Building Blocks for an Ocean Act

V. Maritime security and defence

The Maritime Century: Securing Europe's future at sea

Why is the Ocean Act needed for Europe's security and defence

The maritime domain is becoming increasingly central to Europe's security. Growing geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions, disruption of trade routes, strategic use of chokepoints, attacks on critical infrastructure such as submarine cables and emerging threats in tactical regions such as the Arctic, the Black Sea and the Middle East are reshaping Europe's security environment.

Climate and environmental change are also acting as threat multipliers and conflict catalysts. Changes in ocean conditions, shifting access to marine resources and increasing competition over maritime space are creating new security challenges while amplifying existing ones.

At the same time, security and defence activities themselves can have significant impacts on marine ecosystems. As Europe increases investment in maritime security and defence capabilities, it is essential that environmental considerations are integrated from the outset.

The Ocean Act provides an opportunity to promote a more integrated approach that recognises the interdependence between ocean health, resilience and security.

Policy context and Ocean Pact commitments

The EU Maritime Security Strategy provides the main framework for European action in the maritime domain. Its recent update strengthened recognition of emerging threats and the links between environmental change and security, but significant opportunities remain to better integrate ocean governance and maritime security objectives.

The Ocean Pact announced several initiatives relevant to maritime security, including a European unmanned drone fleet, an action plan on submarine cable security and a strategy for the removal of unexploded ordnance (UXO). The ongoing review of EU Arctic policy also highlights the growing strategic importance of ocean governance in a changing geopolitical context.

The Ocean Act should build on these initiatives and promote a more coherent approach to the environment-security nexus.

Key measures for the Ocean Act

1. Include maritime security into maritime spatial planning obligations

Under their current obligations, Member States are not required to address maritime security in their maritime spatial plans. The MSPD should be amended to require Member States to integrate maritime security considerations from the outset of the planning process, ensuring that security needs are well anticipated and that synergies and trade-offs with other maritime activities (energy, shipping, fisheries, conservation) are identified and managed proactively within a single coherent spatial framework.

2. Integrate environmental safeguards into maritime security activities

The Ocean Act should ensure that maritime security and defence activities are planned and implemented in ways that minimise impacts on marine ecosystems and remain consistent with broader environmental objectives. Specifically, exemptions to environmental procedures for security and defence projects under the next EU budget should be applied only in a restrictive manner.

3. Promote dual-use ocean infrastructure and observation systems

New investments in maritime infrastructure, monitoring systems and ocean observation should be designed to serve both environmental and security purposes wherever possible, improving efficiency and strengthening situational awareness. Submarine cables offer such an opportunity, where sensors integrated into cable infrastructure can simultaneously monitor oceanographic conditions while enhancing the security of critical undersea networks. The developing European unmanned drone fleet is another good example of this dual-use potential.

4. Establish environmental standards for unexploded ordnance (UXO) removal

The Ocean Act should promote the use of environmentally responsible methods for the detection, management and removal of unexploded ordnance, building on scientific guidance and regional cooperation frameworks, notably as undertaken under the Regional Sea Convention for the Baltic Sea (HELCOM).

5. Make the Arctic a flagship region for integrated ocean security

The Ocean Act should recognise the Arctic as a priority region where maritime security, environmental protection and scientific cooperation must be pursued together, building on the forthcoming revision of the EU Arctic Strategy.