

Hosted by Ifri

Paris Naval Conference 2025



February 04, 2025

Ladies and gentlemen,



This third edition of the Paris Naval Conference is an ideal opportunity for exchanges between all the players in the maritime, economic and naval worlds.

Let us seize this opportunity, because the strategic environment is demanding. It is characterized by profound instability, but also by a temptation to turn inwards and by growing challenges to the international order.

In the maritime domain, this tension is reflected in heightened competition and even confrontation. Conflicts on land are spilling over into the sea. They have a considerable impact on maritime flows, as it has been the case for over a year in the Red Sea, or since February 2022 in the Black Sea. They also affect our marine and undersea infrastructures for energy and telecommunications, which are repeatedly the target of incidents or hybrid operations with grave consequences.

Our societies are experiencing this reality once again: our shared economic prosperity is dependent on the security of our trade flows, through sea routes for the greater part. At times of geopolitical tension, this maritime ecosystem reorganizes itself, adapting not only traffic flows, but also infrastructures, ports, logistics and supply chains.

This is where the key role of naval power comes into light. By controlling seas and oceans, sea power supports the economy. As they have done for several centuries, our navies provide security and stability essential to enable innovation and investment in the future. For our sailors, this requires a constant high level of preparedness and responsiveness to protect shipping, regulate maritime uses and enforce international law at sea. Our navies also try and anticipate all the emerging developments in the maritime economy, linked to climate change or the technological and energy breakthroughs.

Facing this complex environment, we can rely on a network of partners. Foreign partners first of all, through alliances and coalitions to increase our influence, operate together and consolidate access to areas of operations. And secondly, economic, educational, financial and industrial partners: all parts of a whole ecosystem, broad and diversified, which needs to rally and mobilize.

In this Year of the Sea, the Paris Naval Conference aims to bring us together to reflect on the strategic issues that link naval power and the economy. I hope that this conference will be a great success, and I look forward to exchanging views with you in the corridors of the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri).

