁰ Their analysis suggests that small States must navigate institutional challenges with strategic adaptability to ensure that their voices are heard within the EU's decision-making structures.

The central hypothesis concerns the fact that, based on their limited capabilities and expertise in overseas missions, Cyprus has yet to participate operationally, meaning the practical deployment of naval or air assets in the area of operation, in any of the four naval missions launched in the EU's CSDP framework. This suggests limited diplomatic, political, and military contributions by the country to EU maritime security and strategy.

In contrast, this paper finds a complex and unexpected leadership role taken by Cyprus in advancing the EU's maritime policy. Specifically, during their first time holding the Presidency of the European Council in the second half of 2012, the small island State provided renewed impetus to the EU maritime agenda with the publication of the Limassol Declaration.¹¹ At the time, the advancement of a joint naval strategy had been in a stalemate for approximately two years; Cyprus managed to bring the topic back to the negotiating table in Brussels thanks to their maritime vocation. More recently, Cyprus has been proactive in providing humanitarian support to the civilians in the Gaza Strip following the Israeli bombings in their conflict with Hamas since 7 October 2023.¹² As of May 2024, the delivery of aid to the Gaza Strip through a maritime corridor in Larnaca has been made possible only thanks to the Cypriot

¹⁰ Anna-Lena Hogenauer & Matúš Mišík (eds), *Small States in EU Policy-Making: Strategies, Challenges, Opportunities* (Routledge, London: 2024).

¹¹ Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union, *Declaration of the European Ministers responsible for the Integrated Maritime Policy and the European Commission, on a Marine and Maritime Agenda for growth and jobs the "Limassol Declaration"* (2012), available at https://maritime-forum.ec.europa.eu/document/download/96c0f40f-bcc7-409b-9307-03bda4881045_en?filename=The%20Limassol%20Declaration%20-%20A%20Marine%20and%20Maritime%20Agenda%20for%20Growth%20and%20Jobs.pdf

¹² European Commission, *Joint Statement from the EC, Cyprus, the UAE, the US, and the UK Endorsing the Activation of a Maritime Corridor to Deliver Humanitarian Assistance to Gaza* (8 March, 2024), available at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-statement-ec-cyprus-uae-us-and-uk-endorsing-activation-maritime-corridor-deliver-humanitarian-2024-03-08_en

proposal at the 2023 Paris Peace Forum.¹³ In conclusion, both episodes explain the agenda-setting powers of small island States in the context of supranational organisations such as the EU in times of crises and stalemates. Overall, the potential of this research to explore the implications of small States' operational, policy, and strategic contribution to maritime security policy and governance is significant.

This paper will proceed as follows. The next section will discuss the role played by the first-ever Cypriot Presidency of the European Council in the second semester of 2012. The approval of the Limassol Declaration on 8 October 2012, which represented a turning point for the maritime policy agenda of the EU before the first Maritime Security Strategy, was eventually published in June 2014. The following section will explore the Cypriot participation in the EU's four maritime security operations—Atalanta, Sophia, Irini, and Aspides—between 2008, when the first was launched, and 2024, the time of writing. The deployments in the various operational headquarters will be discussed, and their rationale will be analysed through primary and secondary sources. Finally, the last section will discuss the current Cypriot diplomatic leadership in proposing, advocating, and eventually setting up a humanitarian corridor for Gaza as part of the Amalthea initiative.

Advancing the European Agenda on Maritime Policy: The 2012 Presidency of the European Council

On 1 July 2012, Cyprus assumed the Presidency of the European Council for the second semester of the year. This was the first time the Republic had taken such a leadership role since joining the EU only eight years earlier. The occasion to plan, propose, and eventually approve policy was invaluable to bringing national interests into the broader European agenda but it was also a double-edged sword for the country. Holding the Presidency was regarded as a test for 'new' Member States that joined the EU in the 2004 enlargement.¹⁴

A limited cohort of scholars has investigated the impact of 'smallness' on the capacity to run the European Council presidency, focusing on various national case

¹³ European Commission, *Press statement by President von der Leyen with Cypriot President Christodoulides in Larnaca* (8 March 2024), available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_24_1367

¹⁴ Ieva Grumbinaitė, 'Bringing the European Union closer to the member states? The impact of the rotating EU Council presidency on small member states' in Anna-Lena Högenauer & Matúš Mišík (eds), *Small States in EU Policy-Making* (London: Routledge, 2024) [page number].

studies. It has been argued that small States tend to work on their few areas of expertise during the rotating Presidency for pragmatic reasons, given that they likely lack comprehensive staff and competencies in every field of EU governance.¹⁵

As a small State and a newcomer to the EU, Cyprus had the arduous task of coordinating the work of the Council for half a year. Thus, the executive focused on their most immediate vocation, the sea. This was reflected in the maritime connotations of the Presidency's logo: A tricoloured ship featured yellow for the country's flag, green for the olives, and blue for the seas and skies of the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁶ The then-Deputy Minister for European Affairs, Andreas Mavroyiannis, commented: 'The ship's compass points to one direction only: the vision for a Better Europe, closer to the citizens, its neighbours and the world at large'.¹⁷ The metaphor of the ship sailing towards the shining future of Europe foreshadowed Cyprus' focus: maritime policy.

