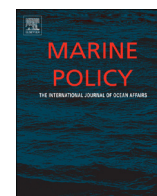


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# Marine Policy

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/marpol](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/marpol)

## The geopolitical dimension of maritime security



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 3 December 2014

Received in revised form

19 December 2014

Accepted 21 December 2014

#### Keywords:

Maritime security

Geopolitics

Maritime security strategy

Projection

### ABSTRACT

This article discusses the geopolitical dimension of maritime security, which has been neglected by scholars despite the growing number of studies devoted to a variety of aspects related to maritime security. The first step consists in clarifying the definitions of the two concepts; 'geopolitics' and 'maritime security'. Then the article introduces the geopolitical dimension of maritime security from a conceptual perspective, and then analyses three practical examples of maritime security geo-strategies released in 2014. The results demonstrate that states' and international institutions' maritime security objectives and interests are indirectly and directly influenced by geographical and geopolitical considerations, although this link is only tacitly acknowledged in official documents. Scholars and practitioners interested in maritime security are encouraged to further engage with this dimension.

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### 1. Introduction

Maritime security is a fairly recent expression, which has become a buzzword in the past decade [2], especially within the maritime community. Maritime security can be understood as a *concept* referring to the security of the maritime domain or as a *set of policies, regulations, measures and operations* to secure the maritime domain. In academia, the term 'maritime security' was almost absent from the debates about the security of the maritime domain until the beginning of the 2000's. Since 2002, the number of references to maritime security in the academic literature has increased linearly (c.f. Fig. 1). This increase in academic literature on maritime security can be explained by the conjunction of the three following factors: 1) the impacts of the 9/11 terrorist attacks (notably the launch of counter-terrorist operations at sea), 2) the occurrence of three high visibility terrorist acts against ships (USS Cole in 2001, French tanker Limburg in 2002 and Filipino passenger ship SuperFerry 14 in 2004), and 3) the rise of piratical attacks in the Strait of Malacca at the beginning of the century. Then the surge of piracy at the Horn of Africa between 2007 and 2012 largely contributed to generating academic debates beyond strategic and security studies, with scholars from various disciplines discussing the legal, criminal, cultural, economic, military, environmental and energy dimensions of piracy in particular and maritime security in general.

Between 1989 and 2014, Google Scholar lists more than 16,000 references comprising the exact phrase 'maritime security' compared to only 218 between 1914 and 1988 (Google Scholar Search, [13]).

However, despite this academic interest, the geopolitical dimension of maritime security has been overlooked by practitioners and scholars alike. Only a handful of scholars have started to discuss the link between maritime security and geopolitics, mainly focusing on the Indian Ocean, the European Union (EU) or both (e.g. [12,14,17,18,20]). The aim of this article is to shed light on this overlooked dimension and to propose ways to integrate it within the emergent field of maritime security studies. The first step consists in clarifying the definitions of the two concepts; 'geopolitics' and 'maritime security', since both of them are open to various, often divergent and modular, interpretations. Then the article introduces the geopolitical dimension of maritime security from a conceptual perspective and analyses three practical examples of maritime security geo-strategies released in 2014, which demonstrate the importance of geographical and geopolitical considerations for maritime security studies.

### 2. Definitions

The term 'geopolitics' has been employed indiscriminately by both practitioners and scholars in reference to states' zones of interest or influence and how they clash with each other's. This meaning is both vague and limited; it does not account for the full significance of the term, and even bears a negative connotation due to the emphasis on power politics. After all, Nazi Germany's expansionist foreign policy goals were justified using 'geopolitical' arguments based on simplistic (and erroneous) geographical naturalisations. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, geopolitics as an academic discipline has lost its prescriptive nature. It actually aims at explaining how geography somewhat constrains politics, how states try to bypass those constraints, and (in the case of

