KONRAD-ADENAUER-STIFTUNG 1|2025

INTERNATIONAL REPORTS

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Dear Readers,

"Water" is a concise title, but one that covers a vast range of topics in the present issue of International Reports. The opening article highlights the many different dimensions of this theme from a foreign policy perspective: In their analysis of EU water policy, Olaf Wientzek and Nicole Linsenbold reveal how water plays at least three distinct roles that subsequently re-appear throughout this issue – namely the roles of water as an ecosystem, as a resource and as a conflict arena.

Water as a conflict arena: The world's oceans are arenas of international disputes. In their article, Ferdinand Gehringer and Matthias Hespe illuminate how critical maritime infrastructure – such as undersea data cables – has increasingly become a target of Russia's hybrid warfare against European states, particularly in the Baltic Sea. In order to counter this threat, the authors argue that the countries concerned should not only strengthen the protection of this infrastructure, but also invest in redundant capacities.

Tensions in the South China Sea may currently be the most prominent example of the contestation of maritime territories themselves, with various actors competing for control. In their contribution, Daniela Braun and Florian Feyerabend examine the different strategies being used by the Philippines and Vietnam to push back against China's expansive and increasingly aggressive claims in the region.

Water as a resource: Water is essential for life. It is a fundamental requirement for agriculture and is a key factor in certain industries. When water becomes scarce, as during droughts, the consequences can be catastrophic. Around one third of the world's population currently lacks secure access to drinking water, and this "water stress" is only expected to worsen in light of climate change. However, while wars over water have often been predicted in recent decades, they have yet to materialise.

Nonetheless, fluctuations in water availability can certainly fuel local and domestic conflicts. In his article, Ulf Laessing vividly describes how climate change in the Lake Chad region is playing into the hands of jihadist groups such as Boko Haram and the so-called Islamic State: "There is either too little rain in the region or far too much", Laessing writes. The consequence: People who rely on farming are finding it increasingly difficult to make a living, which in turn makes them more susceptible to recruitment by terrorists, for whom Lake Chad provides a virtually ideal environment in which to operate. Once a vast body of water in the mid-20th century, the lake shrank dramatically for decades before its water levels began rising again around the turn of the millennium. The result is a fragmented landscape of islands that local militaries struggle to control.

At the international level, water scarcity has tended to drive cooperation at least as much as it has fuelled tensions: Indeed, the Council on Foreign Relations has recorded more than 300 international water agreements since 1948. One example of how cooperation

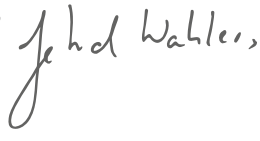
in the area of water management can endure even during politically difficult times can be found in the partnership between Israel and Jordan, which Edmund Ratka and Michael Rimmel examine in their article. Thanks to innovation and modern technology, Israel is able not only to supply its own population and economy with water, but also to provide for its neighbour Jordan. At the same time, the article clearly demonstrates that water cooperation between the two countries forms part of a complex web of relations and is by no means immune to shifts in these countries' bilateral ties: Indeed, water can be used both as a tool for easing tensions and as a means of applying political pressure.

Water as an ecosystem: Water – and especially the ocean – is a vast habitat, an ecosystem whose well-being is a global public good in the same way as is a stable climate. Protecting that good requires both national efforts and international cooperation. In her contribution, Julia Sandner explores this notion based on the example of Costa Rica, a country with a "green" reputation that has nonetheless seen some setbacks in marine conservation, though Costa Rica continues to play an active role on the international stage, not least as co-host of this year's UN Ocean Conference.

Ecosystem, resource, conflict arena: Water is relevant to international politics in highly diverse ways. As all three of these aspects are important, Germany and its European partners should engage with them both in the interest of fair global solutions and in pursuit of their own strategic goals. There are some particularly urgent challenges, however, chief among which is certainly maritime security, which has been coming under increasing threat – both above and below water – from revisionist autocratic states. Countering this threat will demand significant efforts and financial resources in the years ahead. We Europeans should not lose sight of the challenges posed by China in this regard. However, in the maritime sphere, as in other areas, the stance of the current US administration may push Europe to focus even more on its immediate neighbourhood and on the threat posed by Russia.

I hope you find this report a stimulating read.

Yours,



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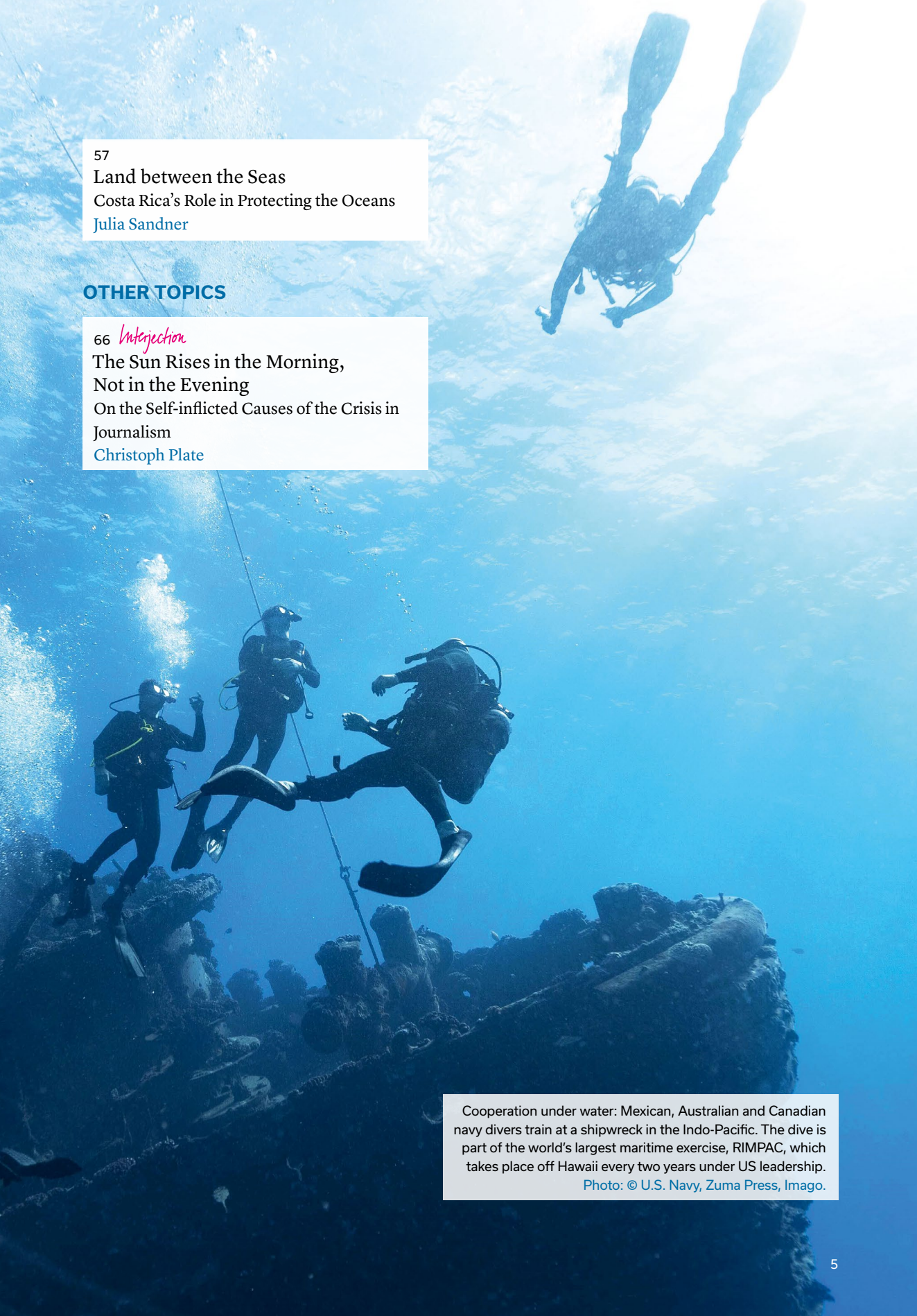
Water

OTHER TOPICS



Cooperation under water: Mexican, Australian and Canadian navy divers train at a shipwreck in the Indo-Pacific. The dive is part of the world's largest maritime exercise, RIMPAC, which takes place off Hawaii every two years under US leadership.
Photo: © U.S. Navy, Zuma Press, Imago.

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Water

Challenges at Home, Opportunities Abroad

Water as a Multifaceted Priority for the EU

Olaf Wientzek / Nicole Linsenbold

Water is a matter of great importance for the European Union, as the new EU Commission has recognised. In order to address challenges such as ensuring the quality of water bodies and the sustainable management of water as a key resource, it will be necessary not only to pursue conservation, but also to balance a wide range of interests – and European Christian Democrats and Conservatives will have a prominent role to play in this connection. Meanwhile, in external EU relations, increased engagement in the field of water and maritime security could yield a geopolitical dividend.

The newly installed EU Commission commenced its work under President Ursula von der Leyen on 1 December 2024, with its political guidelines being dominated by the major themes of security, competitiveness, the implementation of the Green Deal, defence and Ukraine. However, there is a clear indication that water is likewise a cross-cutting theme of enormous relevance. Managing scarce water resources will be a crucial challenge for the EU in the years ahead, with this topic simultaneously presenting an opportunity for the EU to boost its status in the area of foreign policy.

Growing Pressure on Water Resources – Even in the EU

Access to clean drinking water and sanitation is a human right, as explicitly recognised by the United Nations General Assembly in 2010 through Resolution 64/292. The resolution calls on states and international organisations to promote capacity-building and technology transfer in order to support developing countries both in providing water for their populations and in establishing a resilient water infrastructure. The EU has already set out a range of ambitious goals in connection with the UN sustainability agenda, including improving access to drinking water and sanitation for 70 million people by 2050.[1]

Global water demand is steadily increasing,[2] with half of the world's population experiencing water scarcity for at least part of the year. In many regions, water is a scarce resource: Indeed, a total of 2.2 billion people lack access to clean drinking water.[3] Compared with the severe water stress[4] in other parts of the world, the situation in the EU is less critical because nearly 100 per cent of the population has access to clean drinking water, with water management being relatively robust. Nonetheless, some of the worrying global trends are also becoming increasingly evident in the EU, such as the loss of biodiversity in aquatic ecosystems.