The advancement of integrated maritime policy was also regarded as a priority by two previous temporary Presidencies: Denmark and Poland (2011–2012).¹⁸ These two countries did not successfully deliver any remarkable improvement for maritime policy, preferring to invest their resources in other areas closer to their national interests.¹⁹ Cypriot decisionmakers, in contrast, had a particular interest in developing maritime policy with a cross-sectoral approach to EU maritime security. Conversely, there was very little that Cyprus could have proposed in other areas of European integration. For example, the then-Minister of Defence argued that 'we do

¹⁵ Marjan Svetličič & Kira Cerjak, 'Small Countries' EU Council Presidency and the Realisation of their National Interests: The Case of Slovenia', (2015) 21(74), *Croatian International Relations Review*, [page number]; Robert Steinmetz, *Small states in Europe: challenges and opportunities* (London: PUBLISHER, 2016); Michael Harwood, Stefano Moncada & Roderick Pace, *Malta's EU Presidency: a study in a small state presidency of the Council of the EU* (Msida, 2018).

¹⁶ Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union, The logo of the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the EU, available at <http://www.cy2012.eu/en/menu/the-presidency-eu/cyprus-presidency/visual-identity-of-the-presidency>

¹⁷ Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union, *Presentation of the Logo of the Cyprus Presidency* (19 June, 2012), available at http://www.cy2012.eu/en/page/videos/channels/the_cyprus_eu_presidency/video-53

¹⁸ Council of the European Union, *18 month programme of the Council (1 July 2011 - 31 December 2012)* (17 June, 2011), available at http://www.cy2012.eu/index.php/en/file/ZvIy6XtZoD_GpdeP_+CepQ==/

¹⁹ CBOS, *EVALUATION OF POLISH PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION*, available at https://www.cbos.pl/EN/publications/reports/2012/011_12.pdf; EU Monitor, *Europe at work - The results of the Danish Presidency*, available at <http://eu2012.dk/en/NewsList/Juni/Uge-26/~media/66DF9F34D5AC4DBB98AB99538DE35F86.pdf>

not have a great number of experts, technocrats and specialists; neither do we have previous experience [regarding CSDP development]'.²⁰ With no other viable option for agenda-setting, the emphasis on maritime policy could be regarded as the sole opportunity for the country to make its voice heard. The publication of the Limassol Declaration was the turning point of EU maritime policy as we know it today and, even more importantly, provided the necessary optimism to advance maritime security and strategy at the time. As the then-President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, pointed out, the publication of the Limassol Declaration came at the right time for a Europe that had just experienced the 2008–2009 financial crisis.²¹ Following an unprecedented crisis, the EU was ready to embark on a process of economic growth, which could have been realised also thanks to the development of a serious and comprehensive maritime policy.²² Overall, Cyprus excelled at advancing the status of maritime policy, which was stuck in early 2012. By being assertive in this course of its first temporary Presidency of the Council, the country provided a valuable step forward for maritime strategy. This circumstance shows how a small State can be successful in advancing public policies if it focuses on its own speciality, in this case maritime policy, rather than a broad variety of policy areas, as a larger country would instead do. Finally, the Cypriot Presidency came at the right time between the 2008–2009 financial crisis and the EU's recovery process in the sense that it shed the light on the necessity to focus also on other previously neglected issues (such as maritime security).

On 8 October 2012, the Limassol Declaration was unveiled in the presence of the various Ministers of the Environment of EU Member States, the applicant Croatia, and the European Economic Area.²³ It presented a 20-point sustainable maritime agenda and focused on enhancing a dynamic programme for the coastal communi-

²⁰ Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union, *Address by the Minister of Defence of the Republic of Cyprus Mr. Demetris Eliades: Seminar "On the Road with CSDP"* (30 October, 2012), available at <http://www.cy2012.eu/index.php/tr/file/gFrCXkoekhP2nxXo9+AUZw==>

²¹ European Commission, *Statement by President Barroso at the joint press conference with Cypriot President Christofias following the Informal Ministerial meeting on EU Integrated Maritime Policy* (8 October, 2012), available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/fr/SPEECH_12_697

²² European Commission, *Speech by President Barroso: "A strong maritime pillar for the Europe 2020 strategy"*, *Informal Ministerial meeting on EU Integrated Maritime Policy/Limassol* (8 October 2012), available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_12_696

