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# Towards a Standing European Union Auxiliary Navy

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»Diplomacy cannot succeed unless it is backed by action«,<sup>1</sup> remarked Josep Borrell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission when he inaugurated the EU's naval mission »Irinini«, designed to support efforts to contain the ongoing violence in Libya. To enforce the United Nations weapons embargo against the war-torn North African country, EU Member States plan to assign ships and aircraft to this common effort. Once again, European governments rely on warships and maritime power to counter a security challenge. As with »EU NAVFOR Sophia« (2015–2020) or the on-going »EU NAVFOR Atalanta« (since 2008), ships are readily deployable to the scene on relatively short notice. They are also versatile in dealing with a range of tasks, from enforcing international law and handling complex security threats to providing competent and reliable humanitarian assistance. Through making a real difference on the ground, not least to the over 50,000 migrants whose lives have been saved by European warships in the Mediterranean over the past five years, this is a good example of the use of naval capabilities in EU foreign policy; the indispensable political solution and the challenges associated with consensus among member states migration operations notwithstanding.

It is no surprise that the European Union depends on the sea for its security and prosperity as over 70 % of its borders are

maritime, 90 % of its external commerce and world trade pass over the ocean, 50 % of EU population and 50 % of EU GDP is situated in regions close to the sea.<sup>2</sup> It is essentially the world's largest peninsula. In addition to maritime security in its adjacent seas, the use of the world ocean as a global commons for commercial, diplomatic and peaceful purposes is vital to Europe. The security of the trans-Atlantic link for military logistics within NATO is of utmost strategic importance too. During the summer of 2019, the EU began formalizing maritime strands into a concept for coordinated maritime presence from the Gulf of Guinea to the Strait of Hormuz, including all of Europe's major adjacent seas.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to this, possession of sufficiently numerous, versatile, and deployable maritime and naval capabilities allows for rapid reaction to trans-regional challenges. The EU's naval vessels are not just the »first line of defence« overseas, a hard power tool, when it comes to European values and interests. They are also visible and respected representatives of European presence, concern, and commitment – a soft power tool. In this, providing good order at sea and fostering stability ashore, up-

<sup>1</sup> Borrell, Josep, <https://twitter.com/josepborrell/status/1245019450157469696>, 31.3.2020

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, European Union Maritime Security Strategy. Responding together to global challenges. A Guide for Stakeholders, Brussels 2014, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Hans-Uwe Mergener, »Informelles EU-Verteidigungsministertreffen: Einigung auf ein Konzept der koordinierten maritimen Präsenz«, ES&T September 3, 2019, <https://esut.de/2019/09/meldungen/international/15226/informelles-eu-verteidigungsministertreffen-einigung-auf-ein-konzept-der-koordinierten-maritimen-praesenz/>

holding international law, offering support to crisis response or disaster relief efforts, and training and education (enabling) can be some of their core tasks. Furthermore, their range of capabilities and professional training make them a key element in Europe's maritime Search and Rescue (SAR) framework, our commitment to saving lives at sea. When it comes to acting beyond the range of coastal waters or within areas of heightened security risk, there is rarely a more suitable executive agency than a navy on which to base a state's external action at sea: The European Union depends on a capable naval force to make a difference in this rapidly changing world.

Ultimately however, even the most capable navy can only be as effective as its logistical support infrastructure allows it to be. Among the EU Member States, long-range support vessels, tankers, tenders, and transports are a scarce commodity. For many of the smaller navies in the EU, national procurement and operation of such larger so-called ›auxiliary‹ vessels is out of the question because of their maritime interests – or indeed, defence budgets – which are limited to the immediate home waters. To enable European solidarity, however, auxiliary naval vessels could be employed to ›leverage‹ existing capabilities to be used in distant waters. This could be achieved in a coordinated manner, if there were a pool of support vessels of an EU Auxiliary Fleet to extend the Member States' navies' range. Such a fleet would most effectively be established directly at EU-level – similarly to propositions by the SPD in Germany for a European Army<sup>4</sup> –, as a »28<sup>th</sup> Navy«,

<sup>4</sup> See interview with Felgentreu, Fritz (MdB/SPD), ZDF, 23.2.2020, via: <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/heute/spd-verteidigungsexperte-plaedoyer-fuer--28--armee-der-eu-100.html>

under the authority of the European Commission. It could include EU-flagged and operated vessels as well as national assets that are being dispatched on a rotational basis to this unique EU NAVFOR.