Some EU countries and regions are already experiencing seasonal water shortages. According to the latest report issued by the European Environment Agency (EEA), around 20 per cent of EU territory and 30 per cent of its population are now affected by "water stress" – at least on a seasonal basis.[5] Water pollution caused by chemicals, coal-based energy production and highly persistent per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) – which pose serious health risks – represent another major challenge for the EU. Nevertheless, 77 per cent of the EU's groundwater reserves remain in good chemical condition, with pollution primarily being caused by nitrates and pesticides. The greatest pollution pressure on both surface water and groundwater stems from agricultural use. All in all, the EEA report warns of increasing pressure on the water sector, with this pressure being driven in part by climate change. Moreover, projections indicate that the gap between water supply and demand

will continue to widen.[6] Alarmingly, the report finds that the EU is not well prepared to tackle these challenges. The paper identifies three key problems: protecting and restoring aquatic ecosystems, achieving zero pollution, and adapting to water scarcity, droughts and potential flooding.

Effective cooperation between commissioners will be crucial.

Water scarcity and water stress are also becoming an increasing economic burden in the EU. The 2022 drought caused damage amounting to 40 billion euros, while the 2021 floods resulted in losses of 44 billion euros and severely affected not only Germany, but also Belgium and the Netherlands. The European Commission estimates that without efforts in the area of climate action or adaptation, these costs could increase sixfold by the end of the century.[7] Droughts impact not only agriculture, but also waterborne transport: For example, low water levels on the Rhine in 2018 caused nearly five billion euros worth of damage. Flood-damaged infrastructure is also an escalating concern.[8]

Broad Consensus on Water as a Priority for the New European Commission

Against the backdrop of the increasingly deteriorating situation, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has not only highlighted the importance of water in her political guidelines, but also assigned it a key role in the portfolios of several commissioners:

- The new EU Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans – Costas Kadis (independent) from Cyprus – has been tasked with launching a research and innovation strategy for oceans by 2030 in order to meet the goal set in 2021 of regenerating oceans and water.[9]

- Agriculture Commissioner Christophe Hansen (European People's Party, EPP) will also address water-related issues in his portfolio because agriculture is the largest water consumer in the EU, accounting for 59 per cent of total use.[10] The Luxembourgish politician served as rapporteur for the EU Drinking Water Directive during his time as an MEP.

- The main responsibility for water-related policies will lie with Swedish EU Commissioner Jessika Roswall (EPP).[11] She will be in charge of the European water resilience initiative, which aims to strengthen the water supply across the EU. This comprehensive strategy will address water efficiency, scarcity and pollution as well as water as a risk factor. At the same time, it seeks to enhance the competitiveness of Europe's water sector – including water supply and wastewater management – as well as digital water management and cross-border water infrastructure. Roswall is additionally tasked with strengthening the EU's global leadership on water, not least through the launch of Global Gateway projects in partner countries. What is more, the EU will continue to play an active role in the G7 Water Coalition, which aims to tackle the global water crisis by identifying common goals and strategies.

Given that water policy spans multiple portfolios, effective cooperation between commissioners will be crucial.

Essentially, there is a comparatively broad consensus within the EU and among member states on the importance of water and the urgency of addressing the issue at the European level. Originally proposed in 2000, the Water Framework Directive received strong support in the European Parliament at the time. Similarly, the European Commission's proposal to protect groundwater from pollution and to establish quality standards for water policy was widely endorsed by the four traditionally pro-European parliamentary groups: namely the EPP, S&D, Liberals and Greens. Additionally, the European Parliament has established an informal Water Group, which is chaired by German MEP Hildegard Bentele (CDU).[12] At the end of the previous EU legislative period, nearly

40 members of the European Parliament from various political groups – led by Danish MEP Pernille Weiss (EPP) – signed a letter calling for an "EU Blue Deal", which is a comprehensive, cross-sectoral water strategy designed to complement the Green Deal. There is also strong consensus among member states that water should be made a priority for the EU in the coming years, as underscored by a letter signed by 21 EU member states that was sent to the European Commission on 17 July 2024.[13]

A directive identifies water as a key component of Europe's heritage that must be preserved.

Fresh Momentum on a Long-standing Issue

The EU's key instrument for ensuring water quality is the Water Framework Directive. Its overarching objectives include protecting and improving the condition of aquatic ecosystems and groundwater, such as land ecosystems that depend directly on water, that promote the sustainable use of water resources, that reduce groundwater pollution and that address the impacts of floods and droughts. The main 15-year goal of the directive was to achieve good ecological and chemical status for surface waters as well as good ecological potential and chemical status for heavily modified or artificial water bodies. This deadline was later extended to 2020 and then to 2027. The directive identifies water as a key component of Europe's heritage that must be preserved.[14]

Other instruments dedicated to the protection of water include the Nature Restoration Law, which was adopted in 2024, as well as the Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and the Zero Pollution Action Plan. Additional measures include the Groundwater Directive and the Floods Directive. One significant step was the Drinking Water Directive

Focussing on water as a priority: EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen speaks with Jessika Roswall (right), EU Commissioner for Environment, Water Resilience and a Competitive Circular Economy. Photo: © Wiktor Dabkowski, Zuma Press, Imago.

of 2019, which updated quality standards for drinking water; introduced stricter thresholds for certain pollutants, such as lead and bacteria; and set minimum hygiene requirements for materials that come in contact with water, such as those used for making pipes and taps.

When it comes to water, the EU is not dependent on geopolitically unreliable partners.

In 2025, ideally before the summer, the Commission plans to present the long-delayed Water Resilience Strategy, which aims to provide fresh momentum and to serve as a comprehensive cross-sectoral approach. All in all, the strategy is to focus on the following priorities[15]:

- maintaining high water quality both in the EU and globally,
- restoring the disrupted water cycle,
- strengthening the competitiveness of the water sector,
- creating an ambitious vision for a "water-resilient" society and
- fostering innovation.

The EU's Strengths and Weaknesses in the Water Sector

In several respects, the EU continues to demonstrate notable strengths in water management. The water sector plays a significant role in the EU economy, contributing substantially to economic output. Commissioned by the European Council and authored by former Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta, the Letta Report cites 107 billion euros in value creation and 1.7 million jobs across approximately 80,000 companies. What is more, no other region in the world has such a dense network of cooperation initiatives and a similarly robust legal framework as the EU. Cross-border water use is facilitated, and conflicts over this increasingly scarce resource are less acute than in many other parts of the world.

The EU is even a global leader in innovation in the area of water management, at least in terms of patents: According to figures published by the European Patent Office, between 1992 and 2021, around 32 per cent of water management patents originated from EU member states (when taking all member states of the European Patent Organisation – which also includes the UK – into account, the share rises to 40 per cent), with Germany alone accounting for 12 per cent. This puts the EU well ahead of the United States, Japan and China over the period in question.[16] Unlike in the case of critical raw materials, the EU has its own water resources and is not dependent on geopolitically unreliable partners. The EU also has a dense network of navigable waterways that spans 25 member states and connects 13 of them – an even more extensive network than that of the United States.[17]

However, the EU also faces challenges. Despite being a global leader in water management innovation, gaps in innovation have widened in recent years. In order to address this gap, the EU's Horizon Europe research framework programme has allocated 1.3 billion euros to research and innovation projects in the water sector. Experts and industry representatives have also criticised the slow implementation of innovations, which has been partly due to the regulatory environment: Compared with other regions or countries, it takes far too long for innovations to reach the market in the EU.

While networking in the EU may be more advanced than in other regions, the internal water market still requires significant development, with key areas being the standardisation of regulations, better cooperation between inland waterway ports across different EU countries and the harmonisation of labour standards in the water sector.[18] There is still room for improvement when it comes to using waterways for transport, and a better water infrastructure network could also act as a driver of growth and help to relieve congested roads. In 2020, only six per cent of freight transport in the EU took place via waterways, with this figure representing a slight decline since 2015. The biggest shortcoming is

that as impressive as the EU's regulatory framework may be, the implementation of many directives remains inadequate. The EU is also falling well behind on the targets set by the Water Framework Directive: Indeed, only around 37 per cent of EU water bodies are classified as being in good or very good ecological condition. These figures have remained largely stagnant since 2010 and are still far from those that would meet the directive's requirements. In February 2025, the European Commission therefore announced that it would intensify the constructive dialogue with the member states in this regard, but would also maintain the infringement proceedings against defaulting member states.

Highly Diverse Expectations

There is broad consensus on water as a priority issue, on the overall resilience goals already envisaged by the Commission and on the importance of raising awareness about water-related issues, but there is less agreement with regard to the choice of measures. Many experts in Brussels believe that the water sector is lacking not primarily legislation, but rather the effective implementation of legislation. Accordingly, some members of parliament are sceptical about the need for entirely new legislation. However, there are strong calls for a revision of the Water Framework Directive. For instance, the Draghi Report – published in 2024 – also advocates targeted adjustment,[19] citing the significant gap between the quality of EU water bodies and the targets set in the directive.

There are several reasons for this discrepancy. One is simply that water bodies take considerable time to recover. Another reason – according to the EU Environment Agency – is the slow implementation of the Water Framework Directive, which has been partly due to insufficient funding and to the inadequate integration of water-related aspects into other policy areas. Other voices – particularly in industry – are calling for a comprehensive revision of the directive in order to better align environmental and sustainability goals with the use of water in connection with economic activity. Representatives of civil society, politics and industry are advocating greater water efficiency and are raising awareness both in society and in the economy about the notion that water is a finite resource. However, particularly in industry, there are also concerns that a water resilience initiative could result in lower priority being attached to industrial water use.

Several key elements continually resurface in the discussion. One such element is the strengthening of economic incentives through water pricing, also in the private sector, and another involves making greater use of lower-quality water for certain activities. High-quality drinking water is still being (over)used across the EU for purposes for which lower-quality water would suffice.

Water scarcity contributes to the destabilisation of EU neighbouring countries.

Another pressing issue – quite literally a work in progress – is the renewal and expansion of water infrastructure in the EU as well as the better adaptation of waterborne transport to times with low water levels, which are expected to occur more frequently in the future. The need for investment – particularly in the area of infrastructure – is substantial, which is why experts and the European Parliament[20] are pushing for such investment to be a key priority in the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028 to 2035, for which negotiations are set to get underway in Brussels in mid-2025. The European economy is hoping not only for large-scale investments, but also for faster EU approval procedures similar to those in the renewable energy sector and for a reduction in bureaucratic hurdles in order to accelerate market access for innovations.