²³ Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union, *Informal Meeting on the IMP, October 8*, available at <http://www.cy2012.eu/index.php/en/gallery/gallery-161?fromSearch>

ties.²⁴ Shipping, renewable marine energy, fishing, and tourism were the sectors in which the EU would invest as part of the Limassol Declaration.²⁵ The document focused on the necessity of enhancing knowledge and expertise in the maritime domain with a view to supporting ‘sustainable and inclusive growth’.²⁶ In this regard, the Declaration envisioned a programmatic strategy for advancing the EU’s blue economy, which, according to the World Bank, is the ‘sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs while preserving the health of ocean ecosystem’.²⁷

Drafting this Declaration, which was also known as the ‘Maritime Agenda for Growth and Jobs’, sparked renewed interest and provided momentum for the EU’s understanding of the seas as a fundamental economic opportunity.²⁸ After several years of policy stalemate, the EU’s maritime policies were re-discussed to provide a maritime pillar for the broader 2020 strategy.²⁹ As rightly anticipated by the then-President of the European Commission, the Declaration remains a fundamental doctrine for the subsequent policies of the EU’s maritime security in its environmental component.³⁰ The EU began to understand the sea as an opportunity for growth, prosperity, and development of coastal communities from the northern to the southern flanks. The 2014 EU Maritime Security Strategy was the first for the community and was finalised by the Greek and Italian Presidencies of the European Council in

²⁴ Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union, *Declaration of the European Ministers responsible for the Integrated Maritime Policy and the European Commission, on a Marine and Maritime Agenda for growth and jobs the “Limassol Declaration”* (2012).

²⁵ Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union, *Declaration of the European Ministers responsible for the Integrated Maritime Policy and the European Commission, on a Marine and Maritime Agenda for growth and jobs the “Limassol Declaration”* (2012), 3–4.

²⁶ Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union, *Declaration of the European Ministers responsible for the Integrated Maritime Policy and the European Commission, on a Marine and Maritime Agenda for growth and jobs the “Limassol Declaration”* (2012), 5.

²⁷ United Nations, *Blue Economy Definitions*, available at https://www.un.org/regularprocess/sites/www.un.org.regularprocess/files/rok_part_2.pdf

²⁸ European Commission, Maria Damanaki, *European Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, The Integrated Maritime Policy gains momentum, Ministerial meeting on EU Integrated Maritime Policy/Limassol* (7 October 2012), available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_12_699

²⁹ European Commission, *Speech by President Barroso: “A strong maritime pillar for the Europe 2020 strategy”*, *Informal Ministerial meeting on EU Integrated Maritime Policy/Limassol* (8 October 2012).

³⁰ Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union, *Press Release - “The Declaration of Limassol will go down in history”* (8 October 12), available at <http://www.cy2012.eu/index.php/en/news-categories/areas/general-affairs/press-release-the-declaration-of-limassol-will-go-down-in-history>

2014.³¹ These two other Mediterranean Member States continued the labour initiated by their Cypriot counterparts and completed the EU's reorientation towards an understanding of the seas as economically crucial for prosperity.³²

This strategic reorientation of the EU benefitted from Cyprus' willingness to develop a newer maritime agenda after a period of inactivity.³³ Twelve years later, the Limassol Declaration represents the fully realised diplomatic, political, and policy potential of a small island State, a newcomer, in the complex institutional framework of the EU when their main area of expertise, the maritime domain, was brought to the intergovernmental bargaining tables.

The Cypriot Contribution to the European Union's Maritime Security Operations

This section explores Cyprus' participation in the four EU maritime security operations between 2008 and 2024. It provides an overview of the Cypriot armed forces and their capabilities in the broader European context. Subsequently, it investigates the country's various levels of participation in the four naval missions launched in the CSDP framework.

The Cyprus National Guard

Cyprus has only one division of its armed forces, the National Guard.³⁴ Personnel are usually conscripted for a compulsory period of 15 months and remain part of the reserve until their 50th birthday, in the case of officers, or until their 60th, in the case of military doctors.³⁵ Only Greek-Cypriots can be conscripted since 1964 following the dismantling of the National Guard's predecessor in 1963, in which both Turkish- and Greek-Cypriots had served. At the time of writing, in May 2024, the active personnel of the National Guard account for 12,000, while there are around 50,000 reserves.³⁶

³¹ Council of the European Union, *European Union Maritime Security Strategy* (24 June 2014), available at <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST%2011205%202014%20INIT/EN/pdf>

³² Council of the European Union, *European Union Maritime Security Strategy* (24 June 2014), 14–15.

³³ Argyris G. Passas & Evangelia I. Katakalous, *The Cyprus EU Presidency: "Riders on the Storm"* (2012), available at https://www.sieps.se/en/publications/2012/the-cyprus-eu-presidency-riders-on-the-storm-20123op/Sieps_2012_3op.pdf 48–50.

³⁴ Andreas Efthymiou, 'Militarism in post-war Cyprus: the development of the ideology of defence', (2016) 16(4) *Defence Studies* 410.

³⁵ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 2024*. (London, 2024), 80.

³⁶ Ibid 80.

