



Egmont's Grand Strategy Project

To Rule The Waves: Why a Maritime Geostrategy is Needed to Sustain European Union

James Rogers

Their differing conceptions of space and of the conquest of space indicate one of the outstanding differences between land and sea powers. A sea power conquers a large space by leaping lightly from point to point, adjusting itself to existing political relationships wherever possible, and often not establishing its legal control until its factual domination has long been tacitly recognised. An expanding land power moves slowly and methodically forward, forced by the nature of its terrain to establish its control step by step and so preserve the mobility of its forces. Thus a land power thinks in terms of continuous surfaces surrounding a central point of control, while a sea power thinks in terms of points and connecting lines dominating an immense territory.

– *Nicholas Spykman, 1938*

In Egmont Paper No. 33 'The Value of Power, the Power of Values: A Call for an EU Grand Strategy', edited by Sven Biscop, Egmont calls for an EU Grand Strategy completing the European Security Strategy by identifying EU interests and setting concrete objectives. A proactive EU, acting as a true global power, must result. Some of Europe's leading strategic thinkers react to Egmont's proposals in its series of Security Policy Briefs.

In this paper of the Grand Strategy Project series, young British scholar James Rogers argues that we Europeans must begin to focus more on maritime geostrategy.

They can do so by aggregating the Member States' maritime assets—particularly overseas naval stations—under the European Union's umbrella to project a 'forward presence' and protect key trade lines and zones of critical interest to the European economy. While the Chinese, Indian, Russian and South Korean navies are continuing to grow in size and power, Europeans have become increasingly 'sea blind'. In order to remedy this problem, we must look back to our history and realise that our economic and social success was grounded in our maritime strength—and that the European Union's prosperity will depend just as much on our sea power in the twenty-first century.

Since its inception in the 1950s, the European Union has acted like a traditional land power, much like Germany or Russia. Forced by geopolitical impediments and a desire to maintain internal cohesion, it has moved slowly and methodically forward, establishing its geographical control step by step. It has conquered space through territorial enlargement, pushing its frontiers initially north and west (to include Denmark and the British Isles), and then south and east (to include Spain, Portugal, Greece, East Germany, Austria, Poland, and so on). This has proven to be a very difficult process, requiring a series of systematic alterations to the countries seeking accession—in other words, the full implementation of the *acquis communautaire* and their alignment with the common European policy. More importantly, it has also required ongoing reform to the structures governing the European Union itself. This is what the Single European Act, the Treaty of Maastricht and the Treaty of Amsterdam aimed to do after the waves of enlargement in 1973/1981, 1990 and 1995. And likewise, the recent passing of the Treaty of Lisbon in December 2009 was also designed to modify the political nucleus and make it more responsive to the needs of a much more heterogeneous community, after two large waves of expansion in 2004 and 2007, whereby twelve new Member States and 120 million more people were embedded into the European enterprise.

The European Union: A Natural Sea Power

Although the European Union has acted like a land power for the past fifty years, it actually has the geographical predilection primarily of a sea power (*see map, below*). While the European Union shares a lengthy land border with Russia, it retains a natural maritime geography: it sits on a jagged peninsular surrounded on three fronts by ocean, and only one front by land. To the north is the icy Arctic Ocean; to the west are the vast depths of the Atlantic; to the south are the warm blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea; to the south east is the Black Sea; while to the east sit the wind-swept expanses of the Eurasian steppe. This jagged European peninsular has some of the best agricultural land in the world, which is nourished by the warm winters provided by another maritime asset: the Gulf Stream. The European homeland is also richly endowed with raw materials and dense forests made

possible by this maritime position, as well as numerous natural harbours and navigable rivers with direct access to the sea. It was from these ports that European explorers, traders and conquerors set out to establish economic and political relations with other parts of the world, which allowed Europeans to acquire the greatest concentration of wealth and power in human history. From Henry the Navigator, Christopher Columbus and John Cabot onwards, European history has been heavily entwined with and shaped by interaction with the maritime environment.

This maritime heritage has contributed to making the European Union's economy the world's biggest, accounting for approximately one-third of annual global economic output.¹ Belgium, Britain, France, Germany and the Netherlands—which form the European Union's pulsating economic heart—are more dependent on international trade than almost any other society in the world and require unfettered oceanic access for their imports and exports. The great European ports of Antwerp, Zeebrugge, Rotterdam, Hamburg, London and Felixstowe are our outlets and inlets to and from the rest of the world. With an increasingly 'just-in-time' approach to the delivery of energy, products and raw materials, any disruption can cause major downstream consequences.² Any disruption could harm an entire distribution network and the European consumers entwined within that network, leading to wider industrial decay. So as the economic powerhouse of the global economy, the European Union needs the world's international maritime trade lines to be secure, more than any other country, including China and the United States.

