

European issues
n°667
May 2nd 2023

Naval rearmament, European perspectives

Dr. Nicolas MAZZUCCHI

The increase in international crises, particularly since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the continuing rhetoric of future Sino-American confrontation in the Indo-Pacific, are resulting in a period of profound geopolitical upheaval, with rising maritime and naval challenges. Several trends are thus interlinked, between the strengthening of the transatlantic nexus, the continuous increase in the importance of the Indo-Pacific and the wish for strategic rebalancing on the part of the countries of the South.

Faced with these multiple challenges, underscored by [an unprecedented trend in naval rearmament](#), the European Union is seeking a

new strategic-military balance at sea. Between the strengthening of the European Union-NATO link, the resolve of member states to invest more in their naval assets and the need to work to defend and enforce respect for international law, the European Union must show determination and also support this effort to rearm.

The various institutional frameworks, as well as cooperation formats, have meant that defence equipment projects have been developed in a more flexible way in recent years, notably with the [progressive maturity of the European Defence Fund](#). Interoperability, joint operations and new capabilities are needed jointly, so that Europe can continue to play its part in the global naval game.

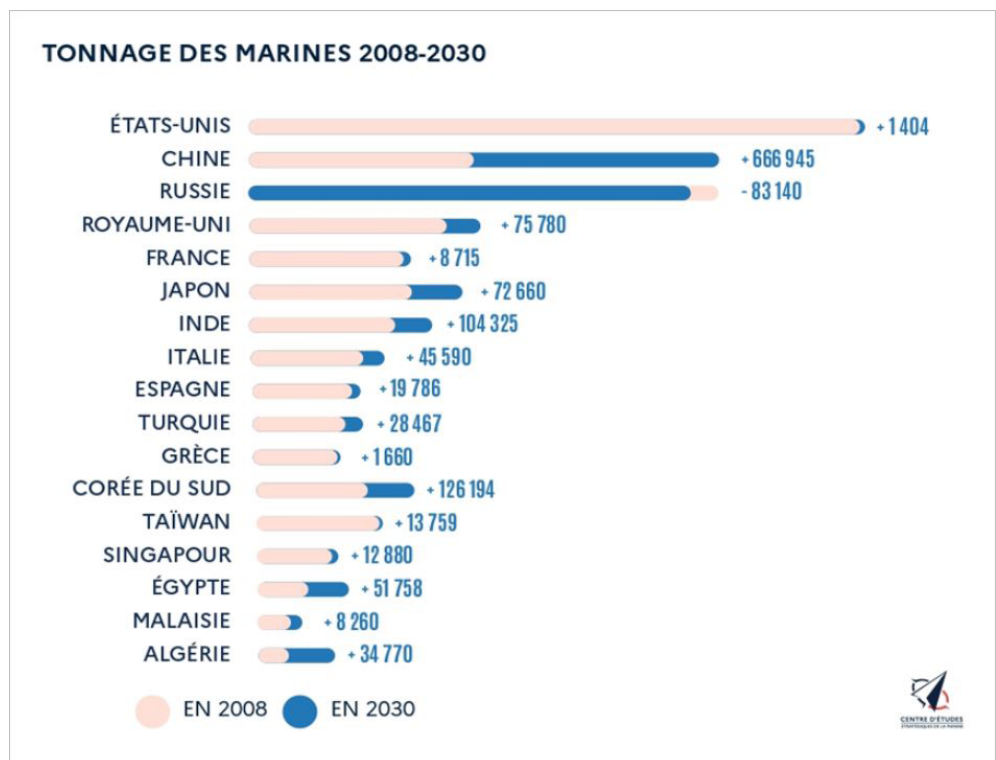


Fig. 1 Naval rearmament shown by the development of naval tonnage ("[Military naval rearmament in the world](#)", Études Marines, Hors Série, CESM)

THE EUROPEAN DIMENSION OF CURRENT MARITIME CHALLENGES

The strengthening of transatlantic cooperation, following the Ukrainian conflict, mechanically implies a need to reposition naval challenges at the core of military cooperation, particularly in an EU-NATO format.

Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, NATO had tended to focus on distant planning operations, with a very strong land component, while minimising naval issues, particularly on the northern flank (North Atlantic - Arctic - Baltic). The return of a strong strategic dialectic between NATO and Russia is repositioning this region as one of the major areas of attention for all 31 NATO members.

In this respect, the importance of EU-NATO cooperation, which has continued to develop since the [Wales Summit in 2014](#), includes a new naval dimension for the European Allies, after the creation of air policing mission and the deployment of multinational battalions in Poland and the three Baltic states. Cooperation on anti-submarine warfare, as well as on real-time naval situation awareness, is becoming an imperative for the European members of the Alliance in view of the challenge dictated by the changing geopolitical context.

The decontinentalization of energy flows, a consequence of the war in Ukraine and the wish to limit or even completely cut off Russian hydrocarbon imports, is also resulting in an increased maritimisation of European energy supplies.

In addition to recourse to nearby countries accessible by sea (Norway, Algeria), decontinentalization is taking place through diversification towards distant suppliers (North and South America, the Arab-Persian Gulf, India, etc.) which is leading to a need for increased security of the main maritime routes. In addition to the North Atlantic, which is of major interest with growing energy routes from the United States and Brazil and a continuity of flows from the Gulf of Guinea, it is above all the Mediterranean Sea, seen as a passageway to the Indo-Pacific (gas and crude oil from the Arab-Persian Gulf, petroleum products from India), which is a major transit area.

Moreover, we must add to this picture the future development of imports from the gas fields of the Eastern Mediterranean, once the necessary infrastructure to export gas in liquefied form would be built. Indeed, the Mediterranean Sea, through this enhanced energy role, is itself facing a need for increased planning of European naval forces for security purposes, in a context of regional naval rearmament and persistent tensions between certain regional actors.

Finally, planning towards the Indo-Pacific area, particularly because of the decontinentalization of supplies, constitutes the last of the three major background elements that are pushing Europe towards a major naval rearmament.

The publication in 2021 of [the European Union's Indo-Pacific Strategy](#), demonstrated the resolve of the Member States to strengthen their ties and their focus on a maritime territory that represents both import (energy and merchandise) and export challenges for European industries. In this respect, in view of the persistent tensions between actors of different sizes and in the face of an unprecedented local naval rearmament, the Europeans have acknowledged the importance of their presence, in view of these economic interests, but also for the need to work towards respecting treaties and international law.

Moreover, for member states with an ultramarine territory such as France, it is important to consider the issue of sovereignty, which remains particularly important at a time of increasing contestation of international law and [challenges being made](#) by some key players at international level, to the measures set out in [United Nation Convention on the law of the sea](#). The Member States and the European Union, wishing to promote their vision of international order, based on respect for the law and stability must be increasingly present militarily in relatively distant areas, in view of this global dynamic of contestation of the international order.

OPERATIONAL INTEGRATION

Faced with the multiplicity of geopolitical challenges at sea, both on the doorstep of the European continent and thousands of kilometres away, member states must strengthen their naval operational cooperation to deal with the multiple risks posed by state and non-state actors.

The maritime component of CSDP remains a significant part of the EU's external action, with a number of missions in the immediate EU neighbourhood EU (Sophia until 2020, [Irinia](#)), but also further afield, with in particular [Atalanta](#). Long before the publication of the European Indo-Pacific strategy, the latter had already demonstrated a form of maritime security planning in the zone - admittedly limited to the Horn of Africa - with the challenge of protecting the various flows of hydrocarbons circulating there. Operational since 2008, *Atalanta* has been a real success for the EU, demonstrating that coordinated action by the various navies, leading to a quasi-permanent presence in the area, enables the achievement of tangible results that benefit both Europeans and all the players concerned by maritime piracy.

