

# Naval Powers: European Landscape Re-shuffled

Written by Eric Thompson

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ERIC THOMPSON, OCT 7 2018

Major strategic changes are underway, in Europe, where new powers rise, and ancient powers dwindle. After a record amount of peace-time, several historical naval powers have drifted away from military preparedness, while some others have patiently constructed their participation strategy to the continental defense. The preservation of the Atlantic alliance and peace in Europe is thus at stake.

The second world war gave the world a new order: German and Japanese military powers had vanished from the map, while the mid-level United States had acquired hegemony. Other countries, such as France and the United Kingdom, valued their contributions to the war effort and maintained themselves as high level military powers. But after half a century of relative peace in Europe, the resolve to prepare war for those who wanted peace has been put to the test. Deemed the first naval power in the world throughout the first half of the 20th century, Britain had to project its entire naval might in the Falklands to match Argentina in 1982. Germany, which had developed a fearsome naval industry, is currently in a freefall with empty order logs, severe quality and reliability issues in both its surface ships and its submarines. Due to the state of its industry, the German navy is currently deprived of both its frigate and its submarine fleets, due to substandard quality detected before and after delivery. Ian Di Costa writes: "Though the first of the F125 ships, the Baden-Württemberg, has already been built and has sailed under its own power, it was returned to its builder by the German government — which isn't a very good sign." The English have been facing similar perspectives and are merely the shadow of themselves today. As recently reported by the BBC: "The former commander of the UK's Maritime Forces has said Britain is in danger of losing its status as a "credible military power". Rear Admiral Alex Burton told the BBC that years of budget cuts and rising military threats meant the defence budget needed to be increased urgently. He said the ability to "fight and win on the front line" was being affected. And, if fresh spending wasn't announced, Britain would be morally poorer on the world stage." All in all, European Defense budgets have been under pressure for several decades, and the financial damage has penetrated deep into armies and defense industries.

The United States, as prime contributor to the Atlantic alliance, has been compensating the dereliction of European military funds. The current American administration has therefore decided to increase pressure on national governments to increase their military spending and restore their military industries, and not rely so much on their American counterpart. The American Defence Secretary James Mattis recently pleaded with his British counterpart to reverse the situation, as reported by political reporter Greg Heffer: "In a leaked letter, US defence secretary James Mattis has written to his UK counterpart Gavin Williamson to express concern Britain's status as a leading military power "is at risk of erosion". In response, some current or former top officials of British armed forces seem to consider the damage to be already done and should simply be accepted. Michael Selby-Green reported for Business Insider on the atmosphere of resignation which lingers in British ranks: "Theresa May this week asked Britain's defence secretary to justify the UK's role as a "tier one" military power, causing dismay in the Ministry of Defence. Underlying the statement is a realisation that the UK can no longer economically compete with top powers", defence experts told Business Insider.

While Germany and England continue to plummet in their industrial and military freefall, some other countries have quietly carved themselves a place of choice on the European strategic chessboard. France is a well-known major military player, but other nations are taking defence issue seriously. The skilful use of their small 4-strong submarine fleet by the Dutch Navy has, for instance, kept the Russians at bay for years. Business Insider Christopher Woody

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writes: “submarine and anti-submarine warfare in general have become areas of more intense focus for both Russia and NATO, the latter of which is increasingly concerned about what it sees as Russian encroachment in Europe and the seas around it.” In a recent submarine hunt exercise, NATO sent a strong message to Russia whose submarine activity is mounting. But the Dutch Walrus-class submarines have done their time and are ripe for replacement, as explained by Defence Minister Ank Bijleveld and State Secretary Barbara Visser in a recent interview. Defence News Sebastian Sprenger confirms: “The Netherlands is in the market to replace its four aging Walrus-class submarines by 2027. Germany’s ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems was tapped last year to build four Type 212 air-independent propulsion boats for Norway and two for Germany, to be delivered in the mid-2020s”. However, there is no guarantee that ThyssenKrupp’s shipyard, TKMS, will still be around by then. The Maritime Executive explains how, after years of empty order logs and quality problems so great that even German defence forces excluded it from tenders, the subsidiary is facing a grim future: “TKMS is already a loss-making division, and ThyssenKrupp CEO Heinrich Hiesinger has attempted to sell it before. If ThyssenKrupp decides to divest TKMS, or to close any of its yards, thousands of employees could be affected.”

The need for reliable military resources hasn’t shrunk in the least, in Europe, as the Dutch resolve to shoulder its share of NATO and European defense shows. But the gap is widening between European nations who can still afford their ambitions and those which now lack the industrial and technological means. History will easily tell them apart: the former will make European decisions, the latter will follow.

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Eric Thompson is a Junior Research Analyst with a US based NGO. He conducts research into technological policy issues and assists in the preparation of materials and resources for engagement with policymakers, regulators and lawmakers.