

European issues

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# The challenges of protecting Europe's maritime areas of common interest, from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific

The geostrategic environment is currently replete with confrontations and "fait accompli" policies, set against a backdrop of national power reassertion and conflicting competitive interest<sup>[1]</sup>. Maritime spaces are also increasingly embroiled in this tension as economic, commercial and even strategic issues remain inextricably linked to the maintenance of good order at sea.

Consequently the world faces two strategic paradoxes. The first of these is the tension between national and global interests. The interdependence of world economies and the pressing issue of climate change require a global approach to problem resolution. Indeed it is from this imperative that the notion of common spaces was born, initially in the maritime domain before being extended to the air, space and cyber domains. Freedom of navigation enabling the ability to trade in the maritime environment is therefore a fundamental element of collective wealth.

The second paradox is the contradictory pressure between the maintenance of the international framework and the law of the strongest. Some States increasingly uses intimidation and coercion as the transactional mode of choice. This challenge to the role of the international community is contributing markedly to increased instability and regional tensions. Certain stakeholders are attempting to appropriate maritime areas over which they claim sovereignty.

The European Union (EU) must take account of this evolving ominous change to the stability of geostrategic environment. While the extent of the EU maritime domain is synonymous with major opportunities, it also brings with it a corresponding

level of challenges to be met, first and foremost that of the security of these maritime areas of common interest.

Accordingly, to ensure continuity of the work undertaken within the framework of the Strategic Compass, the theme of "maritime issues" must be taken into account in the Member States' discussions. The French Presidency of the Council, which lasts until 30 June 2022, should also provide an opportunity to capitalise on the relative consensus of the collective opinion concerning the importance of the "maritime factor". This would allow us to further promote the EU to assume a broader remit, both as a security provider with a global vocation and as an actor that invests and innovates in this crucial strategic area.

## MARITIME SECURITY ISSUES ARE CENTRAL TO EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Through its various instruments, funds and programmes, the EU makes an important contribution to the development and improvement of global stability. In terms of maritime security, it benefits from the collective expertise of its Member States. The various EU navies are also North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) members or partners, facilitating their on-going interoperability. Moreover, most of the technical skills in the maritime field, both civilian and military, are resident within the EU itself. Effective action to counter the expansion of threats in the maritime sphere, which are sometimes hybrid in nature (civil/military, private/public, legal/illegal), requires deliberate adaptation of the European response and better coordination of national and European tools.

<sup>[1]</sup> This text was originally published in the "Schuman Report on Europe, the State of the Union 2021", Marie B, April 2021.

There are four key issues that need to be addressed within the EU in relation to the protection of maritime areas of common interest.

### Developing joint strategic thinking

Firstly, Europe must work towards a common strategic approach to the security of its maritime flows, trade and supplies, including the critical subject of submarine cables. Notably, the Member States face three very different dilemmas: the protection of the northern versus the southern flank, the control of approaches versus the need for long-term planning and, finally, the control of the upper end of the spectrum (traditionally attributed to NATO) versus the control of the lower end (crisis management).

A review of the EU Maritime Security Strategy (EUMS) and its Action Plan (adopted in 2014 and 2018 respectively) would help to revise and update the identification of European maritime interests. This is a key element in the European strategy for the Indo-Pacific, to underline the reasons for the EU's action in this area as credible and understandable, at a time when Member States' interest in the region is constantly growing[2].

### European governance

European governance is the second challenge in the implementation of the EUMS and Action Plan. Europe must adapt to the changing nature of security threats at sea so that it can best respond through effective and coordinated actions, which its various instruments theoretically allow.

In addition to the coherence and steering of the various initiatives of the European institutions and agencies or the Member States themselves, effective governance also concerns the federation of the capabilities already in place, particularly the maritime information systems, which provide detailed knowledge of the areas concerned and is therefore an essential capability for anticipation. Global surveillance of these areas could be implemented by relying on a combination of Member States on the one hand and on technological innovation on the other.

The maritime domain could thus constitute the framework for a competitive and innovative Europe in which France, in view of its expertise in the field of maritime information, its worldwide network of sensors[3], and the excellence of its industrial backbone, could legitimately contribute.

### Assuring the capacity to influence and act

Thirdly, Europe must have the means to be able to influence and act in defence of its interests "offshore". The EU is home to global champions in the construction and equipping of naval, maritime and port industries. Links between European industrialists deserve to be strengthened to leverage the potential for dual use technology synergies and thus improve European competitiveness and maritime resilience.

But European maritime power is not just the sum of its naval fleets. In parallel with the consolidation of the industrial sector, which will take time, it is important to improve the coordination of existing resources. By integrating European naval air assets during its deployments in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, France has paved the way.

### A more inclusive approach to operations

The fourth challenge is to seek a more inclusive approach to maritime security operations in the framework of a "Europe that protects". The framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) may at times preclude the involvement of third countries that would help offset an increasingly constrained force generation of military elements. The CSDP framework also excludes Denmark, despite its status as an important maritime player. The launch by the Council on 25 January 2021 of the concept of "Coordinated Maritime Presences" (CMP) in the Gulf of Guinea should serve as a basis for more effective coordination, in the long term, between the various components of the European institutions [4].