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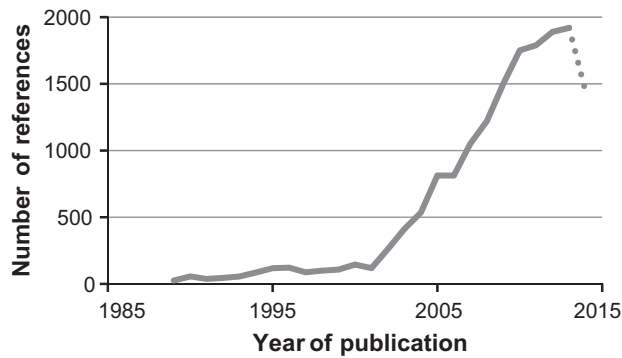


Fig. 1. Evolution between 1989 and 2014 of the number of academic publications mentioning 'maritime security' listed by Google Scholars.

Source: Google Scholars search [13]

critical geopolitics) how they try to use geography to their advantage, including in discourses through series of geo-informed representations. In practice states and other international actors take into account the constraining impacts of geographical factors. They develop and tacitly or explicitly endorse 'geopolitical visions' or 'geo-strategies' that directly or indirectly guide their foreign and security policy goals and activities. In other words, both in practice and in the collective imaginaries, geography contributes to defining the boundaries of what is possible to achieve in international relations along with other material and ideational factors.

The expression 'maritime security' is recent. Before the end of the Cold War it was rarely used and primarily in reference to sea control over maritime areas in the context of the superpower confrontation, that is to say in a naval context. It is thus not surprising that during the Cold War maritime security was more frequently employed in references to geopolitical considerations (such as sovereignty claims over maritime territories, the status of coastal waters, and the control over maritime zones) than in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since the end of the 1990's and the beginning of the 2000's, maritime security was increasingly used to describe preventive measures set up to respond to illegal activities at sea or from the sea (including the protection of shipping and ports). Terrorism (post 9/11) and piracy (especially after 2007 and the rise of attacks at the Horn of Africa) attracted most of the media's attention. However, arms and drug trafficking, people smuggling, illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing (IUUF), and deliberate pollution still represent the bulk of illegal and disruptive activities at sea. Today, states and international actors such as the EU have adopted a more comprehensive and pro-active approach to maritime security, which centres around the exercise of the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence at sea to implement and maintain security, safety and good governance within the maritime domain, with both preventive measures (e.g. port security regulations) and reactive measures (e.g. counter-piracy operations). Maritime security is increasingly linked to economic and environmental considerations, as illustrated by the EU *Integrated Maritime Policy* (IMP) adopted in 2007 and the *Blue Growth* initiative adopted in 2012 [4,5]. Indeed, although the main driver of the IMP has been economic growth, the success of the *Blue Growth* strategy rests on a safe and secure maritime domain, which grants economic agents with the stability and certainties they expect to see before they make any investment. Marine environment and fisheries protection as well as maritime surveillance initiatives have been instrumental in raising maritime security objectives to the top of the security agenda of various state and non-state actors.

The geopolitical dimension of maritime security accounts for the way geography constrains and informs (directly or indirectly) maritime security policies, regulations, measures and operations,

as well as how states take (tacitly or explicitly) geography into account when developing their maritime security strategies.

### 3. Geography and maritime security

Geographical 'permanence' such as the length of a country's coastline or the absence of direct access to the high seas constrains seapower in general (e.g. [16]) and maritime security policies in particular, "for geography does not argue. It simply is" ([19]: 236). This in no way means that politics and policies are determined by geography but that geographical factors need to be taken into account in the list of explanatory factors along with other material, structural and ideational factors.

Maritime security has to do with (illegal and disruptive) human activities in the maritime *milieu*, that is to say a certain geographically delimited space. Thus, states are differently impacted by maritime security threats depending on their actual geographical location. For example, in the case of illegal immigration by sea, Italy is more directly impacted than (for instance) the United Kingdom, because of its very geographical location. Sicily and especially the island of Lampedusa are located directly on the main (and one of the shortest) immigration route from North Africa to the EU and have thus sustained a constant flow of illegal migrants for the past decades. In other words, even if Britain, France or Germany may be the ultimate destination goal of illegal migrants crossing the Mediterranean on small boats, Italy, Spain (through the Gibraltar Strait) and Malta are more easily, quickly (and relatively safely) accessible by boat than the UK or even France, due to evident geographical factors. As a result Italy has to spend more resources on counter-immigration than many other EU states, which explains its recent request for the EU's assistance in dealing with counter-immigration at sea in central Mediterranean, leading to the launch of FRONTEX operation Triton in November 2014. This example illustrates that simple geographical realities have constraining impacts on states' maritime security policies, notably when it comes to regulating human activities at sea.