Demands often go in different – and not always compatible – directions. Public discussion frequently brings up the notion that sustainability and competitiveness in the water sector are not

contradictory. However, many issues should be expected to require difficult trade-offs, especially where not only consistent implementation, but also a significant tightening of regulations is called for. The EU-wide debate on banning PFAS is a prime example: While these substances contribute significantly to water pollution, they are indispensable for key technologies that are needed in the energy transition.

Water as a Key Aspect of EU External Relations

There is likely to be less controversy over the importance of water in the EU's external relations. In this area, the EU is able not only to help improve water management worldwide, but also to contribute to its own security. Indeed, a clear focus on water in EU foreign policy could even yield geopolitical benefits in the long run.

Water scarcity and unreliable access to water are key factors that can destabilise countries both in the EU's immediate neighbourhood and further afield, which in turn can lead to increasing migration pressure on the EU. Climate change has strengthened jihadist groups in several African regions, with the case of Somalia illustrating how terrorist groups such as Al-Shabaab deliberately exploit climate-induced resource scarcity in order to expand their influence and control at both local and regional levels. These groups restrict access to humanitarian aid and strategically manipulate resource distribution in a manner that gains them local support.

Water management issues can serve as a platform for dialogue with difficult partners.

Experts emphasise that international players such as the EU can contribute to the resilience of fragile regions or states – and thus to the security of the EU as a whole – even by means of soft measures, such as supporting capacity-building at the local level, whether in the area of improved water management or better early warning systems. In addition, EU member states with significant expertise in water management – such as Denmark or Germany – can enter into bilateral partnerships in order to provide targeted climate adaptation funding. Other key priorities include strengthening regional cooperation – as seen in Central Asia – and continuing the intensified efforts in water diplomacy that have been undertaken in recent years. Water cooperation could also enable the EU to play a greater role in the Middle East, particularly in plans for the creation of a renewable

Experienced player in the field of maritime security: The EU's anti-piracy mission Atalanta was launched back in 2008. The picture shows a routine check by Swedish forces in May 2009. Photo: © Johan Lundahl, TT, Imago.

energy corridor between the EU and this region. A crucial factor for many countries in the region in developing this corridor is the fight against water scarcity. The EU could contribute by supporting better water management in some of the countries concerned through programmes such as Horizon Europe, thereby drawing on experience from Southern Europe.[21]

Under the Global Gateway Initiative, the EU can play a key role in development by strengthening water infrastructure in partner countries and by providing guidance on creating legal frameworks for water management. Several Global Gateway projects in Africa and Latin America already focus on water, though their financial scope remains relatively modest. These projects range from desalination projects – such as in Djibouti – to water purification measures and flood prevention initiatives.[22]

Given the EU's strong expertise in water management, it has the potential to be at least as competitive in this field as other global powers, such as China and the US. Global Gateway also strongly emphasises private sector involvement. In light of Europe's well-developed water industry, a greater focus on water within the initiative could yield both political and economic benefits for the EU. At the same time, the EU will need to carefully assess its priorities in order to avoid overburdening itself. This challenge is illustrated by one of Global Gateway's flagship water initiatives: namely the Team Europe Initiative on Water, Energy and Climate Change in Central Asia, which has a budget of 700 million euros. The initiative's broad scope spans improving regional cooperation for sustainable development, supporting the controversial Rogun Dam megaproject and boosting investment in a regional energy transition. Given the EU's limited diplomatic and financial resources, it is doubtful whether it can fully meet all these objectives.

Water partnerships with third countries can be another useful instrument. The EU launched such a partnership with India in 2016, although this partnership has thus far focused mainly on research projects. Water management issues can also serve as a platform for dialogue with difficult partners where common ground in other areas is shrinking. For instance, the EU has had a water cooperation agreement with China since 2006 that began with a river basin management project, while the EU-China Water Cooperation Platform was established in 2012 and was followed in 2017 by an EU-China dialogue on water diplomacy and by the EU-funded China-EU Water Platform, which includes an annual ministerial meeting.[23] Some observers also view water partnerships as confidence-building measures and potential gateways for cooperation with states where "normal" diplomatic relations are currently not possible or not desired. There are some in Brussels who view dialogue on water as a preliminary diplomatic channel for engagement between the EU and Afghanistan, for instance. The Taliban-led National Environmental Protection Agency has acknowledged the severe impacts of climate change on Afghanistan and has called for international assistance.

The nature of water policy aligns well with the core principles of conservatives and Christian Democrats.

At the multilateral level, the EU is still expected to take a leading role in the water sector, whether within the G7 or in various UN bodies. A sound awareness of the fact that water stress affects numerous countries in very different ways across continents is an important factor in terms of the EU's international credibility.

The European Union is also a key player in the field of maritime security and is expected to remain so in the new legislative period. In October 2023, the EU updated its maritime security strategy, which had originally been adopted in 2014.[24] This strategy sets out six main objectives: strengthening maritime operations, including annual exercises; increasing cooperation with

like-minded and strategic partners, particularly NATO; taking a leading role in maritime situational awareness; addressing risks and threats, such as the protection of critical infrastructure; enhancing capabilities; and improving training and education.

In practical terms, the EU is currently conducting several maritime military missions, including Operation Aspides, which was launched in February 2024 in order to safeguard the freedom of navigation in both the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Operation Aspides has fewer operational powers than the equivalent US-led mission, however. It is closely coordinated with Operation Atalanta, the EU's anti-piracy mission, which has been in place since 2008 and involves around 600 personnel. Furthermore, the EU runs Operation Irini in the Mediterranean Sea in order to enforce the UN arms embargo on Libya. Given both security and trade interests, continued and potentially stronger EU engagement in maritime security is likely to be necessary in the future.

A Key Issue for European Christian Democrats

Ultimately, the European Christian Democrats and Conservatives of the European People's Party will bear a particular responsibility for water policy in the coming years for several reasons. Firstly, representatives of the EPP family hold key positions in the EU, including Commissioner Roswall, Agriculture Commissioner Hansen and Hildegard Bentele, who is the chair of the Water Group in the European Parliament. Secondly, the nature of this policy area aligns well with the core principles of conservatives and Christian Democrats. Conservation lies at the heart of conservatism, while political Christian Democracy is fundamentally about finding balance and making difficult tradeoffs between different goals.[25] In order to effectively achieve the goal of preserving water as a valuable resource in the long term, such a balance will be needed – not only between different objectives, but also between a wide range of policy instruments. Water protection and management require a broad understanding of sustainability – one that goes beyond obvious ecological concerns to also include social, economic and financial aspects, thereby ensuring a fair balance between the interests of present and future generations.

Some examples include the importance of raising awareness about the careful use of scarce water resources as well as the need to ensure affordable access to water for everyone. A fresh initiative with the goal of improving water efficiency is valuable; however, it is just as crucial to ensure that all sectors and consumer groups face fair but not excessive burdens.

From a regulatory perspective, balancing objectives is not enough. Indeed, there must also be careful consideration of the instruments used. Do new regulations need to be introduced, or would revising existing ones and providing better support, incentives and pressure for their implementation be more effective? Equally, it will also be necessary to strike the right balance between urgently required infrastructure investments and more cost-effective measures for enhancing competitiveness and innovation. This includes facilitating faster market access, reducing bureaucracy, and supporting research, innovation and the water sector.

If the EU succeeds in striking this balance in the coming years, this will not only strengthen water resilience, but also contribute significantly to the EU's own competitiveness and to the security of its citizens.

– translated from German –

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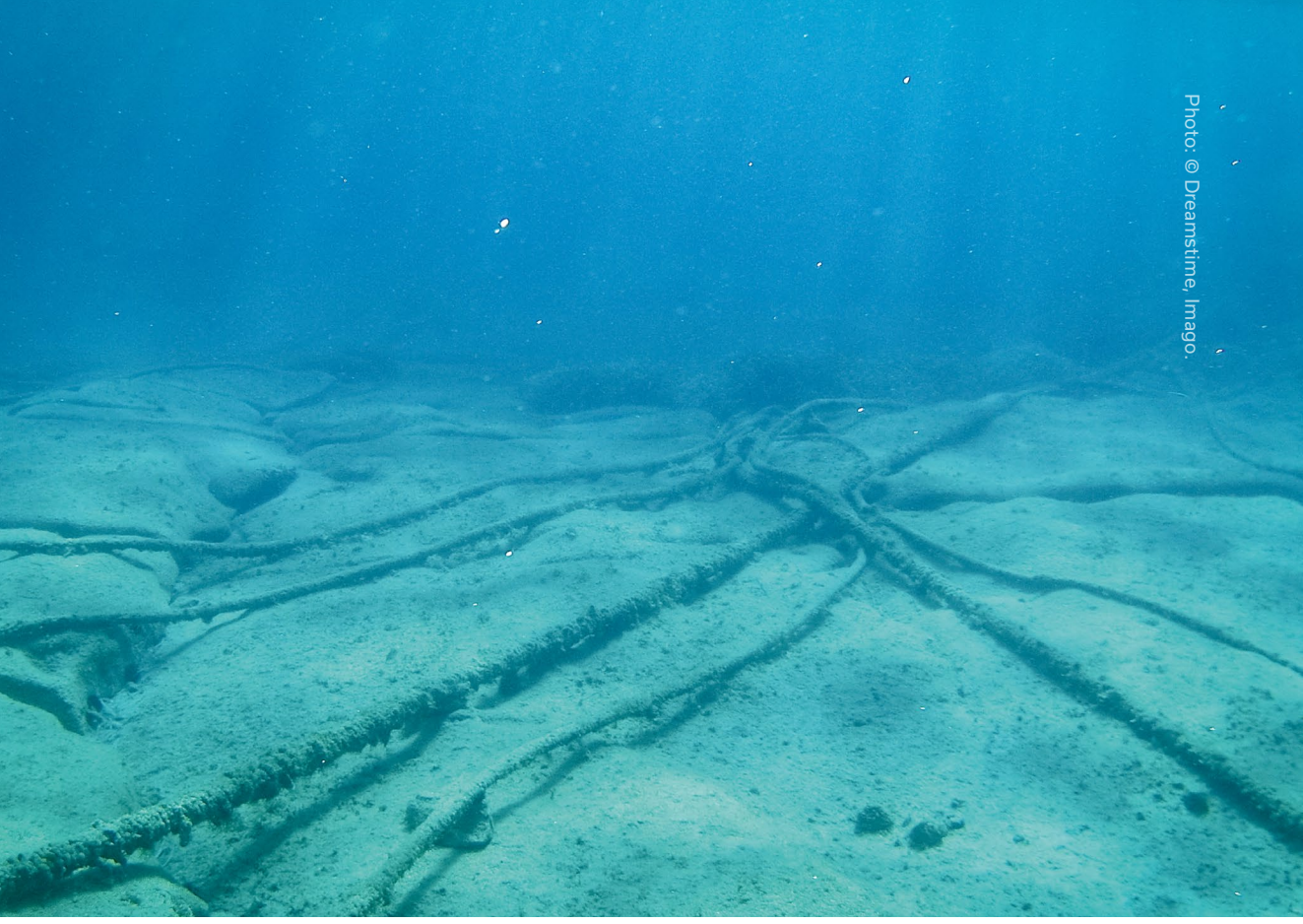

Photo: © Dreamstime, Imago.

