

Introduction

After several decades of relative stability at sea following the end of the Cold War, NATO is now facing an increasingly contested and challenging maritime environment. Such stability had a major impact in the Alliance's maritime posture, with the promises of the widely acclaimed «peace dividends» leading to a sharp decrease in defense spending and in the size of most NATO fleets. This short period, however, soon gave rise to a wide plethora of risks and threats which are now shaking maritime stability across the entire globe, including in the Euro-Atlantic region.

Smaller than before, and struggling with lower budgets that prevent their growth, NATO navies no longer have the muscle necessary to properly deter aggression within their maritime areas of interest, and are finding it increasingly challenging to withhold freedom of navigation. The threats posed by revisionist states such as Russia or China (particularly in the High North and the East and South China Seas), or the growing capabilities of non-state actors (like the Houthis), are rapidly transforming the environment at sea for NATO. To address these challenges, Allied navies are once again transforming and adapting their fleets, pushing to increase their budgets and move towards new operational concepts that help leverage the latest technologies.

Thus, amid the ongoing crises in the Black and Red Seas, the threats posed to critical undersea infrastructure in the Baltic Sea, or China's growing maritime ambitions vis à vis a weaker U.S. Navy, this article reviews NATO's maritime posture during the last decades highlighting its most important aspects sailing into an uncertain future. It examines the evolution of the maritime strategic environment and the naval capabilities of its members, and discusses the most relevant trends that will likely impact its short- and medium-term future.

Evolution of NATO's Maritime Strategic Environment

The end of the Cold War in the early 1990s led to the disappearance of Soviet naval threat, and thus, to a radical change for the European strategic environment. The Atlantic Alliance, which had had a predominantly maritime focus since its very inception, entered a period of significant changes for the navies of its members. Most of their efforts until

then had been oriented towards ensuring sea denial and sea control around their waters to deter any potential Soviet threat coming from the sea. However, with that threat which had also driven most navies' shipbuilding efforts now gone, many governments began to shift their priorities and their force structures towards a peacetime posture.

This shift implied a lesser focus on high-end capabilities, and, for the biggest navies, a growing interest on achieving the ability to «prevent or shape crises further away [from home]» — as highlighted in the UK Strategic Defense Review of 1998.¹ While the United States maintained its global presence through forward deployments to ensure the stability in East Asia and the Middle East, other navies such as the French, British, Italian or Spanish began to expand their horizons seeking to project power far from their coasts.

Other smaller, more regional navies, such as the German or the Dutch, also began shifting from being brown/green water navies towards being capable of deploying further away and for longer periods.² The Netherlands focused on the promotion of technological and operational defense, pushing for additional multilateral cooperation with its closest neighbors while also adapting shrinking defense budgets with initiatives such as the Standard Flex modular mission-payload system, which allowed for a reduction in the number of surface combatants in the fleet while still able to conduct a set of different missions.³

Unlike them, however, the Nordic navies (especially Norway, due to its geographical configuration) remained focused on territorial defense and the protection of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) near their waters. Meanwhile, the two members and neighbors in the Eastern Mediterranean, Greece and Turkey, were involved in a series of continued disputes over the little islands dispersed across the Aegean Sea, and neither of them considered power projection abroad as a primary task.⁴

¹ UK MINISTRY OF DEFENCE, «Strategic Defence Review» (London: 1998), chap. 5. Available at: <https://fissilematerials.org/library/mod98.pdf> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

² STÖHS, Jeremy «Into the Abyss?: European Naval Power in the Post-Cold War Era», *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 71, No. 3, 2018, pp. 4-9. Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5123&context=nwc-reviewb> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

³ On modular systems, most notable examples include the Littoral Combat Ship program of the U.S. Navy. For more in mission modularity, see: SALISBURY, Emma «Beware the Allure of Mission Modularity», *U.S. Naval Institute, Proceedings*, Vol. 149/5/1,443, May 2023. Available at: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/may/beware-allure-mission-modularity> (Accessed 21 January 2024).

⁴ STÖHS, supra note 2.

From 2014 Onwards

With the invasion of Crimea in 2014, it became clear that the Russian threat had not vanished with the USSR, but had rather remained dormant. Since then, Moscow has made significant investments in the militarization of its Arctic region, which has included the re-establishment of the Cold War-era bastion defense strategy. As was described in a previous article, Russian submarine activity has returned to levels not seen in almost four decades, with the Northern Fleet's conventional and nuclear submarines conducting regular patrols in the Barents Sea and the North Atlantic and threatening NATO's Northern Flank.⁵

Despite the several setbacks suffered by the Black Sea fleet, with several of its surface units (most notably, the Slava-class cruiser Moskva) and a Kilo-class submarine lost to Ukraine, the Russian Navy's Pacific Fleet is also a notable threat. In 2023, it conducted several joint naval exercises with the Chinese Navy, such as the «Fiscal 2023» naval exercise conducted in the Chukchi and Bering Seas. This scheduled, pre-announced operation featured successful live fires into the Siberian peninsula, with the participation of surface warships (including the Slava-class RFS Varyag, the modified Udaloy-class destroyer RFS Marshal Shaposhnikov, or a Gremyashchiy-class corvette), submarines (the Oscar-class submarine RFS Tomsk), and coastal missile systems like the K-300P Bastion-P mobile system.⁶

But more importantly, with the emergence of Chinese maritime ambitions over the past decade, the U.S. Navy is pushing for a stronger maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific region, in cooperation with regional allies such as the Philippines, South Korea and Japan.⁷ This pivot, although understandable, will come at a cost for maritime security in

For more on the Greece-Turkey dispute, see for example: KARAGIANNIS, Emmanuel «The Coming Naval Arms Race in the Eastern Mediterranean», *RUSI Commentary*, 22 July 2021. Available at: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/coming-naval-arms-race-eastern-mediterranean> (Accessed 22 January 2024).