Admiral Nicolas Vaujour
Chief of French Navy

Agenda

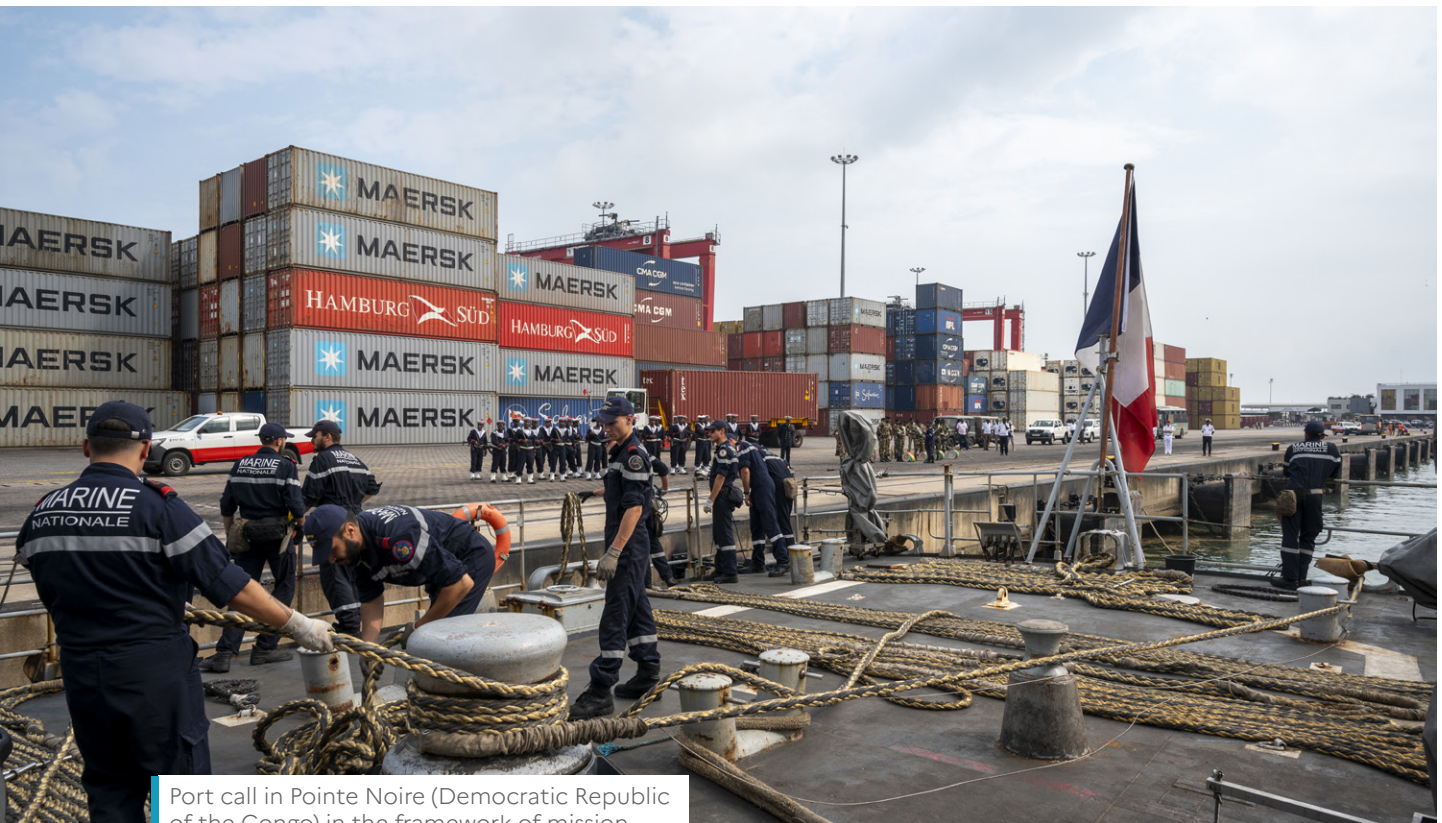
(ALL LISTED TIMES ARE IN UTC +1)

NAVAL POWER IN SUPPORT OF MARITIME ECONOMY

- 09h45 - 10h15** Arrival at Ifri, coffee.
- 10h15 - 10h30** Welcome remarks by
Dr. Thomas Gomart, *Director of Ifri* and
Admiral Nicolas Vaujour, *Chief of French Navy*.
- 10h30 - 12h00** **SESSION 1**
Challenges and perspectives on securing maritime flows for navies and the maritime sector.
- 12h00 - 12h15** Presentation of the «Admiral Castex» prize.
- 12h15 - 13h45** Lunch Break.
- 13h45 - 15h15** **SESSION 2**
Security in support of prosperity: safeguarding critical flows to enable long-term economic development.
- 15h15 - 15h45** Coffee Break.
- 15h45 - 17h00** **SESSION 3**
The influence of the maritime economy on naval power: rethinking Mahan in the 21st century.
- 17h00 - 17h30** Concluding remarks by a civilian senior official.
- 17h30 - 17h45** Closing address by Admiral Nicolas Vaujour.
- 17h45 - 18h30** Press conference.

Food for thought

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NAVAL
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Port call in Pointe Noire (Democratic Republic of the Congo) in the framework of mission CORYMBE off the coasts of western Africa.

The concept of sea power has historically been based on the need to secure maritime flows, which, in a liberal conception of the economy, are essential to nations' wealth. For Alfred T. Mahan, the 19th-century American strategist, control of the seas through maritime trade and naval supremacy was the key to a great power's influence.