Beyond enabling and leveraging existing naval capabilities to operate with greater endurance and in distant seas, an EU Auxiliary Fleet could also pool enough resources to provide maritime capabilities that, to date, are not yet available in the EU. Accordingly, it could also be a natural institutional harbour of a set of hospital ships or purpose-built platforms for the wider low-end spectrum of maritime security. Under the European Commission's authority, hospital-ships could be employed to support Member States during crises – as in the current COVID-19 pandemic – or provide the capability to act quickly in humanitarian disasters like those seen in Haiti's earthquake in 2010 (where the US Navy deployed one of its hospital-ships) or the Tsunami in Banda Aceh in 2004 (where the German Navy deployed a combat-supply-vessel with an embarked containerised hospital). Once baseline capabilities have been defined, particularly regarding interoperability and command and control, non-state vessels, such as privately-operated »Mercy« ships or from those NGOs in the Central Mediterranean, could join the fleet on a case by case basis.

An EU Auxiliary Navy, with its organic capabilities and effect on the existing European navies would be of substantial value for the Member States long-term-security and their common foreign policy. Therefore, it is time to seize the opportunity for substantial mutual European steps ahead and act jointly on this both very relevant and at the same time manageable issue.

Figure 1  
Military Sealift Command Hospital Ship USNS Comfort



Source: U.S. Navy / Elisabeth Allen (public domain)

## MARITIME SECURITY OPERATIONS, A RAISON D'ÊTRE?

Exemplified by the inauguration of »Irinia«, the growing recognition of the relevance of the maritime domain for the EU has increasingly manifested itself over the past decades. In 2008, with the counter-piracy operation »Atalanta« off the Horn of Africa, the EU launched a naval mission as its first ever self-led joint military deployment. With the aim of stabilising the region and secure vital international trade-routes in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions, the Member States acknowledged the immediate interest of the EU for unobstructed passage of goods over vital maritime trade-routes, as well as concern for the spreading insecurity caused by failed states in general and Somalia at the time in particular.

More recently, from 2015 until 2020, in the ongoing crisis with human trafficking and mass-migration across the Mediterranean Sea, the EU has also responded with setting up a naval task force »Sophia« to address immediate challenges. In both cases, maritime security off the Horn of Africa and in the Mediterranean, NATO has also played a key role as a partner, joint forum, and force-provider. This comes in addition to the alliance's traditional and no-less vital role of linking Europe and North America in collective defence. Nevertheless, both the EU and NATO draw on the same scarce naval resources of the EU Member States.

## NAVIGATING THE HIGH-END/ LOW-END CONUNDRUM

The current global political situation does not appear forgiving for the scarcity of European naval assets. From global ocean governance to dealing with the revival of power-politics, navies have a persisting unique utility in the 21st century. While the current COVID-19 global pandemic clouds many of the traditional roles and missions of naval forces in favour of crisis response, the width of challenges has simply not gone away. In all likelihood, they will indeed return once the Corona virus will be contained. There is the ongoing maritime security and humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean and the increasing rivalry with Russia that not only has a military but a distinctly naval element. Furthermore, the waters off the coast of failing and failed states, regions of conflict from Yemen to Somalia, to the Gulf of Guinea, will call for EU involvement from mere presence over stabilisation and cooperation to ultimately coercive measures. Additionally, what sometimes might seem very distant shores and seas to some in Europe, can be strategically relevant to international stability in the highest order: be it China's or Iran's militarised behaviour in its maritime vicinity, both need to be carefully addressed with sound policy – these states' navies play a key role and the EU's naval »tool« is too significant and versatile to be left out of the consideration. If the EU fails to acknowledge and address the realities of seapower, it may rather sooner than later find itself and its interests a tar-

Figure 2  
Map of Europe and Maritime »Hot-pots«



get of hostile gunboat-diplomacy. Some of these maritime challenges might in fact be amplified in the post-COVID-19 world order as governments struggle with control of security and the well-being of their people.

