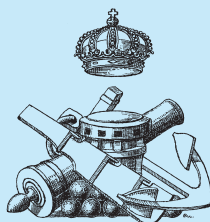


*Building European Seapower: Reinvigorating  
EU naval strategy and maritime capabilities for  
the 2020s*

*By Moritz Brake & Sebastian Bruns*



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## ***Building European Seapower: Reinvigorating EU naval strategy and maritime capabilities for the 2020s***

*"Facing Russia at our borders, which has shown how much of a threat it can be, we must have a more sovereign Europe, more capable of defending itself, not just depending solely on America."*

French President Emmanuel Macron<sup>1</sup>

***The Mediterranean Sea, September 2020: The German frigate Hamburg, an anti-air warfare warship commissioned in 2004, plows the waters off the coast of war-torn Libya. Unlike its original capability-set suggests, the warship is tasked with embargo control against the North African country and its warring factions.***

Once again, European governments wish to rely on warships and maritime power to counter a security challenge. As with "EU NAVFOR Sophia" (2015 – 2020) and the ongoing "EU NAVFOR Atalanta" (since 2008), ships and aircraft are readily deployable to the scene on relatively short notice. They are also versatile in dealing with a range

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1. Interview with Emmanuel Macron (passage translated from French by M.B.), Radio Europe 1, 06.11.2018, as last accessed on 23.11.2020 via: Montée des nationalismes, Front national, flambée des prix de l'essence : ce qu'a dit Emmanuel Macron sur Europe 1.

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 over the past five years, this is a good example of the utility of naval capabilities to EU foreign policy ends. It is also certainly an echo of the late political scientist Samuel Huntington who, at age 29, wrote a ground-breaking piece on the need for a coherent naval strategy. Referring to low-end maritime security missions, he remarked that navies could certainly do these, but that was not what they were built for.<sup>2</sup> However, had European navies not proved to policy-makers year in year out since the 1990s that they possess real strategic utility by carrying out those very ‘low-end’ missions of peacebuilding and crisis-response which are below the threshold of an actual shooting war there would hardly be a warship left here today. In fact, almost three decades of cashing in on the post-Cold-War ‘peace dividend’ would likely have taken an even bigger toll on Europe’s navies.

Regrettably, neglect of high-end naval capabilities in Europe is no longer excusable with optimistic views of its geopolitical situation. As Russia undeniably re-militarised its foreign policy and China’s geostrategic reach has become increasingly global, the need for credible deterrence – at sea as much as ashore – has returned to the political agenda in the EU. This article proposes a set of rapidly actionable steps to build European seapower, from the ‘bottom up’. Namely, from the naval tactical and operational level, rather than from the grand-strategic inter-governmental level “top down”. What the authors suggest, is the creation of an EU Auxiliary Navy,<sup>3</sup> with the purpose of leveraging existing member-states’ navies capabilities for greater reach and endurance, and the setting up a complementary set of regional EU NAVFORs for the maritime hot-spots in European waters. Modelled along the lines of “Atalanta”, “Sophia” and “Irinì”, these would focus on deterrence and cohesion as well as some capacity-building, rather than humanitarian or constabulary roles.

## Europe’s maritime dependence – on naval power

It should not come as a surprise that the European Union depends on the sea for its security and prosperity. 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>4</sup> It is essentially the world’s largest peninsula. Furthermore, in addition to maritime security in its adjacent seas, the use of the world ocean as a global common for commercial, diplomatic and peaceful purposes

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2. Samuel Huntington, “National Policy and the Transoceanic Navy”, USNI Proceedings Vol. 80, No.5, May 1954. Available online at <https://blog.usni.org/posts/2009/03/09/from-our-archive-national-policy-and-the-transoceanic-navy-by-samuel-p-huntington>.

3. See also the present authors’ paper published in July with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in Bruxelles, “Towards a European Union Auxiliary Navy”, and Sebastian Bruns, A Call for an EU Auxiliary Navy – under German Leadership, Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC), 1 March 2016.

4. European Commission, European Union Maritime Security Strategy. Responding together to global challenges. A Guide for Stakeholders, Brussels 2014

is vital to Europe. The security of the trans-Atlantic link for military logistics within the NATO alliance is of utmost strategic importance, too. In the summer of 2019, prior to the sweeping outbreak of the Corona pandemic, the EU began pulling together the maritime strands into an informal concept for coordinated maritime presence from the Gulf of Guinea to the Strait of Hormuz, including all of Europe's major adjacent seas.<sup>5</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, upholding international law, providing 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 risks, 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 capable naval forces to make a difference in this rapidly changing world.