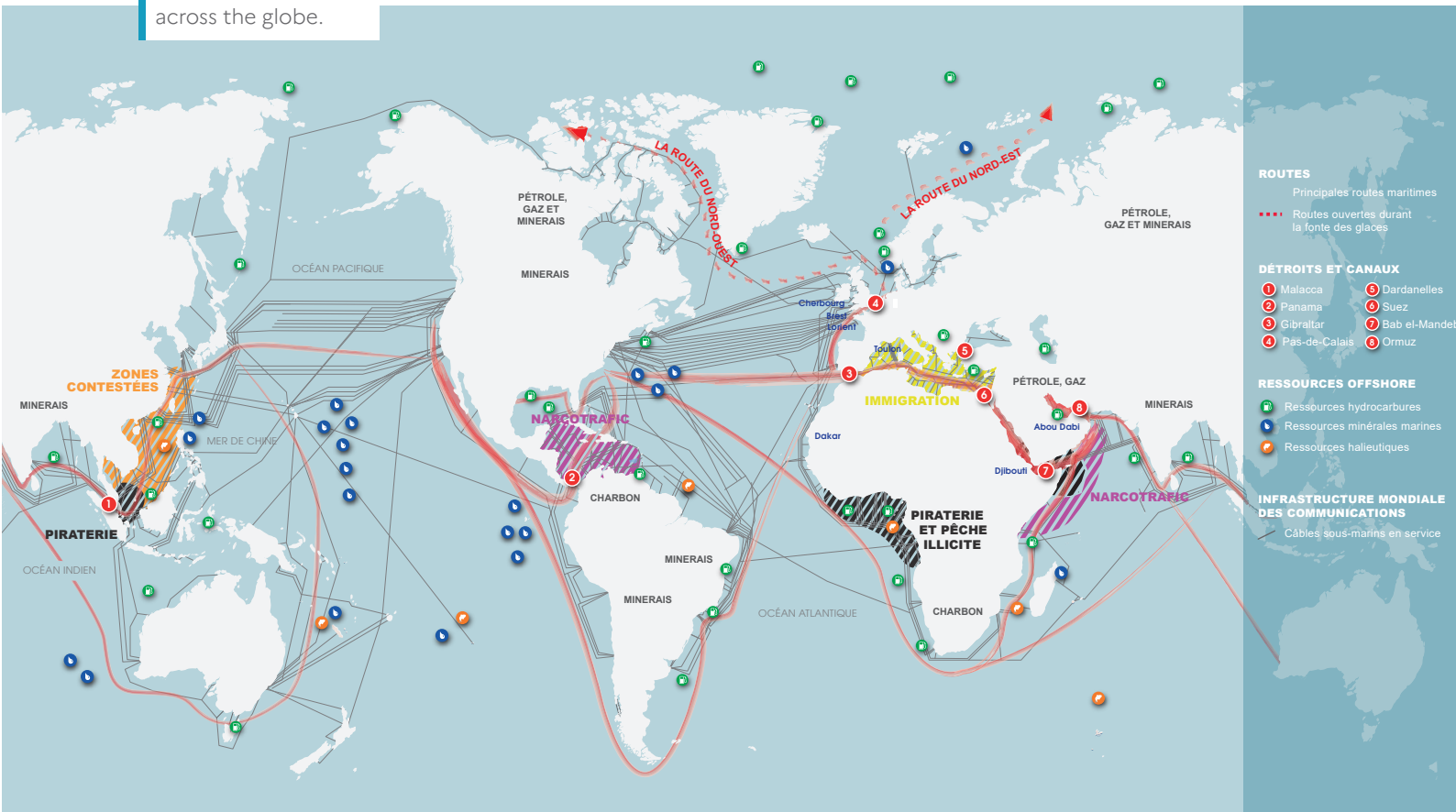
Targeting maritime trade meant attacking a competitor's economic prosperity, and thus the foundation of its power. Widely practiced for centuries by those in a position of naval inferiority, privateering was outlawed by European nations in 1856 during the Treaty of Paris, which brought an end to the Crimean War.

Attacks on merchant vessels resurged during the World Wars of the twentieth century, particularly during the Battles of the Atlantic and Pacific, where each side sought to undermine the other's war effort by attacking the transport of equipment, reinforcements, and the supplies needed for its wartime economy.

