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# The deep end of security

## From the Baltic to the South China Sea, maritime threats expose a blind spot in Europe's pursuit of strategic autonomy

Since the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines in 2022, the sea has been high on Europe's political agenda. This was followed by damage to cables in the Baltic Sea and attacks by the Houthis in the Red Sea. Yet the recent attention that international seas have received is misleading and has done little to challenge Europe's general 'seablindness': While it does indeed react to incidents at sea, Europe does not plan with the sea in mind, and both decision-makers and the general public tend to underestimate the role of the sea in times of peace and war.

This is particularly evident in the EU's economic security policy, through which it aims to strengthen its strategic autonomy. The 2023 strategy identifies pipelines and submarine cables as critical infrastructure, and its update from December 2025 mentions ports and shipbuilding, albeit as matters of industry and ownership. Yet neither document mentions shipping lanes or straits. The term 'maritime security' is also absent, even though the EU has had a dedicated strategy on the subject since 2014.

Europe's supply, however, depends on the sea. The majority of intercontinental trade in goods takes place by sea. Norway, now Germany's largest gas supplier, sends its gas through pipelines on the seabed of the North Sea. And global communications and internet traffic run via undersea cables. A policy of strategic autonomy that ignores shipping routes and only protects cables once they have been damaged is built on a fundamental blind spot.

## When dependence becomes a liability

The Red Sea offers a good example of just how quickly dependence can become a liability. In November 2023, the Yemeni Houthi militia began attacking merchant ships. Four of the world's largest shipping companies responded by rerouting their vessels around the Cape of Good Hope. In 2024, the EU launched 'Operation Aspides' to protect merchant

shipping.

But the mission exposed what happens when Europe reacts to threats rather than takes preventative measures. Member states failed to provide sufficient resources to carry it out effectively. At least 10 ships were considered necessary from the outset. By September 2026, however, only six were in operation. Italy, meanwhile, was considering using its own warships to escort Italian merchant vessels through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait rather than waiting for an EU response. It seems that Europe is currently unable, on its own, to secure a shipping route on which its supply depends. That is the price of that very 'sea blindness'.

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In the Baltic Sea, another question arises, namely who is authorised to intervene at sea and impose penalties for damage. The European Commission classifies the tanker Eagle S as part of Russia's 'shadow fleet'. In December 2024, it was suspected of dragging its anchor across the seabed for around 90 kilometres, damaging five cables in the Gulf of Finland, including the Estlink 2 power cable connecting Finland and Estonia. Two courts have since reached conflicting rulings on whether Finland is entitled to prosecute the case, as the damage occurred outside its territorial waters. The defendants, meanwhile, have long since returned to their home countries.

This incident highlights another gap in Europe's economic security. Classifying submarine cables as critical infrastructure is of little use if it remains unclear who has the authority to act when they are damaged. Such legal uncertainty lowers the risks for those responsible and makes a ship dragging its anchor a cheap and effective tool for disruption.

NATO and the EU have since taken action. Following a series of cable damage incidents in the Baltic Sea, NATO launched its Baltic Sentry surveillance mission in January 2025. The EU followed with an action plan for the security of submarine cables in February. Both measures are welcome, but they only came into being *after* the damage had been done.

The question of responsibility is also becoming increasingly urgent for Germany as more critical infrastructure moves offshore. By the end of June 2026, wind farms with a combined capacity of 10.8 gigawatts were in operation in the North Sea and Baltic Sea. By 2032, that figure could

almost triple. The country's framework legislation for critical infrastructure, the Critical Infrastructure Protection Act (KRITIS Umbrella Act), which entered into force in March 2026, obliges operators to meet minimum security standards. However, no obligation imposed on operators can prevent a tanker from dragging its anchor for kilometres across the seabed. Who then is ultimately responsible for protecting this infrastructure when a threat emerges beyond territorial waters?

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What is currently occupying the courts in the Baltic Sea has been a constant reality for the Philippines for more than a decade. China lays claim to large parts of the South China Sea. In January 2013, the Philippines initiated arbitration proceedings against their maritime neighbour under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and in July 2016, the arbitral tribunal finally ruled that China has no legal basis for historical rights to resources within the so-called Nine-Dash Line. Beijing, meanwhile, does not recognise the ruling, holding that the tribunal had no jurisdiction.

This ruling also addressed fishing and the marine environment. The tribunal found that China had barred Filipino fishermen from Scarborough Shoal since May 2012, thereby infringing upon their traditional fishing rights. It also found that China had caused severe damage to coral reefs by building artificial islands and by tolerating the fishing of endangered species. The pressure continued even after the arbitration ruling. To take just one example, in April 2024, the Chinese Coast Guard fired water cannons at a Philippine Coast Guard vessel and a vessel belonging to the fisheries authority at Scarborough Shoal.

As in the Baltic Sea, the pressure remains below the threshold of an armed conflict. For coastal communities in the Philippines, however, it is a matter of livelihoods and food security. More than 2.5 million people in the Philippines depend on fishing for their livelihoods, and fish as well as fish products account for 11.7 per cent of the typical diet.

The situation in the South China Sea holds a lesson for Europe: Maritime security extends far beyond sea lanes and pipelines. Political scientist Christian Bueger has proposed a much-cited framework that identifies four interconnected dimensions of maritime security: national security, the marine environment, economic development and human security. I would argue that pressure below the threshold of war often

arises where these areas intersect. At Scarborough Shoal, for example, it affects fishermen, reefs and the authorities all at once. These areas are also interlinked off the German coast, where shipping, offshore wind farms, cables and pipelines share a comparatively small exclusive economic zone.

## Foresight, not hindsight

If Europe is serious about protecting its economic security, it needs to start looking beyond its own coastline. Shipping lanes and straits require the same risk assessments as those already carried out for critical raw materials. Anyone seeking to secure energy and raw materials must also secure the routes by which they are transported. In its December 2025 communication, the European Commission itself acknowledged the need to move beyond a reactive approach. The question is whether this ambition will translate into concrete measures to protect Europe's maritime supply routes.

Germany's expanding offshore infrastructure makes these questions particularly pressing. Its new KRITIS Umbrella Act requires operators to protect their installations. However, it does not specify which German authority is responsible for monitoring cables, pipelines and wind farms beyond territorial waters, or which authority intervenes should a threat arise. The German parliament must close this gap through legislation before any damage occurs.

Clear responsibilities would provide legal certainty for authorities and courts, but they would not alter maritime law. Outside territorial waters, it is difficult to exercise control over foreign vessels without the cooperation of their flag state. Berlin must therefore also negotiate agreements that allow flag states to authorise inspections of their vessels.

Europe also has a reason to protect its own interests in the South China Sea, since these waters carry around 40 per cent of the EU's external trade. Since 2018, authorities in the Indo-Pacific have been exchanging situational information through the EU-established Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing platform. Among other things, it has helped to combat illegal fishing. The Philippine Coast Guard and the maritime authority, Marina, joined the platform in 2023. The EU should build on this existing cooperation and work more closely with Manila to protect fishing grounds, the marine environment and undersea cables. This would support coastal communities while strengthening Europe's credibility as an advocate of the law of the sea.

Europe's autonomy is also decided at sea. But as long as Berlin and

Brussels only take notice of the sea when a cable breaks, it will remain a project confined to the mainland.

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