

Plea for a powerful and permanent maritime Atlantic power

Europe and the Sea



The French nuclear-powered aircraft carrier "Charles de Gaulle" in the harbour of Toulon

by Admiral (ret) Alain Coldefy, President, Société des Membres de la Légion d'Honneur (SMLH), Paris

War made a tragic return to continental Europe when Russia invaded neighbouring Ukraine in early 2022 in an attempt to terrorise the entire country. It is a land war, partly air-land but relatively little naval, even if the French daily "Le Monde" titled the front page of its edition of 21 July 2023 with: "War in Ukraine: the major issue of the Black Sea".

Admiral (ret) Alain Coldefy



has sailed the seas of the world, starting as an ensign and rising through the ranks to become commander of the French aircraft carrier "Clemenceau". As a Rear Admiral, he led a Franco-British fleet in the Adriatic during the Balkan Wars. Promoted to the rank of Admiral, he was appointed Vice Chief of Defence ("major général des armées") in 2002

before assuming the position of Inspector General of the armed forces (2005-2006). Having subsequently worked in industry for several years, he became President of the "Académie de Marine" in 2016 and President of the "Société des Membres de la Légion d'Honneur" (SMLH) in 2018.

The end of pacifist illusions

The consequences are multiple, but we will consider only two of them here.

Firstly, in a world that has been rearming everywhere for years, Europeans, who have long been cradled in pacifist illusions under the American military umbrella, have (finally) realised that the tragedy of history has returned home.

Secondly, the common spaces, hitherto relatively preserved from open wars, are henceforth and for the foreseeable future, spaces of conflict, starting with the oceans, all oceans without exception. These global common spaces have generated broad-based economic activity open to the world, belonging to everyone, vital for everyone. The famous "res nullius" that characterised the high seas in previous centuries has become disputed and is imperfectly covered by law. It is therefore one of increasing militarisation, including in the Atlantic zone. Strategists have likened maritime flows to the fluidity that characterises ocean waters, but these flows are now sources of friction.

The shock of reality

In reality, global naval rearmament is nothing new, nor a surprise to professionals. The era of supremacy of large navies, both in blue and brown water operations is long gone. Admittedly, human and material trafficking of all kinds is

increasing, without so far having a negative influence on world maritime trade, including that of hydrocarbons. But the control of maritime spaces has become an issue for an ever-increasing number of states, for whom sea power is no longer an abstract concept.

The increase in naval capacity of the permanent members of the UN Security Council is generally well known to observers: on the one hand, an overpowerful American navy (11 aircraft carrier battle groups and 75 nuclear attack submarines, SNN), a Chinese navy, which now aims to overtake the American navy in tonnage but does not yet have the professional sailors to do so, a Russian navy which is still strong in SSNs and which reoriented its naval policy in 2022, and on the other hand, the British and French navies, which maintain their rank of nuclear powers but are falling back in global tonnage rankings.

The rise of regional players in the Indo-Pacific zone is just as spectacular: India, Japan, South Korea and even Taiwan are in the top 10 navies of the world. And elsewhere Iran, Türkiye, Algeria, Egypt are progressing rapidly. The indicators of this policy are the growing number of aircraft carriers and the proliferation of modern submarines – about 450 for about forty countries.

Maritime theatres in open crisis

Before analysing the Atlantic theatre – which includes the Arctic, the Baltic and the area in the South Atlantic outside NATO, it is useful to recall that today all seas and oceans are theatres of war.

The Mediterranean, including the Black Sea, has been a place of almost excessive concentration of nearly all the naval powers bordering its coastline as well as the great powers, China included, for the past decade. Europe must play the role of a stabilising power beyond the European Union (EU) Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex.

The Indo-Pacific region is currently attracting a lot of attention, in particular because of the face-to-face between China and the United States. European countries, including and especially France – a nation bordering the Indian Ocean and Pacific Oceans, with nearly 8 million km² of national Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) there – are acting within their means. The EU has intervened in the fight against piracy and, more modestly, against illegal fishing.

The Atlantic theatre

The Cold War has adapted to hybrid strategies and Russia is implementing them on a grand scale. In reality, for the NATO navies, the “classic” Cold War has never ceased, particularly in submarines.

The emergence of hybrid strategies will result in the engagement of greater resources by European navies in the Atlantic area in return for greater engagement by the United States in

the Indo-Pacific zone (their Pacific Joint Command in Hawaii, PACOM, became INDOPACOM in 2018...it says it all).

The European allies will implement these strategies by a reinforced and permanent presence of combat ships, of a sufficient level in quantity and quality to see action if necessary.

The capabilities of force projection by amphibious ships and helicopter carriers and power projection by aircraft carriers

will thus be less urgent than in other more distant theatres. On the other hand, anti-submarine warfare capabilities (attack submarines, maritime patrol aircraft and frigates) and anti-aircraft warfare (frigates) by large numbers of surface ships will be essential.

It is in this area that European nations can make a big contribution; they have the competence and the quality, they will have to make efforts on the quantity of assets but the conditions for doing so are quite straightforward:

Operations conducted under the EU banner

- Since “Berlin plus” in 2003, cooperation between the EU and NATO is a reality that must now be implemented on a large scale, that of the entire Atlantic Ocean.
- Brexit has changed neither geography nor British commercial and strategic interests. They are obviously included in the ambitions of EU Member States.

Definition of the area of the Union’s responsibilities

- The Baltic: The real change here is the entry of Sweden and Finland into NATO, which should strengthen their security and encourage their commitment to Europe. Their border with an aggressive but blocked Russia is still one of the longest. A permanent surface and submarine naval force with maritime patrol aircraft can be set up there (in imitation of NATO STANAVS).
- The Arctic: The Arctic region is once again becoming an area of major strategic importance for several reasons, namely global warming and global strategic competition between the US, Russia and China.
- Africa: Oil in the Gulf of Guinea is threatened by terrorist groups.

Single command

- The prerequisite for success is a single command.

Relevant means

- Roughly 7 combat vessels (CV), 1 nuclear powered aircraft carrier (CVN), 119 frigates, 72 submarines (6 nuclear attack submarines) 27 amphibious ships and 157 minesweeper-hunters.

As always within the EU, the means exist, but the political will to use them jointly is often lacking. The Atlantic could be a catalyst of European ambitions, even of European power. ■

“As always within the EU, the means exist, but the political will to use them jointly is often lacking.”