Over the last two decades, the number of military personnel increased to a maximum of around 15,000 in 2020; but since then, it decreased to the same level as in most other EU Member States. There is no separate data available for the country's sea-going agency. Like the other small Mediterranean island EU Member State, Malta, Cyprus possesses a small naval force, the Naval Command, serving as the maritime wing of the National Guard. The Naval Command is tasked with the traditional policing functions of any coastguard and primarily focuses on patrolling the Cypriot coastlines. Its assets include one coastal defence support and seven patrol and coastal combatants.³⁷ Capabilities include a mix of former Soviet assets and modern European systems, mostly provided by EU partners following operational usage.³⁸ Due to numerical and technical limitations, the Naval Command cannot protect the territorial integrity of Cyprus from its long-standing Turkish threat.

As a result, Cypriots relies on the Greek navy, army, and air force to protect their territorial waters and economic exclusive zones, and even to ensure territorial defence on land.³⁹ The country's decisionmakers have decided to keep their military personnel on the island to counter risks from their main regional competitor and to deepen ongoing cooperation with the Greek armed forces regarding training, capacity-building, and joint exercises. The sole exception of military deployment has been their participation in the United Nations Peacekeeping Forces in Cyprus (UNFICYP), in place since 1964 in the buffer zone between the two sides of the island, and the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission in Lebanon, in which they have been participating consistently since 1978.⁴⁰

The National Guard in Operations Atalanta, Sophia, Irini, and Aspides

In the first 20 years following EU accession, Cyprus did not participate operationally in the maritime security operations launched in the CSDP framework, of which there were four. The National Guard has been deploying its high-ranked military personnel in the operational headquarters of these four missions ever since 2008. This peculiar

³⁷ Ibid 81.

³⁸ Ibid 80–81.

³⁹ Zenonas Tziarras, 'Israel-Cyprus-Greece: A "Comfortable" Quasi-Alliance', (2016) 21(3) *Mediterranean Politics*, [page number]; Informal conversation with serving and former Greek military personnel, February–April 2024.

⁴⁰ Republic of Cyprus Ministry of Defence, *Defence Policy: United Nations*, available at <https://mod.gov.cy/en/o.η.ε.html>

type of deployment could be regarded as strategic as it entails deploying personnel to the missions' headquarters without deploying any asset in the area of operation. In the first-ever EU naval operation, the EUNAVFOR Somalia Atalanta, Cyprus sent one naval officer every year to the then-operational headquarters in Northwood, UK. After the Brexit referendum and the Council's decision to relocate the mission to the naval base of Rota in Spain, Cyprus maintained its traditional strategic contribution to the anti-piracy mission. A cohort of around 17 personnel has been estimated to participate in Operation Atalanta.

The second and third EU maritime security operations, EUNAVFOR Med Sophia and EUNAVFOR Med Irini, were both assigned to the Italian navy in the operational headquarters of Centocelle in Rome. The prior mission was launched in the aftermath of the unilateral Italian mission Mare Nostrum, meant to provide search-and-rescue to migrants crossing the Mediterranean, but had different executive and non-executive tasks, primarily the disruption of human trafficking networks. Operation Sophia ceased in 2020, and shortly after, the EU formally approved and operationally launched a mission to enforce the UN Security Council's Resolution of the arms embargo towards Libya. Irini, meaning 'peace' in Greek, is still active under Italian leadership, but has not been able to comply with the third phase, the training of Libyan military forces, due to political disagreements.

In terms of Cypriot contributions, the Republic maintained the same numerical participation in Sophia as in the EU's first naval mission, Atalanta. Specifically, one naval officer was deployed in the operational headquarters in Rome yearly between May 2018 and March 2020. There was a reduction of serving personnel in the third mission, Irini, in which only one military officer of the National Guard was deployed every two years in Italy.

As of 1 May 2024, a military officer is deployed in the operational headquarters in Rome to contribute to Irini.⁴¹ The reason might be in the simultaneous national participation in the EU's fourth naval mission, EUNAVFOR Aspides, to provide a defensive response to the growing Houthi naval warfare attacks in the Red Sea. Two National Guard officers are participating in the operational headquarters in Larissa, Greece, for the strategic work of the mission.⁴² This commitment is the largest to date of the Cypriot armed forces in any maritime security operation launched in the

⁴¹ Informal conversations with serving and former Greek military personnel, February-April 2024.

