



Europe's political landscape is in a state of profound flux, one that presents real challenges to those continental nations who see their interests best served by a combination of effective, geopolitically balanced European institutions and a robust transatlantic alliance. This is true for countries like Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands, countries notably effective in maintaining a sound balance between these two strategic principals.

The continent faces a plethora of disruptive and divisive dynamics. It is a focal point of Great Power aggression. Russia is using military force to revise European borders, and both Moscow and Beijing are using economic, cyber, and social media to sow discord within and across nations " and to pillage their economic assets. Populist movements, many fueled by Moscow, are undercutting commitment to both the European Union and NATO. On top of all this, economic fragility looms like a dark storm cloud over Europe.

In the future the EU political and economic power will decrease, but also the trans-Atlantic relation can deteriorate. This will affect the role of NATO. In the EU France and Germany will become more influential, if not preponderant, drivers of decisions within that institution. That too will leave the EU more vulnerable to bouts of anti-Americanism and to those who pursue EU "strategic autonomy" to weaken the role of NATO.

As these countries navigate these challenges, they must carefully reinforce and expand a mix of regional partnerships, designed to foster an equitable distribution of power within the European Union, and a strong commitment to transatlanticism across the continent. An example of such a regional partnership is the Hanseatic League.

Toward these ends, these countries should ensure that their significant and useful ties to Germany and France remain complemented by a robust relationship with the United Kingdom. For example the Netherlands and London share an ardent commitment to NATO, strong relations with United States, and proven adeptness in managing the latter's highs and lows. Their defence relationship – particularly in the maritime domain – is a long-standing and deep. Indeed, a tight Dutch-UK partnership will be essential to keeping the latter linked to the EU.

Second, these countries need to further animate the strength and relevance of other relationships key to balancing out Franco-German dominance in EU decision-making. Relationships like the Hanseatic League become even more important to small and medium sized countries in Europe. The League – catalysed into action by the Netherlands and that includes Sweden, Finland, Ireland, Denmark, and the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – brings a conservative approach to EU financial matters. It has already proven to be an impediment to French President Emmanuel Macron's efforts to centralize more authority within the Union. A fact underscored by the irritation of senior French officials who derisively refer to the League as "Wopke and his Seven Dwarfs," a reference to the leadership Dutch Finance Minister Wopke Hoekstra.

Sweden's participation in the League highlights another partnership useful to The Netherlands. The two nations deploy small but capable militaries and are equally determined to promote the competitiveness of their national defence industries across Europe. They are wary of France's Strategic Review and Germany's Defence Industry Strategy that would label strategic maritime, aerospace, cyber and other capabilities as national key technologies and reserve them for domestic industries. Such policies, especially if reinforced via the European Union, would be a blow to Dutch interests.

For this reason, further diversification of The Netherlands's defence industrial relationships makes eminent sense as a means to sustain and enhance the nation's unique national capacities. This is especially true of the maritime domain, and how The Hague moves forward with its submarine program promises to have a profound effect on the independence and capacity of both the Dutch navy and maritime industry.

Recently the Dutch MoD selected France's Naval Group to build its navy's new mine hunters. If the Dutch government would again select France and Naval Group as prime-partners for its next submarines, the impact would be multi-dimensional. First, it would further embed, if not subordinate, Dutch defence industry under the wing of French companies, further increasing Dutch dependency upon French technology and industrial know-how. Second, it would dilute

decades of operational Dutch-UK maritime collaboration as the Dutch navy would adjust its submarine doctrine and naval operations to match those of the French navy.

Alternatively, selection of the submarine offered through the collaboration of the Swedish and Dutch shipyards and UK industry, offers an opportunity to reinforce a strategic relationship with UK and its navy through introduction of cutting-edge technologies. It would also deepen co-operation with a like-minded Nordic member of the Hanseatic League, and strengthen the independence and vibrancy of the Dutch defence industrial base.

By balancing adeptly its roles and positions within the Western Alliance and the EU, The Hague has served both Dutch national interests and those of the Western community. It should continue and build upon that strategic approach, maintaining close relations with Europe's great powers while also driving forward coalitions that check the over centralization of power. It is in this framework, that The Hague should give serious consideration on how it can deepen and further institutionalize its political and economic relationship with Sweden.

The ambition for the EU to achieve Strategic Autonomy is a laudable one. This ought not to mean the creation of a protectionist bloc. The defence sector is one of the most international in outlook, and flourishes where partnerships can share know how. Prime contractors rely on a vibrant and innovative supply chain to add value to their offerings. This is doubly so in the case of export opportunities. Global customers are increasingly seeking to participate in major programmes, to include local content. The same criteria should also apply among European neighbours and partners.

A shared maritime heritage means that navies can learn from each other, by exchanging best practice. This need not mean doctrinal homogeneity, as different outlooks can be enriched over time. In the same vein strategic autonomy need not translate as 'one size fits all'!

Nick Watts is Deputy Director General, U K Defence Forum. This article was first published in Warship World