The same reasoning works for other types of illegal flow within the maritime domain. For example, drug smuggling directly impacts countries located on the main routes, such as Spain through the Gibraltar Strait, or those whose coasts are difficult to monitor due to a negative ratio between the length of the coast to police and the resources at the disposal of the navy/coast-guard. This can be the case for small states such as for example Ireland with limited resources and a rather extended coastline or powerful states such as the United States, which despite the resources at the disposal of its coast-guard service has such a long coast to monitor and is the intended destination goal of so much drug trafficking that it still struggles to 'seal' its maritime borders. Here the geographical factor (length of coasts) is clearly not sufficient to explain the burden of counter-narcotics. Material power (such as the coast-guard budget) and drug traffickers' business strategies (privileged destination countries) need to be factored in the explanation. As shown in Table 1, the geographical factor is still very relevant. Despite the US deploying almost 20 times more coast-guard vessels, each of those vessels have a theoretical length of coast to monitor that is just

Table 1  
Ratio between length of coast and coast-guard resources (comparison Ireland – USA).

	Length of coast (in km)	Number of coast-guard vessels	Ratio (km of coast per ship)
Ireland	1500	8 OPV	187
USA	20,000	More than 159 coast-guard vessels	125

62 km shorter than the one devoted to each Irish offshore patrol vessels (OPV).

States' involvement in maritime security also depends on non-geographical factors such as governments' capabilities and/or will to tackle maritime security threats. For example, Somalia has not been in a position to control illegal activities in its own territorial waters (hence the need for foreign maritime capacity-building operations, such as EUCAP Nestor). Empowering secessionist Somaliland's and autonomist Puntland's own coast-guard forces shows the importance of political will and material realities as explanatory factors. It has also been argued that in certain South East Asian countries, police or naval forces are reluctant to engage in counter-piracy activities and could even be "complicit in these crimes, especially in areas where a culture of corruption (possibly boosted by underpaid maritime security forces or smuggling activities) has evolved under years of authoritarian governments" ([3]: 79).

Due to the global nature of the maritime domain and to the transnational nature of many of the current maritime security threats (immigration, drug smuggling, piracy, etc.), countries not directly impacted by the threats coming from the sea can nevertheless decide to contribute to the policing efforts, based on the understanding that they will eventually be impacted later. For example the EU has set up the FRONTEX agency to deal with illegal immigration and coordinate member states' activities in this field, based on the principle that member states are all impacted by the consequences of illegal immigration to the EU whatever their geographical location. Counter-immigration at sea represents a major part of FRONTEX's budget and activities; in 2012, the largest share (42.3%) of the agency's operational budget (excluding risk analyses and research & technology) went to sea borders joint operations (Frontex, [9]: 32). In 2013, within the FRONTEX framework, North European countries such as Denmark, Iceland, Finland, Latvia and landlocked countries such as Austria, Luxembourg and even non-EU member Switzerland have contributed to counter-immigration operations taking place in the wider Mediterranean area (Frontex, [10]: 59). This shows that states include geographically distant maritime regions into their security perimeter, for transnational threats need to be tackled beyond one's external boundary. Controlling the sea far away from home is of strategic value. It represents a means to expand one's zone of control and competencies beyond one's external boundary, which can be considered as a form of post-modern territorial expansion (e.g. [11]). It must however be noted that overseas possessions imply the right and the duty to maintain a (naval) presence there, which is mainly about affirming one's sovereignty, although overseas naval bases and prepositioning can also contribute to power projection and naval diplomacy.