⁴² Presidency of the Republic of Cyprus, *Statements by the President of the Republic and the President of the European Commission* (8 March 2024), available at <https://www.presidency.gov.cy/cypresidency/cypresidency.nsf/All/18D98C29CDD6EBC2C2258ADD00342FCC?OpenDocument>

CSDP framework. There are two main rationales behind this strategic choice. For one, Cyprus wanted to demonstrate solidarity with their EU partners in upholding international maritime law. For another, the economic driver of securing one of the most trafficked trading routes in the world has undoubtedly played a crucial role in the decision to deploy two military officers to Larissa's operational headquarters. The Cypriot-flagged merchant fleet is the third largest in the EU, right after the Greek and Italian companies, and is ranked 11th globally in terms of hull numbers.⁴³ In 2023, the shipping industry accounted for approximately 7% of the country's GDP, the highest in relative percentage terms in the Eurozone, and has been the fastest growing in the last five years, with a substantial increase of 37%.⁴⁴ As of April 2024, slightly more than 1,000 Cypriot vessels were at sea, encompassing over 9,000 ship-related activities annually.⁴⁵ A notable reflection of importance of the maritime trade industry for the Cypriot economy has also been the creation in 2018 of an extraordinary Deputy Minister for Shipping, which was a first for the EU, as of May 2024.⁴⁶ The country's shipping and commerce companies have expressed their satisfaction and gratitude for the prompt political decision to deploy military personnel to ensure the required functioning of the Larissa headquarters.⁴⁷

Similarly, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has praised the immediate national response to the crisis in the Red Sea with the de-

⁴³ Shipping Deputy Ministry of the Republic of Cyprus, *Marking the milestones at Cyprus Shipping Deputy Ministry's four-year anniversary* By Vassilios Demetriades Shipping Deputy Ministry to the President, available at <https://www.dms.gov.cy/dms/shipping.nsf/All/EFB8E90E6125DDBDC22587F80032B-06D?OpenDocument#:~:text=The%20flag%20represents%20a%20workforce,7%25%20of%20Cyprus%20GDP>

⁴⁴ Cyprus Profile, *Global Shipping Nation*, available at <https://www.cyprusprofile.com/sectors/maritime-and-shipping>; Shipping Deputy Ministry of the Republic of Cyprus, *Marking the milestones at Cyprus Shipping Deputy Ministry's four-year anniversary* By Vassilios Demetriades Shipping Deputy Ministry to the President.

⁴⁵ Shipping Deputy Ministry of the Republic of Cyprus, *Marking the milestones at Cyprus Shipping Deputy Ministry's four-year anniversary* By Vassilios Demetriades Shipping Deputy Ministry to the President.

⁴⁶ Shipping Deputy Ministry of the Republic of Cyprus, *Marking the milestones at Cyprus Shipping Deputy Ministry's four-year anniversary* By Vassilios Demetriades Shipping Deputy Ministry to the President.

⁴⁷ Cyprus Shipping Chamber, *CSC strongly welcomes EU's Operation ASPIDES* (21 February 2024), available at <https://cyprussippingnews.com/2024/02/21/csc-strongly-welcomes-eus-operation-aspides/>; KNews, *Cyprus plays key role in EU's operation ASPIDES: Republic of Cyprus takes active role in protecting Red Sea shipping routes* (23 February 2024), available at <https://knews.kathimerini.com.cy/en/business/cyprus-plays-key-role-in-eu-s-operation-aspides>

ployment of those two military officers.⁴⁸ The original mandate of Operation Aspides is set to last twelve months until February 2025 and will be reviewed by the military and strategic officials of the EEAS, in conjunction with the operational chain of command, at the beginning of the next year. The Cypriot participation in the Larissa headquarters will last until the end of this initial mandate, and the deployments are likely to be confirmed with Aspides being extended by one year.⁴⁹

The extensive discussion about the participation of Cyprus' National Guard in EU maritime security operations raises some concerns regarding the reasons why the country never contributed operationally, in the sense that personnel were not deployed at sea. Instead, Cypriot military personnel were only sent to the four operational headquarters of the naval missions since 2008. They have mainly been tasked with daily strategic tasks in the behind-the-scenes of military operation.

On the one hand, in light of increasingly aggressive Turkish behaviour, Cypriot politicians were conscious that proper operational participation at sea would have strained the already limited capacity of the armed forces to defend their country's sovereignty, on both land and at sea. As noted in this section, the Naval Command possesses only eight assets, of which just one serves as a proper defence vessel, while the other seven are traditional patrol and coastal combatants. Even though the core of their operational activity relates to the defence of the Republic's territorial waters, they have relied on regional partners to protect their waters.

The Greeks remain the most significant contributor to patrolling Cyprus waters and its economic exclusive zone (EEZ) for cultural, political, and historical reasons. However, in the last three years, the Republic has expanded its defence agreements with other like-minded countries, ranging from France to Italy to Israel. Providing substantial operational capacity to the EU's naval missions was thus a quasi-impossible task for Cyprus, one which would have posed a risk to sovereignty. Therefore, the deployments in the operational headquarters of the above missions should be seen as primarily symbolic, demonstrating the country's solidarity with its EU partners.

By constantly maintaining a military contingent in those headquarters, Cyprus benefitted from closer cooperation at the highest military and strategic levels with those countries operating under the traditional NATO procedures and standards that otherwise it would not have been exposed to. In this light, deploying slightly more

⁴⁸ European Commission, *Press statement by President von der Leyen with Cypriot President Christodoulides in Larnaca* (8 March 2024).

