



INSTITUTE
OF POLITICAL STUDIES
Faculty of Social Sciences
Charles University

Contribution ID: 149

Type: **Paper Abstract (Closed Panels)**

Toward a Novel Conception of Naval Strategy for Small Countries

Thursday 27 June 2024 12:00 (20 minutes)

With the advent of the New Revolution in Military Affairs, the strategic environment that existed during the post-Cold War “unipolar moment,” when the US and its junior alliance partners could conduct combined arms operations with guaranteed air superiority and freedom of maneuver in the seas, is no more. Nevertheless, the fact that the globalized, hyperconnected 21st century will be a century where great power competition will in large part be over command of the sea is at odds with the scant literature to inform in particular small states’ naval strategy in the new bi/multipolar strategic environment. While there have been some recent works reviewing the literature, for example by Mulqueen et al. and McCabe et al., the latter rightly admit that these works have “only touched the surface of the topic”; indeed, it is more descriptive than theorizing. Long lulled into a false sense of security, and unwavering American protection, Europe’s current posture and approach are wholly inadequate. Especially if multiple crises in different parts around Europe crop up simultaneously, smaller European states dependent on the UK and France—Europe’s only two serious naval powers—will soon be overwhelmed. At the same time, it is smaller European countries’ combined economic surplus that can potentially yield the added capabilities that move us to European “strategic autonomy.” That is, if a region-centered common naval strategy is devised, a communication and command infrastructure separate from NATO is set up, needs-based procurement toward 2035 happens in a coordinated, complementary fashion, and there is the political will and long-term financial commitment along the lines of the “Zeitenwende” to do so. This article explores what a credible European external posture could look like, and how small European navies could contribute to such an overall stronger defense outlook.

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Session Classification: Defence Cooperation and Military Assistance

