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Batten down the hatches: Sea power in a contested security environment from the Mediterranean and beyond

EVENT REPORT



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Where freedom of the seas is paramount

Facing major challenges across the Mediterranean, NATO and the European Union must step up their cooperation to ensure the region's security, stability and prosperity – with the full backing of the Atlantic alliance's maritime forces. Participants clarified this point in 'Batten down the hatches: Sea power in a contested security environment from the Mediterranean and beyond', the debate held during a Friends of Europe policymakers' dinner in Brussels on 24 September 2019. Over 20 peace and security experts – among them US, NATO and EU officials responsible for safeguarding the region – explored 21st century sea power's role and relevance.

The debate kicked off with an introduction by Paul Taylor, author of 'Molto Agitato – Italy and Mediterranean security'. This 2019 joint publication by Friends of Europe and the Italian Institute of International Affairs (IIA) pinpointed the region's biggest problems: growing power rivalries between the US, Russia, China and others; the frailty of states like Libya and Syria; and dangerous new threats like radicalisation, terrorism and climate change.

"Our debate will be a no-holds-barred look at the challenges facing NATO in the region and how it's addressing them," said the moderator Jamie Shea, Senior Fellow at Friends of Europe and former deputy assistant secretary-general at NATO. He also wanted to assess the new technological challenges for naval forces in what some people are calling the 'maritime century'. How can the alliance's sea power in the Mediterranean deal with everything from Great Power competition to thorny new issues, such as illegal migration and violent extremism?

Battles of the Atlantic

The Mediterranean is a highly strategic body of water that links three continents or acts as a barrier between them. It's also home to 20% of global shipping trade, yet covers less than 1% of the planet's surface area. Regional and external actors have long competed for influence across the wider region.

The debate presentation on 'Battles of the Atlantic' since the First World War underlined the strategic importance of the area. Each battle led to devastating disruption of global security and trade, hence NATO's determination today to keep the seas free for all the world's vessels and commerce. However, these confrontations were also key for technological and tactical advances in multiple fields, ranging from weapons systems to mine detection and cyber warfare.

During the Cold War, NATO forces engaged in a constant high-pressure cat-and-mouse game with Soviet submarines. Despite the lingering threat of mutually assured destruction (MAD) from nuclear weapons, no shots were fired and the West prevailed. Sadly, there was no obvious peace dividend.

Today we are in the fourth Battle of the Atlantic in which the fragile security environment is increasingly challenged by the naval forces of Russia and other nations. Great Power competition is now increasingly playing out beneath the ocean waves.

Strategic naval competitors for the West have long included Russia, which has its sights on oil and gas reserves in the Arctic and elsewhere. China's naval forces are also roaming farther from home, while the nation continues to buy up Mediterranean ports as part of its Belt and Road Initiative.

This complex situation is not helped by the growing contest among nations for natural resources in and around the region in addition to thousands of deaths at sea due to uncontrolled migration. As one speaker remarked, the Eastern Mediterranean is a "potentially lethal cocktail that is ripe for conflict."

What's so special about a navy?

Naval forces are powerful, can go anywhere and are versatile in terms of operations. They are arguably better at keeping the peace than air or land forces, acting as an extended arm of diplomacy above and below the sea to deter and avoid war. According to one participant, "The US and the alliance will continue to operate freely in the waters of the world. In the spring of 2019, the US ran dual carrier operations in the Mediterranean, with the equivalent of 200,000 tonnes of forward-operating diplomacy!"

Navies also provide effective surge capacity for crisis management. This happened in Libya in 2011, when NATO sea power played a significant role in responding to the violence unleashed by the Gaddafi regime. One speaker commented that Libya was a turning point for Mediterranean security, fostering new and stronger cooperation between NATO and the EU – which respectively focus on defence and crisis management. Thus the NATO Hub for the South, recently established in Naples, is tasked with monitoring the southern area of NATO's borders and any crises emerging in the Middle East, North and Sub-Saharan Africa. The Hub works closely with international partners, notably the EU, in the Mediterranean.

