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**NAVIGATING EUROPEAN NAVAL
POWER: THE ROLE OF THE
EUROPEAN PATROL CORVETTE IN EU
MARITIME SECURITY**

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Introduction

As international trade grows, there is a greater demand for controlled and safe sea routes. Recent developments, such as the Houthi attacks on cargo ships in the Red Sea (Power, 2024) and China's rise to global naval power, present substantial challenges for Europe (Palmer, Carroll & Velazquez, 2024). Considering growing geopolitical tensions and the need for strategic autonomy for Europeans (European Commission, 2023a), this article explores the changing and complex nexus between maritime security and naval cooperation inside the EU.

The article examines the EU's response to these rising challenges through the 2014 EU Marine Security Strategy (EUMSS), which was revised in 2023, and the 2022 Strategic Compass (European Commission, 2023b; Council of the European Union, 2022). Notably, both strategic documents place a higher priority on improved Member State collaboration in the marine security and defence industries. As the first naval vessel created under the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and European Defence Fund (EDF), the European Patrol Corvette (EPC) project lies at the heart of this collaboration (PESCO, 2019). By combining national requirements into a single platform, this initiative seeks to increase naval capabilities' cost-effectiveness and interoperability.

The aim of the article is to explore the EPC's innovative potential in comparison with previous programmes like the Horizon and the European Multipurpose Frigate (hereby FREMM). Examining the historical backdrop of EU naval cooperation, the article provides insights into the prospects and constraints of coordinated defence. It then goes into depth on the EPC's features and implementation phases, emphasising its capacity to unite European defensive forces with inexpensive, versatile and interoperable ships. This strategy strengthens Europe's strategic independence and lays the groundwork for future joint security endeavours.

1. The Maritime Domain as the Centre of Great Power Competition

The significance of marine security has never been greater, as maritime routes account for almost 90% of global trade (European Maritime Security Agency, 2024). It is estimated that maritime commerce volumes will triple by 2050, highlighting the need for safe and reliable sea routes for countries' economic well-being (Anadi, 2024). Additionally, an estimated three billion people depend on the oceans and seas for their livelihoods by supplying necessary food supplies and jobs (United Nations, 2021). However, these waters serve as more than just commercial routes; they are also sites of ongoing international conflicts, particularly in areas like the Black Sea and the Red Sea, where geopolitical tensions have escalated.

By limiting access to major routes for commodities and goods, these conflicts can slow or stop shipping. In addition to the nations immediately impacted, this disruption has an impact on global markets, raising transportation costs and resulting in shortages. Any obstruction or military conflict in strategically significant areas can have far-reaching economic effects, ultimately destabilising national economies and international trade networks (Liuima, 2024).

Control over sea routes is therefore essential for any country or alliance seeking to safeguard trade and national interests while preserving access to key chokepoints, such as the Panama and Suez Canals, as well as the Straits of Malacca, Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb and Gibraltar (Wang, Du & Peng, 2024). Safeguarding access to these chokepoints is fundamental, not only to facilitate the continuous flow of goods but to ensure geopolitical influence in key areas across the world that have the possibility of affecting national security interests such as procurement.

In light of the escalating geopolitical stiffensses, the EU and its Member States have acknowledged the need for increased maritime security (Council of the European Union, 2023). Notably, in 2023, 47.4% of the value of products that have been transferred between the EU and non-EU nations came from maritime transportation (Eurostat, 2024). Undeniably, the growing international instabilities and escalating maritime tensions in the global landscape have spurred interest and investment in the EU's naval defence industry in recent years. According to forecasts, the European naval vessel market is expected to reach \$35.44 billion by the end of 2024 and grow to \$57.62 billion by 2029, reflecting the substantial increase in defence spending by EU Member States. It is also anticipated that EU countries will spend €55.5 billion on marine technology by 2025 (Mordor Intelligence, 2024). Nevertheless, less than 20% of defence programme investments are coordinated among Member States, according to official EU reports (Tilenni, 2023). More collaboration is needed to realise the full potential of these efforts. Preventing waste and maximising the use of resources will guarantee that investments effectively promote the Union's defence and security capabilities (Calcagno, Juncos & Vanhoonacker, 2022).

