

European interview  
n°111  
1<sup>st</sup> February 2022

# “The European strategy in the Indo-Pacific is subtle and perfectly adapted”

## What do we owe Europe on the maritime front?

Europe owes much to the sea and the sea also owes much to Europe. The fact that Europe has a number of maritime regions around it means that it has naturally been oriented towards the sea. The links that have developed between the various European countries over the centuries, alternating between periods of peace and war, have enabled a better understanding of the sea and the countries visited. Maritime links were first initiated in the Mediterranean and then along the African coast and in Northern Europe. The discovery of these new horizons made Europeans aware that there was a plurality of goods, ideas and cultures from which they could learn. As a result, cultural and economic relations developed, as well as technical exchanges, for example in the construction of ships. Indeed, the way ships were built in the North was different from the way they were built in the Mediterranean.

Over the centuries, these exchanges benefited all European peoples since it allowed them to learn from each other's know-how. Gradually, this exchange stimulated the commercial development of cities, particularly in Italy, such as Genoa, Venice, Pisa and Amalfi, which became real maritime thalassocracies. In the north of Europe, the development of the [Hanseatic League](#) eventually included 200 cities and ports in the Baltic and North Seas. In a way, Europe became aware of its existence as maritime trade increased.

This also led to progress in shipbuilding and knowledge of the coastline. The discovery of the compass or the stern, transmitted by the Arabs who traded with China, benefited all European maritime countries. As knowledge increased, navigational charts became ever more accurate. While they were

relatively secret objects because they were a source of power, as evidenced by the expeditions of Henry the Navigator who sent his emissaries to plot the maps needed to plan future maritime ventures, they became more widespread over time with the creation of the printing press.

The curiosity of European navigators was evident as early as the 10th century: let us recall that the Vikings discovered America by sailing across the northern seas. Emulation between the European peoples and their curiosity led them to explore further and further afield across the world. The Portuguese Bartolomeo Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope at the end of the 15th century. Christopher Columbus, who thought he had arrived in Asia, reached the Americas a few years later. In the 15th century, Spain and Portugal were the dominant maritime powers in Europe. However, news of the wealth found in the new territories prompted France, England and the Netherlands to challenge the wealth that Spain and Portugal had shared by challenging the [Tordesillas Treaty](#). This was decided under the aegis of Pope Alexander VI, who allocated the eastern territories to Portugal and those in the west to Spain.

But while the sea has historically been an essential element in the development of the European continent, in recent decades some Anglo-Saxon writers have sometimes used the term «*sea blindness*» to describe the attitude of Europeans to maritime stakes after the Second World War. It is only very recently, in the face of the aggressive attitude of certain foreign powers, that European states have become aware again of the importance of the sea.

**Indeed, regarding this awareness, you were given the task by the Chief of the Defence Staff of reorganising the Joint Operations Centre so**

“The European strategy in the Indo-Pacific is subtle and perfectly adapted”

---

**that it could plan and conduct operations for the European Union. Have you seen any progress towards greater interoperability between the navies of the Member States?**

First of all, it should be stressed that naval interoperability is something that the European Union owes mainly to NATO. Indeed, over the past decades, NATO has defined procedures and standards to allow for the emergence of a high degree of interoperability between allied naval forces. NATO exercises have validated these procedures and taken into account technical progress to adapt them. All European ships can now refuel each other, land their helicopters on all platforms, and exchange their tactical situation in real time thanks to these common standards. This is an essential step forward that must be continued. There may be specific communication systems in Europe... as there are in the United States: but for procedures, in general, we must continue to exchange and share information, for example regarding the situation of a fleet. This is an asset that must be retained.

**What is your view of the EU strategy in the Indo-Pacific?**

The European strategy in the Indo-Pacific might be qualified as subtle and perfectly adapted. Indeed in the [conclusions published by the Council on 19th April 2021](#) regarding the [European strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific](#), Europe does not oppose China, but the document does mention the reluctance of European states to deepen their interaction with states that do not respect its values, such as human rights. The first important point is that Europe wants its values to be shared. Furthermore, the European strategy in the Indo-Pacific insists on the need to strengthen partnerships with the states of South-East Asia ([ASEAN](#)) to safeguard freedom of navigation and to combat the territorialisation of the seas. Even if some ASEAN countries are less economically developed and some, such as Laos and Cambodia, are under the influence of China and certain decisions are conditional on the latter's agreement, it is essential to strengthen ties with the countries of South-East Asia.

Finally the European strategy in the Indo-Pacific mentions [Global Gateway](#), an initiative that is a European response to the Chinese New Silk Roads project, and which will provide up to €300 billions of investment by 2027. One could say that Europe wants to compete with China at its own game, with a smart strategy. While many countries, including in Europe, run the risk of becoming captive to Chinese interests, Europe is making a different proposal, one that respects the rule of law, human rights and international standards.

**Does the military build-up in the region represent a security threat to Europe?**

The answer is that New Caledonia's decision to remain part of the French community is essential for France, for Europe, but also for Australia and New Zealand to stand together in the face of China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific, the heart of world trade. China is seeking to increase its influence and its ambitions reflect the need for Europe to have a greater presence in the Indo-Pacific. Europe needs to increase the number of its naval vessels present in the area on a permanent or temporary basis to make itself visible there.