Water

Lifelines under Threat

How We Can Make Europe's Maritime Critical Infrastructure More Resilient

Ferdinand Gehringer / Matthias Hespe

Vulnerable and lacking sufficient protection, maritime critical infrastructure is the target of hybrid warfare. The latest incidents involving submarine cables have revealed weak points that highlight an urgent need for action. However, protecting this vital infrastructure alone will not be sufficient to prevent significant disruptions in the future.

There has been an increase in incidents involving maritime critical infrastructure in the recent past, including two damaged submarine data cables in November 2024, disruptions to one submarine power cable and four submarine data cables around Christmas of the same year in the Baltic Sea region, and damage to a submarine data cable off the coast of Taiwan at the beginning of 2025. Ever since the attack on the Nord Stream pipelines in the Baltic Sea in September 2022, the security of maritime critical infrastructure has become the focus of public attention, thereby raising questions about security measures and how to deal with outages. Although there have been a number of initiatives and some progress has been made, these steps forward have been far from sufficient given the importance of this infrastructure, its vulnerability, and the actors intent on damaging it. Submarine cables, in particular, are the perfect target for hybrid warfare.

Vital Facilities – Above and below the Waterline

There is no universal definition of maritime critical infrastructure; instead, the maritime component is integrated into what is generally defined as critical infrastructure, or "KRITIS", as it is known in Germany. According to the German Federal Office for Information Security (BSI), the term denotes "organisations and facilities of major importance for society whose failure or impairment would cause a sustained shortage of supplies, significant disruptions to public order, safety and security or other dramatic consequences".[1]

Such organisations and facilities may have maritime relevance in sectors such as energy, information technology and telecommunications, and transport and traffic. This includes infrastructure in and on the water, such as energy supply facilities including drilling platforms and wind farms, as well as underwater infrastructure, such as pipelines, submarine data cables and submarine power cables. At the same time, critical infrastructure on land can also be categorised as maritime if it has direct maritime relevance, including basic physical and digital infrastructure belonging to port facilities and port operators as well as shipping companies, cranes and logistics centres, landing points for submarine cables and transhipment points, such as oil and LNG terminals.

Distinctive Characteristics of Maritime Infrastructure

Maritime critical infrastructure exhibits a number of distinctive characteristics that pose a particular threat to its security. Its remote location requires the use of special skills and technical equipment. Underwater infrastructure in particular – such as data and power cables or pipelines – can, depending on the depth, only be accessed using the appropriate devices and equipment. Data cables that run through the Atlantic lie at depths of up to 6,000 metres and are often several thousand kilometres long.

The ownership structures are also often complex, with several companies frequently investing jointly in submarine data cables. Planning, building and laying these cables is highly costly. For instance, the SEA-ME-WE 6 cable (South East Asia-Middle East-West Europe 6) is a 21,700-kilometre-long submarine cable

system that lies between Singapore and Marseille and cost around 480 million euros to construct. While the submarine cable infrastructure was operated for decades by consortia of state-owned telecommunications providers, rising costs, the expansion of the global data industry and increasing demand on the part of tech companies have led big tech firms such as Alphabet, Apple, Meta, Microsoft and Huawei to invest in submarine cable infrastructure, thereby taking the place of state investors and telecommunications providers.

Maritime critical infrastructure is exposed to a wide range of potential threats.

In addition, infrastructure often extends across national borders, which gives rise to complex questions of jurisdiction and grey areas from the point of view of international law. For example, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) establishes clearly defined zones of national responsibility and authority,[2] but maritime critical infrastructure – especially underwater infrastructure of a transnational nature, such as pipelines and submarine cables – often passes through several such zones, each of which may be subject to a different legal framework. In its coastal waters, which are defined as the territory up to twelve nautical miles from the baseline of the land border,[3] a state has territorial sovereignty, meaning that it is entitled to take comprehensive measures to protect its maritime critical infrastructure. However, in the immediately adjacent exclusive economic zone (EEZ, up to 200 nautical miles from the baseline), this is only the case to a limited extent. Coastal states have exclusive economic rights in their EEZ and are authorised to build, operate and protect their own infrastructure in this zone. That is why, in addition to underwater infrastructure that passes through the EEZ, a significant proportion of offshore energy supply facilities – such as drilling platforms and wind farms – are also located in these areas. However, the problem is that UNCLOS does not grant a coastal state any authority to exercise sovereignty over ships travelling in its EEZ or in the adjacent high seas area; rather, this authority lies exclusively with a ship's own flag state. Consequently, the coastal state may not take any coercive measures against a foreign ship in its EEZ without the consent of the flag state, even if the ship is suspected of committing sabotage against the coastal state's critical infrastructure. There is some dispute as to whether other international conventions might provide a legal basis for measures taken by the coastal state against foreign ships in such cases.[4]

Infrastructure as a Target of Hybrid Warfare

Maritime critical infrastructure is exposed to a wide range of potential threats, including environmental impacts such as storms, landslides and seaquakes as well as accidents caused by technical or human error, such as those that result from shipwrecks or fishing activities. The majority of disruptions to maritime critical infrastructure are caused by natural or unintentional factors of this kind. Approximately 70 per cent of the damage to submarine cables is inflicted by ship anchors, dredging work or trawling.[5] In the spring of 2024, several submarine cables were damaged following an attack on the freighter Rubymar by Houthi rebels in the Red Sea. Of the 16 submarine cables that run through the Bab al-Mandab strait from the Arabian Sea to the Red Sea, three were no longer functional afterwards; they had been damaged by the anchor of the sunken freighter dragging along the seabed.[6]

In addition to unintentional incidents, deliberate harm to maritime critical infrastructure is also becoming a growing concern. Hybrid warfare is becoming more aggressive, especially on the part of Russia, but the Chinese are also pursuing more confrontational activities in Europe, and incidents involving deliberate acts of harm are on the rise. In addition to the examples mentioned above, other cases have occurred in the Baltic Sea and the North Atlantic in recent years.[7]

Sabotage and espionage of critical infrastructure are key tactics used in hybrid warfare. By carrying out attacks on critical infrastructure in order to inflict damage and potentially even cause service outages, the aim is to impair state interests by inducing insecurity and instability within society. In such cases, it is considerably more difficult for governments to respond rapidly, appropriately and in a legally compliant manner. The damage to infrastructure typically falls short of full-scale war and is generally carried out secretly, with the perpetrators' identity remaining concealed.[8] As such, it is difficult to attribute the damage to a specific actor, and it is thus by no means easy to come up with an appropriate response.

The Russian "shadow fleet" is being deployed for hybrid warfare.

Energy and telecommunications infrastructure, in particular, has become a target, with two scenarios having become more likely in the Baltic Sea region:

1. cumulative acts of sabotage carried out in quick succession on critical infrastructure aimed at causing noticeable disruptions so as to burden or entirely overwhelm state structures and have an unsettling impact on society;

2. acts of sabotage against energy infrastructure – particularly offshore wind farms – aimed at slowing Europe's progress towards the energy transition, deterring investors and prolonging dependence on fossil fuels (including Russian energy sources).

Russia operates a fleet of "research vessels" through its Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research (also known as GUGI), which is an organisational unit of the Russian Ministry of Defence.[9] This fleet comprises more than 50 ships, including civilian research vessels, specialised Russian navy vessels and submarines that are additionally capable of carrying out reconnaissance and sabotage on facilities as well as of conducting warfare on the seabed.[10] The fleet systematically collects data on critical energy and telecommunications infrastructure in the North Sea and Baltic Sea and maps the seabed.

However, this is not the only tool used by Russia to conduct its hybrid warfare: the Russian "shadow fleet"[11] is also being deployed with increasing frequency. Last December, the oil tanker Eagle S – the vessel whose crew is suspected of having sabotaged a submarine cable between Estonia and Finland – was revealed to belong to this fleet. The Russian shadow fleet consists of tankers and cargo ships that are frequently very old and poorly maintained: they tend to operate under alternating foreign flags of smaller states, they often switch off the automatic identification system (AIS) used for exchanging ship data and routes, and they are significantly underinsured.[12] Generally speaking, nothing is known about the ownership structures. The tankers export Russian crude oil, so the fleet is effectively used to circumvent economic sanctions.[13] At the same time, the tankers also pose a significant risk to the environment and to marine conservation.

China has also stepped up its hybrid activities, as exemplified by the damage inflicted on the natural gas pipeline Balticconnector in the Baltic Sea between Finland and Estonia in October 2023. Investigations revealed that the Chinese container ship Newnew Polar Bear – which flies the Hong Kong flag – dragged its six-tonne anchor over a distance of 180 kilometres across the bottom of the Baltic Sea, thereby destroying the pipeline and two submarine data cables running nearby. Chinese authorities deny that this act was intentional, describing the incident as an accident.[14] Submarine cables off the coast of Taiwan were likewise damaged with China's involvement.[15]

Cases of sabotage and espionage are not limited to critical undersea infrastructure: other maritime critical infrastructure has been affected as

well. Incidents include flights by suspected Russian surveillance drones over harbour facilities – such as LNG terminals in Germany[16] – and over oil rigs and offshore wind farms off the coast of Norway.[17] German and European port operators and authorities have been increasingly confronted with cyber attacks, especially since the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022.[18] Incidents of Russian electronic warfare have also become more frequent since then, especially in the Baltic Sea region. Satellite navigation signals are jammed, and the positions of civilian and military ships are spoofed.[19] Some shadow fleet vessels are also used for espionage purposes. These ships often call at European ports at random and are turned away from the harbours due to their condition or their cargo, but in the process they record the processes and structures of the harbours as well as the security precautions on site.

Private data cable operators are increasingly becoming a pawn in geo-economic power games between the US and China.

Even if the immediate impact of these incidents has thus far been limited and any damage is usually repaired quickly, there is clearly an urgent need to pay greater attention to maritime critical infrastructure.