Given just this brief overview of continuing salience of recent and ongoing naval engagements and concerns of the EU, it is surprising how little common efforts to increase the EU's naval ›punch‹ have evolved over the past decades. Navies have suffered from reductions in their national defence budgets across the board of EU Member States.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, while the defence industry of Europe saw the major transnational mergers of EADS/Airbus (2000) and KANT (Krauss-Maffei-Wegmann And NEXTER Together, 2016), for military aviation and armoured vehicles respectively, a similar restructuring for the naval shipbuilding industry has not yet materialised. If anything, recent developments in Member States indicate a stronger focus on nationalisation of the naval industry, with Germany in between a rock (having awarded the contract for the next-generation frigate to a Dutch-led consortium) and a hard place (maintaining its own naval industrial base). The challenges of small batch-numbers of vessels in mostly national procurements, as well as expensive duplicative chains of maintenance and supply are felt across navies from the Iberian Peninsula to the North Cape, and from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Navies, even the most modern ones, are rather challenged to maintain a degree of reserve capabilities for those crises that materialize on a short- and medium-term base.

**»If the European Union fails to acknowledge and address the realities of seapower, it may rather sooner than later find itself and its interests a target of hostile gunboat diplomacy.«**

A policy dilemma has emerged: if the intention is to maintain a continuous presence of one warship in any given mission, a navy actually needs three of these to guarantee a sustainable force-generation-cycle of presence, maintenance and training. While ships are not built to sit idly in harbours, they also cannot all be constantly on deployment without rapidly eroding their utility. Looking at the array of current and potential missions for European navies today, this leads to a considerable need for naval assets – a need that with rising costs for research and development, procurement, maintenance and operations, can hardly be met by single Member States alone. Accordingly, pooling resources and creating economics of scale by joint programmes and multi-national missions would give the EU's modern sea power a much greater soft and hard power punch.

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Close cooperation and integration are indispensable to EU Member States to provide the forces needed to address mari-

time security challenges and defend their strategic interests. This calls for a solid and increasing financial foundation for naval planning, efficient cooperation and pooling of existing capabilities, as well as creative and ambitious political action. Its objective is to best utilise the naval and financial resources at Europe's disposition. A European Auxiliary Navy would be a force of ships under EU command (akin to »Atlanta«, »Sophia« and »Irinia«, but foregoing their temporary character) that would for one be able to leverage the utility of existing naval capabilities of Member States, and also be able to carry out certain (low-intensity) missions on its own and thereby freeing up naval assets for other tasks.

There are several options that ought to be studied in depth:

- It could be modelled on the example of the current EU Naval Forces (EUNAVFOR) ATALANTA or MED/SOPHIA – made up solely of temporary Member State vessels delegated for the task, but under an EU HQ;
- along the lines of FRONTEX, the EU's border control agency, where Member State national assets are augmented by or crystallised around a core of EU-personnel;
- or like the »28<sup>th</sup> Armed Force« – Navy in this case – that the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) has recently proposed to be directly mustered and deployed under the immediate authority of the EU Commission.

To be clear: it would not require much time or effort to set up the force on short notice – a major advantage in the current complex crisis. With decisive political action behind it, an EU Auxiliary Navy could be available within a matter of weeks, if it were to draw upon adapted vessels from the currently under-utilised merchant fleet, as well as available capabilities and half-finished projects in the largely dormant European shipbuilding sector. This could then be augmented in the medium and long term by tried and tested procedures for naval projects of the European OCCAR defence-procurement agency,<sup>6</sup> including joining already ongoing projects like the dual-purpose civilian-humanitarian- and military-mission Logistics Support Ships being built for France and Italy,<sup>7</sup> or the next generation of tankers for the German Navy.<sup>8</sup>

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## TEETH-TO-TAIL RATIO: FOCUSING ON THE TAIL

Looking at navies in Europe and beyond, the utility of powerful fighting-ships, vessels that make up the sharp end of the naval spectrum, allowing the application of force and coun-

<sup>5</sup> For an introduction to the problem, see Jeremy Stöhs, »Into the Abyss? European Naval Power in the Post-Cold War Era«, in: *Naval War College Review*, 71(3)/2018, pp. 13–40.