Since then, the major naval forces have made a point to protect civilian vessels in all types of confrontation at sea. This was all the more true after the globalization of the economy in the 1980s, when commercial maritime flows - the key to this globalization - came to be seen as a "global collective good."

The maritime economy took full advantage of this relative safety of navigation for decades. Today, maritime transport accounts for some 90% of the world's trade in goods. However, the gradual reduction in the size of Western navies since the end of the Cold War allowed for a modern form of piracy or armed robbery at sea to reemerge in the early 2000s in the Gulf of Guinea, the northern Indian Ocean, and in Southeast Asia due to difficult economic conditions for local populations. Moreover, merchant ships have occasionally been targeted and seized for political purposes during this period of time.

Main maritime issues across the globe.



CHIFFRES clés



71% de la planète est recouverte par les espaces maritimes, soit 361 millions de km²



70% de la population mondiale vit en zone littorale, à moins de 100 km des côtes



90% du commerce mondial est maritime



99% des télécommunications transitent par des câbles sous-marins



© M. BAILLY/MN

EU mission APSIDES – An AAW French destroyer escorting merchant vessels in the Red Sea.

However, only since the early 2020s have we witnessed the full-scale targeting of commercial vessels as vectors of the maritime economy, and therefore of a state's wealth. Ships seized by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in the Strait of Hormuz or the Persian Gulf, Russian threats against ships serving Ukrainian ports as part of Russia's war in Ukraine, or the hundred or so attacks carried out since October 2023 by Yemeni Houthi forces against merchant vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, are all proof of this growing phenomenon. These attacks have significantly disrupted the global maritime economy and forced the world's navies to provide ship escorts, notably through the European Operation Aspides.

Nevertheless, the maritime economy is not limited to shipping. It also includes fishing, the extraction of underwater resources, marine tourism, marine renewable energies, and marine and undersea infrastructures such as energy pipelines and communication cables, which carry 99% of intercontinental data exchanges.

In just a few years, various clandestine or hybrid actions have highlighted states' vulnerability to threats against these infrastructures, such as the sabotage of the Nord Stream gas pipelines in 2022, or the repeated damage to transoceanic internet cables. Here too, the sea is becoming an increasingly key arena of confrontation.

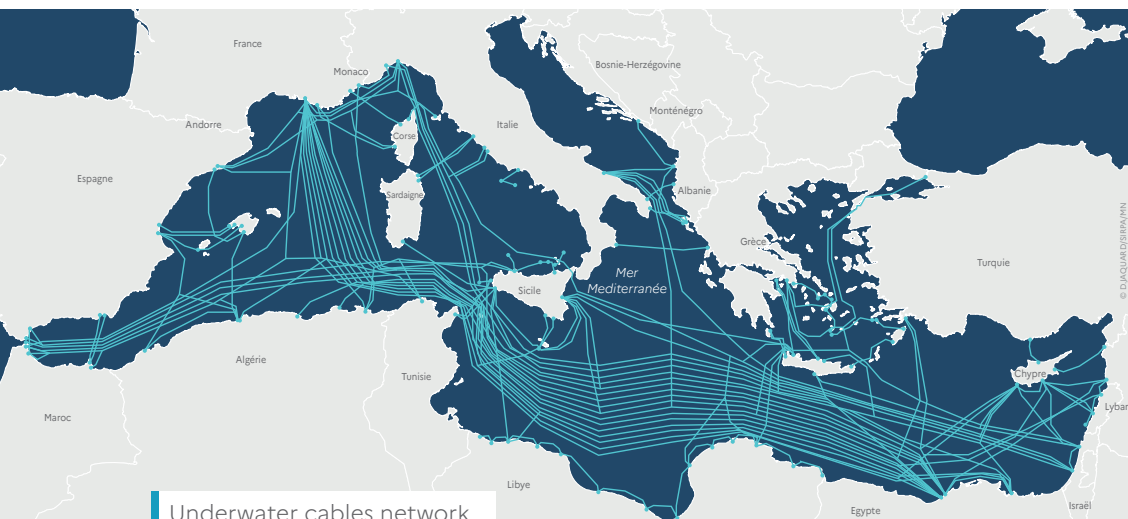


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Polar patrol vessel *L'Astrolabe* operating in the southern polar region.

