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Didier PIATON

# The sea as a strategic interest for Europe

## A European perspective on the ocean and its challenges

The return of a forgotten conflict, both in everyday life and in the subconscious of European democracies since the end of the Cold War, invites us to revisit the foundations of geostrategy and the place of oceans within it. Europe is an island in the geostrategic sense: it has many maritime assets. In the new era ushered in by Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine and in the context of a 'decentring of the world'[1], the European Union is gradually asserting its own strategic identity. The European initiative launched in early 2025 to offer security guarantees to Ukraine, under the dual pressure of Russian military operations and the US diplomatic shift, illustrates the need to take a new step forward. To live up to its ambitions, Europe must fully embrace the geostrategic dimension of the maritime sphere.

### EUROPE IS A SEA-GOING CONTINENT

Geographically speaking, Europe is a peninsula: this promontory forming the western part of the Eurasian landmass is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the west, the Arctic Ocean to the north and the Mediterranean Sea to the south, which form a natural border. Its land border from Finland to Bulgaria, located between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, has been its greatest strategic challenge since the [Budapest Memorandum](#) was violated.

Europe is thus bordered by 66,000 kilometres of coastline, making the European Union

one of the political entities with the longest maritime borders in the world. By comparison, the European Union's approximately 15,000 kilometres of land borders represent only 18% of its borders in total. Russia's borders with the European Union account for less than 3%[2], this puts into perspective the notion of encirclement sometimes put forward by Russia to lament the enlargement of European or Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Its coastline opening onto the Arctic also puts it in a good position to exploit direct routes to the Pacific as they thaw. The Northwest Passage off the coast of Canada and the Northeast Passage off the coast of Russia will eventually offer[3] an alternative to the Suez Canal or the diversions around the Cape of Good Hope. The United States' long-standing ambitions for Greenland[4], which were expressed without diplomatic restraint by the new American president in early 2025, have highlighted the strategic importance of the Arctic region.

As the European Union's new [maritime strategy](#) updated in 2023 reminds us, its Member States form the largest combined exclusive economic zone in the world. As such, Europe has a leading role to play in the security and preservation of the world's maritime areas, which are a common good of humanity, and in promoting international law (notably the [Montego Bay Convention](#) or the [BBNJ Treaty](#)) which lays down the rules for its peaceful use.

[1] Pierre Haroche "dans la forge du monde" (Fayard, 2024)

[2] 2250 km, half of which is in Finland

[3] The major shipping companies are ever cautious about this route, which is still fraught with navigational difficulties and lacks logistical support points

[4] President Andrew Johnson tried to buy Greenland from Denmark in 1867, arguing that it belonged to the American geographical area.

[5] Maersk (DK), MSC (IT-CH) et CMA CGM (FR)

[6] Naval Group (FR), TKMS (DE), Fincantieri (IT), Saab Kockums (SE), Damen (NL), Navantia (ES) et BAE Systems (UK)

[7] Gallimard, 2025

[8] Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer "Le réveil stratégique, essai sur la guerre permanente" (Seuil, 2024)

[9] Philippe Boulanger « Introduction à la géostratégie » (la Découverte, 2023)

[10] An approach used in France "multi-places and multi-fields" (M2MC), It has replaced the American concept of multi-domain operations since the 2010s, the development of which is continuing within NATO's Strategic Command for Transformation (SCAT).

[11] The latter justifies the adoption of the "influence" strategic function in the 2022 national strategic review

[12] Sherry Sontag, Christopher Drew "Blind Man's bluff, the untold story of American submarine espionage" (Perennial, 1998)

[13] NATO's decision in 2018 to create a joint command in Norfolk (JFC Norfolk) reflects the renewed interest in the strategic dimension of this large area, forgotten since the closure of the historic Atlantic Command (SACLANT).

[14] Study on maritime transport UNCTAD, 2024. Introduction by Secretary-General Rebeca Grynspan: "The development of sustainable and resilient maritime transport is not only desirable, it's a strategic necessity."

[15] Strategic vision of the French Chief of Staff for 2021

[16] See the [study](#) (FMES, 2025)

[17] Alfred Thayer Mahan "The Influence of Sea Power upon History" (1890) influenced the naval policies of the United States, the United Kingdom and other major powers.

This geography is the source of its immense maritime assets, accumulated since the end of the Middle Ages when European nations decided to turn to the sea. As the heir to this strategic choice, the European Union has major ports that are well located on the most direct shipping routes, even if the largest in terms of volume are now in Asia, particularly in China.

Its maritime industry is powerful: the three world leaders in maritime transport are European[5]. Its shipbuilding industry has the capacity to build all types of warships and naval drones, with world-class companies also operating in this sector[6] which equip Europe's major navies and have expertise that is highly valued on the export market.