<sup>6</sup> Organisation Conjointe de Coopération en matière d'Armement (OCCAR)

<sup>7</sup> OCCAR, Logistic Support Ship, via: <http://www.occar.int/programmes/lss>

<sup>8</sup> »Zwei neue Doppelhüllentanker für die Marine«, ES&T, 29.7.2019, via: <https://esut.de/2019/07/meldungen/ruestung2/14188/zwei-neue-doppelhuellentanker-fuer-die-marine/>

tering the exertion of others' uses of force, often depends on operational range and endurance at sea, far away from hospitable waters and bases. A typical frigate or destroyer, the standard high-end surface warship of the more powerful (yet medium-size by any sensible international comparison) European navies, runs through its entire on-board supply of fuel within 36–48 hours, if operating at top speed under challenging conditions. While the range is substantially extended to a week and more, if more economic speeds or means of propulsion are employed, this illustrates the immediate importance of at-sea-refuelling capabilities to accompany any meaningful naval presence at a distance.

Furthermore, warships are versatile military platforms that derive a substantial part of their utility from being deployable in a range of diverse missions. From humanitarian assistance

**»From humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, to search and rescue, patrolling duties, presence on-scene, »showing the flag« in foreign ports to ultimately bringing the high end of naval hard-power to bear, navies offer unique hard- and soft-power utility to their political masters.«**

and disaster relief, to search and rescue, patrolling duties, presence on-scene, »showing the flag« in foreign ports to ultimately bringing the high end of naval hard-power to bear, navies offer unique hard- and soft-power utility to their political masters. They are, literally, the »Swiss Army Knife« of militaries. However, navies derive their value in almost all of these tasks from how well they are able to perform at the highest end of the challenge:

war at sea. Competitiveness in high-intensity combat not only requires expensive state-of-the-art equipment, it is also founded on the readiness and level of training the crews can acquire during a ship's operational preparation period.

Over the past decades, the money needed to maintain larger numbers of state-of-the-art vessels has been substantially cut in Europe. Indeed, only few EU navies preserve the ambition to maintain warships at the technological edge of global development, as well as across the entire spectrum of the maritime domain (air, surface, sub-surface, cyber and space operations). In addition to this, »crises response«, lower intensity deployments focussing on providing maritime security, and »good order at sea« in places further afield from European waters have increased the work-load of most EU navies over the past two decades and contributed to operational strain. The result of this is a scarcity of vessels for any given task, compounded by the challenge that most crews lack training in their high-intensity roles of naval warfare: billion-euro-anti-air-warfare frigates deployed for years in repeating cycles to either combat pirates or pick up shipwrecked human beings in the Mediterranean, certainly builds up valuable and meaningful experiences in constabulary functions for navies. However, critically, it also entails deteriorating the vessels' capability to fulfil its original role as a platform for deterrence and high-end power projection.

These problems could be addressed twofold by the creation of a European Union auxiliary naval task group.<sup>9</sup> On the one

hand, by providing EU assets that augment, pool and increase Member State refuelling, replenishment, transport and support capabilities at sea, on the other by setting up a generic force of constabulary vessels that free up valuable naval capabilities by covering search-and-rescue duties, low-intensity embargo-operations or counter-piracy, counter-crime operations. It would strongly signal a division of labour between the EU (more focused on maritime security operations) and NATO (deterrence and collective defence) while interacting as the occasion permitted. For instance, NATO Standing Maritime Groups could train with this unique EU NAVFOR.

These ships could also for all sense and purposes be used for naval diplomacy, such as showing the EU flag around the world. If one were to consider significant medical capabilities embarked – akin to the containerized integrated naval rescue centre iMERZ of the German Navy fast combat support ships of the Berlin-class, type 702 - a host of valuable goodwill missions could be conceived. This would hardly be a new mission set for naval forces: The US Navy's African Partnership Station programme has brought American uniformed and civilian personnel such as doctors, teachers, and engineers to ports and maritime regions of Africa to provide aid and assistance. The Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is pursuing a similar cross-sectoral but military-minded approach in the Indo-Pacific and in Africa. Many countries are considering or even already operating a maritime platform for soft power, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief, be they organized within a navy, a coast guard, or any other form.

