



The European Maritime Security and Defence Policy Architecture: Implications for Norway

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Main takeaways:

- Maritime security is high on the international and European security agenda, hence a number of new initiatives and actions have developed within the EU, NATO and through bilateral/minilateral agreements.
- To increase the common capabilities of Europe and secure more targeted responses, there is a need for better coordination between different organizations and forums. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept and the EU's parallel Strategic Compass offer an opportunity to do this.
- Bilateral and minilateral defence groupings can strengthen European maritime security by accelerating capability development and fostering improved levels of interoperability.
- Norway should further develop its political dialogue and practical cooperation with the EU, and secure participation in major defence initiatives like the EDF and PESCO, various programmes, and cooperative arrangements with the European Defence Agency (EDA).
- Norway should pursue further leadership roles within NATO to bolster both its national interests and transatlantic security within the maritime security domain.
- Norway should actively promote enhanced EU-NATO cooperation on maritime security issues, including closer alignment of strategic thinking, policies and investments of the two organisations.
- Mini-lateral' structures can allow Norway to join forces with like-minded nations to act rapidly on maritime issues of common importance.

Navigating a complex maritime security environment

The waters surrounding Europe are becoming increasingly contested and congested. Russia's military build-up in the Black Sea, China's expanding territorial claims in the South China Sea, and growing inter-state rivalry in the Arctic have signalled a return of geopolitics at sea.

Alongside new dynamics of maritime competition, European states face a wide spectrum of threats from non-state actors, such as maritime piracy, terrorism, illicit trafficking in people, arms, or narcotics, illegal fishing and pollution. These can affect not only vital shipping and economic interests, but also critical infrastructure, military operations, and societal resilience. Recent years have also seen a proliferation of hybrid threats and tactics, as exemplified by China's construction of artificial islands and armed fishing militia operations in the South China Sea, or by the Russian paramilitary and information warfare campaign in Crimea.

Globally, emerging technologies like robotics, autonomous systems, and artificial intelligence, create new opportunities for navies but also for hostile state and non-state actors. Climate change is another factor that will reshape maritime spaces. Climate-related risks are projected to affect critical infrastructure such as ports and harbours, exacerbate transboundary maritime disputes, trigger resource shortages, and drive mass migration. The COVID-19 outbreak has also impacted European and international maritime security, causing disruptions in ongoing training exercises and operations, defence supply chains, as well as international coordination meetings. As socio-economic recovery dominates the public agenda, generating support for maintaining defence budgets becomes more difficult.

Against this changing backdrop, Europe has a vital interest in upholding the freedom of navigation and protecting strategic maritime routes. Approximately 75 percent of the EU trade is seaborne, while the [maritime economy](#) generates a gross added value of circa 500 billion euros a year. Europe also depends on a safe and secure maritime space to defend its borders, ensure its energy security, and protect its coastal communities.

Combined, these factors have increased the demand for high-end capabilities and effective structures suitable for a fast-changing maritime environment. This has reopened difficult questions and debates over how to balance involvement in overlapping European defence frameworks; how to foster synergies between these initiatives; or where to focus operational and procurement efforts.

This policy brief provides a short introduction to the evolving European maritime security and defence architecture. It first focuses on recent institutional developments in the EU and NATO, before turning to multinational group-

ings outside of these formal structures. The final section explores the implications for Norwegian maritime security and outlines a set of policy recommendations on how Norway can maximise the benefits it derives from these collaborative frameworks.

Maritime cooperation in the EU and NATO frameworks

The European Union (EU) is rapidly emerging as a global maritime security actor. Over the past decade, it has become actively engaged in a wide range of maritime initiatives, from undertaking border and coastguard functions to countering piracy and conducting maritime capacity building tasks. Thus far, the EU has conducted two naval operations out of six active military missions under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP): [EUNAVFOR Atalanta](#) in the Western Indian Ocean, and [EUNAVFOR MED Sophia](#), later replaced by [operation IRINI](#) in the central part of the Mediterranean. These operations were supported by various training and regional capacity building activities as part of the EU 'integrated approach', combining political, diplomatic, security, development, and humanitarian tools to tackle insecurity both at sea and onshore. More recently, the EU has spearheaded new tools such as the '[coordinated maritime presence](#)' concept, which enables member states in maritime areas of interest to share information. Designed to enhance complementarities and synergies between national naval assets, the mechanism is currently tested in the Gulf of Guinea and could be replicated in other vital maritime areas.