However, one need not look to those distant waters to see the need for greater naval commitment: ask a Scandinavian and he or she will point to the Arctic and the Baltic; a Romanian or Bulgarian would point to the Black Sea; and Europeans from the south have long been calling for more protection of the EU's "soft underbelly",<sup>6</sup> the Mediterranean. In fact, with the sole exception of a new EUNAVFOR for the latter – where there already is a EU naval presence – the authors propose a new set of missions, one for the Baltic, the Arctic and the Black Sea. Standing maritime forces not unlike its predecessors off the Horn of Africa and in the Mediterranean, and loosely modelled after the Strait of Hormuz maritime security mission. We further argue that these be coupled with a standing EU auxiliary force which we proposed in a paper earlier this year.<sup>7</sup>

## First Things First: Expanding and Leveraging Capabilities

Even the most capable navy can only be as effective as its logistical support infrastructure allows it to be. Among the European member states, long-range support vessels, tankers, tenders, and transports are a scarce commodity. Furthermore, for many of the

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5. Hans-Uwe Mergener, "Informal EU defense ministers' meeting: agreeing on a concept of coordinated maritime presence", ES&T September 3, 2019, <https://esut.de/en/2019/09/meldungen/international/15226/informelles-eu-verteidigungsministertreffen-einigung-auf-ein-konzept-der-koordinierten-maritimen-praesenz/>

6. Barkey, Henri, "France vs. Turkey: A Showdown in the Mediterranean Is Brewing", 16.09.2020, The National Interest, as last accessed on 15.10.2020 via: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/france-vs-turkey-showdown-mediterranean-brewing-169048>

7. Moritz Brake/Sebastian Bruns, "Towards a Standing European Union Auxiliary Navy". Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Brussels, July 2020.

smaller navies in the EU, national procurement and operation of such larger so-called “auxiliary” vessels is out of the question because their maritime interests – or indeed, defence budgets – 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 reliable 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 – similar to recent propositions by the SPD in Germany for a European Army<sup>8</sup> – established directly at EU-level, as a “28<sup>th</sup> Navy”, 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 rotating bases 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 available in the EU yet. Accordingly, it could also be a natural institutional harbour of a set of hospital ships or purpose-built as well as converted platforms such as readily available offshore vessels for the wider low-end spectrum of maritime security. Under the European Commission’s authority, such flotillas 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 large purpose-built hospital ships) or the Tsunami in Banda Aceh in 2004 (where the German Navy, for example, deployed a combat-supply-vessel with an embarked containerised hospital). These expeditionary operations would necessarily rely on foreign port visits, but more importantly on tankers and tenders. Once baseline capabilities have been defined, in particular regarding interoperability and command and control, non-state vessels, like privately-operated “Mercy” ships or from those NGOs in the Central Mediterranean, could join the fleet on a case by case basis if command and control as well as very basic interoperability can be established. Ultimately, despite the required legal clarification and pioneering political action, there is plenty of need for even a modest application of our proposition. Three or four supply ships or tankers taken up from trade, or readily converted passenger or cargo ships out of a job in this current crisis would make a significant political and operational difference. Regardless of the modalities of its creation and future organisational structure, the utility of such an auxiliary naval force would be significant both in operational effect as well as political momentum. Most crucially, it would be a clear statement that maritime security really matters. All the while, it would rest on established procedures and tested models without necessarily creating yet another command staff. The staff at the Maritime Security Centre Horn of Africa (MSCHOA) in Rota, Spain, would be well-suited to serve as the host for future EU NAVFORs.

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8. See interview with Felgentreu, Fritz (MdB/SPD), ZDF, 23.02.2020, via: <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/heute/spd-verteidigungsexperte-plaedoyer-fuer--28--armee-der-eu-100.html>

## EU Maritime Security Operations and NATO's Naval Deterrence

As exemplified also by the recent inauguration of “Iriní”, the growing recognition of the relevance of the maritime domain for the EU has manifested itself over the past decades increasingly, still this appears to have happened only gradually and incompletely. 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 to stabilise 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.