Maritime security threats are also used in geopolitical discourses as an argument (amongst others) justifying the projection of security beyond one's external boundary [12]. In other words, geographical representations framed within the 'safe/inside' versus 'unsafe/outside' dichotomy encompass maritime elements. For example, the seas surrounding Europe are represented as vectors of threats in both EU's and member states' discourses, which may then justify various (sometimes controversial) projection activities in the maritime periphery of Europe. Securing the freedom of the seas and policing the 'global commons' justifies projecting regulations, norms but also police and naval forces beyond one's territorial or jurisdictional waters. In other words, maritime security has a geopolitical dimension. The control of distant maritime areas is presented as vital to assure security on land. This construction of threats along geographical lines and the practical consequences in terms of power and forces projection are strengthened by the fact that the boundary between naval deployments and maritime security operations is growingly blurred, which is illustrated by counter-terrorist and counter-piracy operations currently taking place at the Horn of Africa,

which result in the deployment of frigates within war-like coalitions. It is interesting to note that the deployment of frigates instead of patrol vessels is mainly due to geographical considerations; the units sent by the US, the Europeans or the Chinese need to sustain operating for a long period far away from their bases, which is beyond the capacity of many coast-guard patrol vessels. As will be discussed below, the geopolitical dimension of maritime security also reflects in current maritime security strategies.

#### 4. Maritime security (geo) strategies

States and regional organisations such as NATO and the EU have interests linked to maritime security, which go beyond securing the freedom of the seas. Thus maritime security concerns integrate within broader geo-strategies. A number of states, as well as the EU, have recently elaborated specific maritime security strategies. These documents tend to include a geopolitical dimension, although sometimes rather tacitly. This section analyses three maritime security strategies, all released in 2014: the UK National Strategy for Maritime Security (NSMS), the EU Maritime Security Strategy (EU MSS), and the EU Strategy on the Gulf of Guinea (GoG). This choice of text responds to the need to discuss current narrative practices, since the concept of maritime security has only recently been broadened (as discussed above). The texts are located in different planes, since the first was elaborated by a state (the UK) whereas the second and the third by a supranational actor (the EU). This allows conducting a comparison between the UK (that is to say a state with pro-active security policies and substantial material power to back it) and the EU (that is to say a supranational actor whose security policies reflect compromises between all member states and which suffers from a deficit of means when it comes to applying security policies). Two variables are under scrutiny: 1) the 'geopolitical approach towards maritime security', for which two categories are defined; a tacit versus an explicit approach, and 2) the 'extent to which geopolitical considerations inform policy objectives', for which two categories are defined; a direct versus indirect influence. The indicators employed for the coding are exposed in Table 2. They are then applied to the analysis of the three above-mentioned strategies (codes in brackets). The presence of an explicit link between maritime security and geopolitics is measured by the occurrence of unequivocal references to the concept of geopolitics and to the fact that geography influences maritime security. The direct influence of geopolitical factors on maritime security objectives is measured by the occurrence of unequivocal references to geopolitical interests in the maritime domain and to geographical locations when referring to maritime security objectives.

##### 4.1. The UK National Strategy for Maritime Security (NSMS)

The NSMS stresses that the UK is "an island trading nation" ([15]: 18) with overseas territories and global interests. Consequently, maritime security is very important for Britain both in terms of economic and national security: fisheries protection in the territorial waters and EEZs of Great Britain and overseas territories, security of sea lanes of communication, energy security, and drug-interdiction represent vital interests (Tgeopol1). Some regions are specifically described as prone to maritime security issues and of interest to the UK's security: the Arctic, the South and East China seas, the Horn of Africa, the Gulf of Guinea and the Caribbean (26–37) (Tgeopol2). The UK NSSM explicitly acknowledges the UK's political will and capabilities to protect British maritime security interests wherever needed, i.e. with no geographical limitation (Dgeoinfl2):