**»The EU and its member states should actively pursue a form of »good boat diplomacy« that, complementary to high-end naval forces, will significantly advance the EU's alliance cohesion and further the cause that Europe once came together over: peace.«**

In addition to this, for the projection of power, a capability the EU appears to be in need to acquire, it needs the mobility of military forces. In this, all branches of the armed forces combined depend on maritime assets for global deployability: armies need strategic transport on ships to be able to effectively and efficiently reach distant operational theatres, airpower needs operational bases – with aircraft carriers as the only ones that do not depend on the goodwill of regional partners of doubtful reliability. Strategic maritime transport is in short supply in Europe and the few small and medium-sized aircraft carriers European navies possess have difficulty assembling their essential task-forces of combat- and supply-vessels, in order to be of sustained operational value.

Undoubtedly, certain aspects of the proposition require further consideration:

- Multi-national crewing: it would be instrumental to study multi-national crewing both from a legal and from a political standpoint to potentially create a maritime equivalent of NATO's airborne early-warning fleet, AWACS. Here, the multi-crewing experiment aboard the US Navy's Cold War era guided-missile destroyer Claude V. Ricketts (DDG 5) could be instructive. From June 1964 to the end of 1965 Claude V. Ricketts was part of a mixed-manning trial for a proposed Multilateral Force (MLF). Its crew consisted of ten officers and 164 crew from the US Navy with the re-

<sup>9</sup> See also Sebastian Bruns, A Call for an EU Auxiliary Navy – under German Leadership, Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC), 1 March 2016.

mainder filled by sailors from West Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Greece, Italy, and Turkey. Though the MLF never was created, the experimental manning was considered a wide success. The EU should aspire to do the same.

- The legal status of EU vessels: so far, vessels have to fly a *national* flag under the current and commonly accepted Law of the Sea, while only the UN itself is recognized as a kind of »supranational flag-state«. However, the EU has for example become party to international treaties and with the advent of EU executive personnel such as in FRONTEX in international roles, it might be not too far-fetched to discuss the creation of an EU flag, a registry for ships. Still now, it would not be possible to deploy vessels solely under the EU flag. As in the current missions, the nationally flagged warships fly the EU flag in addition to the national ensigns.
- Executive powers: closely tied to the issue above, the basis for executive authority of EU-vessels and personnel would have to be clarified. As exemplified by the provisions in the Law of the Sea for piracy, warships – or at least vessels in government service – of a *state* are empowered to act against the crime.<sup>10</sup> The EU were to tread new ground with this project, legally, but also along its path towards greater capability for unified action.
- Force Structure: it must be studied how warships, coast guards, and able NGO platforms can best be trained, equipped, and maintained in what is truly a comprehensive approach in the sense of the word.

Ultimately, despite the required legal clarification and pioneering political actions, there is plenty of need for even a modest application of our proposition. Even a very limited number of ships – three or four supply ships, tankers, or the likes taken up from trade or converted passenger or cargo ships out of a job in this current crisis, to increase mobility and range of fleets would make a significant difference. Regardless of the modalities of its creation and future organisational structure,

<sup>10</sup> UNCLOS, Art. 107

the utility of such an auxiliary naval force would be significant both in operational effect as well as political momentum. Setting up the EU Auxiliary Navy could even be addressed in a gradual approach. By first beginning with strictly civilian crewed, unarmed supply and support ships, issues of deploying armed force abroad, including parliamentary prerogatives in certain Member States, could be avoided. They would be the original »good boats« – pulling into ports and providing medical services, education and assistance. Further provision of more strictly militarised, armed assets could follow. The EU could also focus on missions most likely to be consistent with its self-image as a civilian power: supply vessels, hospital ships, fisheries surveillance, crisis- and crime-response craft from navies, coast guards, and other law enforcement organisations. Furthermore, by not only leveraging existing Member States capabilities, allowing smaller navies such as Denmark's or Sweden's to operate their ships in distant waters, but also offering new or hitherto very scarce assets, the gain for European soft and hard power would be comprehensive. Ultimately, permanent and tangible EU auxiliary naval capabilities make it significantly more attractive for Member States to flock to its banner and more likely for its voice to be heard near and far.

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