However, European operational cooperation does not only take place within the framework of CSDP and also covers more varied aspects. The [EMASoH Agenor](#) mission is, from this point of view, an important success, compensating for the departure of a large part of the American forces from the Arab-Persian Gulf. While the United States has chosen to redeploy to the Asia-Pacific and, as a result, no longer maintains a permanent aircraft carrier presence in the region, the Europeans, who face the growing influence of the Arab-Persian Gulf regarding their energy supplies, have a vital need to ensure the security of the area. *Agenor*, which comprises nine countries led by France to ensure the security of maritime routes and freedom of navigation, is becoming a flagship mission for the naval forces of European countries as a whole.

In addition to these multilateral missions under the aegis of the CSDP or not, joint deployments and training must also be reinforced. On the first point in

particular, the example of the participation of frigates from European countries in the deployments of the French carrier strike group is revealing. Thus, among the 3-4 frigates accompanying the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle*, in charge of the air defence mission and anti-submarine warfare, it is increasingly common to find ships from other European navies on part of the mission.

During the 2022 deployment of the French carrier strike group - the [Antarès](#) mission, Greek and Italian ships in particular participated in the escort. While [France](#) is the only country in Europe to have this type carrier-based capability, which includes a nuclear deterrence component, this increased operational cooperation with the European Allies is a sign of the importance of the European cooperation in the French naval action. This is also enabled by the ever-increasing interoperability between data link and command systems, but also by the strengthening of industrial cooperation for future equipment.

PERMANENT STRUCTURED COOPERATION CENTRAL TO MAJOR PROJECTS

In terms of European industrial cooperation, recent developments related to the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), as well as to projects led by [the European Defence Agency](#), address the structural priorities of the naval domain for Europeans, namely maritime surveillance and mine warfare.

As defence issues *par excellence*, these two fields lend themselves particularly well to European cooperation, since they present little risk of political blockage on the one hand and require significant economic and technological investment on the other, so as to have the most effective equipment. Thus, the issues of digitisation of sensors or the droning of carriers - for mine warfare in particular - are central to the programmes supported by the European Union. However, the European Union is also investing in more substantial equipment in view of the geopolitical and operational challenges mentioned above.

In France, the [European Patrol Corvette \(EPC\)](#) is proving to be an important area of focus, as the future EPCs are intended to replace the current surveillance frigates in the overseas territories. The generation of surveillance frigates is reaching its limits in terms of capabilities, both in terms of sensors and on-board effectors. Given the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic area for Europe, an increase in these capabilities is more than necessary. Depending on the variant acquired, the EPCs will be able to carry helicopters or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which is also a sign of better integration of new equipment.

The EPC programme, which includes Italy, France, Greece and Spain as initial partners, has been joined by Norway and Denmark, with Portugal and Croatia as observers. The scale of the programme in terms of participating states makes it a *de facto* major European cooperation programme, which is also reflected in the amount of resources devoted to it, in particular through the European Defence Fund (EDF).

Although several variants of these corvettes are being considered, depending on the missions assigned to them by the navies (enforcing sovereignty afar, protection of Europe neighbourhood, surface warfare, etc.), they will be built on a common basis, which offers many advantages in terms of interoperability. Indeed, joint training, or even sharing of capabilities, could be more extensively organised with the various countries in the EPC programme, especially since this programme brings together most of the European naval powers, especially in the Mediterranean.

BILATERAL CHALLENGES

In terms of naval industrial cooperation, European action in recent years, led in particular by the Franco-Italian partnership, has resulted in a number of important achievements.

Amongst these the [FREMM](#) programme is of note – these frigates being the core capabilities of the two navies, particularly in anti-submarine warfare – but also in [Logistic Support Ship \(LSS\)](#), driven by [OCCAR](#). The LSS tanker programme is particularly important in

the context of the long-range deployment of European forces, especially to the Indo-Pacific area, and should help France – in particular – to support the deployments of the carrier strike group. The LSS programme, which is expected to include between 5 and 7 ships in total, is a major element in the capacity to deploy European naval forces for a long time, both in the gateways to Europe, including in the framework of *HADR* (*humanitarian assistance, disaster relief*) missions, and in long-range operations.

