

Europe: A Global Strategic Actor Must be Present at Sea

Jeremy Stöhs (ISPK)

interviewed by Joseph Henrotin –

Chief Editor of *Défense & Sécurité Internationale*



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If you want to be a world-class strategic actor, you must be present on the seas. In the context of declining naval forces, can Europe or its states still be global players?

That depends on what you define as a global player. It also depends on how much presence at sea – or, in other words, naval power – you believe is necessary. The individual European states and respective governments will have different and often contradicting views on what role naval forces have to play compared to other elements of foreign policy toolkit.

The most common example of a world-class strategic actor, of course, is the United States. No other state wields such comprehensive political, military, economic, and cultural power. In military and naval terms, no state can hope to achieve the same degree of capability to conduct and sustain large-scale power projection operations on a global scale. Despite China's massive military buildup and growing global footprint, the United States will maintain this advantage by a considerable margin for the foreseeable future.

In regard to Europe, both France and the United Kingdom have demonstrated that they can project a measurable degree of military power over distance. They maintain a strategic deterrent, nuclear attack submarines, carrier aviation, amphibious assault and precision strike capabilities, all of which other powers

will surely take notice of. However, in their national defense strategies, both acknowledge that for large, lengthy, and high-risk military campaigns they will need the help from allies, i.e. the United States. Nevertheless, the *Royal Navy* and the *Marine nationale* have maintained global reach, albeit limited by the declining size of their military forces.

Europe as a whole is an industrial powerhouse. It has a greater combined gross domestic product and is more populous than the United States; with which almost all European states enjoy some sort of defense cooperation. Despite all its apparent flaws – many of which are currently more pronounced than in the past – the European Union has evolved from being a political and economic actor to become a security actor in its own right. It follows that Europe will continue to be a global security player. However, this cannot ob-



HMS Queen Elizabeth represents a powerful tool of global power projection. Source: UK Ministry of Defence.

sure two facts: First, the European Union does not entertain military forces but has to rely on its members' capabilities. Second, the decline of European naval forces over the past three decades relative to other states in the world has had significant ramifications for the respective states, Europe and the transatlantic community as a whole. Under the premise that global power distribution depends on the application of a combination of soft power and hard power (= smart power), the cuts to navies have limited Europa's ability to buttress its political ambitions with credible hard power. This subtracts from the individual and collective ability to shape events abroad; which in our globalized world can quickly have adverse effects at home.

In your book, you have demonstrated the current trend toward force reduction in most of the European navies, despite their investment in ships that have more capabilities. But those ships are also costlier, which in turns implies reducing – once more – quantity. Will this cycle continue?

As I have argued in a recent article for the *Naval War College Review*, "Into the Abyss: European Naval Forces in the Post-Cold War Era", European naval forces reached their collective nadir in 2014. Since the illegal annexation of Crimea, the War in Ukraine, the migration crisis, and the wave of terrorist attacks across Europe, Western governments are again willing to spend more on defense and security – the degree of course being subject to discussion. NATO is again placing greater emphasis on warfighting capabilities

and being able to prevail against peer competitors. Revitalizing collective defense and strengthening national and European security is, of course, a painstaking matter. It will probably take as much time to rebuild the envisioned capabilities and to reach desired readiness levels as has passed since last facing a similar challenge. At the same time, the ongoing instability across the greater Middle East has thrust the maritime domain and the role of naval forces and coast guards into the limelight. This is why NATO also acknowledges that it must maintain a "360 degree approach".

From the waning years of the Cold War up until very recently, force reduction was the rule rather than the exception across most of Europe. While the majority of governments were eager to capitalize on the gains that the 'peace dividend' promised, the speed and degree of decline (in numerical terms) varied. Between 2001 and 2014, naval forces underwent the most drastic cuts. This was a consequence of 1) the paradigmatic shift toward projecting power beyond Europe to address various perceived security challenges. 2) the financial crisis, which was of greatest detriment to European navies, large and small.

As you correctly point out, while spending was reduced, the price-tag attached to capable naval platforms has significantly increased over time. That means that fewer platforms are available to deal with a greater number of duties over a broader range of the intensity spectrum. It appears, however, that European

navies are finding ways of escaping this vicious circle. The German navy, for example, is likely to increase the size of its navy for the first time since the end of the Cold War; the decline of the Dutch navy has been arrested. Similar cases are discernable elsewhere. This can be attributed to increased defense spending but also to closer cooperation between European states what defense procurement is concerned. Because steel is cheap, and air is free, building large naval vessels is possible even for relatively small states. Compromises surely have to be made regarding the sophistication of weapon and combat systems. Finding short-cuts by investing in asymmetric capabilities (anti-ship missiles), affordable high-end technologies (signature reduction, off-the-shelf solutions), or cost-saving features (lean-manning and multiple crewing) allows European states to regenerate their fleets without breaking the bank.