⁴⁹ Informal conversations with serving and former Cypriot military personnel, February–April 2024.

than 20 military officers to the four operational headquarters has served as an instance of small navy diplomacy, telegraphing to the broader European community that the Republic supported the CSDP framework as best it could. Besides this diplomatic implication, these deployments have benefitted the country's economy, particularly the first and last missions, given that they were meant to ensure the freedom of navigation, a crucial aspect for the EU's third largest merchant fleet. Finally, these strategic participations have deepened political cooperation with the leading European partners in terms of joint training and patrolling exercises.

The Republic of Cyprus and the Maritime Corridor for Gaza

This section discusses Cyprus' unexpected leadership role in responding to the humanitarian crisis during the recent conflict in Gaza. On 7 October 2023, Hamas attacked the southern flank of Israel, killed a total of 1,139 people, and took more than 250 Israeli civilians as hostages in the Gaza Strip, making the armed incursion the first in the territory of Israel since 1948.⁵⁰ These attacks began the Israel–Hamas War, with Israel bombing the Gaza Strip several times.⁵¹ As of 24 April 2024, the UN has estimated that over 34,000 Palestinian civilians, of which approximately 70% were women and minors, have been killed in attacks conducted by the Israeli Defence Forces.⁵²

The seriousness of the humanitarian crisis following the Israeli attacks has urged rapid responses from the EU and its Member States. Cyprus was among the first early respondents to the crisis, proposing a maritime corridor for delivering goods to the Gaza Strip. The European Council's meetings in late October 2023 included early talks over the feasibility of such a humanitarian corridor at sea.⁵³ The Council Conclusions called for 'continued, rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access and

⁵⁰ Sarah El Debb, *What is Hamas? The group that rules the Gaza Strip has fought several rounds of war with Israel* (15 October 2023), AP, available at <https://apnews.com/article/hamas-gaza-palestinian-authority-israel-war-ed7018dba09b81513daf3bda38109a>

⁵¹ Bill Hutchinson, *Israel-Hamas War: Timeline and key developments* (22 November 2023), ABC News, available at <https://abcnews.go.com/International/timeline-surprise-rocket-attack-hamas-israel/story?id=103816006>

⁵² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #157* (24 April 2024), available at <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-157>

⁵³ Informal conversations with European Union officials, January–April 2024.

aid to reach those in need through all necessary measures, including humanitarian corridors and pauses for humanitarian needs'.⁵⁴

Two weeks later, at the Paris Peace Forum organised by French President Emmanuel Macron, the President of Cyprus, Nikos Christodoulides, presented a plan for a maritime corridor to deliver aid to the civilians in the Gaza Strip.⁵⁵ Facilitated by the Republic's geographical proximity, approximately 210 nautical miles, the proposal included using the port in Larnaca for collection, inspection, storage, and, eventually, shipping of goods to a neutral region on the coast of Gaza, escorted by warships.⁵⁶

The initiative was named Amalthea after the foster mother of Zeus, the king of all gods, on Mount Olympus in Greek mythology.⁵⁷ This choice was highly symbolic since there was a parallelism between the fostering care provided to Zeus and Cyprus' willingness to provide aid to those civilians in danger in Gaza.

President Christodoulides visited the main national actors in the region to gain support on this maritime corridor proposal. In late November 2023, Cyprus and Israel held various high-level ministerial discussions.⁵⁸ Simultaneously, the Cypriot executive managed to secure support from German Chancellor Scholz while reinforcing the bilateral partnership with France on the necessity of humanitarian aid to Gaza.⁵⁹ In early December 2023, the President visited Egypt and Jordan to meet with

⁵⁴ European Council, *European Council meeting (26 and 27 October 2023) – Conclusions* (27 October 2023), available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/67627/20241027-european-council-conclusions.pdf>, 5.

⁵⁵ Clea Calcutt, *Macron's peace forum adds to 'conference overkill,' critics say* (9 November 2023), Politico, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/macrons-peace-forum-adds-to-conference-overkill-critics-say/>

⁵⁶ Nektaria Stamouli, *EU throws weight behind Cypriot plan to ship aid to Gaza* (9 November 2023), Politico, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/cyprus-humanitarian-aid-gaza-european-union-israel-hamas-shipments/>

⁵⁷ Peter T. Struck, *Amalthea, Greek and Roman Mythology*, University of Pennsylvania, available at <https://www2.classics.upenn.edu/myth/php/tools/dictionary.php?method=did®exp=1658&set-card=0&link=0&media=0>

⁵⁸ Annie Charalambous, *Cyprus, France launch diplomatic marathon for Gaza humanitarian corridor initiative* (17 November 2023), En.Philenews, available at <https://in-cyprus.philenews.com/local/cyprus-france-launch-diplomatic-marathon-for-gaza-humanitarian-corridor-initiative/>

⁵⁹ Financial Mirror, *Cyprus-Israel in 'final stage' of opening Gaza aid corridor* (18 November 2023), available at <https://www.pressreader.com/cyprus/financial-mirror-cyprus/20231118/281608130168781>

President al-Sisi and King Abdullah, respectively, to secure diplomatic and political support.⁶⁰ The talks continued in the first trimester of the 2024.