In a predominantly sea-based globalisation, Europe's geographical setting as a peninsula of Eurasia means that control of the oceans, from the seabed to the space above, needs to be a key part in building its strategic identity.

## MARITIME POWER, THE FOUNDATION OF GENERAL STRATEGY

The return of conflict coincides with the "*hour of the predators*" described by Giuliano da Empoli[7] and the uninhibited exercise of power. He calls for a '*strategic awakening*' of European democracies, to use a term that is widely employed today[8].

Drawing lessons from this well-established trend is a matter of overall strategy. It needs to be revisited over the long term and on a broader scale, allowing a clear distinction to be made between strategy and tactical action.

In recent years, the geostrategic approach[9] adds to traditional physical environments of confrontation (land, sea, air) a contiguous space (exo-atmospheric), immaterial spaces (digital, electromagnetic) and even a cognitive field[10], that of perceptions[11], which is in fact the ultimate objective of the confrontation.

One of the major challenges is integrating the effects produced collectively in these 'large geostrategic spaces,' foremost among which is its maritime space. The second of these challenges, another pillar of geostrategy, can be described as strategic depth. It is the vast Euro-Atlantic space that has given Europe its essential strategic depth vis-à-vis the Eurasian landmass for nearly a century. A theatre of confrontation during the Cold War[12], the political and military framework of the Atlantic Alliance remains relevant in this respect[13].

However, at a time when US foreign policy is demanding that Europeans take on more responsibility for their own security in terms that are more explicit than ever before, we need to find a more European dimension to this strategic depth. Dual in nature, the civil aspect concerns the free movement of maritime traffic and free access to the blue economy. This requires the ability to maintain knowledge of the oceans, operating methods and associated expertise[14].

The military aspect involves the freedom of action and combat capability of European war fleets. Our fleets work to ensure the safety of activities at sea and to preserve certain unique skills. They guarantee the continuum of competition, protest and confrontation[15], a deterrent to a strategic competitor seeking to harm our interests, at sea or elsewhere.

By way of illustration, they help to counter attempts to territorialise maritime areas in the Mediterranean Sea[16] whose resurgence reflects the return of power relations and the *fait accompli*.

Over a century ago, at a time already marked by major technological and geopolitical transformations, American Admiral Mahan was the one who best described the role of maritime power in global competition. An excellent strategist, he also formulated a vision that went beyond simple military naval might, analysing the dynamics of global power[17]. He did not view maritime power as an independent variable, but rather as the result

of a complex combination of factors: geography, demographics, industrial capacity and political choices. His vision remains surprisingly relevant today.

Finally, a much more recent but highly symbolic aspect of a maritime component directly serving the overall strategy, the oceanic<sup>[18]</sup> nuclear deterrent force does not have as its primary objective to fight at sea but, if necessary, from the sea to its targets via the trajectory of its ballistic missiles. However, its only real success will be achieved in the realm of an adversary's perceptions, deterring them from attacking our interests beyond a threshold unknown to them.

Although France has chosen to remain outside NATO's nuclear plans, its recent proposal to discuss the European nature of its independent nuclear deterrent is an unprecedented and encouraging contribution to this strategic construction. European leaders cannot therefore ignore the importance of naval power, not only as a guardian of the seas, but above all as a guarantor of a maritime dimension that is essential to its global security, the construction of its strategic identity and its place in the world.

## A NEW STEP TOWARDS A MORE STRATEGIC EUROPE

The lack of robust military capabilities that could be mobilised collectively, despite the commitment of the WEU, prevented Europe from compensating for the failures of the UN in the post-Cold War Balkan crises. This ultimately led to recourse to the Americans and NATO at the height of these crises.

Since then, the slow process of building a European strategic identity has continued in step with the development of a [European security and defence policy](#) that sought to avoid duplicating or pre-empting NATO and [its strategic concept](#).

Recent developments in a common strategic culture include the launch in 2020, under the German Presidency, of the '[Strategic Compass](#)', adopted in

March 2022 under the French Presidency, a few days after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, followed by the [European Defence White Paper in 2025](#). In its [national strategic review](#), France reiterates the need for Europe to have real power to act.

Mastery of the seas, which requires consistency and long-term vision, must now be considered at European level if we are to be able to hold our own against the major strategic competitors of the 21st century. The Compass advocates strengthening this. The [European Union's maritime security strategy](#), updated in 2023, aims to promote activities related to the blue economy and interests at sea, tackle the consequences of climate change and strengthen maritime surveillance instruments, in particular for the protection of critical maritime infrastructure.

Moreover, the European Union's naval [operations](#) or those under European leadership over the last few years reflect an ambition in which France is actively taking part. They have helped forge an indisputable body of experience<sup>[19]</sup>, while in the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea, the Americans, followed by the British, opted for different modes of operation, justifying the establishment of separate operations, even though it is likely that there was a minimal level of coordination between them at the tactical level.