Many of these efforts were streamlined in the EU's first maritime security strategy ([EUMSS](#)) in 2014 and the 2018 [revised action plan](#). These strategic documents set out the EU's ambitions to become a global provider of security at sea, placing emphasis on areas of 'strategic value' or at risk of 'crisis and instability'. In response to China's military modernisation and rising assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, for instance, the EU released a [Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific](#), which focuses on securing sea lines of communication, strengthening capacity-building, and enhancing naval deployments in the region. Another example is the new [EU Arctic Strategy](#).

The publication of the 2016 EU Global Security Strategy (EUGS) was followed by a set of defence cooperation mechanisms intended to help the bloc build up 'strategic autonomy', including the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), and the European Defence Fund (EDF). Inside PESCO, for example, EU member states have laid the groundwork for 47 joint projects, six of which deal with maritime issues. Yet so far, most of these initiatives have failed to deliver the [high-end capabilities](#) that would enable the EU to better respond to maritime security threats, such as a European patrol class surface ship, counter-UAS, or anti-access/area-denial capacities. Moreover, many of the PESCO projects are still in the ideation phase. This

means that setting priorities is essential for achieving EU strategic autonomy, especially after [Brexit](#) and the significant [budget cuts](#) applied to the EDF, military mobility, and European Peace Facility (EPF) programmes. The EU [‘Strategic Compass’](#) initiative, to be finalised by 2022, provides an opportunity to set out a shared vision for the EU maritime security and defence, across its four interconnected ‘baskets’: crisis management, resilience, capabilities, and partnerships. This could help answer questions such as how to make EU operations at sea more effective, counter maritime hybrid threats, fill capability gaps, and strengthen cooperation with like-minded nations as well as with international organisations such as the UN, NATO, ASEAN, and the African Union.

Maritime security is also ranking high on NATO’s political and governance agenda. The [Alliance Maritime Strategy](#), adopted a decade ago, outlines four fundamental tasks for NATO at sea, which span the areas of crisis-management, cooperative security, maritime security, and collective defence. After Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea, this strategic outlook shifted more towards defence and deterrence. This resulted in the establishment of an ‘Enhanced Forward Presence’ in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, followed by a ‘Tailored Forward Presence’ in the Black Sea region. A 5,000-personnel Very High Readiness Joint Task Force ([VJTF](#)) including a maritime component, was also set up within the NATO Response Force (NRF) to enable a rapid response to security crises. Operationally, NATO has conducted a diversified range of [maritime security activities](#), from suppressing piracy off the Horn of Africa and monitoring refugee and migrant crossings in the Aegean, to capacity-building, maritime situational awareness, and counter-terrorism tasks in the Mediterranean. In the near-term, NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept is [expected](#) to further strengthen the maritime security role of the Alliance, not least by ensuring collective defence, guaranteeing freedom of navigation in contested waters, responding to crises, and deepening cooperation with key partners. This opens an important window of opportunity for the EU and NATO to align more closely their agendas, priorities, and resources to maximise their impact and influence as the main pillars of the European maritime security and defence architecture.

Flexible cooperation formats beyond the EU and NATO

Despite the growing institutionalisation of the maritime security, European states are still reluctant to define national defence priorities within the formal structures of the EU or NATO. Like-minded governments have preferred instead to cooperate in ‘coalitions of the willing’ and flexible bilateral and multilateral frameworks, which help them eschew cumbersome decision-making. The establishment of an ad-hoc maritime surveillance mission in the Strait of Hormuz ([EMASOH](#)) in February 2020 by eight European countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal) to deal with the rising insecur-

ity in the region is a telling example.

These agile defence groupings can strengthen European maritime security by accelerating capability development and fostering improved levels of interoperability. For instance, the Franco-British Lancaster House Treaties facilitated the creation of a Combined Joint Expeditionary Force ([CJEF](#)), capable of deploying a joint 10,000-strong force, including maritime elements, to respond to security crises. The same goes for the British-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). This quick-response force of 10 nations (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) can act independently or as part of a UN, EU, or NATO operation to address crises in northern Europe. A key component of the JEF is its maritime task group, which is able to take on a wide range of tasks, from high-end combat operations to disaster relief and humanitarian missions. Along the same lines, five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) forming [NORDEFCO](#), have engaged in joint maritime patrolling and information exchange in the Baltic Sea.

