

Julian Pawlak | Johannes Peters [eds.]

# From the North Atlantic to the South China Sea

Allied Maritime Strategy in the 21st Century



**Nomos**



The Kiel  
Seapower  
Series



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# From the North Atlantic to the South China Sea

Allied Maritime Strategy in the 21st Century

With an introduction by Sebastian Bruns



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## Preface

The maritime domain remains a central pillar of contemporary military strategy. Even as defence policy and warfighting has ventured into new operational areas, such as space or cyberspace, warfare at sea continues to be a key area of 21<sup>st</sup> century military strategic thought. While the naval domain has been a concern for military strategists for centuries, one might contend that it has never been as important as in today's hyper-connected, globalised world.

The world's seas are essential to the freedom, safety and prosperity of our societies. The vast majority of global trade is conducted via international shipping lanes, many of them running through vulnerable choke points and bottlenecks. Marine resources such as fishing grounds or natural gas and oil deposits below the sea are still the bedrock of many economic sectors. Most of the world's population lives within 100 kilometres of the coast. Societies and economies are also more interconnected than ever through trans-oceanic infrastructure, such as submarine communication cables or pipelines on the seabed. Even small disruptions to global shipping or the failure of a few elements of global maritime infrastructure can have serious ripple effects that are felt worldwide. Thus, allies in Europe and North America must have paramount interest in preserving the peace, stability and freedom of global waters.

At the same time, the maritime security environment has become more complex and faces major challenges. Geopolitical competition—even rivalry—in the maritime domain has become a major threat to peace, stability and freedom. Heightened tensions with Russia after 2014 and increasing friction between the United States and China are being played out in the maritime field. An illustrative example, of course, is the South China Sea, where Beijing's territorial claims clash with Washington's intention to defend the current rules-based order and assert freedom of navigation. But there are also more indirect threats to the security of international waterways. State fragility and sub-state conflicts in coastal states or in the vicinity of important straits have externalities, such as attacks on international shipping by pirates, criminal groups or terrorists.

In addition, climate change is increasingly intensifying the threat of all the aforementioned challenges. It opens up geo-strategic competition in new theatres, such as the Arctic, where melting ice caps have increased accessibility and brought with it a potential strategic race between China,

Russia and the US. Global warming is also adding to the fragility of vulnerable societies and to the kind of protracted conflicts that spill over into the maritime domain. Furthermore, the destruction of livelihoods through climate change will become one of the top push-factors forcing people to migrate—which is often exploited by human traffickers operating via international waters. This all demonstrates why preserving maritime security must be a chief concern for Germany and its partners in the EU and NATO.

Yet, the maritime strategies that underpin both organisations, NATO's Alliance Maritime Strategy and the EU Maritime Security Strategy, still stem from 2011 and 2014 respectively. They do not adequately reflect the realities of the fundamentally altered security environment of the 2020s and 2030s. In particular, 2014 marked a strategic watershed moment, bringing territorial defence back to the forefront of debate. Effectively defending the Euro-Atlantic area, however, will hardly be possible without taking the maritime dimension into proper consideration. The requirements for European, Canadian and American navies have drastically changed. While we have grown accustomed over decades to engaging in low-intensity operations fulfilling stabilisation or policing missions, Western naval forces will have to return to their traditional roles. Once again, they need to be able to conduct naval warfighting in contested environments and engage at the high-intensity end of the spectrum. Still, allied navies will not be able to entirely shed their former roles. Conflicts and instability on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean and at the Horn of Africa will require us to deal with the continued need for naval stabilisation missions.

Both, the EU and NATO maritime strategies also do not take into account the full extent of Washington's pivot to Asia and its shifting focus towards the Indo-Pacific. The fact that the only global maritime power is turning its attention towards China carries far-reaching implications for its other allies. On the one hand, it comes with an expectation that Canada and Europe will pick up some of the slack—including in the maritime domain. The US will ask Europe to shoulder more of the burden of counterbalancing Russia and its aggressive foreign policy at sea. On the other hand, Washington will initiate a debate on how its Euro-Atlantic allies can complement American efforts in the Indo-Pacific—either through force projection in the form of naval deployment or through more indirect support for the intensifying American military stand-off at sea with China.

Allied maritime strategies will need to consider the altered circumstances of today's global security environment. A first step would be to formulate a strategic level of ambition for the EU and NATO. What is it that

we hope to achieve in the maritime domain in the future? How do we prioritise tasks and what could constitute suitable division of labour between the European Union and the Transatlantic Alliance? Policymakers will then need to translate these strategic ambitions into appropriate requirements for the equipment, training and organisation of naval forces. This entails empowering the defence industry to remain at the innovation frontier of naval technology. And it will require further harmonisation of national navies across the EU and NATO in order to generate cross-linked, multinational and interoperable naval units.

To this end, this book takes an in-depth look at key tenets of current allied maritime strategy, conducts a strategic and operational assessment of the current threat level and sketches the responses required to deal with these challenges effectively. While not an exhaustive assessment, it is an important look at what allied maritime strategy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs to consider. The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung is honoured to be able to support such an important endeavour in maritime strategic thought. We hope scholars and practitioners alike will find this book an informative and thought-provoking read.

Nils Wörmer and Philipp Dienstbier  
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung







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