In providing a joint coordination centre for the maritime corridor, Cypriot leaders were praised in Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. Ursula von der Leyen acknowledged the ‘relentless work’ done by the Cypriot President to have a functioning humanitarian corridor ‘by serving as a mediator for all parties’,⁶¹ while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates praised the Cypriot leadership in addressing the unprecedented humanitarian crisis in Palestine.⁶² More importantly, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the Emirates, confirmed the allocation of \$15 million to strengthen the humanitarian corridor between Cyprus and Gaza.⁶³ Additionally, a White House press statement emphasised: ‘Cyprus’ leadership in establishing the Amalthea Initiative—which outlines a mechanism for securely shipping aid from Cyprus to Gaza via sea—was integral to enabling this joint effort to launch a maritime corridor’.⁶⁴ Finally, in his letter to President Christodoulides, US President Joe Biden commended the ‘leadership, determination, and vision’ demonstrated by Cyprus in providing a safe humanitarian corridor for delivering goods to the civilians in the Gaza Strip.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Reuters, *Cyprus pushes Gaza corridor idea; leader to visit Egypt, Jordan* (4 December 2023), available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/cyprus-pushes-gaza-corridor-idea-leader-visit-egypt-jordan-2023-12-04/>

⁶¹ European Commission, *Press statement by President von der Leyen with Cypriot President Christodoulides in Larnaca* (8 March 2024).

⁶² United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *UAE Strongly Condemns the Israeli attack of World Central Kitchen Team in the Gaza Strip* (2 April 2024), available at <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2024/4/2/2-4-2024-uae-ghaza>

⁶³ United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Under the directives of the UAE President, the UAE supports the “Amalthea Fund” for humanitarian response in Gaza with USD 15 million* (10 April 2024), available at <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2024/4/10/10-4-2024-uae-gaza>

⁶⁴ The White House, *Joint Statement from the European Commission, the Republic of Cyprus, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States Endorsing the Activation of a Maritime Corridor to Deliver Humanitarian Assistance to Gaza* (8 March 2024), available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/03/08/joint-statement-from-the-european-commission-the-republic-of-cyprus-the-united-arab-emirates-the-united-kingdom-and-the-united-states-endorsing-the-activation-of-a-maritime-corridor-to-deliver-hum/>

⁶⁵ Iole Damaskinos, *Biden credits Christodoulides for ‘Amalthea’ initiative* (20 March 2024), available at: <https://cyprus-mail.com/2024/03/20/biden-credits-christodoulides-for-amalthea-initiative/>

Conclusion

This research has explored Cyprus' contribution to maritime policy, naval operations, and humanitarian responses through maritime security cooperation in its first two decades of EU membership. Despite its relatively small size and limited military capabilities, Cyprus has asserted itself as a proactive and influential Member State within the EU in various fields of action. The country's maritime expertise and diplomatic finesse has contributed to unexpected success in strategically re-positioning EU maritime policy.

The pivotal moment in Cyprus' European trajectory came during their Presidency of the European Council in the second semester of 2012. Faced with the challenge of steering the broader EU agenda, the Republic seized the opportunity to champion maritime policy, culminating in the landmark Limassol Declaration published on 8 October 2012. This document represented a turning point in EU naval strategy, which had been in a stalemate due to the lack of interest of the previous Member States holding the Presidency. Conversely, Cyprus's maritime vocation helped the country promote cross-sectoral cooperation to enhance a sustainable approach to the blue economy. Overall, Cypriot leadership has underscored its commitment to the development of maritime policy and showcased its ability to drive EU policymaking despite being a relative newcomer in its complex institutional framework.

Similarly, the engagement of the National Guard in the four EU maritime security operations since 2008 has underscored the country's commitment to collective security and defence policies. Undoubtedly, the Cypriot military capabilities and overall deployments in the operational headquarters of Atalanta, Sophia, Irini, and Aspides have been modest compared to those of more significant EU partners. Nevertheless, the consistent deployments of their few military personnel have demonstrated support for the CSDP agenda. Moreover, these contributions have enhanced the strategic planning of the officers of the National Guard in the conduct of naval operations under NATO's standards that would have been otherwise missed, given that the country is not part of the alliance.

Finally, the last section has discussed the most recent Cypriot contribution to EU maritime security. Since the beginning of the Israel– Hamas conflict, Cyprus has emerged as a proactive actor in addressing the unprecedented humanitarian crisis happening in the Gaza Strip. The seminal proposal of a humanitarian maritime corridor—the Amalthea initiative—has demonstrated Cyprus' commitment to humanitarian principles, its strategic thinking in ameliorating the difficult conditions for ci-

vilians living in the Strip, and facilitating the complicated peace process in the region. The proposal of such a maritime corridor has showcased the country's diplomatic leadership and has received extensive support and praise from partners in Europe, the Middle East, and North America.