⁵ VÁZQUEZ, Gonzalo «The Resurgence of the GIUK Gap's Strategic Importance», *Opinion Paper IEEE* 49/2023. Available at: https://www.ieee.es/en/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2023/DIEEEO49_2023_GONVAZ_Artico_ENG.pdf (Accessed 20 January 2024).

⁶ VÁZQUEZ, Gonzalo «Russia's Bloodied Navy Remains a Threat», *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 11 October 2023. Available at: <https://cepa.org/article/russias-bloodied-navy-remains-a-threat/> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

⁷ VÁZQUEZ, Gonzalo «To Succeed Against China, Washington and its Allies must be in the South China Sea», *Center for Maritime Strategy*, 28 September 2023. Available at: <https://centerformaritimestrategy.org/publications/to-succeed-against-china-washington-and-its-allies->

the Euro-Atlantic region, leaving European navies to share a higher burden in the defense of the waters around the European continent. Multilateral cooperation will prove decisive to ensure European navies can address the emerging challenges throughout these regions, and each navy will also have to focus on the individual contribution it can make within its possibilities.

This tendency, reminiscent of the days of the late Cold War, could lead to the return of local sea control efforts by NATO navies, a task that was partly forgotten during the post-Cold War years. In the case of Spain, it could eventually translate into a stronger focus on the long-forgotten «Balearic-Strait-Canaries Axis», which served as the cornerstone of Spanish maritime strategy during the late 1970s and the 1980s.⁸

As in the past, such focus would not only serve to protect Spanish national security interests from the threats emanating from the North of Africa (which have also been on the rise during the last three decades as the military difference between Spain and its neighbors steadily decreased), but it could also provide a useful instrument for NATO, securing the accesses to the Strait of Gibraltar and monitoring any Russian move close in the Mediterranean.

Red Sea Crisis

The latest episode of maritime instability, adding to the ongoing situation in the Black Sea with the conflict in Ukraine and the risks to critical undersea infrastructure,⁹ is the crisis in the Red Sea following the numerous attacks by Houthi rebels in Yemen against global shipping lanes transiting through the Bab El-Mandeb Strait.¹⁰ The Houthis, a military group supported by the government of Iran in the efforts to destroy Israel, have been

[must-be-in-the-south-china-sea/](#) (Accessed 21 January 2024).

⁸ TRIANA, Jesús M. «Balears-Estrecho-Canarias: el eje original de soberanía que España puede volver a defender», *El Confidencial*, 21 December 2023. Available at:

https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2023-12-21/eje-balears-estrecho-canarias-defensa-nacional-armada_3796682/ (Accessed 21 January 2024).

⁹ BUEGER, Christian «NATO's Contribution to Critical Maritime Infrastructure Protection», *Center for Maritime Strategy*, 19 January 2024. Available at:

<https://centerformaritimestrategy.org/publications/natos-contribution-to-critical-maritime-infrastructure-protection/> (Accessed 21 January 2024).

¹⁰ See ROMERO JUNQUERA, Abel. CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio «¿Qué está pasando en el Mar Rojo? Causas y consecuencias de esta nueva crisis» *Documento Informativo IEEE* 01/2024. Available at:

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_informativos/2024/DIEEEI01_2024_ABEROM_MarRojo.pdf (Accessed 20 January 2024).

engaging in unlawful attacks against commercial vessels around their coasts.

Yemen, astride one of the most commercially-relevant regions in the world (the maritime route that connects the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean through the Red Sea), has provided a perfect launch platform for their attacks, which have included anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles, UAVs and USVs, and the hijacking of several vessels.¹¹