In the long run, I believe there is no way around further consolidating Europe's defense sector. For example, Franco-Italian naval planners learned their lessons from the *Horizon*-class destroyer project that had evolved from the NRF-90. These lessons were later successfully applied to FREMM frigate. Moreover, it is safe to say that – despite constant contestation – European naval industry enjoys significant success in export market, which improves the economy of scale. Alone the fact that two European designs are considered by the USN for their future frigate program is not only unprecedented but highlights the ability of

European defense industry to hold its own. The current trend toward national solutions in the procurement of future surface combatants is therefore somewhat surprising.

Through NATO, the US Navy is somehow a European navy. But it faces many challenges and the US position regarding European security – and its commitment to it – is not as certain as it was during the former administration. How do you envision the US position and its effects on European navies?

Currently, questions have arisen pertaining to the United States' willingness to provide 'unconditional' security guarantees to its European allies. However, I cannot envision a future in which the United States forfeits its commitments and retreats from the European continent. As the noted offshore-balancer John Mearsheimer has pointed out, there are three regions in the world that matter to the United States: Northeast Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. The United States has an inherent interest in maintaining a (military) presence in all of these regions.

What is more, power-projection and having a forward presence is instilled in the Navy's DNA; and not just since Admiral Stansfield Turner promulgated the 'classic four missions' of the USN in 1974 (sea control, strategic deterrence, power projection, forward presence).

It is important to remember that John Paul Jones's early naval engagements during the War of Independence took place in European waters, off the shore of Ireland and in the

North Sea. Similarly, the nascent USN under-

relegating duties to the Italian, French, or Hel-



Despite French and British nuclear forces, Europe remains dependent on U.S. security guarantees. Source: UK Ministry of Defence.

took archetypical naval projection operations during the Barbary Wars (1801-1815). So, yes the USN is, in many ways, a European-minded navy.

If we look beyond the tweets, there are very few indicators that would suggest a reduction of American engagement in Europe. In fact, senior US defense officials I have talked to are adamant that America's support is as comprehensive as ever. They point to the fact that the United States has deployed mechanized forces to Eastern Europe as tripwires in case of a Russian incursion into the Baltics. The US 6th Fleet has contributed significantly to fighting the Islamic State and is showing little signs of

lenic navy in the Mediterranean as was suggested only a couple of years ago. Just recently, after a hiatus of several years, the US 2nd Fleet was reestablished. In the meantime, the British Carrier *HMS Queen Elizabeth* is deployed to Florida for flight trials. From what I can gather at recent conferences the ISPK has hosted, such as the *Kiel International Seapower Symposium* and the *Baltic Sea Strategy Forum*, the Americans (and the USN in particular) are more interested in addressing the security challenges in the maritime domain and beyond than most of the littoral states in the region.

This brings me back to your questions, namely, the possibility that the current Administration might actually reduce its commitment. What Europeans fear – and rightfully so – is that US security guarantees will become conditional. This has the potential of undermining NATO Article 5, along with credible nuclear and conventional deterrence; drastically shifting the balance of power. In case anybody in Paris, Brussels, or Berlin has overheard the first wakeup call in 2014, the time is more than ripe for European states to shoulder greater responsibility for their own security and defense.

In the future, I foresee evolutionary rather than revolutionary changes to the posture and missions of both the USN and the European naval services. As European navies incrementally regain some of their (high-end) capabilities, cooperation, integration, and interoperability are likely to further expand. European navies will continue to be looked to in order to address the vast range of low-end MSOs, whereas their (niche-) capabilities (mine warfare, conventional submarines) and increasing proficiencies in the high-end will be welcomed by the USN and NATO. In addition, the EU as a maritime security actor provides a framework to address challenges which NATO, for political reasons, cannot.

You perfectly demonstrate that there are different naval ways in Europe: the navies are very different, depending on their respective naval and strategic cultures, budgets, missions assigned to them, etc. One of the mantras we can sometime hear in Brussels is the

need for an “European strategic culture”. Do you think this common culture will emerge in the naval domain?

You are right. There is no such thing as a paradigm navy, according to which other navies can be modelled. Frankly, the ways in how states can fashion and deploy their navies are endless. Still, many seem to believe that a common strategic vision would solve this problem. Before we can discuss European strategic culture, it is important to first define it. Jack Snyder calls it the sum total of ideas, conditional emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other with regard to . . . strategy.” As he indicates, first, national strategic culture must be explored. It bears remembering that Europe will likely remain an amalgam of strikingly different states with very different ideas, emotional response, and behaviors pertaining to policy objectives. In addition, many pundits argue that even some of the largest states in Europe, such as Germany, lack strategic culture. They point out the reluctance to invest in national defense, contribute to high-risk military operations abroad, and to the absence of public support for most things related to the military. Such atmosphere naturally makes it difficult for common strategic culture to flourish.

Acknowledging that Europe is a conglomerate of different states, the range of common ideas, emotional responses, and behaviors will be

modest. I am somewhat wary to speak about a European strategic culture and the need for 'strategic autonomy' on all levels (political, operational, and technological) – which is another buzzword. By any reasonable estimate, European states will be unable to become autonomous actors, particularly in the 'operational' security realm. Unless defense spending doubles or triples, Europe will not be able to create the necessary strategic nuclear deterrent, the command and control structures, the ISR assets, the sea and airlift capabilities, etc. to become an autonomous actor. I would rather advocate for an increased strategic 'independence', acknowledging the continued need for close cooperation and support by the US.