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the influence of small States in supranational organisations, particularly the EU. Traditional power-based theories have often emphasised the constraints faced by small States due to their limited economic and military resources. However, the Cypriot case challenges these assumptions and aligns with the 'smart state' framework, which posits that small States can exercise influence through strategic specialisation, diplomatic entrepreneurship, and institutional engagement.⁶⁶ The country's leadership in EU maritime policy, notably through the Limassol Declaration and the Amalthea initiative, supports the argument that small States can drive policy change by leveraging niche expertise and agenda-setting power.

Additionally, Cyprus' engagement in EU naval operations without direct military deployments exemplifies the concept of 'diplomatic actorness', demonstrating that influence is not necessarily contingent on hard power but can be achieved through sustained participation in decisionmaking structures.⁶⁷ The Cypriot experience underscores how small States can use institutional frameworks to amplify their international role, reinforcing existing literature that sees EU membership as a force multiplier for small-State diplomacy.⁶⁸

Finally, this research article offers insights into the adaptability of small States in evolving security environments. The Cypriot response to the Israel–Gaza crisis through the Amalthea initiative illustrates how small States can act as regional mediators, extending their influence beyond EU borders. This suggests that small States can play a crucial role in crisis management and humanitarian diplomacy.

Mutatis mutandis, the Cypriot contribution has been significant within the broader context of small-State engagement in EU maritime security and policymaking. On the one hand, other small Member States, such as Malta, have similarly demonstrat-

⁶⁶ Caroline Howard Grøn and Anders Wivel, 'Maximizing influence in the European Union after the Lisbon Treaty: From small state policy to smart state strategy' (2011) *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 33.5.; Diana Panke, 'Small states in the European Union: structural disadvantages in EU policy-making and counter-strategies' (2010) *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 17.6.

⁶⁷ Baldur Thorhallsson and Anders Wivel, 'Small states in the European Union: what do we know and what would we like to know?' in *Cambridge review of international affairs*, 19/4 (2006), 651-668.

⁶⁸ Kristi Raik and Merili Arjakas, 'Grasping the opportunity for small state leadership: Estonia's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine' (2024) *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*.

ed proactive maritime diplomacy, as in the case of the 12-man Vessel Protection Detachment deployed aboard the Dutch 'Johan de Wit' frigate in 2009–2010 and the initiatives MaltaMedFish4Ever Declaration, during its Presidency of the Council, and the Malta Declaration on Search & Rescue in 2019. On the other hand, the Cypriot approach possesses distinct features. Unlike Malta, whose engagement was mainly operational and migration-related, Cyprus has played a leading role in shaping EU maritime security policy at the strategic and diplomatic levels. The 2012 Limassol Declaration reinvigorated the EU's maritime agenda, while the Amalthea initiative positioned Cyprus as a humanitarian actor beyond European borders, exemplifying its unique diplomatic influence. By leveraging its maritime expertise, geopolitical positioning, and agenda-setting capabilities, the Republic has influenced high-level policy frameworks and, by doing so, demonstrated that small States can exert leadership in EU governance beyond their immediate operational capacities.

To summarise, Cyprus has proven itself to be a dynamic and influential actor within the EU and beyond by making meaningful contributions to EU maritime policy and naval operations. By focusing their energy on their established maritime expertise and diplomatic networks, Cypriots have shaped the EU's environmental approaches to maritime affairs and their humanitarian response to an ongoing conflict. This article has discussed the unexpected contribution provided by a small island State in its very first participation in the high-level political, military, and diplomatic venues of the EU. Cyprus could serve as a model for like-sized countries whose potential in the EU institutional framework might have been underestimated.

In the years to come, Cyprus will likely consolidate its role in EU maritime security and regional diplomacy, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean. The country's strategic location and maritime expertise provide a strong foundation for enhancing its influence in energy security, regional stability, and crisis response. In this regard, Cyprus is likely to deepen its collaboration with like-minded European partners and regional allies, particularly through enhanced participation in the CSDP's missions and joint naval initiatives. In the long run, the country's maritime strategy is expected to align with the EU's broader security goals to emphasise sustainable economic growth in the blue economy.

Finally, Cyprus' evolving security posture has sparked discussions on its potential NATO membership, a topic gaining renewed relevance amid shifting regional security dynamics. While the country has not formally applied for NATO membership, its growing defence cooperation with NATO-aligned partners suggests a gradual in-

tegration into Euro-Atlantic security frameworks. A moderate increase in defence spending, including investment in naval capabilities, could further strengthen its position in regional security mechanisms, ensuring that the Republic remains an active contributor to both EU and broader transatlantic security efforts.

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