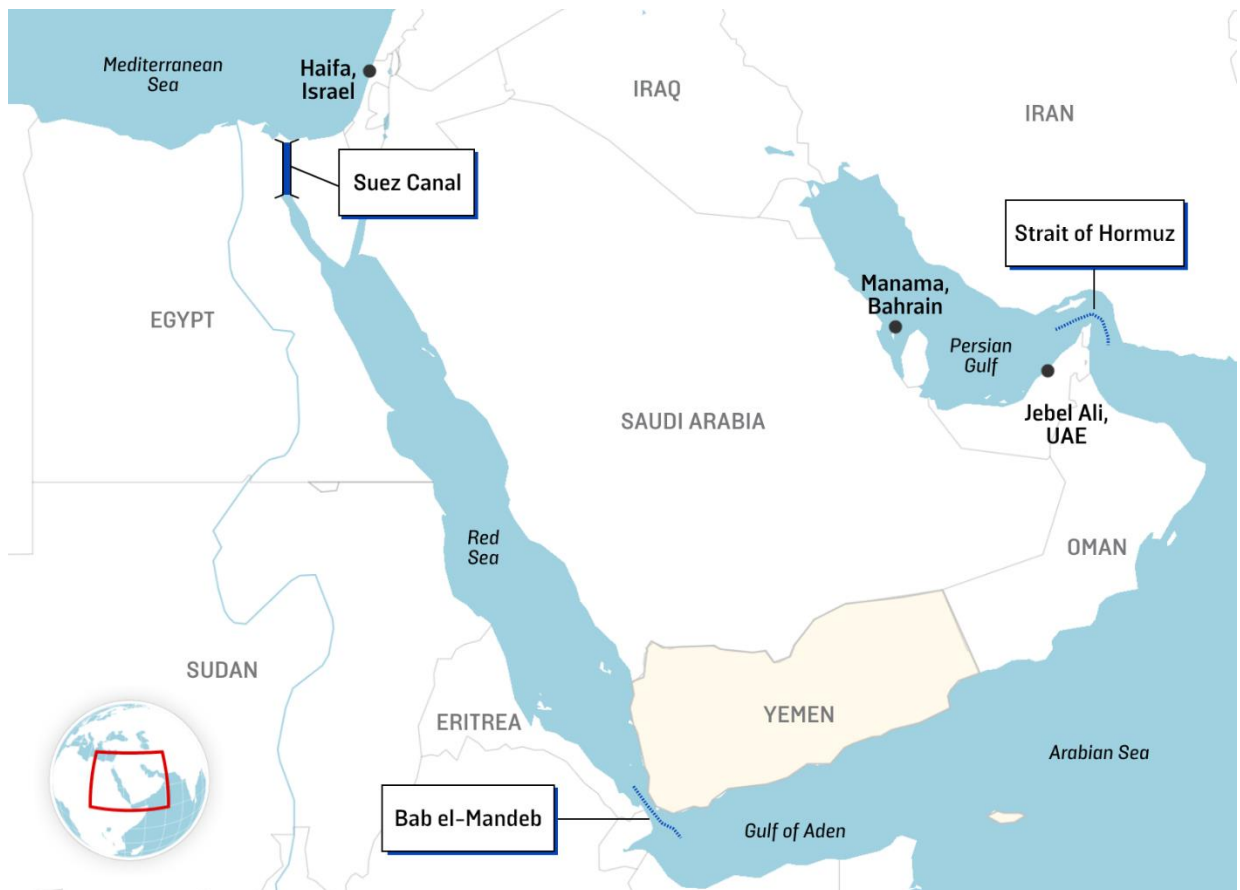


Figure 1: Map of Yemen and its position in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration via Foreign Policy).

In spite of their relative success in compromising global shipping, «the Houthis' maritime strike capabilities are technically advanced but lack targeting sophistication», thereby making them «a manageable threat that can be countered with air defense assets in the region».¹² Indeed, the interventions of three NATO countries' warships, the U.S, France

¹¹ ALI, Idrees & ZHDANNIKOV, Dmitry «Red Sea Attacks continue to disrupt global trade», *GCaptain*, 16 January 2024. Available at: <https://gcaptain.com/another-bulk-carrier-hit-in-the-red-sea/> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

¹² CRANNY-EVANS, Sam & KAUSHAL, Sidharth «Securing the Red Sea: How Can Houthi Maritime Strikes be Countered?» *RUSI Commentary*, 10 January 2024. Available at: <https://rusi.org/explore-our->

and the UK (arguably the strongest navies in the Alliance at the moment), have contributed to the protection of many vessels from missile and drone attacks, with more than a hundred intercepted since October 2023. However, these successful interventions have highlighted some acute shortfalls in NATO's anti-air warfare (AAW) capabilities.¹³ Not only has the number of large surface combatants designed for AAW declined significantly since the 1990s, but more importantly, launching heavily expensive missiles to intercept much cheaper drones will not be sustainable in the long-term.¹⁴

Thus, NATO navies are faced with the twofold challenge of putting additional AAW-capable surface combatants in service while also finding more effective solutions to address asymmetric threats such as that of the Houthis; all while attempting to grow the size and capabilities of their fleets after decades of fiscal austerity.

Evolution of NATO Naval Capabilities

By the end of the Cold War, NATO navies amassed a strong level of naval capabilities, a power upon which rested most of the resources they expected to employ should they have to confront the Soviet Union or the Warsaw Pact. The demise of both in the 1990s, however, quickly led to a shift in security priorities for many members. Essentially, most of NATO's navies gradually transitioned from the traditional sea control and sea denial tasks they had performed during the Cold War, with fleets trained for potential conflicts in the high-end of the intensity spectrum (anti-submarine warfare, anti-air warfare and anti-surface warfare), transitioned towards power projection over greater distances and littoral regions around the world (favoring the role of amphibious capabilities).

Although adequate for the time, these changes began to take a toll on many navies, leading to a reduction in the overall size of their fleets. The U.S. Navy, for example, went «from almost 600 [ships] at the beginning of the decade to just over 300 at the turn of the

[research/publications/commentary/securing-red-sea-how-can-houthi-maritime-strikes-be-counterred](#)

(Accessed 20 January 2024).