The Arctic zone is a prime example of the intertwining of military and maritime issues. At a time when economic opportunities seem to be opening up due to the gradual melting of ice caused by global warming, Russia is claiming a large part of the Arctic as an extension of its continental shelf, asserting its ability to control maritime flows passing through the Northeast Passage as if they were in internal waters. For several years now, Russia has been massively reinvesting in the Arctic militarily, under the guise of defending its national stronghold in the Barents Sea.

In response to these threats, some leading navies have developed surveillance and intervention capabilities, from space to the surface and deep underground, for both defensive and offensive purposes. Similarly, against a backdrop of resurgent conflict and threats to maritime flows and critical infrastructure, NATO nations have rediscovered the crucial importance of the Atlantic Ocean for the Alliance's security, formally recognizing it by creating the Joint Force Command Norfolk in 2019.



Underwater cables network in the Mediterranean Sea.

© D'ARQUARDIS/ANW



Oil platform seen from French LHD *Dixmude* patrolling in the Gulf of Guinea.

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At the same time, protecting or monitoring civilian ships and marine infrastructure is highly resource-intensive for navies that rely on mobility and maneuverability in times of conflict.

Furthermore, the challenges related to the maritime economy show no signs of abating, when new activities are developing or are expected to develop, such as marine renewable energy, seabed mining, and the collection of marine bioresources. This increase in activity will further complicate the control of the aero-maritime environment by naval forces, which is essential for operational efficiency and battlefield superiority in naval warfare.

These challenges of surveillance, protection and intervention are problematic for navies that are

already operating at their limits, under significant human and material constraints. In a global context of rising conflict, balancing preparations for high-intensity conflicts with the renewed importance of maritime security missions, including more frequent humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) missions due to climate change, proves to be all the more difficult. However, the growing threat to the maritime economy, which is set to expand in new ways, will demand even more from naval forces.

Conversely, and in line with Mahan's principles, a powerful navy must be able to rely on a solid industrial base, first to support shipbuilding and the operational readiness of forces, on national territory or near deployment zones, but also to complement its capabilities for the projection or transport of



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French LHD *Dixmude* navigating in the strait of Malacca during mission "Jeanne d'Arc".



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NATO naval units operating together during mine warfare exercise SPANISH MINEX.



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French nuclear carrier vessel *Charles de Gaulle* leaving drydock in Toulon.

material by sea. While the maritime economy is now largely globalized, the need to control value chains requires strengthening national assets or consolidating trusted partnerships in a context of heightened international competition.

Given their relative interdependence, the increasing disorder at sea seems to call for strengthened synergies between the naval and maritime worlds, but how so?