Still, the EU appears to be willing to only assume responsibility for the lower intensity roles of the naval spectrum. So far, the appearance is one of a division of labour between NATO and the EU: The latter is particularly strong, where it can bring its full political-diplomatic tool-set to bear – as exemplified in the comprehensive approach to Somalia piracy since 2008; the former however is at its best when it comes to high-end deterrence. This would all be well, if it weren't for three key reasons:

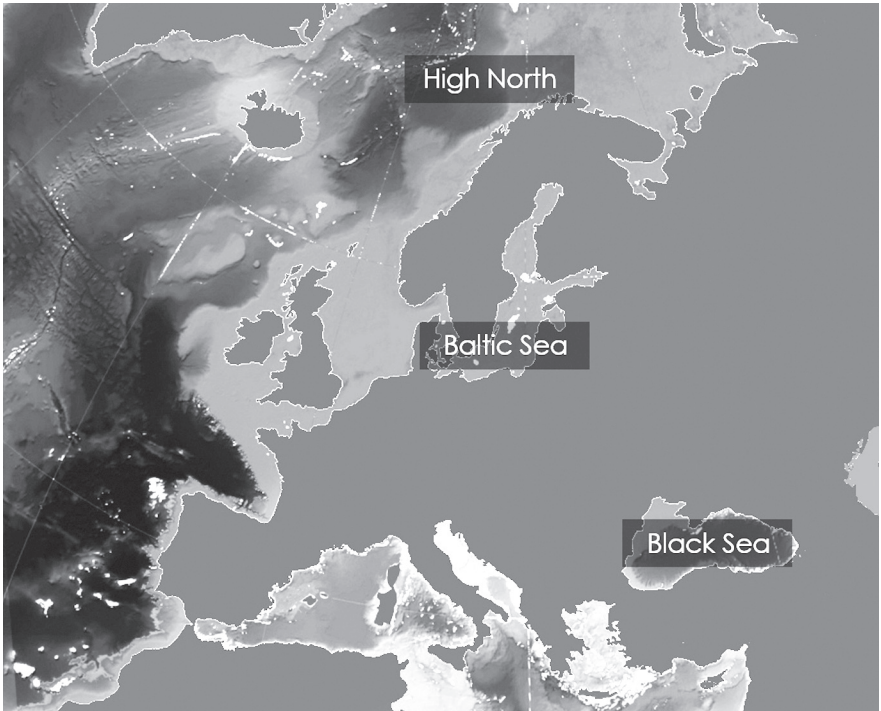
- NATO has lost much of its former coherence and reliability since Donald Trump has called American commitment to the alliance (and more broadly, the world order) into question;
- The EU – within and certainly without NATO – has to assume greater responsibility in its geostrategic surroundings;
- Resources available to the EU but not to NATO, non-NATO EU-member-states potentials and the broader spectrum of political-diplomatic power of the collective whole, are currently not being coherently channelled towards mutual defence and deterrence.

Clearly, building EU seapower would not come at the expense of NATO. To the contrary. In ongoing EU maritime security commitments, be it off the Horn of Africa or in the Mediterranean, NATO has not only played a key role as a partner, joint forum, and force-provider. The alliance has also benefitted from the additional capabilities contributed by the Europeans. Still, the EU leaves the traditional and no-less vital role of linking Europe and North America in collective defence and high-end deterrence largely to NATO. This comes at the cost of under-developing the EU's intellectual and practical seapower and thereby is a failure to realise its full potential for the alliance as well.

Combined, NATO is by far the dominant seapower in Europe's waters, not least because of the Canadian and American warships that regularly make their appearance in the Baltic Sea, the Mediterranean, and beyond. Still, there is no reason for the EU to shy away from the responsibility to muster the strength to cover the full spectrum of its maritime responsibilities. Indeed, it is surprising that given the cost, effort, and the shared interests involved, that a 450-million citizen-EU, with a mutual GDP of

almost 14 billion €, is not able to generate a more substantial naval force. As with other issues, the burden rests with few – in this case the maritime-minded few – rather than the federated community. While the USA does exceed the EU’s economic power by a little more than 12% in annual GDP,<sup>9</sup> this is no justification for the past and ongoing imbalance in the EU’s substantial reliance on the US Navy for its maritime deterrent.