¹³ VÁZQUEZ, Gonzalo «NATO Must be Ready for High-Intensity Naval Conflict», *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 11 December 2023. Available at: <https://cepa.org/article/nato-must-be-ready-for-high-intensity-naval-conflict/> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

¹⁴ CHILDS, Nick «Global implications of the shipping attacks in the Red Sea», *IJSS*, 19 December 2023. Available at: <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/12/global-implications-of-the-shipping-attacks-in-the-red-sea/> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

century».¹⁵ As Jeremy Stöhs has highlighted in several instances,

«While most navies have excelled at conducting operations at the lower end of the intensity spectrum and within largely permissive environments, traditional war-fighting capabilities against near-peer competitors have atrophied severely in the quarter century since the end of the Cold War. The shortage of platforms, as well as the lack of mission-specific training and exercises, is the chief cause of this dangerous development, which finds its origin in strategic shortsightedness, political myopia, and the attendant fiscal austerity measures».¹⁶

This change was particularly sharp in the Royal Navy (as showcased in the table above), which saw the number of surface combatants in its fleet shrink during the 1990s and early 2000s – including a reduction in the navy personnel from 69,000 to 50,000 sailors – as did many of its partners. While NATO was expanding its frontiers outside of the Atlantic area in search of new members in the East, «individual NATO nations in both Europe and North America seized the opportunity to cut back on their armed forces, including their navies».¹⁷

It was during these years that the Alliance began experimenting with new operational force packages, such as the Combined Joint Task Forces (CJTF), with which members were able to deploy in specific situations to carry out any given mission. Other initiative which has remained as powerful instrument are the Standing Maritime Groups, with the cooperative efforts of many Allied navies that ensure a continued presence across the main areas of interest.

The Spanish Navy, having made significant investments during the 1970s and 1980s in its naval capabilities, reached the mid-1990s with a strong fleet based upon the *Principe de Asturias* STOVL¹⁸ aircraft carrier (based on the U.S. design of sea-control ship), two *Galicia-class* landing platform dock (LPD) ships, 11 guided-missile frigates (five of the *Baleares-class* and six of the *Santa María-class*), and eight submarines (four of the S-60

¹⁵ SWARTZ, Peter M. «Evolution of U.S. Navy Roles in NATO: Always an Important Part of a Larger Whole», *Center for Naval Analyses*, August 2021, p. 88. Available at: <https://www.cna.org/reports/2021/08/Evolution-of-US-Navy-Roles-in-NATO-Always-an-Important-Part-of-a-Larger-Whole.pdf> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

¹⁶ STÖHS, supra note 2, at, p. 22.

¹⁷ SWARTZ, supra note 15, at p. 92.

¹⁸ Short-takeoff and vertical landing.

Delfin-class and four of the S-70 Galerna-Class); supported by a strong fleet of P-3As maritime patrol aircraft.¹⁹ These capabilities, experienced a decline during the following decades, as did those of many other partners.

The Principe de Asturias carrier, decommissioned in 2013, was replaced with an amphibious landing helicopter dock, which, although carrier-capable, does not provide with the same capabilities. The submarine fleet was significantly affected by the numerous technical difficulties and budgetary problems experienced with the S-80 program, leaving the Navy at just 2 operational units as of early 2024. Although the S-80-class is expected to bring the total number to 4 by the 2030, such number is still considered insufficient to fulfill Spain's strategic requirements in the waters around its coasts and the Strait of Gibraltar. The P-3As of the MPA fleet were also gradually decommissioned, leaving Spain without any for some time. It wasn't until late 2023, that the purchase of 16 Airbus C-295 aircraft was announced,²⁰ even though these are not as capable of Boeing's P-3s and P-8s.

Nevertheless, despite the reduction in the number of surface combatants, the return to great power competition and the huge impact it is expected to have upon naval warfare has become a grave concern for most nations. Thus, NATO navies are showing a renewed interest in strengthening their assets, as evidenced by some of the major naval programs currently underway:

United States Navy: In spite of significant constraints arising from the shortfalls of its shipbuilding industry, as well as the proven failure of modern programs as that of the Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) which have wasted significant amounts of resources,²¹ Washington is currently working on the Columbia-class of SSBNs that will replace the current Ohio-class.²² They are also working on the Constellation-class of guided-

¹⁹ MINISTERIO DE DEFENSA, «Defense White Paper 2000» (Madrid: Centro de Publicaciones, 2000), p. 194. Available at: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/155731/Spain_English2000.pdf (Accessed 20 January 2024).

²⁰ «España adquiere 16 Airbus C295 en configuraciones de patrulla y vigilancia marítima», *Airbus*, 20 December 2023. Available at: <https://www.airbus.com/es/newsroom/press-releases/2023-12-espana-adquiere-16-airbus-c295-en-configuraciones-de-patrulla-y> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

²¹ O'ROURKE, Ronald, «Navy Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) Program: Background and Issues for Congress», *Congressional Research Service (CRS)*, 17 December 2019. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33741/257> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

²² O'ROURKE, Ronald, «Navy Columbia (SSBN-826) Class Ballistic Missile Submarine Program: Background and Issues for Congress», *Congressional Research Service (CRS)*, 20 December 2023. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R41129/255> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

missile frigates, which are set to support the current fleet of Arleigh-Burke-class of destroyers.²³ However, due to the workforce shortfalls at the Wisconsin yards where the frigates are being built, the program has been delayed at least for a year.²⁴

Royal Navy: The current class of Type 45 destroyers (Daring-class) will be likely replaced with the future Type 83 destroyer somewhere around the mid-2030s, as part of the Future Air Dominance System (FADS) of the Navy.²⁵ Another of the Royal Navy's main pillars, its deterrent fleet of ballistic missile submarines, will also see the replacement of the current Vanguard-class submarines with the upcoming Dreadnought-class (with the first unit expected to be delivered in the early 2030s).²⁶