Significantly, the passing of the Treaty of Lisbon comes at a time when the European Union's land power geostrategy has given us pervasive influence over the entire European continental zone, meaning that we can begin to look beyond our homeland.

¹ Based on nominal figures.

² Lee Willett (2008), 'British Defence and Security: The Maritime Contribution', *Occasional Paper*, London: Royal United Services Institute, p. 4.

THE MARITIME GEOGRAPHY OF THE EUROPEAN PENINSULAR



Indeed, so successful has this approach been that—short of a few small peripheral countries in Scandinavia, Central Europe and the Former Yugoslavia—European enlargement has probably reached its logical conclusion. Apart from Turkey, which from a geopolitical perspective, forms an extremely risky candidate for accession, there is nowhere left to go.³ It is in this sense that the first decade of the twenty-first century might be for the European Union as the last decade of the nineteenth century was for the United States: ‘Manifest Destiny’ has effectively been reached and the frontier will soon be closed.⁴ And as the period

³ Many Europeans are reluctant to allow Turkey into the European Union for cultural and demographic reasons. However, just as important and often overlooked, are geostrategic needs: do Europeans really want to share borders with countries like Iran, Iraq and Syria? Do they really want to become a Middle Eastern land power?

⁴ Throughout the nineteenth century, the United States was preoccupied with territorial consolidation, widely known as ‘Manifest Destiny’. But by 1890, most of the interior of North America was under Washington’s political jurisdiction, meaning the United States could refocus its attention on the outside world. It can be no co-incidence that less than twenty years after the frontier’s closure that all vestiges of European colonial rule in America’s own backyard had been cleared out and that Washington had equipped itself with what was at the time one of the world’s most formidable navies (i.e. the Great White Fleet).

between 1895 and 1910 witnessed the emergence of the United States as the dominant power in the Western Hemisphere—and then a nascent global power—the period between 2010 and 2020 might turn out to be a similar period of transition for the European Union, but only if Europeans have the courage and political will to make it so. Indeed, empowering the European Union and providing it with a successful Grand Strategy might turn out to be the only way of ensuring that we remain capable of punching at our correct weight during the twenty-first century.⁵

Why Sea Power Still Matters

Sea power, when wedded to a well-thought-out maritime geostrategy, facilitates the application of maritime assets (e.g. warships, coast guard vessels, naval stations) to gain influence over particular and geographically sensitive spaces on the global map. The location of these spaces depends on a country’s geographical position, along with its trade routes and commercial partners. Any power with a heavily

⁵ The most recent call for a European Union Grand Strategy has been made by Sven Biscop et. al. (2009), ‘The value of power, the power of values: a call for an EU Grand Strategy’, *Egmont Paper No. 33*, Brussels: Egmont Institute.

globalised and technologically powerful economy must place this objective at the crux of its foreign policy, lest other countries or non-state actors like pirates rise up to cut or frustrate these critical arteries.⁶ In maintaining such a system, the dominant power frequently provides an international public good, that others often buy into and help maintain. The Dutch and the British once operated on such a level, while France, Spain and Portugal were not far behind. For the United Provinces in the seventeenth century, the principal focus was on the spice trade in South East Asia. Dutch sea lines of communication were strung together, eventually stretching around the Iberian peninsula, the African continent, and around India, down into the Strait of Malacca, and onward up into Japan. Likewise, particularly after the construction of the Suez Canal in the nineteenth century, the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean emerged as the ‘imperial lifeline’ between the United Kingdom and its numerous colonial holdings, from India and Burma to Australia, New Zealand and Hong Kong. Both countries built forts and barracks, naval stations and trading posts to guard these precious routes.