**Table 2**  
Indicators for coding.

Indicators		
Tacit link between maritime security and geopolitics	Geographical definition of MS risks and threats (Tgeopol1)	Recurrent geographical references throughout the text (Tgeopol2)
Explicit link between maritime security and geopolitics	Reference to the concept of geopolitics (Egeopol1)	Reference to the influence of geography re MS (Egeopol2)
Indirect influence of geographical and/or geopolitical factors on maritime security objectives	Reference to the need to tackle MS threats beyond one's boundary and/or territorial waters (Igeolnf1)	Reference to the need to police the 'global' maritime domain (Igeolnf2)
Direct influence of geographical and/or geopolitical factors on maritime security objectives	Direct reference to geopolitical interests in the maritime domain (Dgeolnf1)	Mention of geographical locations when referring to MS objectives (Dgeolnf2)

We deploy Royal Navy ships acting independently or as part of an international force to maintain vital trade routes and ensure freedom of navigation, including a persistent forward presence in the Atlantic, Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. We also deploy specialised Naval shipping and capabilities to key chokepoints in order to understand and influence these areas, and if necessary to take action to prevent and respond (33).

Following the traditional British approach to seapower as an economic and security enabler, the NSMS highlights the fact that the high seas are part of the “global commons” (25), which implies freedom of navigation and a common responsibility for the maintenance of security (Igeolnf2). Leading maritime nations such as the UK must then adopt a leading role in policing and securing the global commons, as well as in maritime capacity building, since “promoting a secure international maritime domain [...] will benefit all nations” (18). The NSMS has thus a clear geo-strategic and geo-security dimension, since it justifies and further encourages British forces to operate beyond jurisdictional waters, “within the UK Marine Area and beyond” (41), that is to say “across the maritime domain” and “on a global scale” (19) so as to contribute to maritime security in general and to fulfil British national interest in particular (Igeolnf1).

#### 4.2. The European Union Maritime Security Strategy (EU MSS)

The EU MSS was drafted by the Commission in March 2014 (Commission, [6]), then the Council adopted a revised version on 24 June 2014. The two documents do not diverge much, although some important omissions are to be found in the Council's approved version, which reflect member states' reservations about the deployment of the EU's seapower.

The EU stresses its will, interests and responsibility to contribute to promoting “better maritime governance” ([8]: 8), for example by launching maritime capacity building missions (such as EUCAP Nestor at the Horn of Africa or EUBAM in Libya) focusing on coast-guard and maritime governance capabilities (Igeolnf2). But beyond the stewardship of the oceans, the EU's maritime security strategy is informed by geopolitical elements. Maritime areas in the periphery of Europe and beyond have a “strategic value” ([8]: 4) to the EU (Tgeopol1, Tgeopol2 and Dgeolnf2):

Some maritime zones or areas within the global maritime domain are, because of their strategic value or potential for crisis or instability, of particular importance to the EU and its Member States. The Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the global network of shipping lanes to and from Asia, Africa and the Americas are of critical importance (Commission, [6]: 6).

This Strategy takes particular regard of each of the European sea and subsea basins, namely the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and the North Sea, as well as of the Arctic waters, the Atlantic Ocean and the outermost regions ([8]: 4).

Contributing to the security of the seas beyond the EU's jurisdictional waters also serves the Union global geo-strategy, which requires visual presence. The Commission advocated regular “EU-flagged maritime exercises with third countries [...] in order to improve the visibility of the EU in the global maritime domain” (2014: 7). Without mentioning this very possibility, the Council nevertheless stressed the fact that the EU has interests to defend over the world's oceans, which are not bounded by geographical considerations. Although they revolve around the ‘liberal’ notions of the freedom of the sea and the promotion of good governance at sea, they are nonetheless informed by ‘realist’ power politics considerations (Dgeolnf1):

The Union stresses the importance of its assuming increased responsibilities as a global security provider, at the international level and in particular in its neighbourhood, thereby also enhancing its own security and its role as a strategic global actor. ([8]: 8)

Member States' Armed Forces should play a strategic role at sea and from the sea and provide global reach, flexibility and access that enable the EU and its Member States to contribute to the full spectrum of maritime responsibilities. ([8]: 10)

In sum, despite the fact that it originates in the Commission's Maritime Affairs department's work related to the security of the maritime domain, which was mainly informed by economic considerations (c.f. IMP), and despite the fact that the EU MSS needed to be approved by the member states, this strategy tacitly acknowledges the geographical if not the geopolitical dimension of maritime security and directly takes those factors into account to inform the EU's objectives.