This Franco-Italian cooperation thus appears to be one of the driving forces behind naval rearmament at European level, including with a view to having classes of high-performance ships at relatively sustainable costs. The *FREMM* programme, despite differences between the Italian and French versions, has brought down the unit cost of each ship^[1] by its sheer size – 18 units for the two navies, not counting exports. The programme is also a real industrial and operational success, since the United States has chosen *FREMM* as the basis for the US Navy's *Constellation*-class frigate programme.

Beyond these major ship programmes, bilateral cooperation, still under the aegis of the OCCAR, enabled the renewal of European mine warfare capabilities, with the Franco-British programme [MMCM](#). However, it should be noted that it also reveals the limits of European cooperation. Indeed, *MMCM* – resulting from the 2010 Lancaster House Treaty – coexists with the [MAS MCM](#), managed by the PESCO, uniting 9 countries, including France, in a Belgian initiative. The two programmes are very similar in their expectations – high level of system robotization, human-machine teaming, etc. – but differ in the industrial operators chosen and could be more complementary than the descriptions suggest.

However, while programmes such as EPC, *FREMM* or LSS tend to reinforce European interoperability, the divergence on mine warfare systems may limit this trend. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the massive reinvestment, through the PESCO, or Franco-British bilateral cooperation in this field, is a particularly positive point, considering the very deep stakes involved in these areas of expertise, especially from the point of view of seabed warfare.

[1] Before the *FREMM* programme, the *Horizon* air defence frigate programme enabled this proximity in the naval industry between France and Italy to be established for major units

The continuing geopolitical challenge of protecting Europe's maritime gateways, combined with those arising from the war in Ukraine and the European Union's wish to venture into the Indo-Pacific area, are leading to a strengthening of European naval operational cooperation and, as a corollary, to an increase in bi- and multilateral industrial projects.

In addition to this reinforced cooperation between member states, it is also important to note that most European countries are involved in this global trend of naval rearmament in a purely national way. This may involve renewing capabilities, as is primarily the case for France, notably with the PA-NG, which will eventually replace the *Charles de Gaulle*, but also, surprisingly in these times of economic uncertainty, major increases in capacity.

In this respect, Italy appears to be almost unique in Europe, with a very strong resolve, particularly in terms of its surface and naval air forces, to have a major naval tool with the announcement of a class of cruisers exceeding 10,000 tonnes, as well as the reinforcement of its naval air capabilities with the *Trieste*, which, alongside the *Cavour*, is due to receive the future F-35Bs built in cooperation with the United States.

Taking into account these increases and the renewals mentioned, Europe would have a more than substantial naval capacity by 2030, with seven aircraft carriers, more than forty first-rank warships and about thirty oceanic submarines; a substantial capacity, but more than useful in these times of uncertainty.

Dr. Nicolas Mazzucchi

Research Director, CESM

You can read all of our publications on our site:

www.robert-schuman.eu/en

Publishing Director: Pascale JOANNIN

ISSN 2402-614X

The opinions expressed in this text are the sole responsibility of the author.

© All rights reserved, Fondation Robert Schuman, 2024

LA FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN, créée en 1991 et reconnue d'utilité publique, est le principal centre de recherches français sur l'Europe. Elle développe des études sur l'Union européenne et ses politiques et en promeut le contenu en France, en Europe et à l'étranger. Elle provoque, enrichit et stimule le débat européen par ses recherches, ses publications et l'organisation de conférences. La Fondation est présidée par M. Jean-Dominique GIULIANI.

[2] Timothy Snider « Bloodlands, Europe Between Hitler and Stalin », Basic Books, New York, 2019.