Accordingly, it would be prudent in terms of burden-sharing within NATO, providing added credibility for European defence and in anchoring the EU’s seapower right in the hearts and minds of its community, to establish core naval capabilities under the Commission’s authority: an EU Auxiliary Navy to generate new and leverage existing forces, and to set up new joint EU NAVFORs in the most contested maritime hot-spots, the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and the Arctic. Alternatively, this could also be facilitated as a EU Coordinated Maritime Presence (where coordination as opposed to a formal CSDP function are prime).



*Map of Europe and maritime “hot-spots”*

9. World Bank, ‘Global GDP 2019’, as last accessed on 06.10.2020, via: [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.PP.KD?locations=US&most\\_recent\\_value\\_desc=true](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.PP.KD?locations=US&most_recent_value_desc=true)

## Dulling the Blade or Broadening the Naval Horizon?

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 21<sup>st</sup> 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. They are indeed reappearing on our radar, as soon as the present focus on the pandemic diminishes. There is the ongoing maritime security and humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean, coupled with a strategic rivalry between the NATO members Greece and Turkey (which has all the ingredients to turn into a shooting war as far as the navies involved are concerned). The increasing geopolitical competition with Russia that not only has a military but a distinctly naval element. In addition to this, China has also begun to flank its bid for super-power status with displays of naval strength – including in European waters.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the coasts 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.

***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.***

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. For instance, China's or Iran's militarised disruptive behaviour in its maritime vicinity and trans-regionally ought to be carefully addressed with sound policy. These states' navies play a key role and the EU's naval potential is too significant and versatile to be left out of the consideration. 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. 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.

This leads us to a dilemma that appears to be particularly relevant for EU democracies: Using high-end naval assets continuously for low-end constabulary functions “dulls their blade”, exhausts a ship's resources for training and wears out equipment to the detriment of their intended roles in deterrence and war at sea. At the same time, without the related demonstration of tangible political utility that comes with disaster relief, humanitarian assistance and presence in UN missions, there might well be no funds allocated to navies by policy-makers for neither hard- nor soft-power functions. Navies need to navigate this dilemma successfully if they wish to prevail in inter-service and general budget rivalries. The fate of the Cold-War German Army's tank component should serve as a stark reminder: once a core strength of Germany's and NATO's land-force deterrent, it quickly shrank from over 3.000 tanks in the mid-1980s, to the

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10. Sebastian Bruns/Sarah Kirchberger, “The PLA Navy in the Baltic Sea: A View from Kiel”, Center for International Maritime Security, 16 August 2017.



present-day planned increase(!) to 320.<sup>11</sup> “Use it or lose it”, was one of the internal mottos of the Bundeswehr during the decades of the peace dividend, and tanks had no place in Germany’s missions abroad since 1990. The same risk applies to navies, to which the old saying “ships are safe in port, but that’s not what they are built for” readily applies.

However, in addition to creating vital political visibility through demonstrating utility in foreign policy, navies gain in experience and their maritime intellectual horizon if they carry out a broader spectrum of roles in maintaining good order at sea. Focusing exclusively on deterring a set enemy and preparing to outmatch his fleet, runs the risk of losing the initiative and cultivating strategic narrow-mindedness. Especially, as is the case with many smaller European navies, if this focus is compounded by a single theatre of operations for the envisaged confrontation. After all, until the end of the Cold War, the German Navy had little or no experience of waters and conditions beyond the North and Baltic Sea. By 2020, the German flag flies alongside the EU’s, UN’s and NATO’s off warships on deployments as far as the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Horn of Africa.

Therefore, the EU needs to build up its seapower for both key naval functions: first, major confrontation, war at sea, to possess a credible deterrent against potential aggressors; second, to provide good order at sea, and to supply the naval component of a comprehensive approach to human security in crises with a maritime element. Neither task can be neglected. Indeed, the two roles benefit from each other, if carried out smartly by political and naval decisionmakers.

## The Case for EU Seapower

Make no mistake: This is not advocacy for European global seapower as a tool of great-power or even imperial domination. Indeed, with its pedigree of commitment to UN-missions and comprehensive approaches to international crisis response, the EU would be what Geoffrey Till calls a post-modern seapower,<sup>12</sup> dedicated to multilateralism with a genuine humanitarian interest and value base. This article is a call to consider the opportunities of naval cooperation and integration, the naval role in comprehensive approaches to crisis-response, but also the ability to keep hostile gunboat diplomacy and naval power projection at bay in credible deterrence.