#### 4.3. The EU Strategy on the Gulf of Guinea (GoG)

One maritime region which has attracted the EU's attention is the GoG, for which the Council has adopted in March 2014 a Strategy. This strategy highlights the various regional threats, including IUUF, illicit dumping of waste, piracy and armed robbery at sea, trafficking of human beings, narcotics, arms and counterfeit goods, smuggling of migrants, as well as oil theft ([7]: 2). In other words, the EU has acknowledged the need to be more active in the GoG due to maritime security threats (Tgeopol1). This is a striking example of how maritime security issues, even very distant from home, can engender and justify the need to take into consideration distant (maritime) regions. In practice, the EU is committed to “identify geographic and thematic priority zones to focus the EU response, including in cooperation with other international actors” (9) and to help “states to strengthen their maritime capabilities, the rule of law and effective governance across the region, including improvements in maritime administration and law enforcement through multiagency cooperation by police, navy, military, coast-guard, customs and immigration services” (3). In 2013, the Union launched the Critical Maritime Routes programme (CRIMGO) “to

**Table 3**  
The geopolitical dimension of three maritime security strategies.

	Geopolitical approach to maritime security				Policy objectives informed by geopolitical considerations			
	Tacit		Explicit		Indirect		Direct	
	Tgeopol1	Tgeopol2	Egeopol1	Egeopol2	Igeolnfl1	Igeolnfl2	Dgeolnfl1	Dgeolnfl2
UK NSMS	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓
EU MSS	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓
EU GoG	✓				✓			

reinforce regional and international initiatives against piracy and armed robbery at sea in the Gulf of Guinea” (7) (Igeolnfl1).

As summarised in Table 3, in the three cases, the geopolitical approach to maritime security is present although tacitly acknowledged. In both the UK NSMS and the EU MSS, policy objectives are indirectly and directly informed by geographical or even geopolitical considerations. Indicators are found throughout the texts. In the case of the GoG strategy, the influence is indirect (i.e. the need to tackle threats), but the very existence of an EU GoG strategy indicates the Union’s increasing geopolitical thinking.

## 5. Discussion

Maritime security is intrinsically geopolitical, since it is about projecting public power beyond one’s external boundary within the ‘global’ maritime domain. The results from the analysis of the three above-discussed examples show that geographical and geopolitical considerations do inform states’ and the EU’s maritime security objectives and goals, although geopolitical considerations remain tacit. The fact that the EU MSS was approved by 27 member states allows some generalisations beyond the very EU’s dynamics. Not only geography does impact on the boundary of what is possible to achieve in terms of freedom of the seas and good governance at sea, but states (and the EU) have also developed maritime geopolitical visions, based on the fact that securing adjacent and distant maritime spaces will positively impact on one’s security on land. Furthermore, contributing to global maritime governance may well ‘hide’ more ‘realist’ policy agendas in the form of a justification for power and forces projection beyond one’s legal zone of competencies.

It is interesting to note that the difference between the UK and the EU documents is limited despite the fact that they are very different actors. References to geopolitical considerations are tacit in both the UK and EU documents whereas policy objectives are directly and indirectly influenced by geographical considerations. This shows that, despite its peculiar decision-making process that often reduces foreign and security policy decisions to the smaller common denominator between member states, geopolitical considerations have been taken into account by the EU. This may indicate that member states have successfully uploaded their strategic and security policy objectives into the European Union. In the case of the EU MSS, since it originated in the Commission’s IMP and subsequent initiatives, it is not surprising to find that it advocates a global vision for the EU and thus frames maritime security objectives within the broader role and place of the EU as a global actor.