Weak Points in the Infrastructure

What is required to deal with this situation is a better understanding of the existing weak points, which frequently extend beyond the infrastructure itself. The example of submarine cables clearly shows how complex the problem is.

1. *Weak Point: A Lack of Redundancies*

By transporting more than 95 per cent of international data traffic, submarine data cables serve as the backbone of global data transmission and communication, and there is currently no alternative.[20] Data transmission via satellite is (still) too slow, in addition to being more costly and more susceptible to interference.[21] Satellite transmission is thus only used in regions in which it is not possible to lay terrestrial cable.

Driven by the digital transformation, increasing numbers of new internet users and data-intensive technologies such as AI, cloud services, streaming platforms and social media, the demand for data transmission is growing rapidly.

2. *Weak Point: High Level of Dependence on Big Tech Companies*

Most submarine data cables are now financed and operated by large technology companies, which control a significant share of the global

Part of the Russian "shadow fleet"? The oil tanker Eagle S, sailing under the flag of the Cook Islands, was seized by Finnish authorities in late 2024. Its crew is suspected of having damaged a submarine cable in the Baltic Sea. Photo: © Heikki Saukkomaa, Lehtikuva, Imago.

data infrastructure, resulting in a concentration of dependency. At the same time, those companies are increasingly becoming a pawn in geo-economic power games that are being played out between the US and China. The US leverages economic pressure in order to counter Chinese competition in the construction and deployment of submarine cables that would enhance global communication. China likewise draws on state subsidies for cable construction. This was especially evident in the SEA-ME-WE 6 submarine cable project.[22]

The European Union and Germany lack infrastructure of their own that they could fall back on in the event of escalating geopolitical tensions, data blockades or other prioritisation of data transmission on the part of companies. The only exception is the EllaLink data cable, a joint project involving the EU and Brazil.[23]

3. *Weak Point: Limited Global Capacity for Damage Repair*

The limited repair capacity can result in prolonged outages.[24] Repairing submarine cables is complex and can be very time-consuming depending on their location and depth. Only a limited number of specialised ships and experts have the ability to carry out this kind of work. Currently, 77 cable-laying vessels are in operation worldwide, but only 22 of them specialise in

repairs. In addition, these ships are 28 years old on average, so in many cases, they are approaching the end of their useful life.[25] Additonally, it makes more economic sense for the operators of cable ships to use their capacity to lay new cables rather than to make repairs.[26]

4. *Weak Point: Responsibilities Are Not Allocated According to Capabilities*

Currently, responsibilities for the protection of critical infrastructure in Germany are not allocated based on capabilities. In principle, the operators (usually in the private sector) are responsible for protecting the infrastructure. It is they who must take appropriate technical and organisational measures to protect the facilities from disruption and to manage security risks. However, these operators lack ships with the appropriate capabilities to counter interference from foreign governments.

A lot of valuable time is lost due to the need for coordination when an incident occurs.

In order to ensure more extensive protection and defence against threats to underwater infrastructure, the police in Germany's individual states have executive powers in coastal waters, whereas in the exclusive economic zone, those powers lie with the federal police. The Federal Ministry of

A comprehensive overview: The Commander Task Force Baltic (CTF Baltic) was set up in Rostock to create underwater and surface situation reports for NATO. Photo: © Bernhard Herrmann, Imago.

Transport is responsible for shipping lanes and harbours but has no means of protecting them, so this protection is taken care of by the federal police. However, the relevant police authorities have only limited capabilities, especially when it comes to operating under water. By contrast, the navy does possess the relevant capabilities in principle but is only authorised to provide support via administrative assistance procedures. This situation, in which the responsible agencies lack the required skills and resources, means that a great deal of valuable time is lost due to the need for coordination and application procedures when an incident does occur.

A Set of Measures to Reduce the Number of Weak Points

Only by applying a set of measures is it possible to increase protection, minimise the risk of outages, and reduce the consequences of disruptions.

1. *Ensuring Better Protection for Strategic Hubs*

Full-scale protection of submarine cables is not possible because the cables are too long and the areas that would have to be protected are too expansive. However, there are strategic hubs around the world where cable connections are clustered and run on land, such as in Marseille, Singapore and on the west coast of Ireland. Many cable connections in the Red Sea are also close together, thereby increasing the risk of multiple instances of damage occurring simultaneously. These critical points require special protective measures on the part of operators and states so as to both deter potential attackers and enable a faster response in the event of damage. In order to ensure the security of the infrastructure, it is essential to ensure continuous monitoring by patrols both on the surface of the ocean and under water using modern, unmanned technologies, such as the German underwater drone Seekatze (Sea Cat), which can reconnoitre the seabed by means of precise sonar at depths of up to 300 metres, or Robosalp, an underwater robot currently under development that is to be able to reconnoitre regions of the ocean that are particularly remote and deep. In January, NATO deployed a fleet of ten ships to protect submarine cables and prevent sabotage in the Baltic Sea region until April, but under the Copenhagen Convention of 1857 and UNCLOS, NATO does not have the authority to block the passage of ships in international waters.

2. *Adapting the Properties and Laying Depth of the Cables*

Submarine cables have to be more robust. Currently, they are up to 15 centimetres thick, are encased in a steel cable, and are surrounded by a tar-soaked nylon mixture. This sheathing can be further reinforced, and the cables can be laid deeper in the seabed. Before installation, cable-laying ships check the seabed for potential risks, such as seabed composition and currents. Where there are major risks on the seabed itself, the cables are laid up to 1.5 metres deep in the ocean floor. This is particularly effective when it comes to avoiding the scenario of damage being caused to the cables by dragging anchors.

All players know full well that comprehensive situational awareness is also required under water.

3. *Increasing Redundancies*

It is also vital to increase redundancies. In addition to alternative and additional data transmission via other cable lines and the construction of further data cable connections, it should also be possible to use satellite systems to transmit data in the event of disruptions. The NATO project HEIST (Hybrid Space-Submarine Architecture Ensuring Infosec of Telecommunications) provides a good starting point:[27] in the event of a major attack on the cable infrastructure, data transmission is to be redirected to satellites. In addition, state resilience plans should prioritise particularly important data so that essential

data connections are instantly rerouted and maintained in the event of a large-scale outage.

4. *Expanding Repair Capacities*

The number of specialised ships has to be significantly increased so as to be able to both distribute repair capabilities regionally and initiate repairs swiftly. One possibility would be for the EU to build up its own capacity. For instance, the EU could maintain three to five repair ships that are to be made available to private operators in the event of damage while at the same time helping to ensure a more balanced sharing of the burden between the state and private companies when it comes to the upkeep and security of the infrastructure. The brunt of the burden is currently borne by private operators. Alternatively, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) could take the lead in globally distributing repair resources, especially through the International Advisory Body for Submarine Cable Resilience, which the ITU established in partnership with the International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC).

5. *Developing Comprehensive Situational Awareness*

All players know full well that comprehensive situational awareness is also required under water. This means that the data from ships, reconnaissance aircraft, drones, satellites and submarine cable operators must be combined in a single overview. Technology such as sensors, multibeam sonar, infrared cameras and laser light sources can also be used to generate an even better image of the situation under water, which is essential when it comes to ensuring protection and rapid incident response. In any case, permit conditions should mandate that operators add more sensors and cameras when installing infrastructure. The European regulations to be implemented for the protection of critical infrastructure – that is, the NIS-2 Directive and the CER Directive – do not go far enough in this regard. Part of the remit of the Commander Task Force Baltic (CTF Baltic) established in Rostock is to provide both underwater and surface situational awareness for NATO in the future.

The navy must be equipped with enhanced underwater capabilities and be authorised to intervene more quickly.

6. *Using an AI-supported AIS Database*

The AIS of ships must be put to more effective use in order to protect submarine cables. Recorded in a database, AIS data can provide early indications of ships that have been suspect in the past, and the database can flag these ships in order to facilitate closer monitoring. This process would enable Russian shadow fleet ships to be detected more easily and to be tracked in real time. Simultaneously, these ships' inadequate insurance could provide an additional avenue for authorities to intervene.

The data could be analysed using AI-supported systems, thereby creating a risk forecast for the ships. The basis for this forecast could be the AI-operated maritime surveillance tool planned by the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF).[28]

7. *Allocating Responsibilities According to Capabilities*

Furthermore, responsibilities need to be allocated according to capabilities. The navy must be equipped with enhanced underwater capabilities and be authorised to intervene more quickly. A framework similar to that used by the German Central Command for Maritime Emergencies could be a solution as it would enable more rapid intervention on the part of the navy in such cases. In complex crisis situations, the Central Command is assigned operational management, taking over leadership of the emergency forces and resources, specifying operational objectives and issuing orders to this effect to the relevant authorities. In terms of

maritime critical infrastructure, a similar model would be conceivable for the federal and state police forces as well as for the navy.

8. Ensuring Clear Communication and Consistent Action

In addition, swift countermeasures are needed in the event of incidents, and so too is precise, effective communication on the part of authorities and operators. Suspicious activity – be it confirmed or disproven – should be regularly shared with the public, and any investigative findings based on images and videos should be showcased for clarity. For instance, Finnish authorities acted swiftly and effectively in response to the suspected sabotage by the oil tanker Eagle S in December 2024.[29]

9. Adapting International Law

UNCLOS should include a ban on sabotage and espionage against submarine cables and pipelines (e.g. as a new Article 112a, UNCLOS), and coastal states should be invested with the relevant authority.[30] In its own EEZ, for example, a coastal state should be allowed to carry out coercive measures and investigations against foreign ships without the consent of the flag state if such ships are suspected of committing sabotage or espionage against the coastal state's maritime critical infrastructure. At present, this area remains poorly regulated – unlike the clearly defined powers over ships suspected of piracy (Art. 105, UNCLOS) or illegal fishing activities (Art. 62 (4) and Art. 73, UNCLOS).[31]

10. Boosting Infrastructure Investment

Above all, the EU must invest more in infrastructure, not least in order to reduce the current significant dependence on big tech companies that dominate investments in the expansion of cable infrastructure. Investments should focus not only on additional cable routes or repair capacity, but also on satellite systems as a redundant transmission option. The EU should either invest in infrastructure itself or support investments by European companies. The key factor here is to reduce dependence on non-European countries and companies.

Conclusion

In recent months, some coastal states have responded more quickly to the incidents in the Baltic Sea region than in previous years. Nevertheless, the security precautions for submarine cables and the measures taken to deal with outages are still inadequate. In light of the increasing risk of further incidents, there is an urgent need to take more comprehensive measures and to make life more difficult for potential attackers in the future. Only a set of smaller and larger measures can address our weak points so as to counter hybrid attacks and secure maritime critical infrastructure.