Since the end of the Second World War, the United States Navy has picked up where the Royal Navy left off. American military installations were constructed in key maritime theatres to facilitate rapid power projection into and across the main trade lines and to discourage hostile intentions on the part of competitors, not least Soviet Russia. This provided the United States with a geostrategic perspective very near to that of Europeans in the past. But whereas the British and Dutch focussed on the Indian Ocean, America’s interests were in South and Central America, Western Europe, the Middle East and East Asia, which formed an enormous residual zone of vital importance to the American economy.⁷ Even today, these areas are

⁶ For one of the most comprehensive studies ever undertaken on geopolitical power, albeit from an American perspective, see: Nicholas Spykman (1944), *The Geography of the Peace*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc. See also: Jacob Grygiel (2006), *The Great Powers and Geopolitical Change*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁷ This was first realised by the War and Peace Studies programme in 1941, organised by the Washington-based Council on Foreign Relations. The participants of this programme described this huge zone as the ‘Grand Area’.

where the majority of American trade is conducted, and where much of the raw materials that fuel the American economy come from. With over five-hundred military installations peppered throughout these zones, backed up by several aircraft carriers and escorting air and naval squadrons, Washington’s network of bases is extensive. These provide ‘strategic trampolines’, which enable the United States’ armed forces to jump across the world and lock it down under some semblance of order preferable to American interests. Backed up by the major European sea powers (i.e. Britain, France and the Netherlands), the United States has since guarded the oceans and provided the foundations of late-twentieth century globalisation: open seas, the principal international public good—reflected by the fact that most of the world’s nations have bought into the enterprise.

Yet today, as American primacy wanes as the world tends towards greater multipolarity, the United States’ ability to use these facilities to shape the global economic system may become increasingly difficult. The key issue for Europeans is not whether the United States is willing to maintain this system, but rather, whether it will be able to do so. With the rise of China, and the refocussing of American maritime assets into East Asia, it seems likely that Europeans will be forced to assume more of the burden than we once had to—at the very least in our immediate maritime approaches—and possibly further afield too. In this sense, the current European Union naval armada in the Gulf of Aden reflects our emerging and our future predicament, about the need for open and unfettered access to the sea. Other powers now understand this need: China has already been installing what in American and Australian strategic circles has been described as a ‘String of Pearls’. These so-called ‘pearls’, following Chinese oil routes to the Middle East, comprise a number of harbours, listening posts and airstrips that link China’s southern coastline to the entrance of the Persian Gulf. This is how Christopher Pehrson, who wrote one of the first academic studies on this strategy, puts it:

Each “pearl” in the “String of Pearls” is a nexus of Chinese geopolitical influence or military presence. Hainan Island, with recently upgraded military facilities, is a “pearl”. An upgraded airstrip on Woody Island,

*located in the Parcel archipelago three-hundred nautical miles east of Vietnam, is a “pearl”. A container shipping facility in Chittagong, Bangladesh, is a “pearl”. Construction of a deep water port in Sittwe, Myanmar, is a “pearl”, as is the construction of a navy base in Gwadar, Pakistan.*⁸

The aim of these ‘pearls’ is to form a wide distribution network to protect the transportation of resources from countries around the Indian Ocean to China’s factories and provide Beijing with a foothold in the Indian Ocean. Obviously, this brings Chinese power into contact with India, whose geostrategic ambitions are also growing. Recently, New Delhi proclaimed in its most up-to-date naval review its own ‘manifest destiny’: in short, dominance over the ocean bearing its name.⁹ And rumours abound about Moscow’s intentions in Yemen, Syria, Abkhazia (Georgia), and even the Arctic coast. Russia certainly intends to modernise its fleet.¹⁰

So as China and India rise; as Russia’s emergence as a maritime power begins; and as other smaller powers—from Japan, South Korea to Australia—react and rearm to meet these potential challenges, their geostrategies will cut across the European Union’s main arteries to the Middle East, the Indian Ocean, South East Asia, East Asia and Australasia—again, all in regions of critical significance to our homeland and in some cases just a stone’s throw away from some of our Member States. How will these new military bases affect the balance of power in those regions? How will the countries concerned react? And how will it affect us? After all, our trade routes hang like delicate necklaces around the southern underbelly of the Eurasian landmass and already run through some of the world’s most vulnerable ‘choke points’. These include the Bab-el-Mandeb, the Gulf of Aden and the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca. It is therefore quite possible that the seas around and leading to

⁸ Christopher Pehrson (2006), ‘String of Pearls: Meeting the Challenges of China’s Rising Power Across the Asian Littoral’, *Carlisle Papers in Security Strategy*, Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, p. 3.

⁹ Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy), *Freedom to Use the Seas: India’s Maritime Military Strategy*, 2007.