Cooperation within smaller groups also boosted the European navies’ esprit de corps through joint training and regular staff interactions. For example, JEF’s first [maritime patrol](#) in the Baltic Sea in 2021 provided a key opportunity for participant countries to test how their forces work together in areas such as refuelling at sea, ships sailing in close formation, or air defence. Similarly, France, Germany and Poland, which are part of the Weimar Triangle, have sought to deepen maritime cooperation via joint exercises, exchange of operational experience, and port visits.

Sharper regional threat perceptions have also spurred new bilateral or trilateral forms of cooperation. Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, for instance, signed a [defence agreement](#) to protect sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and strengthen maritime surveillance in response to Russia’s assertive military posture in the Baltic Sea. In the south, Greece sealed a [strategic defence agreement](#) with France, including a mutual defence clause designed to deter Turkey’s expansionism in the Aegean.

Implications for Norway and policy recommendations

As a small nation outside the EU but inside NATO, Norway is directly impacted by the political and institutional developments in the European maritime security architecture. Norway must therefore leverage its alliances and partnerships across multiple collaborative defence frameworks to secure its vast waters.

Within NATO, Norway was [pivotal](#) in re-shifting the allies’ focus towards collective defence and maritime security, and had a significant contribution to the 2011 [Alliance Maritime Strategy](#). It also plays a crucial role in provid-

ing maritime situational awareness and early warning for NATO in the High North. Norway has also been an active contributor to NATO-led missions beyond its immediate neighbourhood, including to naval operations off the Horn of Africa and in the Mediterranean. Its high-end [maritime capabilities](#) – such as new submarines, multi-mission maritime patrol aircraft, and anti-ship cruise missiles – are seen as [strategic assets](#) for joint operations.

Adding to these contributions, Norway should pursue further [leadership roles](#) within NATO to bolster both its national interests and transatlantic security. To this end, Norway could draw on its well-developed ‘Total Defence Concept’ to extract best practices on how to boost societal resilience inside NATO. Leveraging its relations with non-NATO neighbours Sweden and Finland to foster closer defence integration in the Scandinavian region is another example. Additionally, Norway could use its high-tech industry to accelerate innovation in NATO, for example in niche areas such as cold-weather operations.

Norway has also engaged with EU defence initiatives as a third country through biannual consultations during the EEA Council, ad hoc meetings with the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European External Action Service (EEAS), and more recently, via annual [structured dialogues](#) on security and defence. Within the scope of the CSDP, Norway has joined several EU-led missions and operations, notably including [Atalanta](#). For Norway, this provided an opportunity to tackle shared security challenges while gaining operational expertise, whereas the EU benefited from additional capabilities and broader political support for its mission. Norway is also part of the as-yet undeployed

EU Battlegroups, which could be [redesigned](#) to overcome political and financial challenges and provide a rapid response capacity to maritime crises. Besides developing political dialogue and consolidating practical cooperation with the EU, Norway should leverage its participation in major defence initiatives like the EDF and PESCO to shape the European defence landscape. Norway should capitalize on this constructive engagement with EU programmes as well as its cooperative arrangements with the European Defence Agency (EDA) to promote the interests of its national defence industry. Crucially too, Norway should promote enhanced EU-NATO cooperation on maritime security issues, including closer alignment of strategic thinking, policies and investments of the two organisations.

Other cooperative arrangements like NORDEFECO, the Northern Group, the JEF or E2I as well as bi- or trilateral engagements such as those with the UK, Germany, and its Scandinavian neighbours are also notable. These ‘mini-lateral’ structures can allow Norway to [join forces](#) with like-minded nations to act rapidly on maritime issues of common importance, while also deepening defence ties with key non-NATO partners, such as Sweden and Finland. For instance, Norway could enhance its role in these fora by contributing more forces for joint training and exercise deployments or by sharing its expertise in specialised areas such as Arctic operations. Striking a balance between these overlapping multinational groupings may however prove challenging at times. To get the most out of each initiative, Norway should strive to ensure coherence and consistency among its commitments.

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Photo: EU NAVFOR, Operation Atlanta, Oct. 15, 2020.

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