– translated from German –

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31 UN 1982, n. 2.

Photo: Ruben Montesclaros / Imago

Water

Flash Point in the South China Sea

How the Philippines and Vietnam Are Taking a Stand against China

Daniela Braun / Florian C. Feyerabend

Tensions in the South China Sea have escalated significantly in recent months, with China adopting increasingly aggressive tactics against its neighbouring states. How can smaller nations such as the Philippines and Vietnam push back against a dominant power?

The South China Sea has long been a geopolitical flash point,[1] but the situation has grown even more volatile in recent months. Clashes have become more frequent and dangerous, especially between Chinese and Philippine vessels. Chinese ships have repeatedly forced Philippine boats off course, resulting in serious collisions and confrontations, while in some cases, Chinese forces have used water cannons and lasers against Philippine crews and fishermen. The risk of further escalation looms large.

Multiple nations have faced off for decades over competing territorial claims in the South China Sea. This long-standing dispute has led to military confrontations between China and Vietnam on two occasions: first in 1974, and then again in 1988.[2] Since the 1970s, the South China Sea's coastal nations – China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei – have laid claim to various islands, reefs, atolls and maritime zones.[3] The result is a tangled web of overlapping territorial assertions, particularly around the four major island groups: namely the Spratly Islands, Paracel Islands, Pratas Islands and Scarborough Shoal. With the exception of Brunei, every claimant has built structures on reefs or atolls, many of which have been expanded for military use.[4]

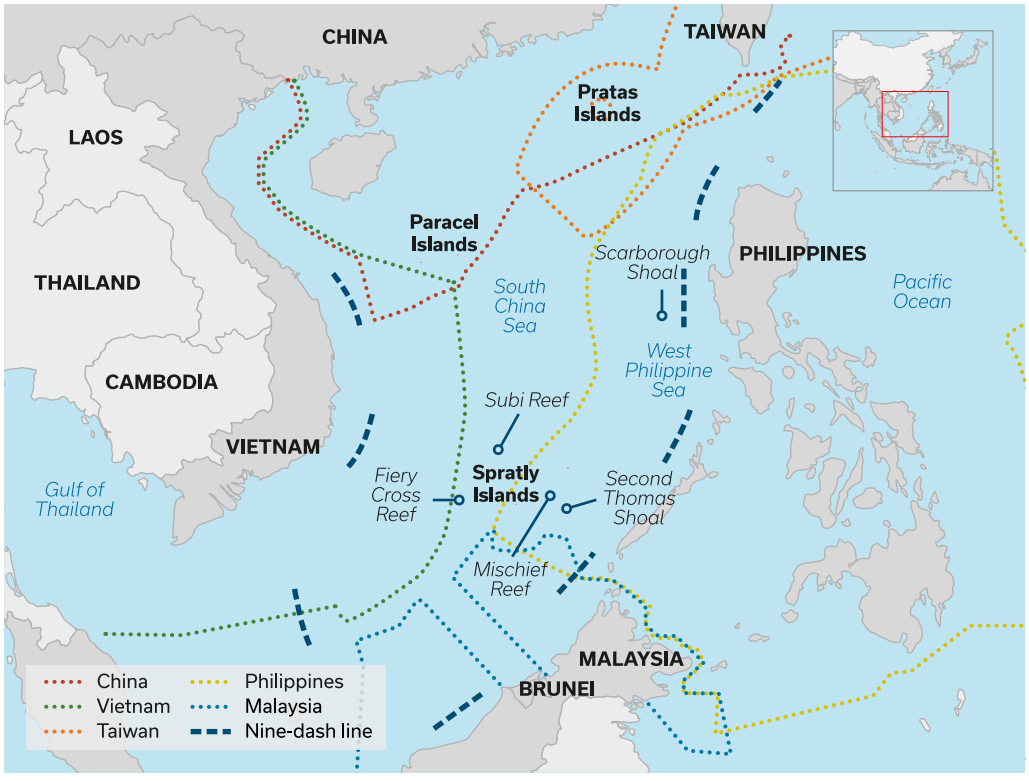
The South China Sea is a vital lifeline for most of the surrounding countries. It is rich in fish stocks, thereby making it crucial for food security and trade in the region, while large reserves of oil and natural gas are believed to lie beneath its seabed. Beyond its role in regional stability, the South China Sea is of global importance. As a key maritime trade route, developments in these waters can have far-reaching economic consequences worldwide. As a key security ally to Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Taiwan, the United States has repeatedly emphasised to Beijing that it takes its defence commitments seriously. For China, the conflict is about more than resources – it is a matter of military strategy and securing control over Pacific trade routes, with undisputed dominance in the South China Sea playing a critical role in the country's broader geopolitical ambitions.

China's Aggressive Approach

Citing historical justifications and basing its assertions on the "ten-dash line" (formerly the "nine-dash line"), the People's Republic of China claims more than 90 per cent of the South China Sea for itself. For years, Beijing has pursued the rapid expansion of artificial islands and military outposts with unprecedented speed and determination. Time and again, China's maritime militia,[5] coast guard and navy have pushed deep into the waters of neighbouring states, harassing fishermen and coast guard vessels while maintaining control over key areas. This aggressive approach is known as grey-zone tactics,[6] which are coercive actions that fall short of outright war yet still challenge the sovereignty of other nations. Coastal states must constantly contend with Chinese incursions into their exclusive economic zones (EEZs), which extend up to 200 nautical miles (370.4 kilometres) from their shorelines. These violations not only undermine national sovereignty, but also inflict serious economic damage since China frequently disrupts traditional fishing grounds, thereby resulting in significant losses for local industries.

Legally, the situation is clear: Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), China repeatedly violates the sovereignty of its neighbouring states. In a landmark

Fig. 1: Exclusive Economic Zones and Territorial Claims in the South China Sea



Dotted lines outline the estimated maximum extent of the exclusive economic zones of the coastal states.
Source: own illustration based on The Economist 2024: The scary new map of the South China Sea, 10 Sep 2024, in: https://ogy.de/gqfr [20 Feb 2025], map: Natural Earth ©.

2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, the tribunal ruled in favour of the Philippines, rejecting China's historical claims. However, to this day, Beijing refuses to recognise the decision.

An escalation between the Philippines and China would also involve the US.

Given China's aggressive and unlawful conduct, the key question remains: How can smaller nations stand up to such an overwhelming opponent? What strategies are countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam employing to defend their sovereignty against the world's most powerful naval force, and how effective are they?

Philippines and China on a Collision Course – The Role of the US as a Security Ally

Clashes between Philippine and Chinese vessels were almost a weekly occurrence in 2024, but the incident on 17 June was by far the most violent. The Philippine military was en route to a routine resupply mission at Second Thomas Shoal – a shallow coral reef about 200 kilometres west of Palawan that is best known as the site of the deliberately grounded BRP Sierra Madre, a rusting Philippine naval ship that serves as a strategic outpost. Before reaching their destination, however, they were aggressively intercepted by the Chinese coast guard. Footage of the confrontation shows Chinese forces ramming Philippine boats, hacking at equipment with pickaxes and knives and physically attacking the Philippine crew. By the end of the skirmish, one Philippine soldier had been seriously injured.[7]

What makes this incident particularly explosive is Manila's recent warning: As a US treaty ally, the death of a Filipino caused by Chinese actions would be considered a red line – one that could trigger the US-Philippines Mutual Defence Treaty.

A former colonial power, the US is the Philippines' most important ally. Several defence agreements are in place, and under the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty, the US would come to Manila's aid in the event of war. Since President Marcos took office on 30 June 2022, relations have deepened further, not least in response to China's aggression in the South China Sea. This is particularly evident in the recent announcement that the US will gain access to four additional military bases in the Philippines. This brings the total to nine Philippine bases where US troops can be deployed on a rotational basis. An escalation between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea would therefore also involve the US, which has repeatedly emphasised in recent years – including during the first Trump presidency – its commitment to defending its oldest treaty partner in the region.[8]

Gradual Chinese Occupation in Philippine Waters

The territorial dispute between the Philippines and China can be traced back to the gradual Chinese occupation of Mischief Reef in the mid-1990s. A traditionally important Philippine fishing ground just 130 nautical miles west of Palawan, this reef forms part of the Spratly Islands. Having been artificially expanded by means of land reclamation, Mischief Reef now hosts a Chinese airbase. As a result, Manila has lost access to the reef within its own EEZ and instead faces a military outpost of a hostile power right on its doorstep.

Another pivotal incident in the South China Sea occurred in 2012 at Scarborough Shoal. After the Philippine navy discovered Chinese fishermen illegally harvesting coral at the atoll, a dangerous two-month standoff ensued between Manila and Beijing. The crisis was eventually defused through US mediation, with both sides agreeing to withdraw their vessels. However, while the Philippines complied, China ignored the deal and remained at Scarborough Shoal – without consequences. This incident ultimately led the Philippines to take its case to the Permanent Court of Arbitration.

Marcos Administration Takes a Firm Stance against China

While close ties with the United States have been a cornerstone of Philippine foreign and security policy since the country's independence, different administrations have taken varying approaches to dealing with China, thereby influencing Manila's actions in the South China Sea.[9] Following a serious incident involving the Chinese at Second Thomas Shoal in February 2023, the current Marcos administration decided to pursue a significantly different course to that of its China-friendly predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte. The government is now employing a range of measures to defend the country's sovereignty and prevent further territorial losses to China in the West Philippine Sea, which is the official name for the part of the South China Sea within the Philippine EEZ.

Diplomatic backing for Manila's position in the South China Sea has gained significantly in strength.

These measures include the so-called transparency initiative, the strengthening of alliances and partnerships, the strategic use of international law,[10] the modernisation of the coast guard and military and the reinforcement of outposts in the West Philippine Sea, particularly of the deliberately grounded Philippine vessel BRP Sierra Madre at Second Thomas Shoal.[11] Although the current administration is taking a much firmer stance against Beijing's aggression in the South China Sea, it remains committed to keeping diplomatic channels with China open and to seeking peaceful solutions.

Using Transparency against a Dominant Opponent

A central element of the current government's approach is the transparency initiative, which aims to expose China's grey-zone tactics in Philippine waters to both the public and the international community while revealing the hypocrisy of Beijing's self-proclaimed image as a major international power that acts peacefully and responsibly.[12] This initiative is not a formally defined strategy, and statements regarding it can vary depending on whom one asks within the Philippine government.