The Strategic Compass, which lays out common goals and principles for military planning (Council of the European Union, 2022), further emphasises that the 2014 EUMSS was the first attempt to create a strategic approach to maritime security (European Commission, 2023b). Member States pledge to “further assert [their] interests at sea and enhance the maritime security of the EU and Member States, including by improving the interoperability of our naval forces” (Council of the European Union, 2022). Additionally, the Compass encourages EU countries to expand the Coordinated Maritime Presences programme beyond its current operations in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Guinea in cooperation with pertinent partners (European Commission, 2023b) while also seeking to create a Rapid

Deployment Capacity of up to 5,000 personnel, including maritime units (European External Action Service, 2023). This emphasis on bolstering marine security highlights the EU's wider potential for defence industry collaboration, demonstrating a greater dedication to improving collective capabilities and guaranteeing improved coordination across Member States.

As the first navy vessel designed under an EU framework, the EPC project under the PESCO framework stands out among these efforts as a noteworthy development. This program acts as a litmus test for the potential of defence industry cooperation within the Union while reflecting the EU's commitment to strengthening its maritime security capabilities (European Defence Agency, 2021).

2. Historical Collaborations in the European Naval Defence Sector

Several considerations complicate industrial collaboration in EU naval defence. Despite having powerful naval forces, major EU nations (Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain) frequently compete with one another rather than work together (Guest, 2024). Workshare is a major problem that affects both the distribution of technical talent among businesses and the creation of jobs. The rewards in terms of skills and intellectual property rights increase with the complexity of the duties allocated to a project. A company creating an advanced radar system, for instance, stands to benefit far more than one making low-value parts. Increased collaboration among EU countries is, therefore, necessary to lessen rivalry and increase reciprocal advantages; Member States may minimise redundancies, maximise workshare and guarantee a just allocation of critical talents and intellectual property by working together (Calcagno, Juncos & Vanhoonacker, 2022).

There have been a few examples of nations working together on significant naval military programmes over the past 20 years, with differing degrees of success, amid an environment of stagnant budgets and growing research costs for new technologies. An important milestone in their continued cooperation is the 2023 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that France and Italy signed for the mid-life upgrade of their Horizon-class Air Defence destroyers (Vavasseuer, 2023). This project expands on the joint venture Naviris, which was formed in late 2019 by France's Naval Group and Italy's Fincantieri to guarantee the boats' continuous efficacy and promote closer cooperation in naval defence (Naval Group, 2019). One of the first and most significant instances in terms of scale is the 1992 Horizon initiative, which helped both navies develop and build sophisticated destroyers. The programme illustrates that the interoperability of a collaboratively constructed vessel must be continuously maintained throughout its operational lifespan; it cannot be presumed (Calcagno, Juncos & Vanhoonacker, 2022).

FREMM is another noteworthy European naval defence cooperative project (Naval Technology, 2019). Due to significant differences in design, weapons, and intended duties between the French and Italian vessels, the 2005 FREMM project has not been able to attain the level of commonality and interoperability that was anticipated, unlike the Horizon programme (Calcagno, Juncos & Vanhoonacker, 2022). Furthermore, a problem that many cooperative defence programmes encounter when trying to access foreign markets is shown by the conflicts between France and Italy over FREMM export agreements (Rossi, 2021). Cooperation in naval defence may be at risk if export laws for jointly produced defence programmes are not clearly defined from the start. Participating nations have a stake in opening up export markets because doing so would result in the manufacturing of more ships or parts, which would raise economies of scale. Beyond the procurement requirements of their separate armed services, this would also increase the potential sales for individual businesses or national industries (Calcagno, Juncos & Vanhoonacker, 2022).

3. The European Patrol Corvette Project

PESCO authorised a project in November 2019 to provide a standard set of specifications for an EPC (PESCO, 2019). The goal of this project, which is led by Italy and involves France, Greece, and Spain, is to combine national needs into the fewest ship configurations feasible. France's Floréal-class frigate, Spain's Serviola-class and Infanta Elena-class ships, and Italy's Comandanti and Costellazioni I & II classes will be replaced by new ships (Peruzzi, 2020). Denmark, Norway, and Romania joined the group shortly after, while Portugal and Croatia joined as observers. This initiative aims to strengthen regional security and cooperative naval capabilities among EU Member States, demonstrating Europe's commitment to unified defence standards.