Several speakers called for stronger and more effective NATO and EU coordination of maritime operations in and around the Mediterranean. The alliance must become more flexible and stable so it can address the causes of instability that drive migration and illicit activity in the region.

The urgency of EU capacity building

With 150 naval ships, the EU does not lack capacity. Yet its members must better coordinate missions regionally and not waste resources. The EU nations – 22 of which are NATO members – must boost their sea power and military interoperability. They already cooperate well in Operation Sophia, a mission to fight human trafficking in the Mediterranean, but this success should be extended to dozens of EU action plans for cooperation at sea.

In the debate, several people called for the EU to speed up progress on European defence cooperation. The bloc must also develop greater military autonomy, as NATO has requested, because "there can be no credibility without autonomy." It was noted



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2. **Yuri Gorchakov**, Acting Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to NATO
3. **Pauline Massart**, Deputy Director, CEIS
4. **Radoslava Stefanova**, Head of the Russia and Ukraine Section, NATO; **Yuri Gorchakov**, Acting Permanent Representation of the Russian Federation to NATO
5. **James Foggo**, Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa, Commander, Allied Joint Force Command Naples, Italy; **Geert Cami**, Co-Founder and Secretary General, Friends of Europe



that only France, Italy and Spain are true naval powers in this region, although the EU has plenty of scope to develop its own capacity, especially in terms of training, surveillance and protection of shipping routes.

Reviving entente with the Great Bear

Relations with Russia were a regular theme throughout the debate. This country is a strategic competitor for the alliance and engaged in naval operations in many seas other than just the Mediterranean, among them the Arctic (where for instance Russia is busy with remilitarisation) and the Baltic. In the Black Sea, tensions are high following the 2018 Sea of Azov incident where the Russian coast guard illegally fired on and seized three Ukrainian ships. One speaker hoped this situation would soon be resolved through the release of the 24 Ukrainian sailors still detained by the Russians, paving the way for more dialogue and cooperation with Russia, notwithstanding the frosty relationship between the two sides since Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Officials speaking on behalf of US and Russia acknowledged they look for dialogue and personal friendship, often starting with their countries' ambassadors and generals. However, the two sides do not always see eye to eye on a variety of issues and their militaries were described as behaving more like a divorced couple! Above all their dispute is political and this can only be fixed by positive and progressive decision-makers.

Debate participants concurred that Europe and Russia still need one another, but must now build on former successes in military and civilian cooperation, notably maritime search and rescue. Together they must address pressing security problems in the Mediterranean such as piracy, violent extremism and people smuggling. For one Russian official – who began by praising the NATO-Russia Council for cooperation that recently led to the saving of three Russian mariners – the key to better cooperation with the alliance in future will be face-to-face meetings and expert-level talks. The official added that Russia has no offensive goals in the Arctic, which is definitely not a place for conflict, and is simply building capacity in that region.

NATO and Russia have previously worked well together on peacekeeping in Afghanistan. Nowadays they usefully brief one another on their respective maritime operations in the Mediterranean, such as NATO's Dynamic Mariner 2019 and Trident Juncture 2018, as part of their continuing dialogue designed to reduce misunderstandings. This form of dialogue is also crucial to avoid military conflict in war-torn Syria, where the US and Russia both have a major presence.

The Libyan conundrum

Libya and its unresolved conflict often cropped up in the debate, mainly as an example of a nation sadly failed by the international community. While NATO's military operations there in 2011 were quick and smooth, Libya is struggling due to poor governance, poor cooperation among some 400 tribes and a lack of national self-determination – all of which have contributed to Libya's Second Civil War.

Ideally, Libyans should find their own solution to this crisis. NATO could help by imposing an arms embargo, although this would require a new UN resolution combined with a

large military force and extensive EU cooperation. Another speaker said this conflict vividly illustrates why EU countries must speak with one voice, as several of them currently back opposing factions in Libya.