Italian Navy: Italy is also working on a future destroyer program (DDX) to replace its Durand de la Penne-class destroyers, expected to have a higher displacement than their predecessors. Additional developments to modernize the Italian Navy include the delivery of additional FREMM frigates, expected to be delivered in 2025, three new amphibious ships to replace the San Giorgio-class from the 1990s, and the U212 Near Future Submarine (NFS) project, with three units already under construction.²⁷

German Navy: With the unveiling of the outline for its 2035 fleet structure, Germany confirmed in 2023 it is set to replace its Sachsen-class (F124) AAW frigates during the 2030s with six new frigates of the F127 program.²⁸ Additionally, there are also plans for the acquisition of several Type 212CD submarines (of which the Norwegian Navy has also ordered four units) to be delivered by the late 2030s.²⁹

²³ O'ROURKE, Ronald, «Navy Constellation (FFG-62) Class Frigate Program: Background and Issues for Congress», *Congressional Research Service (CRS)*, 23 December 2023. Available at: <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/24235547/navy-constellation-ffg-62-class-frigate-program-background-and-issues-for-congress-dec-20-2023.pdf> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

²⁴ LAGRONE, Sam, «First Constellation Frigate delayed at least one year, schedule assessment 'ongoing'», *USNI News*, 11 January 2024. Available at: <https://news.usni.org/2024/01/11/first-constellation-frigate-delayed-at-least-a-year-schedule-assessment-ongoing> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

²⁵ «Options for the Royal Navy's Future Air Dominance System and the Type 83 destroyer», *Navy Lookout*, 9 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.navylookout.com/options-for-the-royal-navys-future-air-dominance-system-and-the-type-83-destroyer/> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

²⁶ «Progress in the Royal Navy's Dreadnought class submarine program», *Navy Lookout*, 10 December 2020. Available at: <https://www.navylookout.com/progress-on-the-royal-navy-dreadnought-class-submarine-programme/> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

²⁷ VALENTI, Alex, «Onwards and Forwards – Italian Navy Program Update», *Naval News*, 11 July 2023. Available at: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/07/onwards-and-forwards-italian-navy-program-update/> (Accessed 24 January 2024).

²⁸ GEHLE, Sarah, «The German Navy's long-distance vision gains clarity», *IJSS*, 21 April 2023. Available at: <https://www.ijss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2023/04/the-german-navys-long-distance-vision-gains-clarity/> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

²⁹ KASS, Harrison, «Type 212CD: Germany and Norway Have Big Plans for a New Submarine», *The*

Turkish Navy: Early in January 2024, Turkey received the first I-class frigate (TCG Istanbul), the new-generation oiler TCG Derya, the unmanned surface vessel Marlin, and a new logistics ship. The I-class of frigates, a replacement for the Yavuz-class, are the first «homegrown» frigates of the Navy, with four additional units to be built over the following years.³⁰ Aside from them, Turkey recently confirmed the purchase of another LHD as the TCG Anadolu, showcasing Erdogan's government is committed to strengthening their naval assets.³¹

Spanish Navy: Spain is currently involved in several programs for its navy. The S-80 Plus submarines, of which the first unit (S-81 Isaac Peral) was commissioned to the navy in November 2023, will add three³² more units throughout the next decade. The ageing Santa María-class will be replaced with the upcoming F-110 program (*Bonifaz-class*) of multi-purpose frigates, expected to enter service between 2028 and 2032.³³ Lastly, Spain is also involved in the European Union's European Patrol Corvette (EPC) PESCO project, which will deliver 6 units to replace the aging *Serviola-* and *Descubierta-class* of OPVs currently in service.³⁴

Additional efforts that are not examined in the article include those of Poland, Denmark and Norway. Together with the incorporation of Finland (and soon that of Sweden), these efforts forecast a significant modernization of NATO naval capabilities by the end of the 2030s. Although positive, NATO navies are also suffering from another endemic problem that hampers these efforts: a shortage of manpower. The United Kingdom announced in early 2024 the decision to decommission two of its Type 23 frigates (*HMS Westminster* and *HMS Argyll*) in order to be able to fill the crew requirements for the new Type 26

National Interest, 28 November 2023. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/type-212cd-germany-and-norway-have-big-plans-new-submarine-207580> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

³⁰ OZBERK, Tayfun, «Turkish Navy strengthens fleet by commissioning 4 new vessels», *Naval News*, 20 January 2024. Available at: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/01/turkish-navy-strengthens-fleet-by-commissioning-4-new-vessels/> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

³¹ OZBERK, Tayfun, «Turkish Government Green Lights Aircraft Carrier And 4 Additional I-Class Frigates», *Naval News*, 4 January 2024. Available at: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/01/turkish-government-green-lights-aircraft-carrier-and-4-additional-i-class-frigates/> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

³² The S-82 Narciso Monturiol, S-83 Cosme García, and S-84 Mateo García de los Reyes.

³³ «Navantia lays keel of Spain's first F-110 frigate» *Naval News*, 17 August 2023. Available at: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/08/navantia-lays-keel-of-spains-first-f110-frigate/b> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

³⁴ «European Patrol Corvette», *Armada Española*, 2021. Available at: <https://armada.defensa.gob.es/ArmadaPortal/page/Portal/ArmadaEspañola/conocenos/especiales/prefLa-ng-en/05feindef--00-2021-FEINDEF--04-EPC> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

frigates.³⁵ Like them, shortages of personnel are haunting most NATO navies at a time when they are needed the most, and are expected to remain a major burden for them as they attempt to enlarge their fleets vis à vis an increasingly competitive strategic environment.