¹⁰ Jacob W. Kipp, ‘The Shifting Strategic Priorities of the Russian Navy’, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 6, No. 195, 23rd October 2009.

the European homeland are going to get less secure, more hazardous and more prone to disruption than we have been used to over the past two decades. In short, the maritime zone between the Suez Canal and the cities of Shanghai, Seoul and Singapore will become much more important to our security.¹¹

The European Union as a Global Power

While the sea has shaped European history, we have become increasingly ‘sea blind’—a term widely used to describe a lack of knowledge about the importance of sea power. While foreign powers have been busily boosting their naval strength over the past decade, we have continued to reduce the number of our warships, while simultaneously downgrading naval spending as a priority. As Paul Kennedy has pointed out, it is as if Europeans and Asians have reversed their roles: we have forgotten our past, and the way in which our command of the sea propelled us forward, while Asian countries have taken on board the lessons provided by European history—and put them into action.¹² Maritime geostrategy has also taken a back seat among Europeans, even in historical sea powers like the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Spain. In the British Strategic Defence Review in 1998, it was hardly mentioned at all.¹³ In the German defence white paper in 2006, it also failed to get much of a look in, although this is less surprising given Germany’s traditional position as a land power par excellence.¹⁴ It was only in the French equivalent in 2008 that geostrategic thinking became more apparent.¹⁵ In a nutshell, France’s white paper argued that Africa would decline in significance to French and European security, whereas the Middle East and the Indian Ocean would rise in importance. It was for this reason that the construction of a French naval station in the

¹¹ James Rogers (2009), ‘From Suez to Shanghai: the European Union and Eurasian maritime security’, *Occasional Paper 77*, Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies.

¹² Paul Kennedy, ‘The Rise and Fall of Navies’, *International Herald Tribune*, 5th April 2007.

¹³ Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Defence Review*, 1998.

¹⁴ Federal Ministry of Defence, *White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr*, 2006.

¹⁵ President of the French Republic, *The French White Paper on Defence and National Security*, 2008.

United Arab Emirates took place in late 2008, which opened last year.

Reducing European sea-blindness will require a systematic transformation in the way that the European Union relates to its surrounding geopolitical environment. The old land power geostrategy will have to give way to—or rather, be complimented by—one predicated on sea power. In other words, rather than behaving like a large continental behemoth seeking to surround itself with continuous surfaces surrounding a point of control (extrapolated: the European Neighbourhood and the Union for the Mediterranean), the European Union needs to think more about how to utilise points and connecting lines on the world's surface to gain command over immense littoral territories, especially the maritime approaches to the European continent. By providing the European Union with a lighter and more dynamic military and geostrategic footprint, this would contribute to the maintenance of the global trade system, and deter potential aggressors from usurping the status quo. This is what the naval theorist, Alfred Thayer Mahan, had in mind when he declared that: 'Force is never more operative than when it is known to exist but is not brandished.'¹⁶

The creation of a European maritime geostrategy also ties in directly with our own ambitions. With the passing of the Treaty of Lisbon, security and defence policy at the European level has the potential for significant functional and geographical expansion. What sort of power do we want to be? Do we want to remain nothing more than a 'civilian power', delegating our security to others (who, in any case, may not be in a position to help)? Or do we want to become a 'normative power', whose sole ambition is the promotion of 'good governance' and 'effective multilateralism', perhaps with a few small military operations bolted on the side? Or should we strive for a greater role on the world stage, commensurate with our weight?

In many ways, the question is a false one: it is not necessarily a case of what we want to be, but rather

what circumstances thrust upon us. A combination of defence inflation in the Member States and the sheer size of the new and emerging actors—all large continental powers—suggests that to remain relevant, let alone prosperous, we must begin harnessing the potential of the European Union more actively than we have been doing. What is needed is a comprehensive strategic defence review at the European level, which would consider the Member States' existing assets and the wider geostrategies of which they form a part. Europeans already operate military installations around the world—in fact more than any other country bar the United States.¹⁷ The existing French and British facilities provide an excellent capacity for the future projection of the European Union's influence into the South Atlantic, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean and indeed, even the Middle East and the Indian Ocean (*see map, below*). And unlike many American or Chinese facilities, many of our military installations are located on our own sovereign territories overseas and include naval harbours, aerodromes and barracks, which could be modified, enlarged or upgraded as the need dictates.