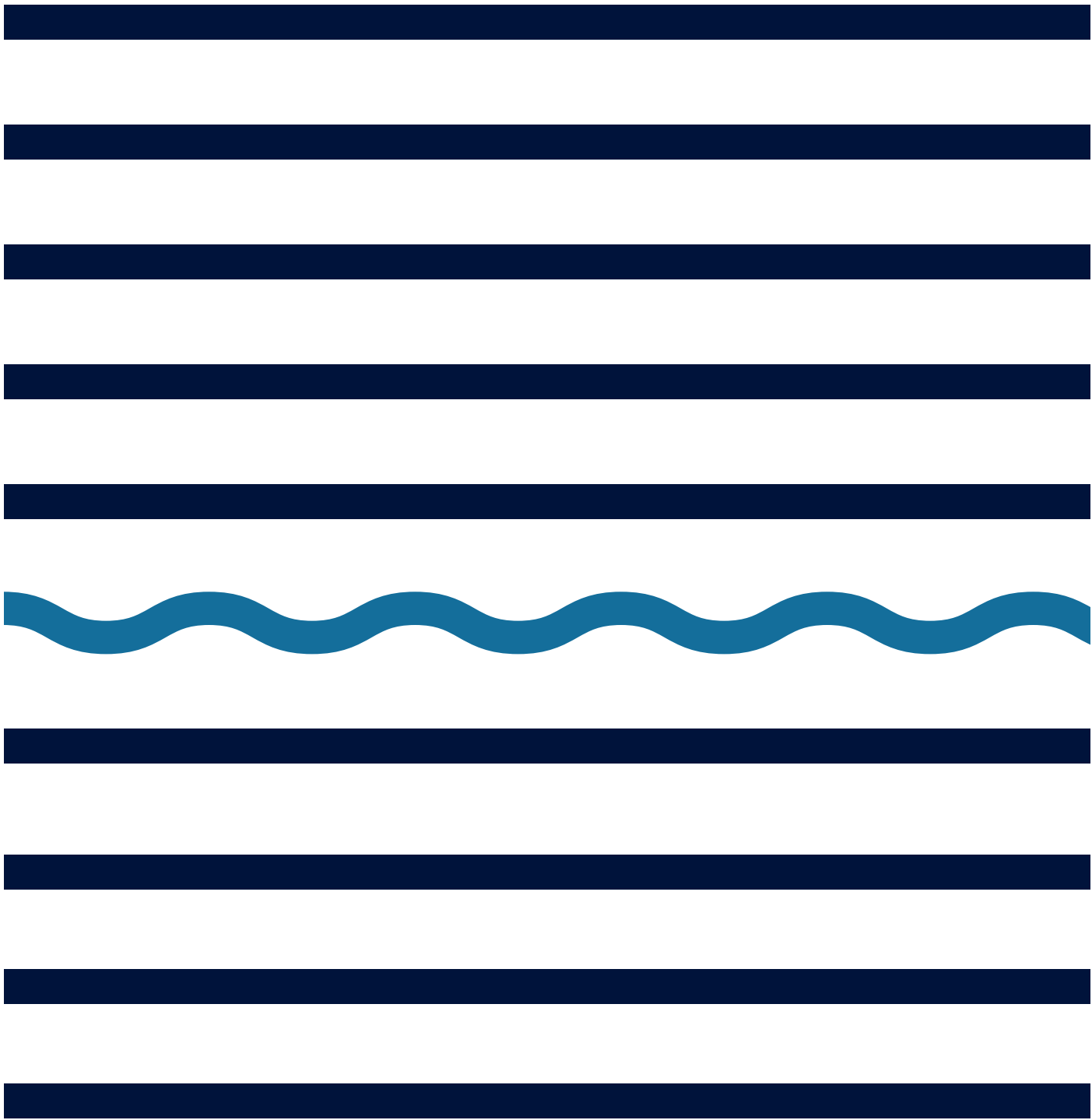
At the very least, maritime states will need to explore the converging interests and cooperation between their maritime economies and naval forces. While smaller navies struggle to maintain a strong presence in the maritime domain, the world's top twenty merchant fleets boast a combined total of nearly 60,000 ocean-going vessels. This is a totally different scale compared to the 900 or so patrol or fighting ships of NATO navies.

Moreover, this raises questions about the nature of the relationship and shared vision that the maritime economy and naval forces must develop in areas such as policy, strategy, and connectivity, and about the possible limits of such convergence in the 21st century, between two worlds driven by different rationales. How do NATO maritime nations, as well as Russian and Chinese competitors, see the necessary components of an integrated maritime strategy? There is also the question of the right format for naval forces to address this challenge in the coming decades, and what regulatory framework should be established for actors in the maritime economy to ensure their effective support for strategic resilience.

These are the major issues that the Paris Naval Conference aims to explore in 2025.

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