What the naval domain is concerned, I think a common culture already exists among the naval community. The maritime domain instills sailors of all nations with a sense of unity. Moreover, European naval forces have a long and checkered history of both confrontation as well as cooperation. This shared maritime culture will remain transatlantic in nature as long as NATO alliance flourishes. To what extent this can be elevated to the strategic level to become a part of a strategic culture remains to be seen. To date, the appreciation for the sea in all its facets – as a vital ecosystem, a resource provider, and as a sphere of power distribution – is sorely lacking among Europe's populace and leaders. The maritime community still struggles to make their voices

heard in the land-centric capitals across Europe.

Is there a hope for European navies, through cooperation in Europe and/or with other actors, for example?

The question implies that European navies are in a bad state. While navies lack capabilities in a many areas, I do not accept the sweeping claim that Western military forces are all but hopelessly incapable. For example, the amount of negative press the German navy, has received as of late, does not in any way reflect the professionalism and commitment the service has portrayed in a period of continuous downsizing. At the same time, de facto, European naval forces have been cut so drastically that they are at times unable to conduct the desired duties in times of relative peace. I probably do not have to remind the reader of the truncated French fleet being confronted with a growing need for high-end capabilities along with greater global presence.

An insightful article from the mid-1990s proposed four solutions for naval policy makers in times of fiscal austerity 1) *to settle for less*, 2) *jointness*, 3) *international cooperation*, and 4) finding technological and tactical *short-cuts*, i.e. leapfrogging or asymmetric capabilities. Clearly, all European states have sought these four solutions over past three decades – often resorting to the first one. Since 2014, and with the return of great power competition, *settling for less* will no longer suffice. The three other solutions remain both timely and appli-

cable. Cooperation is the key ingredient to a successful future across all security and defense related issues in Europe.

In terms of defense cooperation, clearly European states cooperate more effectively with each other as well as with partners and institutions than has ever been the case. People often forget that France only rejoined NATO in 2009, adding significant clout to the alliance. While on a political level, nationalist sentiment and populist ideas stand in the way of the European project, in the security realm, the European Union has become a far more capable actor. In the aftermath of the Cold War, hardly anyone could imagine the European Union (WEU) to 'go naval', as it has successfully been doing since Operation *Atalanta* in 2008. Cooperation has matured to such an extent that even a land-locked country like Austria can actively contribute to addressing maritime security challenges by deploying a Special Forces unit on a German warship as

part of an EU operation

The many bi- and multinational efforts can only be mentioned in passing. They include NATO's standing maritime groups, Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation (BeNeSam), British-Dutch amphibious forces, Swedish-Finnish naval cooperation, Dutch-German *Seebattalion*, Franco-British Combined Joint Expeditionary Force, and the Spanish-Italian EU Battle-group (SIAF). At the same time, bottom-up as well as top-down cooperation with non-EU and non-NATO members (capacity building), civilian agencies, and supranational bodies must be promoted.

After ten years of economic crisis, European GDP is beginning to rise again, in a post-Crimea context of promises to allocate 2 % of it to defence. Do you believe it will have concrete effects on the European navies?

I believe concrete effects are already visible. To paraphrase the Head of the German Navy, Vice Admiral Andreas Krause, the navy has left the worst behind. Similar trends are discerna-

ble elsewhere. This includes the small and smallest European states attaining greater means and responsibility to address common maritime security challenges.

It is important to point out a common misperception: The NATO members have not promised to spend 2% of their respective GDP on defense by 2024. Rather they have col-



German-Dutch naval integration is but part of a broader trend toward defense cooperation across Europe. Source: Bundeswehr/Michael Sühl.

lectively agreed to move “towards the 2 % guideline within a decade.” Commentators have already pointed to the fact that, under current security environment, it is unreasonable to believe that some state will spend such amounts on defense. (Germany’s defense budget would surpass France’s by roughly €20bn and amount to €75bn in total).

Unsurprisingly, recent budget increases are only very slowly translating into more comprehensive posture and greater readiness. On the other hand, large-scale procurement projects are in the books. This includes Boeing P-8 aircraft for Norway and the UK, new frigates for Britain (Type 31, Type 26), France (FTI/Belharra), Italy (PPA), Germany (MKS-180), state-of-the-art submarines for Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands. The litmus test, however, will be to attract, train, and retain the necessary personnel for these growing forces and to provide the necessary maintenance capabilities. Despite all these difficulties, after more than two decades of constant decline, European naval forces are on an upward trajectory – but patience will be needed.

Jeremy Stöhs is a research analyst at the Institute for Security Policy at Kiel University and author of the book *The Decline of European Naval Force: Challenges to Sea Power in an Age of Fiscal Austerity and Political Uncertainty* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018).

jstoehs@ispk.uni-kiel.de

www.ispk.uni-kiel.de

www.kielseapowerseries.com