Officially known as the Modular Multirole Patrol Corvette (MMPC), it is expected to see France acquire six of them, costing between €250 million and €300 million each; Spain is also expected to get another six, and Italy is planned to acquire eight (Kington, 2021). The first transfers for these are expected to happen in 2027 (Kington, 2021). The estimated dimensions of the EPC vessel are 110 meters in length and 3,000 tonnes in weight. The Long-Range Multipurpose (LRM) and Full Combat Multipurpose (FCM) vessels will be the two primary versions of the project (Naval Technology, 2024). In order to satisfy the varied operational needs of different navies, both versions will incorporate innovations and synergies. These ships will be flexible and interoperable, able to perform various tasks specific to each navy's requirements, such as law enforcement or sovereignty affirmation operations near shore and high-seas surveillance with a high degree of autonomy (Naval Technology, 2024).

The first phase of the project, known as MMPC CALL 1, began by the European Commission in 2021 and concentrated on design, technological advancement, and the creation of standard operating procedures (OCCAR, 2024). This phase aims to deliver concept and feasibility studies as well as a first design for a new class of naval vessels (Calcagno, Juncos, & Vanhoonacker, 2022). It is funded by the European Commission through the EDF and has a €87 million worth. The European Commission will offer grants totalling €60 million of this money, with Member States Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Norway and Spain contributing the remaining €27 million (OCCAR, 2024).

The European Commission chose an industry proposal in May 2024 for MMPC CALL 2, the programme's second phase, which will run for four years, from 2025 to 2029 (OCCAR, 2024). By creating at least two prototypes—one for each iteration of the FCM and LRM—this new phase seeks to finish the development phase and the critical design review. The European Commission chose the proposal for a maximum EDF budget of €154.5 million for this phase (OCCAR, 2024).

The EPC project addresses long-standing obstacles frequently impeding cooperative military operations, marking a significant advancement in EU naval cooperation. Because of their shallow draught, corvettes—usually the smallest class of warships—are nimble and ideal for both open-sea and shallow-water operations (Arthur, 2024). Their versatility allows them to execute a wide range of EU security responsibilities outside traditional combat roles, such as border patrol, anti-trafficking operations and diverse maritime security missions (Arthur, 2024). Importantly, the ability to design flexible corvettes that can be set up for naval security or frontline combat missions using a common framework reduces development costs and makes them an invaluable tool for EU forces of all sizes.

Leading European naval powers, such as France, Italy, and Spain, have frequently followed separate defence strategies (Arteaga, 2024). Nevertheless, the EPC brings these countries together within the PESCO framework. The EPC wants to replace several national vessels with a streamlined, versatile fleet of corvettes, with Italy, Spain and France leading the way. With initial prototypes expected by 2029, the project, funded in phases by the European Commission and the EDF, respectively, focuses on improving design and technology. While the reduced construction and operation costs of corvettes guarantee economic viability and strategic flexibility, the EPC also emphasises how concerted workshare and export policies can remove prior obstacles.

The EPC aims indeed to expand on the knowledge gained from earlier initiatives like the FREMM and Horizon, which were constrained by varying national requirements, design variances, and export market constraints. Notwithstanding these obstacles, the EPC seeks to

simplify this by utilising a single, flexible platform created especially to satisfy European naval needs without sacrificing cost-effectiveness or operational compatibility. The capacity of businesses and Member States to reach a consensus on common needs—particularly in preventing industrial interests from impeding the initiative’s cooperative goals—will ultimately determine the EPC’s effectiveness. If successful, the EPC might be a game-changer for scalable, cohesive European naval programmes.

Conclusion

In view of current global challenges affecting relevant sea lanes, this article aimed to investigate how the EU is responding to the changing dynamics of maritime security and naval cooperation. The EPC was analysed as a state-of-the-art project to enhance collective maritime defence capabilities and fulfil the strategic needs of the EU and its Member States.

The project demonstrates the potential to overcome previous limitations seen in EU naval initiatives like Horizon and FREMM by creating a consistent and adaptable platform that serves a range of national interests while promoting interoperability and cost-effectiveness. This aligns with broader EU goals under the Strategic Compass and the updated EUMSS. Yet attaining long-term coordination necessitates settling disagreements over manufacturing competition and striking a balance between national interests and EU security objectives. Thus, the EPC can have a big impact on EU maritime defence in the future. It can improve Europe’s operational preparedness and set a standard for breaking down political and industrial barriers in defence cooperation. Through initiatives like the EPC, the EU sets a strong example of how collective action can safeguard regional security, adapting flexibly to evolving global challenges while promoting a secure and strategically autonomous Europe.

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