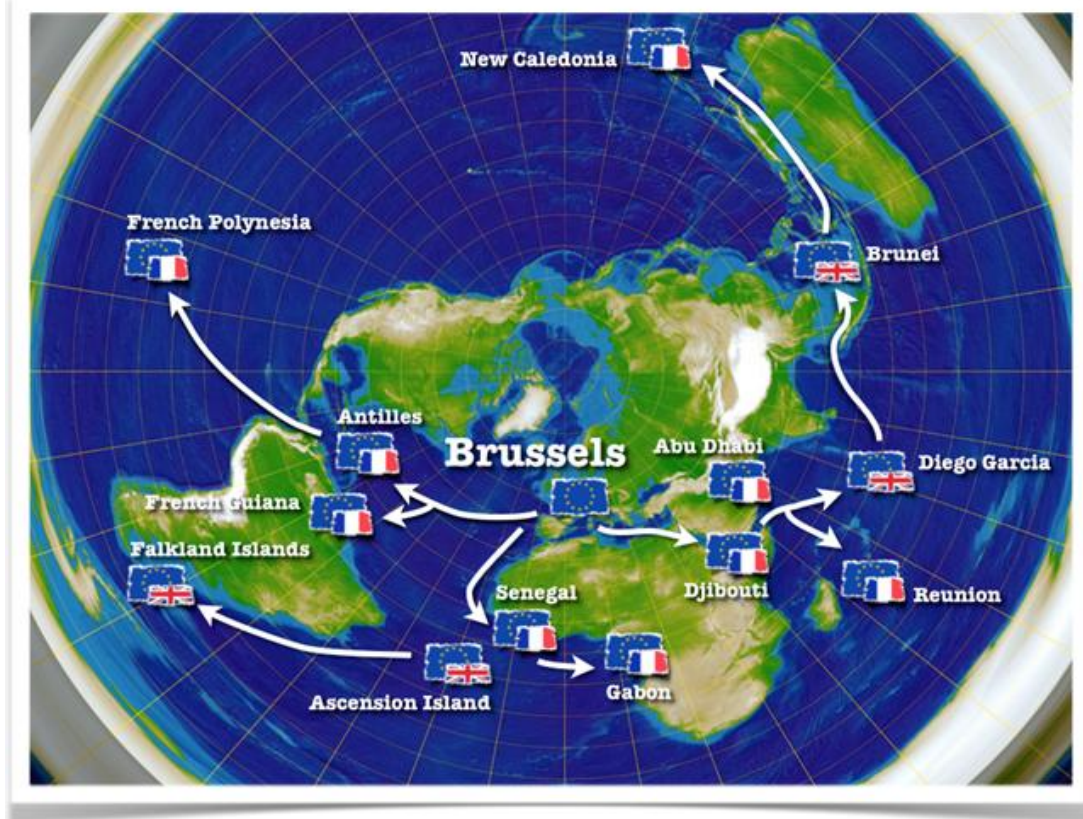
But a potential defence white paper is not just about challenges and threats, or military forces and civilian services and the way in which they should be used. It is also about the geographical spaces in which they are likely to be deployed and sustained as a deterrent, both now and in the near and distant futures. Any European review should give extensive attention to this issue; while, for example, the current focus will remain on the European Neighbourhood and Middle East—with growing attention given to the Indian Ocean region—it is likely that other areas will become important.

Indeed, one day, we may need more overseas military bases, in different locations, and with a different posture and focus, such as in the Arctic zone. A strategic defence review should therefore be supplemented by a degree of geostrategic forecasting, much like the projections undertaken

¹⁶ Alfred Thayer Mahan (1912), *Armaments and Arbitration or the Place of Force in the International Relations of States*, New York: Harper and Brothers, p. 105.

¹⁷ See: James Rogers and Luis Simón (2009), *The Status and Location of the Military Installations of the Member States of the European Union*, Brussels: European Parliament.

A MAP SHOWING THE EUROPEAN UNION'S POTENTIAL FORWARD PRESENCE UNDER A MARITIME GEOSTRATEGY



every five years by the National Intelligence Council in the United States.¹⁸

So if the European Union is to assume more responsibilities, particularly in security and defence, it will have to think wider and more like a globally-oriented sea power. Europeans will only retain a superpower-sized economy and a high degree of social and political cohesion—the prerequisites for prosperity—if we defend and extend our interests as an integrated bloc. This will require a sound maritime geostrategy to compliment our land power presence in Eastern Europe and Central Eurasia, drawing together our civilian services, our armed forces, our overseas military installations, our strategic historical knowledge and our values and interests. A future strategic defence review at the European-level, resulting in a white paper, should enable us to achieve that.

¹⁸ National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World*, 2008.

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