On the basis of this "pilot project demonstrating the EU's capacity to be a reliable partner and maritime security provider, discussions could focus on new ways of

[2] After France in 2018, the Netherlands and Germany have in turn drafted their national strategy for the Indo-Pacific in 2020.

[3] Information merged in the MICA Centre (Maritime Information Cooperation and Awareness Centre), located in Brest.

[4] Only the first pillar of the CMP has been officially launched (coordination of warship deployments); the second pillar, which aims to ensure coherence with the Commission's programmes, is still awaiting an appropriate legal framework.

achieving the maritime security missions of tomorrow, for example by promoting ad hoc mechanisms (such as EMASoH or CMP).

Consideration of all four key issues discussed could help catalyse the collective appreciation of Member States by outlining the contours of a future in which the EU would be a major provider of global maritime security. And furthermore as a provider with more effective procedures and a renewed focus more towards maritime zones of interest well beyond its natural borders, from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific and the Arctic.

### AN INCREASED EUROPEAN PRESENCE IN MARITIME AREAS OF COMMON INTEREST

The EU must capitalise on the actions it is already taking (in the Gulf of Guinea, the Mediterranean and the western Indian Ocean) to do more, including in more distant theatres where European interests are at stake, with a view to protecting maritime trade flows and resources.

In the Gulf of Guinea, the situation is still worrying, despite a decrease in the number of acts of maritime piracy and brigandage in 2021 compared to 2020, when the MICA Center recorded 114 incidents. Despite the initiatives of the coastal countries and their partners<sup>[5]</sup>, within the framework of the Yaoundé process initiated in 2013, we are still struggling to contain maritime crime. This is mainly due to the apathy of certain regional States dominated by other challenges (such as terrorism) and the under-funding of maritime security structures by regional organisations.

Since 2014, the EU has developed a holistic strategy for the Gulf of Guinea. Numerous European programmes are being implemented in the region in support of the Yaoundé framework, and in cooperation with the G7++ "Friends of the Gulf of Guinea". These range from the deployment of a regional maritime information-sharing platform to the strengthening of legislation in ECOWAS and ECCAS countries. While the question of a European intervention in the region, along the lines of EUNAVFOR Atalanta, does not appear to be an option<sup>[6]</sup>, the EU

continues nevertheless to look for answers. The launch of the CMP concept, which is innovative in more ways than one, is an illustration of this. If successful, its extension to new maritime areas of interest, such as the Indo-Pacific, could be considered.

Since the collapse of the Somali state, which led to an explosion of maritime crime in the Horn of Africa, the Indian Ocean has become a maritime area of major interest for the EU. In 2008, the extent of piracy in this area led to EU intervention through EUNAVFOR Atalanta. This operation has proved its worth: by curbing piracy, it has helped to secure 25% of world traffic and 75% of European exports to Asia. It now has an extended mandate to combat arms and drugs trafficking and to carry out surveillance tasks on illegal activities at sea. Atalanta has thus enabled the Union to position itself as a credible regional player in maritime security, which the CRIMARIO II<sup>[7]</sup>, *EU in and with Asia* or MASE<sup>[8]</sup> came to strengthen thereby contributing to the building of a region-wide maritime security architecture.

However, maritime security issues in fact extend across the entire Indo-Pacific region. In addition to the Persian Gulf, subject to renewed tensions since 2019 - which the EMASoH mission is helping to ease - the Eastern Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific zone represent eminently strategic points of interest for the Member States of the Union.

For France in particular, the Indo-Pacific contains nine of the eleven million square kilometres of the French exclusive economic zone. In March 2021, France took over the presidency of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), which comprises five States (Comoros, France, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles), and in June 2021, assumed the presidency of the Indian Ocean Navy Symposium (IONS) for a two-year period. Albeit that IONS is a forum comprising the navies or significant maritime organisations of the Indian Ocean region and despite France being now the only EU Member State to have member status, the French Navy is considering possible synergies with the EU.

<sup>[5]</sup> Since the 1990s, France has maintained a quasi-permanent presence in the area through the *Corymbe* missions and has supported the coastal countries in their efforts to secure their maritime areas.

<sup>[6]</sup> None of the Gulf of Guinea States is a failed State and they refuse any intervention in their waters.

<sup>[7]</sup> The second part of the *Critical Maritime Routes Indian Ocean* programme which has been extended to South and South East Asia.

<sup>[8]</sup> MASE : Maritime Security. The programme ended in 2020.

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Renowned and respected for its economic weight, the European Union must also be able to influence global strategic maritime security issues. Europe has a key role to play in the maritime security of areas of common interest, through its naval operations or its capacity-building and governance programmes. This is particularly pertinent in the contemporary Indo-Pacific, the centre of gravity of the world economy but also the scene of major Armament.

With its global outlook France is already involved in ensuring the security of maritime trade flows through its strong advocacy of compliance with the established international rules-based order, essential for world peace and stability. The French Presidency of the Council could also represent an opportunity for France

to leverage national expertise in maritime security towards a strengthening of the EU's role as a global security provider, whether in the Gulf of Guinea, the Indo-Pacific or the Arctic.

Whatever the frameworks and means of action chosen to respond to the problems of maritime insecurity, only truly international cooperation will enable us to understand what is at stake and to obtain tangible, enduring outcomes. Maritime security issues therefore require Europeans to be " united in diversity " more than ever before.

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