Aside from the potential ways to address the issue which have already been examined recently, centered upon improving the living conditions for the crews, one alternative with potential to ease the situation will be the gradual incorporation of unmanned capabilities into their fleets.

Unmanned Naval Capabilities

The advent of technology is having a significant impact on naval warfare, which will likely continue to do so over the upcoming decades. Although the conflict in Ukraine (particularly its naval dimension) is certainly not the first case of unmanned systems being used in a naval conflict, Ukraine's successful actions in the Black Sea against a much stronger Russian Black Sea Fleet have been quite outstanding and revealing. Numerous raids against the Russian base in Sebastopol and against surface vessels in the waters close to the Crimean Peninsula using unmanned surface vehicles (USVs), have allowed a nation with almost no navy to cripple Russia's ability to obtain sea control in the region.³⁶

These events have highlighted the growing role that unmanned vehicles will play in future naval conflicts, partly due their potential to relieve larger and valuable surface combatants from performing constabulary tasks and missions. In this sense, the integration of unmanned units in NATO navies is expected to grow in the following years, focusing on strengthening maritime surveillance and situational awareness. A prominent case is that of the United States Navy and the efforts to shift towards a larger number of uncrewed platforms within its fleet, as the Middle East-based *Task Force 59* has been doing for years.

³⁵ SHERIDAN, Danielle «Navy has so few sailors it has to decommission ships», *The Telegraph*, 4 January 2024. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/01/04/royal-navy-few-sailors-decommission-ships-new-frigates/> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

³⁶ GROVE, Thomas & MALSIN, Jared «Russia Withdraws Black Sea Fleet Vessels from Crimea Base after Ukrainian Attacks», *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 October 2023. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia-withdraws-black-sea-fleet-vessels-from-crimea-base-after-ukrainian-attacks-51d6d4f5> (Accessed 21 January 2024).

These vessels offer the advantage of not requiring «to accommodate the space and resources to sustain both operators and the personnel who support them», preventing their endurance from being limited by that of their crews.³⁷ They will also prove crucial in the ongoing efforts to strengthen protection and vigilance over critical undersea infrastructure, which have become particularly vulnerable to hybrid attacks by Russia.

Another example of this evolutionary changes is the high potential of drone carriers, such as the Turkish Navy's Navantia-built LHD *TCG Anadolu*, which was converted into a UAV carrier after the United States blocked its participation in the F-35 program. Other NATO nations such as France or the United Kingdom are likely candidates to explore these options in the future, showcasing that «for non-carrier navies, they could open the door to fielding an air wing».³⁸ Most recently, the Portuguese Navy signed a contract for a new multi-purpose vessel capable of deploying unmanned vehicles and helicopters.³⁹

The Spanish Navy has participated for several times in the «REPMUS» and «Dynamic Messenger» naval exercises, both of which focus on the development and integration of unmanned vehicles. Spain is also a member of MUSI (Maritime Unmanned Systems Initiative) and the CMDR (Center for Maritime Research and Experimentation),⁴⁰ which allow members to pool their resources and efforts to improve unmanned systems. It is also employing UAVs in many of its deployments, such as the Scan Eagle UAV of the *F-82 Victoria* frigate currently deployed with Operation Atalanta.⁴¹

As these unmanned vehicles continue to grow in importance for future naval warfare during the following years it behooves NATO navies to take the necessary steps to maximize their integration and employment in their fleets – particularly for tasks related

³⁷ SAVITZ, Scott «Creating the Uncrewed-centric Navy of the Mid-21st Century», *RAND Blog*, 30 November 2023. Available at: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/11/creating-the-uncrewed-centric-navy-of-the-mid-21st.html> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

³⁸ CHILDS, Nick «A new era beckons for UAV s at sea», *IJSS*, 15 January 2024. Available at: <https://www.ijss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2024/01/a-new-era-beckons-for-uavs-at-sea/> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

³⁹ «Portuguese Navy signs Contract with Damen for Innovative Multi-Purpose Vessel», *Naval News*, 25 November 2023. Available at: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/11/portuguese-navy-signs-contract-with-damen-for-innovative-multi-purpose-vessel/> (Accessed 21 January 2024).

⁴⁰ NAVARRO, José María «Vehículos navales no tripulados para la Armada Española», *Defensa*, 4 January 2024. Available at: <https://www.defensa.com/defensa-naval/vehiculos-navales-no-tripulados-para-armada-espanola> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

⁴¹ «La fragata Victoria vigila con un AB212 y drones Scan Eagle un mercante secuestrado por piratas en el Índico», *InfoDefensa*, 18 December 2023. Available at: <https://www.infodefensa.com/texto-diario/mostrar/4653675/fragata-victoria-vigila-ab212-drones-scan-eagle-mercante-secuestrado-piratas-indico> (Accessed 21 January 2024).

to maritime vigilance.