With regard to its goals and effectiveness, Commodore Jay Tarriela – Head of the West Philippine Sea Transparency Office – acknowledges that it is not a miracle solution that will immediately alter China's actions; rather, he says, the objective is to rally support among both the Philippine public and the international community for the stance adopted by the Philippines. In this respect, the transparency initiative appears highly effective because diplomatic backing for Manila's position in the South China Sea has gained significantly in strength. Each time a confrontation occurs between Philippine and Chinese vessels, a wave of solidarity follows, with statements of support from the US, Australia, Japan, the EU and numerous European countries, including Germany. And this is not just rhetoric: Indeed, the list of security and defence agreements and partnerships announced or finalised in recent months is extensive and includes countries such as Japan, Australia, South Korea, Singapore, Vietnam, Germany, the United Kingdom and France. The transparency initiative has played a key role in fostering and strengthening relationships, particularly with middle powers in the region as well as with the EU. With growing international support, Manila's position has grown stronger.

Beijing is continuing to focus on escalation and intimidation.

It remains unclear whether the transparency initiative has had any deterring effect or led to a change in Beijing's behaviour, however. Data from the US think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) indicates that China has deployed more vessels in Philippine waters and that the frequency and intensity of confrontations have escalated. The type of ships, or actors, that China is deploying also indicates that Beijing is continuing to focus on escalation and intimidation: In December 2024, it was reported for the first time that People's

Stealthy appropriation: Especially since the 1990s, China has occupied parts of the Spratly Islands, filling up land there and installing military infrastructure. The picture from 2015 shows Chinese work at the Fiery Cross Reef. Shortly afterwards, a port and an airport were completed there. Photo: © CPA Media, Imago.

Liberation Army Navy vessels had approached Philippine boats, shadowed them and conducted aggressive manoeuvres.[13]

Nevertheless, it is unlikely to suit China's calculations for a "small nation" to publicly defy Beijing and repeatedly show the world the illegal means to which China is willing to resort. What is more, there were numerous clashes between the two countries even under markedly China-friendly President Duterte, though reporting on these clashes was not permitted.

The current Philippine approach can be seen as a bold response by a smaller nation with limited resources to the unlawful and aggressive behaviour of an overwhelmingly powerful opponent. It is up to Beijing to change its actions and render the transparency initiative unnecessary rather than for Manila to turn a blind eye to this behaviour.

China's Aggressive Tactics towards Vietnam

While international attention is primarily focused on China's actions in the Philippine EEZ and the high-profile confrontation between Beijing and the US ally Manila, tensions are hardly less fraught hundreds of nautical miles to the west.[14] Vietnamese fishermen are also regularly harassed by Chinese vessels. At the same time, China repeatedly conducts underwater survey operations, often in close proximity to Vietnam's offshore oil and gas reserves.[15] There are also reports citing US intelligence sources that suggest that China is responsible for acts of sabotage against Vietnam's undersea fibre optic cables in the South China Sea.[16] China's grey-zone intimidation tactics are just as common in the so-called East Sea – Vietnam's name for the South China Sea.

Vietnam asserts its sovereignty quietly but firmly.

Vietnam's Approach to Securing Its Maritime Sovereignty

Due to its one-party communist system, geostrategic position, historical experience and non-aligned status, however, Vietnam takes a different approach to China's actions from that of the Philippines.[17] The Philippine transparency initiative is sometimes referred to in Vietnam as "megaphone diplomacy". By contrast, Vietnam asserts its sovereignty quietly but firmly.[18] Rather than relying solely on the effectiveness of maritime law or on the endless negotiations over a binding code of conduct, Vietnam pursues a dual strategy of reinforcing its claims through facts on the ground while simultaneously strengthening security cooperation with third countries, including the Philippines.[19]

Another key component is the anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy, which involves the construction and modernisation of military bases on islands and reefs under Hanoi's control. It is in this context that Vietnam's land reclamation efforts in the Spratly Islands must be seen. According to satellite image analysis by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) run by the think tank CSIS, Vietnam has made massive efforts to create new land areas in disputed parts of the South China Sea through dredging and infill – at the expense of fragile underwater ecosystems.[20] Since June 2024 alone, Vietnam has reclaimed some 260 hectares of new land on the Spratlys adding them to the about 280 hectares reclaimed between November 2023 and mid-2024. As a result, Vietnam has now reclaimed a surface which is about three-quarters the size of the area reclaimed by China when Beijing built its seven military bases between 2013 and 2016.

These military bases have given China a significant strategic advantage. With Mischief Reef, Subi Reef and Fiery Cross, Beijing controls the largest artificial islands in the South China Sea by far, having fully militarised them with anti-ship and air defence missile systems, laser and jamming devices, fighter jets and runways over three kilometres long. This has greatly enhanced China's ability to monitor, project power over and deter rivals in the disputed waters in addition to having increased the country's capacity to harass neighbouring states with territorial claims of their own. After all, the artificial islands are not just unsinkable aircraft carriers with palm trees; rather, they also serve as permanent bases with harbours that allow for the continuous deployment of China's navy, coast guard and maritime militia. These forces frequently clash with the fishing fleets of Vietnam, the Philippines and other regional players.

Vietnam Modernises and Expands Its Military Infrastructure

By adopting a similar approach to China's land reclamation efforts, Vietnam is positioning itself to modernise and expand its runways and potentially equip its enlarged outposts with advanced weaponry such as anti-ship artillery and guided missiles as well as surveillance capabilities such as radar and defensive structures designed to

withstand potential attacks.[21] In the event of a military conflict, this would complicate Beijing's calculations, thereby serving as a deterrent.[22] At the same time, Vietnam's outposts – much like China's own – will likely function as bases for future maritime patrols. This would allow Vietnam to monitor the disputed waters more effectively and to exercise its maritime rights under UNCLOS.

China has thus far remained silent and seemingly passive in response to Vietnam's activities.

Not a gamechanger on its own, given the militarily asymmetric relationship between Hanoi and Beijing, but still of significant strategic value is the construction of new military airstrips. Previously, Vietnam had only one runway in the archipelago: a 1.3-kilometre airstrip on Spratly Island that is too short for larger transport and surveillance aircraft or bomber operations. However, in the second half of 2024, Vietnam began asphalting a runway twice this length on the artificially created Barque Canada Reef that is long enough to accommodate fighter jets. Satellite images also suggest that another military airstrip may be under construction on the reclaimed Pearson Reef. Hanoi itself has not commented publicly on these expansion plans.

Reaction to Hanoi's Actions

None of these actions have escaped Beijing's attention, yet for a notably long time, China refrained from publicly criticising Hanoi's activities. No measures have been reported that indicate any attempts to disrupt Vietnam's land reclamation and expansion plans. It was not until early December 2024 that Chinese experts close to the government began voicing sharp criticism of Hanoi's actions, with some calling for a more resolute response and warning that if left unchecked, Vietnam's ongoing construction would only continue, thereby further disrupting the existing balance in the region. The result, they said, would be greater instability and increased uncertainty.[23] Others struck an even more alarmist tone, raising concerns that Vietnam might allow the United States or Japan to use its new airstrips.[24] Given Vietnam's defence doctrine of non-alignment and bloc neutrality, however, this is not a plausible scenario.[25]

While Western governments have not officially commented on Vietnam's land reclamation and expansion efforts, the latter have been met with approval among Western experts. These efforts are seen as a potential means of restoring the balance of power in the South China Sea, which has been disrupted by Chinese dominance. Alexander L. Vuving – professor at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Hawaii and a former Fellow of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung – believes that Vietnam's land reclamation efforts offer hope for re-establishing counterweights to China's hegemonic ambitions.[26] Vietnam expert Bill Hayton of Chatham House shares a similar view but does not believe that Hanoi's actions are causing Beijing serious concern or security fears.[27]

It remains to be seen to what extent the public criticism initially voiced by the above-mentioned Chinese experts will herald a new approach in Beijing's policy. However, it is certainly clear that – apart from one official rejection, in February 2025[28] – China has thus far remained silent and seemingly passive in response to Vietnam's activities, even as tensions with the Philippines have continued to rise further east in the South China Sea. As a result, correctly interpreting China's restraint is seen as being highly significant because it could offer insights into Beijing's broader conflict behaviour and potential implications for its stance towards other actors, such as the Philippines.

China's Supposed Passivity towards Vietnam

Experts point to five interrelated factors that could explain China's apparent passivity.[29] Firstly, Beijing may be unwilling to escalate a second

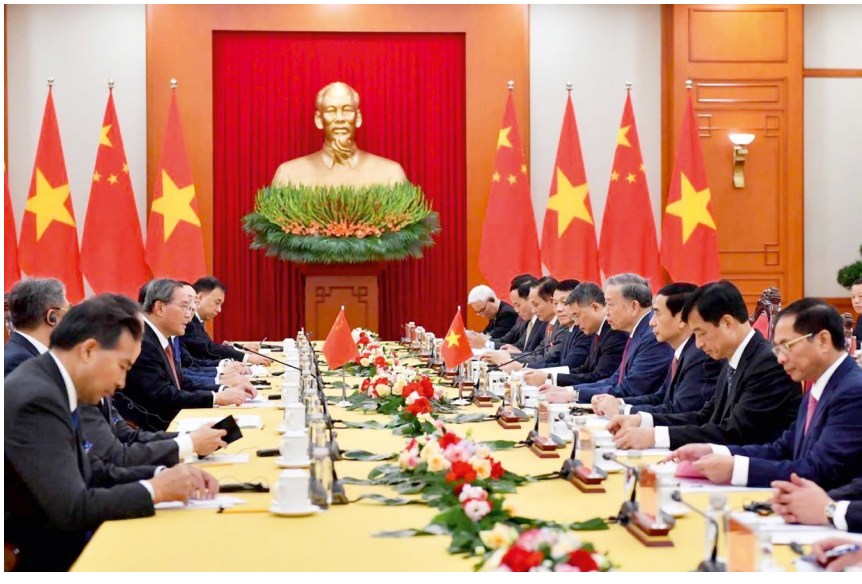
conflict with Hanoi while already facing tensions with Manila out of the fear of diplomatic repercussions. Secondly, China may have concluded that its escalation dominance is limited and that military pressure or intimidation would not force Vietnam into submission. On the contrary, Hanoi has demonstrated both determination and a willingness to take risks, as seen in the 2014 oil rig crisis, which ultimately did not end in Beijing's favour.[30] The third factor is Vietnam's non-aligned status, which could work to the country's advantage in this case because China does not necessarily view Hanoi's actions in the South China Sea as a direct geopolitical challenge.