China has seized the South China Sea even though it signed the [Montego Bay](#) convention on the Law of the Sea. It has created an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) that cuts into those of Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia, for strategic reasons but also because, having a very large territory, and being a fast-growing global economy, China feels that it does not have an EEZ that corresponds to its status. It is constrained by the island barriers of neighbouring countries.

**What is the added value of the Strategic Compass?**

The European [Strategic Compass](#) project is a good idea provided that it is not limited to good intentions. In the case of the navy, the Strategic Compass should help strengthen cooperation between European states. Progress has already been made: the Member States have agreed to coordinate their presence

in certain areas, such as the Gulf of Guinea or the Indian Ocean. We need to go further, especially in terms of logistics. We need to reach agreements with shipbuilding companies so that we have sufficiently large fleets of ships. This is a truly fundamental task: the reduction of costs, the existence of common logistics, common training. It will then be easier to exchange crews between countries because they will already know how the boats work. The same applies to the armaments of vessels, which are subject to different legislation. This Strategic Compass should therefore clear up a certain number of issues and lead to progress, without creating a European Navy, which will take time.

#### **What role is there for the EU in the Mediterranean?**

The Mediterranean is central to Europe and was the first sea on which Europeans actually sailed and traded. At the beginning of our era, the city of Rome, which had a million inhabitants, received 2000 ships a year to provide it with supplies. This sea was therefore already one that «nourished». Europe has a duty to safeguard this sea as a zone of peace and development for all the countries that lie on its shores. However, this is difficult insofar as the rich countries are in the North and the developing countries are in the South, with crisis situations such as Libya and tensions between Morocco and Algeria, not to mention the dramatic situation in the Middle East. It is a complicated sea, including for religious reasons. There must therefore be a tenacious determination on the part of Europe to pursue the initiatives launched with the countries on its shores.

**Operation ATALANTA has been extended until 31 December 2022. On 3 December 2021, the UN Security Council decided that Somalia now has the capacity to fight piracy autonomously. How is this gradual handover phase being achieved?**

Somalia agreed to allow the operation entry into its territorial waters to replace the vacuum in power created by the Somali authorities. When Somalia

feels that it has a strong enough government to take back responsibility for its territorial waters, this decision should be respected. This means that Europe will have done its bit. The purpose of the operation was to get Somalia back on its feet so that it could manage and control its territorial waters. Atalanta's first mission was to resupply Mogadishu and combat piracy. If these objectives are achieved, it can only be a very good thing.

More generally, the European Union should strive to be present in strategic locations around the world. The European Union's exclusive economic zone is 19 million km<sup>2</sup>, which is considerable. Europeans should therefore be present in all the oceans.

In this regard, the [integrated maritime policy](#) supported by the European Union is absolutely remarkable. It has helped us form a common vision of fishing, to develop ports, to launch systematic research thanks to European funds with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the oceans. This last point is absolutely essential because our knowledge of the oceans is still far from perfect: only 10% of the seabed's hydrography is known. This maritime policy is therefore very useful; it allows for improvements in water quality, port infrastructures, common procedures for ships and the fight against pollution. To be able to apply this policy, it is necessary to be present in all five oceans, which is made possible by the many exclusive economic zones that the Member States have. The other countries of the world must also be encouraged to follow the same measures, because it is in no one's interest to have polluted oceans, for example.

#### **What should be the EU's engagement in the Arctic?**

First of all, European involvement in the Arctic is legitimate because three EU countries are part of the Arctic region (Denmark, Finland, Sweden), not to mention Iceland and Norway, which have privileged links with Europe. In all five of the eight countries in the [Arctic Council](#) are European. The European Union tried to become a permanent observer member of the Arctic Council, but was turned down, first by Canada, then by Russia. The recent [strategy for the Arctic](#)

“The European strategy in the Indo-Pacific is subtle and perfectly adapted”

---

which the European Union published in October 2021 no longer mentions the idea of joining the Council in the short term. This means that it can be stronger and more radical in its arguments. For example, the European Union has hardened its tone by saying that it is against the extraction of raw materials in the Arctic.

Europe’s interest in the Arctic is also legitimate, because the European Union has done a lot for the Pole in terms of research and support. European action in the Arctic is increasingly visible, but from now on countries should follow this strategy, including France which, for the moment, is far from these concerns. It is important to maintain this presence,

despite a certain reluctance on the part of countries such as Canada and Russia, by placing the action of the integrated maritime policy, the fight against global warming, the protection of resources and the environment, and respect for the Inuit peoples at the centre of our concerns.

---

**Patrick Hébrard**

Vice-Admiral (2S), Naval Officer, Airborne pilot, member of EuroDéfense-France and Wise Pen International

*Interview realised by Ramona Bloy*

See all of our publications on our site:  
[www.robert-schuman.eu](http://www.robert-schuman.eu)

Publishing director : Pascale JOANNIN

---

**THE ROBERT SCHUMAN FOUNDATION**, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France, Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organization of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.