The Standing Naval Forces

Another important element of NATO's maritime posture, in spite of the sharp decrease in the navies' number of hulls, are the Standing Maritime Groups (SNMGs).⁴² The initiative, a brainchild of U.S. Admiral Richard Colbert in the late 1960s, was conceived as a means to strengthen multilateral naval cooperation among the U.S. Navy and its European partners, providing them with the ability to make rapid deployments to any chosen area of interest.⁴³ The groups eventually evolved into the current structure we have today, with two Standing NATO Maritime Groups and two Standing NATO Mine-Countermeasures Groups, which also constitute the maritime component of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), which is part of the NATO Response Force (NRF).⁴⁴

Although useful, the transformation of the maritime environment will demand more attention for them in order to ensure they can address the emerging threats to Allied security interests at sea. As highlighted by U.S. Navy advisor Joshua Tallis, the current strategic environment increasingly mirrors that of the 1960s period, during which the Standin Maritime Groups were originally created. Additionally, the similarity between the two periods offers valuable insights for NATO on possible ways to modernize its standing naval forces:

«The return of a revanchist Russia makes NATO's previous maritime structure a good source of wisdom for the alliance's future [...] With global demands weighting on U.S. force obligations, both NATO and the United States stand to gain from a deeper reassessment of how the alliance organizes and employs the naval forces under its command».⁴⁵

⁴² A more detailed analysis of the SNMGs, of their function and their current challenges, will be published in the upcoming issue (No. 37) of the «Cuadernos de Pensamiento Naval» published by the Spanish Navy's Centro de Pensamiento Naval (Center for Naval Thought) as a supplement to «Revista General de Marina».

⁴³ NATO, «STANAVFORLANT», *NATO Archives*, 1970. Available at: https://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/null/1/3/137697/0319_STANAVFORLANT-WELCOME_ABOARD_ENG.pdf (Accessed 20 January 2024).

⁴⁴ «German Navy hands over the leadership of SNMG1 to Spain after a year in command», *NATO News*, 12 January 2024. Available at: <https://mc.nato.int/media-centre/news/2024/german-navy-hands-over-leadership-of-snmg1-to-spain-after-a-year-in-command> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

⁴⁵ TALLIS, Joshua «NATO's Maritime Vigilance: Optimizing the Standing Naval Force for the future», *War on the Rocks*, 15 December 2022. Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2022/12/natos-maritime->

NATO's Standing Maritime Groups are valuable assets for the Alliance and its members, providing a relatively balanced presence across all maritime areas of interest without the need to make major investments. However, their current structure is heavily influenced by two decades of a low-threat maritime environment and – as has been already stressed out throughout previous sections – a gradual decline in European naval power. The impressive evolution that the maritime environment has experienced during the past decade, with emerging threats to critical undersea infrastructure, or the challenge posed by ongoing conflicts in Europe and the Middle East, all call for a careful assessment of NATO's maritime presence.

In this sense, it could be useful to consider other alternatives to maximize the employments of the groups. One way to do this, in light of the geographical obstacles imposed by the Danish Straits in the Baltic Sea or the Turkish Straits in the Black Sea,⁴⁶ would be to narrow the area of operations for each group, thereby assigning one to each of the different bodies of water surrounding the continent.⁴⁷ This approach would also help maximize the resources required to deploy these warships, assigning to each group combatants of the navies in the region (as will be done with Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey in the Black Sea).

Other potential innovations which will have to be considered eventually are how to incorporate unmanned vehicles into the fleet, including UAVs, USVs and UUVs, or the possibility of designating one of the groups for the exclusive task of protecting undersea infrastructure. As underlined in the previous sections, the employment of larger numbers of unmanned units for certain tasks (especially those related to maritime vigilance) could free up the bigger combatants so that they can be devoted to other missions. In any case, it is evident that options abound, and will have to be carefully considered to that members

[vigilance-optimizing-the-standing-naval-force-for-the-future/](#) (Accessed 20 January 2024).

⁴⁶ Turkey has invoked the Montreux Convention that regulates the legal status of the Turkish Straits, preventing any warship – including those of the Standing Maritime Groups – to enter the Black Sea and help protect commercial shipping from the large amounts of mines in those waters.

On the Montreux Convention, see: ACER, Yücel «Russia's Attack on Ukraine: The Montreux Convention and Türkiye», *International Law Studies, Stockton Center for International Law (Naval War College)*, Vol. 100, 285, 2023. Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3045&context=ils> (Accessed 22 January 2024).

⁴⁷ VÁZQUEZ, Gonzalo «NATO'S Standing Naval Forces at the Crossroads: Towards Regionalization and Specialization?» *Center for Maritime Strategy*, 26 October 2023. Available at:

<https://centerformaritimstrategy.org/publications/natos-standing-naval-forces-at-the-crossroads-towards-regionalization-and-specialization/> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

can enjoy their potential to the full extent.

NATO's Maritime Strategy

If joint efforts to strengthen the Alliance's maritime posture are to be properly driven, informed by solid conclusions derived from a sound assessment of the strategic environment, NATO will also need to update its Allied Maritime Strategy. A new strategy should be expected to address the most pressing security threats that affect its members' security (which have been described in the first section of this article), laying out the different risks and challenges to our collective maritime posture, and identifying the different areas in which collective action is required to prevent those threats from affecting the rules-based order at sea.⁴⁸

The Alliance's Maritime Strategy was published in 2011, but has not been updated since. During the more than 12 years which have gone by, the plethora of risks and challenges has extensively multiplied; most notably, transforming the seas into one of the main centers of gravity in a new chapter of great power competition. Considering that the current strategy followed on the 2010 strategic concept, logic suggests that 2023 would have been the year for a new update based on the Madrid Concept to be published.