The fact that geopolitics is only tacitly acknowledged but that it does influence states’ and the EU’s policies and objectives shows that the geopolitical dimension of maritime security exists and matters but is still not acknowledged explicitly, which may be due to the enduring negative connotation of the term ‘geopolitics’ discussed above. Practitioners, especially in the Western liberal democratic world tend to negate their using geopolitical (or simply power politics) factors when it comes to foreign and

security policy decisions-making. This can be explained by their accountability to a (supposedly) peaceful public opinion that will expect ‘liberal’ justifications for the projection of power into the maritime domain (such as ‘contributing to the security of the global commons’) rather than ‘realist’ arguments (such as ‘the need to control space beyond one’s external boundary’). For their part, academics who overlook the geopolitical dimension of maritime security take out of the equation a factor that contributes to explaining states’ and the EU’s maritime security policies.

So, could geopolitical approaches be included in maritime security studies? Maritime security scholars form a very eclectic group comprising political scientists, geographers, lawyers, economists, criminologists, anthropologists, etc, resulting in different ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies. Referring to the case of piracy studies, Christian Bueger showed that various scholars with diverging approaches and methodologies are nevertheless united by their “shared interest in understanding piracy and developing responses to it through the use of a scientific method” ([1]: 408). This is true, however their approaches are not always commensurable and maritime security studies remain scholarly very fragmented as of today. Lawyers focus on jurisdictional and legal issues, criminologists on criminals’ business models and culture, and so on so forth. Despite practitioners’ increasing tendency to acknowledge the geopolitical dimension of maritime security, this has left almost no room for geopolitical considerations within maritime security studies, except perhaps in the case of some political geographers and strategic studies analysts as mentioned in the introduction. The results discussed above should serve to highlight the indirect and direct links between geographical/geopolitical considerations and maritime security policies, as well as the fact that they are at least tacitly acknowledged in high level strategic documents.

## 6. Conclusion

Be it understood as a concept or a set of practices, maritime security has a geopolitical dimension. The maritime domain is a space within which human actors operate, either to perform illegal, disruptive and damaging activities or to police and secure the sea in order to fight criminal actors. Maritime security refers to a geographical space, that is to say the sea, which has different characteristics compared to the land. The location of threats impacts on the way states and non-state actors’ security is affected. States’ maritime security interests result in a practice consisting in projecting security beyond their external boundary into the global maritime domain. Thus, zones of interests are defined, which extend beyond one’s legal zone of competencies. In security narratives, those maritime zones are represented as vital for one’s security, which justifies power projection activities. In sum, as demonstrated by the analysis of three recent maritime security strategies, the geopolitical dimension of maritime security indirectly and directly informs states’ and the EU’s maritime security policies.

Beyond technical, operational, legal/judicial, economic, military and cultural elements, there is a geopolitical dimension of

maritime security, which is tacitly acknowledged by practitioners who are nevertheless still reluctant to talk about geo-strategy. This dimension is also rather neglected by scholars who tend to focus on other dimensions due to the fragmentation of social science in general and of maritime security studies in particular.

When states and regional organisations stress their need, will or duty to 'secure the freedom of the seas', to 'police the global commons', to 'promote good governance at sea', or to 'assure the stewardship of the ocean', there are geopolitical forces and factors at play and not only 'benign' intentions. The goal of this article is to initiate debates within maritime security studies, so as scholars acknowledge the relevance of this geopolitical dimension and further engage with it.

## Acknowledgements

This article is based on a paper I presented during the workshop *Into the Blue: Rethinking Maritime Security* held at Cardiff University, 26–27 June 2014. I would like to thank Dr Christian Bueger and all the participants for their valuable comments. I also would like to thank the editor of *Marine Policy* and the reviewers for their helpful comments. Research underlying this article was supported in part by a grant from the University of Lancaster Research Committee (Grant reference: SGS/18/04) with additional support by the ESRC-funded Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Science (grant reference: ES/K002155/1). The findings and views expressed in this article are wholly those of the author.

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