In building EU seapower, it is most promising to avoid lengthy debates on the highest political levels about an outright EU Navy. By all reasonable assessment, this vision is not likely to come to fruition anytime soon. Rather than bogging down progress in this important matter with debates on fundamental differences, it would be much more helpful to build on the visible practical successes of EU maritime commitments. The existing temporary EU NAVFORs “Atalanta” and “Irin” could serve as examples for a permanent structure of EU NAVFORs dealing with persisting maritime hot-spots. At

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11. Wiegold, Thomas, “Ein guter Panzer braucht sieben Jahre“. ZEIT, 27.03.2017, last accessed on 15.10.2020, via: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2017-03/bundeswehr-abruestung-nato-ausruestung-sparmassnahmen-ukraine>

12. See Till, Geoffrey, “Seapower: A Guide for the 21st Century” (3rd edition, Routledge, London 2013), p. 35

the same time, an adapted and evolved model of this could serve as the institutional home for the EU Auxiliary Navy we propose.

After all, the need for action is clearly there, given just a brief overview of the continuing salience of recent and ongoing naval engagements and concerns of the European Union. Indeed, it is surprising how little common effort to increase the EU's naval "punch" for this vital task has evolved over the past decades. Navies have suffered from reductions in their national defence budgets across the board of EU member-states.<sup>13</sup> The resulting challenges of small batch-numbers of vessels in 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 capable ones, are rather challenged to maintain reserves for rapid crisis response.

Close cooperation and integration is indispensable to European member states to provide the forces needed to address its maritime security challenges and defend its 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 set of EU NAVFORs for European maritime hot-spots and an EU Auxiliary Navy would address present and future challenges without having to lose precious time on intricate inter-governmental debate or the construction of entirely new vessels.

To be clear: It would not require much time or effort to set up these forces on short notice – a major advantage in the current complex international environment. With decisive political action behind it, a 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 ship-building sector. And in the case of a Baltic, Arctic or Black Sea NAVFOR, mostly within reach of European land and air-forces, all it would take is a change in current joint military resource allocation of member-states. Not least, such fresh ideas would breathe new life into European solidarity. 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>14</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>15</sup> or the next generation of tankers for the German Navy.<sup>16</sup>

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13. 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.

14. Organisation Conjointe de Coopération en matière d'Armement (OCCAR)

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

16. "Zwei neue Doppelhüllentanker für die Marine", *ES&T*, 29.07.2019, via: <https://esut.de/2019/07/meldungen/ruestung2/14188/zwei-neue-doppelhuellentanker-fuer-die-marine/>

## The Future of EU Seapower: providing good order at sea and credible deterrence“

*“A good Navy is not a provocation to war. It is the surest guaranty of peace.”*

Theodore Roosevelt, 1901

Europe’s defence lacks in coherence as its mutual assets are neither fully developed according to their potential, nor sufficiently integrated with NATO, its mainstay of deterrence and vital link across the Atlantic. Norway, the northward extension of NATO’s European defence, is not a part of the EU, while its member-states Sweden and Finland, the dominant geographic players in the Baltic, are not in NATO. Furthermore, a “hot” major great-power shooting-war scenario is not the most likely to occur in the near future in Europe’s vicinity: hybrid warfare as demonstrated in Ukraine by Russia is a much more realistic threat. However, when countering hybrid attacks, a comprehensive civilian-military, public-private, whole-of-government approach to defence is much more likely to succeed than a purely military one: And comprehensive approaches are precisely the strength of the EU – abroad and at home.

Ultimately, both the highest and lowest end of the utility of seapower suffer from the lack of auxiliary capabilities and coordinated European action closely linked with NATO. EU navies lack reach and endurance, while defence at home lacks coherent depth. After all, a powerful EU force in the Baltic Sea would be more than just naval: The entirety of the Baltic Sea is within reach of Russian shore-based missiles and aircraft – but also those of European allies. It is in deterrence as well as crisis response that a powerful, politically and diplomatically resourceful EU has a distinct advantage over a more military-focussed NATO left to its own devices. And the EU is entirely at home within its own geographic and geopolitical neighbourhood. Accordingly, in its own interest and in that of NATO, the EU is called upon to build up its seapower – not to provoke war, but as the surest guarantee for peace.

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