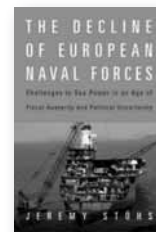


## BOOK REVIEW:

# *The decline of European naval forces: challenges to sea power in an age of fiscal austerity and political uncertainty*

by Jeremy Stöhs

Naval Institute Press: Annapolis, MD; 2018; 290 pp.; ISBN 97871682473085 (hardback);  
RRP \$93.99; Ursula Davidson Library call number 750 STO H 2018.



This is a timely, interesting and alarming book. Its author states that, since the end of the Cold War, the governments of the 11 major European countries reviewed have reduced their navies to a state of near operational impotence, almost entirely reliant on the willingness of the United States (US) Navy to undertake their protection on and from the sea.

This is a sweeping and serious claim but Jeremy Stöhs, an Austrian, has made a strong case supporting it. His introduction discusses the historic role of naval forces in the development of individual European nations and in the opening chapter he outlines the principles of sea power under four headings – international trade by sea, utilisation of ocean resources, naval force in support of national objectives and naval operations in war. His 10 pages are as good an introduction to the subject as any I have read and are free from staff college jargon.

Stöhs then describes what he calls ‘the pivot towards Asia’ in international political, commercial and naval terms. The consequences for Europe are that it attracts less attention from the United States, less of the world’s goods traverse the Atlantic Ocean and the ability of European nations to support sea campaigns far from home have become very limited.

His case studies reveal a marked decline in quantity and, in some regards, quality of European naval forces between 1990 and 2016. By 2016, Britain’s once-mighty Royal Navy had none of its former three carriers, only 19 of the 48 large surface combatants it once operated and just 10 of its former 22 submarines. Britain now can project no air power from the sea, while its navy has lost key war-fighting skills and was reduced to just 30,000 personnel.

Across the Channel, France had the technically-troubled nuclear-powered carrier *Charles de Gaulle* and around the same number of major ships, submarines and amphibious vessels as Britain. Stöhs judges the French Navy as the most capable European naval force. Recently, Britain commissioned the first of two Queen Elizabeth-class conventionally powered carriers, but these lack strike aircraft and sufficient escorts to protect them. The first is not expected to become operational until 2022.

The Italian navy is tightly-linked historically and geographically to the Mediterranean Sea. In 2016, Italy boasted two aircraft carriers, 18 large surface combatants, six submarines and three amphibious vessels. In fighting power, it is arguably as strong as it was in 1990, thanks to technological advances in newer ships, but it faces tough budgetary measures and may not continue to operate at that level.

Facing both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, Spain has experienced a steady decline in its fleet. Better technology is not a replacement for hulls in the water; one ship can only be in one place at a time. However, at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, Turkey has made qualitative improvements to its naval forces for a relatively small reduction in numbers, while its NATO partner and traditional enemy, Greece, while numerically similar, is in a far more parlous state of creeping obsolescence. Ironically, the Greek merchant marine is the largest in the world.

Stöhs reserves particular scorn for the naval capabilities of Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany, the latter tagged as ‘not stepping up to the plate’. The Netherlands Navy has shrunk by more than half and Denmark’s efforts to build and operate a ‘blue-water’ navy have hit budgetary and personnel constraints. Financial and industrial powerhouse Germany has fewer warships than Turkey, with high technology stressed above numbers. Only Sweden and Norway receive good marks for remaining relevant and capable at sea.

There are a number of sorry tales of the abandonment of efforts at ‘European’ warship designs that would meet the requirements of several navies, with a few success stories. The picture that emerges is of a Europe not sufficiently motivated to manage its own naval defence. Stöhs acknowledges European naval participation in humanitarian and power-projection operations within and outside Europe in coalition with the US Navy. Useful in resolving interoperability issues and providing much-needed command experience, they are no substitute for developing ‘high-end’ naval warfare skills. Moreover, Stöhs relates instances of European governments declining to support even relevant ‘low-end’ operations, making nonsense of any concept of NATO solidarity.

The book has copious endnotes and references. Maps of European geography and areas of recent operational activity by their navies would have been useful for non-European readers. Similarly, images of some of the ships discussed to illustrate, for example, the outcomes of efforts at joint ship and weapons systems projects, would have been helpful. And, given Stöhs’ English-as-a second-language background and his research being conducted at Germany’s Kiel University, the editors should have corrected ‘principle’ being used throughout the book wherever ‘principal’ was intended.

These quibbles aside, the book is highly recommended for lay and professional readers who will profit from contemplating its arguments and their implications for our own naval defence situation.

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