This progress is therefore significant and demonstrates the growth of Europe's strategic identity. However, geopolitical challenges require us to go beyond the realm of maritime security and low intensity, which was already surpassed in the case of operation [Aspides](#)<sup>[20]</sup>, to cover the full spectrum of naval power.

Now, a further step must be taken. With the winds blowing against us, we must tack closely, an uncomfortable but necessary manoeuvre to sail into the wind and, to continue the metaphor, take a course that may have seemed unrealistic a short while ago but which has now become essential.

<sup>[18]</sup> FOST, the French Navy's strategic oceanic force, which is strategically linked to FAS, the French Air Force's strategic air forces, in France's nuclear doctrine.

<sup>[19]</sup> Operations Atalanta in the Gulf of Aden, Irini in the Mediterranean Sea and Aspides in the Red Sea are still active, while Operation Agenor/EMASOH in the Strait of Hormuz region ended in 2024.

<sup>[20]</sup> The anti-aircraft defences of the French Navy's frigates deployed in the Red Sea have been deployed on several occasions since November 2023 in the face of attacks by Houthi militias using drones and ballistic missiles.

From an operational perspective, this path is based on accelerating the European convergence of the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTB) so as to achieve the mass and interoperability of naval forces, and on setting up an integrated maritime command, in peacetime, to ensure agility and coordination.

### GREATER INDUSTRIAL CONVERGENCE TO REGAIN STRATEGIC DEPTH

The need for convergence of the EDTB has been well understood for a long time. While Europe is active in this area with the European Defence Industrial Strategy [EDIS](#) and the defence industry programme [EDIP](#) launched in 2024, it must accelerate this momentum by drawing on an industrial base with excellent expertise. The aim is to promote innovation while limiting the undesirable effects of export competition and, at a time of a new digital revolution, to adopt standards that guarantee the best possible interoperability of combat platforms, i.e. their ability to fight together[21].

In addition to the defence industries, this integration must take into account the imperative of establishing a strategic European fleet, comprising civilian vessels to ensure logistics and personnel transport flows[22].

The integration of industrial aspects is therefore essential to restore strategic depth within the European area itself. We now know that this is not unconditionally guaranteed by the transatlantic link.

### A PERMANENT MARITIME COMMAND ENABLING ACTION IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

Delivering strategic effects in the competition-contestation-confrontation continuum is essential, even in peacetime, to guarantee the primary strategic function of deterrence, but also to combat hybrid threats effectively and interpret developments in the environment.

This is why our national military headquarters, like those of NATO, are permanent. The tools of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), without permanent capacity at the operational level, are not yet suited to dealing with all forms of conflict.

In theory, guaranteeing this permanence for Europe could be based on NATO, by activating the so-called 'Berlin+' agreements, which on paper have the advantage of not duplicating European resources. In the naval sphere, this capability could be based on the Allied Maritime Command ([MARCOM](#)) which plays this role at the Euro-Atlantic level, with its interface with the maritime world. Regardless of the disadvantage of the location of this headquarters, outside the European Union since Brexit, these agreements are locked in place by non-European Allies who do not hesitate to use their political veto[23].

A profound change of approach is therefore required to create a permanent maritime command in Europe. This command must have the capability to plan and command operations at the operational level[24], allied and joint naval operations, including high-intensity operations, with a situation centre for assessing naval and maritime situations.

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Full strategic integration will be achieved by combining the military and civilian, industrial and operational, protection and defence aspects at European level. In the maritime domain, the two approaches described above should ensure strategic continuity from peacetime to wartime, effectively calibrate the deterrent posture in the conventional domain and, as is the case in France with the three maritime prefectures, provide a dual protection role (preservation of marine areas, combating environmental damage and illegal trafficking, rescue at sea, etc.). Like any European step forward, these reforms require political convergence first and foremost: it is to be hoped that this will not come

[21] Inspired by the standing NATO agreement (STANAG), whose effectiveness is waning with the divergence of technological choices within the Alliance, national industrial interests having taken precedence over the expression of a shared military need.

[22] The US thanks to the [Jones Act](#) (1920), have the means to consolidate their naval power.

[23] Only one operation is covered by these agreements: [Althea](#) in Bosnia and Herzegovina

[24] Exercising command at theatre level

about under the pressure of a new strategic surprise, but rather thanks to the will of enlightened leaders. May these few lines contribute to raising awareness of the many challenges facing the oceans, which

are the common heritage of humanity, and of their strategic importance so that we can reverse the saying that *'tears taste salty to remind fallen rulers of the sea they neglected'*[25].

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**Vice Admiral (2S) Didier Piaton**

Associate Professor at Sorbonne University  
Associate Researcher at the FMES

[25] Michel Tripier [Le Royaume d'Archimède](#) (Economica, 1993)

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