Hopes and fears for Africa

Thoughts turned to Africa at the mention of illegal migration. Poverty, war and unemployment on the continent have led to thousands of Europe-bound migrants and refugees – some of whom don't survive the Mediterranean crossing. NATO and the EU must be fully engaged in Africa and strive to boost jobs and education there. Otherwise there is a real danger that the African youth bulge of 2050 will result in millions of unemployed and hopeless young people, potentially the source of significant instability and even conflict at home and abroad.

All the region's troubles come from the land, move to the sea and end up back on land – summarised one speaker, who called for the EU to improve cooperation with the African Union. The NATO Hub for the South already helps by pooling alliance assets to tackle everything from destabilisation to migration and environmental issues on NATO's southern flanks. The Hub aims to work with Africans to tackle the root causes of these problems, such as a lack of governance and rule of law, and to foster the continent's security and development. On the plus side, West African navies are now becoming better at tackling local maritime problems, thanks mainly to cooperation with NATO and EU member states.

Embracing new technologies

Looking to the region's future, debate participants acknowledged the immediate threats and long-term challenges for maritime forces of emerging technologies – among them artificial intelligence, cyber and space. For while NATO is the world's most successful military alliance, for 70 years and counting, it must keep pace with all these developments in order to remain an agile and lethal force.

The US Navy is at the forefront of the latest technologies. It is for example testing directed energy and kinetic weapons systems, which enable warships to carry far more munitions than is possible today. It also recently launched the first-ever unmanned aerial fuel tanker from an aircraft carrier, significantly extending the flight range of F-18 and F-35 fighter planes. This pilotless tanker would also be perfect for both the EU and NATO. According to one official, the alliance must avoid falling behind in new technology domains like this, by enhancing the interoperability of its forces.

In response to a query about apparent American reticence to act militarily around the globe, it was noted that the US Navy had no hesitation in striking Syrian facilities in April 2017 and a year later, after President Assad had illegally used chemical weapons against his own people.

Another participant wondered if the recent drone attack on Saudi Arabian oil facilities raised questions about the value of traditional military forces and large navies. Or put another way, 'Are we preparing for the wrong war?' The reply was clear: yes, offensive drones blur the lines between war and peace, especially if these sophisticated weapons

are controlled by unsophisticated actors. The alliance may need to rethink its strategies on new technology, the scope of NATO's Article 5 (an attack on one member is an attack on all members), not to mention cyber and space warfare.

Participants also debated the risks for NATO of the UK's withdrawal from the EU, before concluding that it's still too early to say and that the UK will remain a key member of NATO. Furthermore, 80% of NATO spending does not come from the EU. A question on 'branding' – whether the flag flown makes any difference to a maritime operation's effectiveness – was answered by a US official. In Africa, branding can be a big problem for NATO and EU operations, hence the importance of bringing more African partners on board.

Strong and stable partners

Although the debate touched on many of the world's biggest geopolitical issues, the key conclusion was that the alliance remains strong. It's committed to facing down all conventional and emerging threats in this 'maritime century', in order to guarantee the freedom of the seas in the Mediterranean and beyond. Moreover the EU and NATO work well together and complement one another. In the concluding remarks of one official: Remember that there are no alternatives to the EU and NATO, so we must continue to build them both, with the US Navy remaining the partnership's key partner.



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1. **Mary Fitzgerald**, Researcher and consultant in Euro-Mediterranean affairs specialising in Libya, France, European Young Leader; **Paul Skehan**, Head of EU Affairs, PepsiCo Europe
2. **Nathalie Furrer**, Director of Programmes and Operations, Friends of Europe
3. **Jasem Albudaiwi**, Ambassador, Mission of Kuwait to the EU
4. **Miomir Udovicki**, Ambassador, Mission of the Republic of Serbia to NATO; **Admiral James Foggo**, Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa, Commander Allied Joint Force Command Naples, Italy; **Geert Cami**, Co-Counder and Secretary General, Friends of Europe
5. **Pauline Massart**, Deputy Director, CEIS; **Claudio Graziano**, Chairman of the European Union Military Committee, European External Action Service (EEAS)



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