The 2011 strategy describes a cooperative maritime environment in which the alliance's contributions would be divided into four different groupings: deterrence and collective defense, crisis management, cooperative security, and maritime security.⁴⁹ Most notably, the document does not make any reference to either China or Russia, which were respectively defined in the 2022 Strategic concept as a «challenge [to] our interests, security and values», and as «the most significant and direct threat to allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area».⁵⁰ Evidently, the framework and the maritime environment in which the 2011 Maritime Strategy was drafted is now long gone,

⁴⁸ See: ALAEZ, Octavio «Vicisitudes de una Nueva Estrategia Marítima de la OTAN», *Cuadernos de Pensamiento Naval*, Number 36, 2023, p. 125. Available at: https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/pensamiento_naval_36.pdf (Accessed 21 January 2024)

⁴⁹ «Alliance Maritime Strategy», NATO, 17 June 2011. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_75615.htm (Accessed 20 January 2024).

⁵⁰ «2022 NATO Strategic Concept», NATO, 29 June 2022. Available at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf (Accessed 20 January 2024).

having rendered the strategy almost completely obsolete since.

In light of this, the Allied Maritime Strategy should be urgently revised and adapted to the current strategic environment, aligning it with the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept signed in Madrid. In doing so, it is desirable for the new strategy to establish a clear and logic relationship between the ends it seeks to achieve, and the consequent means and ways that are required to achieve them.

Regarding the ends, a relevant aspect which the new document must address is whether NATO's maritime posture remains focused on the Euro-Atlantic region, or if it aspires to have a global scope which includes the Indo-Pacific region. The latter would be a logic consequence of the growing U.S. involvement in the region to address China's regional expansion, but it is doubtful that all 31 members (especially those with small, green-water navies) would be interested in doing so. Another issue that could be address is the potential reassessment of the SNMGs' objectives, adapting their deployments and tasks to the current strategic needs (which are not the same as those from the 2000s).

For the ways, it would be desirable for the new strategy to define a clear and straightforward division of tasks with the EU, in order to avoid unnecessary duplicities of their efforts at sea. As the Red Sea crisis is highlighting, the EU is not yet able to be the maritime security provider it aspires to be. Thus, it seems logic that NATO should focus on the tasks at the higher-end of the intensity spectrum, leaving to the EU those related with anti-piracy and anti-smuggling, and maritime surveillance more generally.⁵¹

Lastly, with the ends and the ways to attain them properly defined, and together with a thorough analysis of the main threats and challenges in the current strategic environment, the strategy could then be in a better position to determine the specific naval capabilities that their navies need (the means). At the same time, this would also help to inform the adequate size, capabilities and deployments for the SNMGs so as to maximize their employment.

In sum, the Alliance needs an updated maritime strategy that helps drive its maritime posture and orients collective efforts to address the different threats to its security

⁵¹ BUEGER, Christian and EDMUNDS, Timothy «The European Union's Quest to Become a Global Maritime-Security Provider», *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 76: No. 2, Article 6.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol76/iss2/6> (Accessed 30 January 2024).

interests, both now and in the near future.

Concluding Remarks

As has been discussed throughout this article, the number of traditional and non-traditional security threats for NATO navies has been gradually rising during the last 15 years, a period during which naval power in the Alliance has experienced a serious decline (both in terms of assets and of its industrial base). Russian and Chinese revisionist postures, paired with the notable strengthening of their military capabilities (including in the Russian Arctic and the East and South China Seas) have become serious threats for maritime security and stability. More importantly, the threat posed non-state actors, equipped with stronger and more capable weapon systems than a decade ago thanks to the help of rogue states like Russia and Iran, has become increasingly concerning.

The combination of these factors, paired with the enduring economic difficulties faced by most European countries, will continue to impact the short- and medium-term evolution of NATO's naval capabilities. Essentially, «crisis response operations off the coast of Africa or in the Middle East will continue to compete with NATO's requirements for Europe's naval forces, simply because there is no shortage of new challenges and no satisfying answer on how to finish these engagements».⁵² Thus, naval modernization efforts will take time and, more importantly, will require a long-term commitment on the side of national governments in order to strengthen the Alliance's maritime posture.

In spite of this, many navies are already working to reverse the negative effects of two decades of downscaling, through modernization programs that hint to bigger surface combatants with better ASW, ASuW and AAW assets, and a renewed focus on the protection of SLOCs and critical undersea infrastructure. If all the efforts described throughout this article are to be properly driven and informed by sound conclusions on the current strategic environment, the Alliance needs a new allied maritime strategy that underscores all current challenges at sea for allied navies and informs national

⁵² BAUMERT, Mark W. & RACKWITZ, Sascha H. «NATO Navies must get the balance right», *U.S. Naval Institute, Proceedings*, Vol. 148/12/1,438, December 2022. Available at: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2022/december/nato-navies-must-get-balance-right> (Accessed 20 January 2024).

governments on the most pressing needs for their navies.

Without question, the crises in the Black and Red Seas have brought back the attention to the importance of the sea for NATO security, ultimately pushing to increase awareness among national governments on the crucial importance of having strong and balanced navies for the challenges brought about by what many consider will be the «maritime century».

*Gonzalo Vázquez Orbaiceta**
Centro de Pensamiento Naval
[@GonzaloVzquezO1](#)