Closely linked to this is the fact that as communist-led brother states, Vietnam and China have established reliable party-to-party communication channels, which allows them to resolve differences quietly. Finally, overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea are only one aspect of the broader bilateral relationship. Beyond their ideological ties, the two countries are also close economic partners, officially maintaining a "comprehensive strategic partnership" and committing to the development of a "community with a shared future". As renowned Vietnam expert and emeritus professor Carlyle Thayer sums it up, it is "a complex relationship, but not antagonistic – like [the] one between China and the Philippines. China is trying to get the US out of the Philippines and the US is not in Vietnam in the same way".[31]

The South China Sea will remain a geopolitical hotspot.

Manila – Hanoi: An Unlikely Friendship?

The Philippines and Vietnam take differing approaches when it comes to defending their maritime sovereignty. Despite these differences and despite Vietnam – like other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – having criticised the Philippines for its supposedly "noisy" approach, the two countries are the most vocal within ASEAN in pushing back against China's actions. As a result, cooperation between the two nations is growing, with Manila and Hanoi even being referred to as "besties" within ASEAN.[32] One key area of collaboration is coast guard operations, with joint exercises and training planned in order to strengthen coordination. Another area in which the two nations aim to work more closely



Competitors in the South China Sea, brothers in spirit: Despite overlapping territorial claims, there are reliable channels of communication between the communist one-party systems of China and Vietnam. Photo: © Kyodo News, Imago.

together is in responding to incidents in the South China Sea, though the specifics of how this will be implemented remain unclear.

It is a positive development that both countries are seeking closer cooperation over maritime security. Unfortunately, there is little hope for a unified ASEAN response to China's illegal and aggressive actions in the South China Sea because Beijing's influence over many Southeast Asian states remains too strong. While negotiations on a code of conduct are still being supported in official rhetoric, behind the scenes few believe that an agreement will be reached anytime soon. This makes it all the more welcome that Vietnam and the Philippines are taking the lead and working more closely together in response to the situation in the South China Sea.

What is Next in the South China Sea?

The South China Sea will remain a geopolitical hotspot that demands the attention of the international community. The risk of a clash spiralling out of control cannot be ignored – particularly between China and the Philippines or Vietnam – because the consequences of an armed conflict in the South China Sea would be felt across the globe.

Germany and Europe must take a stand in order to also defend their interests in this region. The aim here must be to defend the freedom of maritime routes and the rules-based international order while supporting countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam in their fight for sovereignty. In recent years, Germany has already laid important groundwork through its Indo-Pacific guidelines and its increasing engagement in the region. A key signal was given when Germany once again demonstrated its Indo-Pacific commitment with its navy and air force in 2024, this time not shying away from sailing through contested waters. A new German government should further boost Germany's role in the region, particularly by supporting countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam in their efforts to uphold international law. In this regard, greater importance should be attached to security assistance through military capability-building.

– translated from German –

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Photo: © Michael Runkel, robertharding, Imago.

Water

A Safe Haven for Jihadists

Why Lake Chad Offers Ideal Conditions for Islamist Terrorists

Ulf Laessing

Lake Chad's water levels receded over decades, thereby turning what was once a vast body of water into a landscape of islands and narrow streams – a perfect hideout for jihadists currently expanding their reach in Niger, Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon as they thrive on growing poverty and the effects of climate change in this four-country region.

From the air, Lake Chad in Central Africa looks like a mere puddle, and it has indeed shrunk dramatically compared to its size in the 1960s. Situated on the southern edge of the Sahara, the lake once used to sustain 20 million people through farming, fishing and trade. Today, more than ten million people living around the lake rely on humanitarian aid in order to survive as insecurity, shrinking fishing grounds and the effects of climate change take their toll. Nearly three million have fled their villages[1]: Driven by desperation, many end up joining the jihadists. The United Nations describes this situation as one of the world's largest humanitarian disasters, yet it barely makes headlines anymore, being overshadowed by crises in Ukraine, Syria and Israel/Gaza.

Compared to satellite images from 1960, it is barely possible to recognise Lake Chad, which was once the world's sixth-largest lake. Today, it resembles a Norwegian fjord landscape, with countless small streams and islands providing perfect hiding spots for fighters from jihadist groups such as Boko Haram and the so-called Islamic State. Only at its southernmost tip does a larger, continuous body of water remain. Experts from the United Nations and the World Bank estimate that the lake shrunk by 90 per cent – that is, from 25,000 square kilometres in 1963 to just 1,500 square kilometres in 2001.[2] However, increased rainfall on its two main tributaries has allowed the water level of Lake Chad to recover somewhat in recent decades. Estimates vary, with one putting the current surface at 14,000 square kilometres[3], though even this relatively high estimate is still far below the lake's extension in the 1960s. Moreover, scientists disagree as to the exact changes in the lake's surface area and the extent to which climate change is responsible.

The main obstacle to arriving at any accurate assessment is that the lake region is barely accessible to researchers due to the tense security situation. Even locals face the daily risk of abduction by jihadists and bandits. What is clear, however, is that water levels have declined over the long term and that climate change is, in general, taking a heavy toll on the region. Indeed, storms, floods and droughts alternate unpredictably, thereby making weather forecasts and planning nearly impossible, as the author was told by local farmers, fishermen, other villagers and NGO workers on a visit to the Chadian side of the lake in July 2024. Lake dwellers are catching fewer fish, and their farmland is yielding fewer crops. In some areas, locals are unable to fish or cultivate their fields at all due to the presence of jihadists from Nigeria. Many end up joining the jihadists simply in order to survive.

What is indisputable is that the lake region, which is home to more than 17 million people, has been caught up in a security crisis for over a decade, with jihadists of Boko Haram and the so-called Islamic State effectively controlling large parts of the area. The four countries bordering the lake – Chad, Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon – have only a weak state presence in the region, much like elsewhere in the Sahel. In Baga Sola, a small town on the Chadian side of the lake, there are no paved roads outside the capital, and electricity is scarce. The four lake-bordering countries coordinate through a commission to improve water management, but apart from being heavily

reliant on foreign funding, this coordination is largely inefficient: Indeed, in many cases, state authority is too weak to implement the commission's decisions.

> **There is either too little rain in the region or far too much.**

Mismanagement and Climate Change

How did the crisis unfold? Firstly, there has been a decline in the lake's water levels compared with in the 1960s. Some researchers attribute this decline to overuse and poor management of the lake and its tributaries in the past. While the lake's water levels now appear more stable, scientists view climate change in general as the greater issue, with increasingly extreme and unpredictable weather patterns affecting the region. Chad, Niger and northern Nigeria have endured years of torrential rainfalls, which have resulted in devastating floods. At the same time, the region regularly experiences prolonged droughts with no rainfall and temperatures that are increasing at roughly one and a half times the global average.[4] In Chad, for instance, temperatures could rise by between 2.1 and 4.3 degrees by 2080: Thus, the growing weather instability will render it ever more difficult for farmers to cultivate their fields or to plan for the future.[5]

The lack of rainfall also means that the Sahara Desert is spreading farther south into the Sahel. Where farming is still possible, crop yields are declining. Paradoxically, Chad and Niger also suffer from severe flooding, with entire villages and even towns having been devastated in 2024: In the city of Zinder in Niger, large parts of the old town were heavily damaged, and even the minaret of the main mosque was destroyed. Thus, there is either too little rain in the region or far too much.

What is more, all four lake-bordering countries struggle with widespread poverty and rapidly growing populations. In Niger, women give birth to an average of seven children,[6] while Nigeria's population is expected to reach up to 400 million by 2050 according to the United Nations – almost double today's figure.[7] Chad and Niger are among the poorest countries in the world, regularly ranking among the bottom ten on a UN index comparing global living standards.[8] Outside the capital cities, state authority is weak and barely present. Cameroon is slightly better off, but with a ranking of 151 out of the 191 total countries in the UN index, it still falls in the lower quarter.[9] Moreover, while Nigeria is Africa's largest oil producer, its oil wealth benefits only a small fraction of the population.

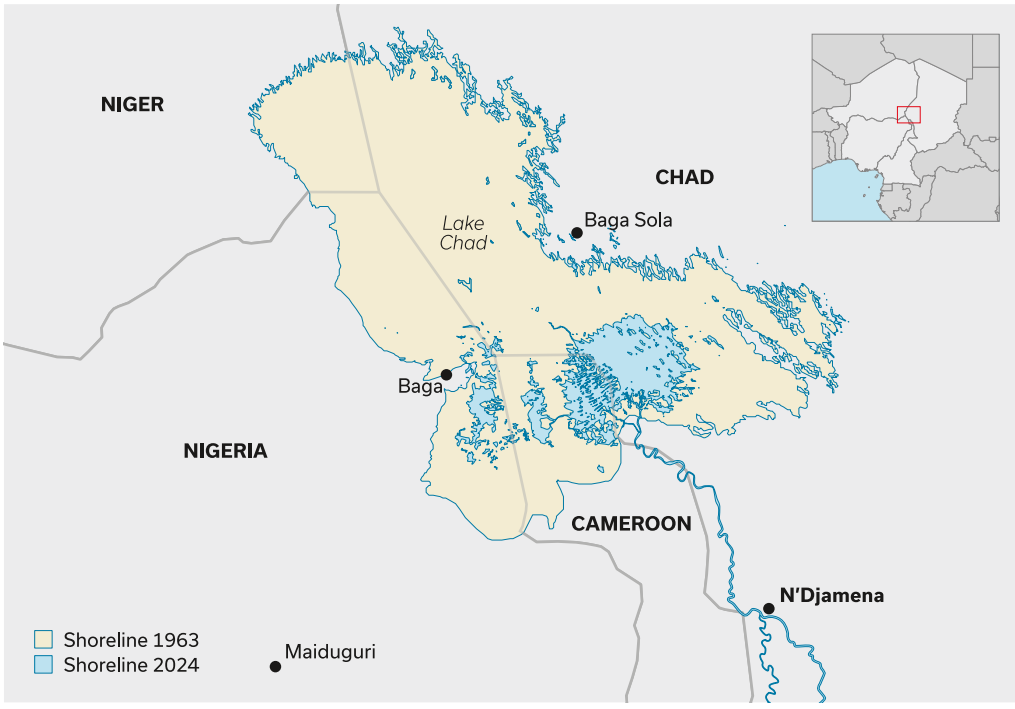
Jihadists on the Rise

Alongside many losers, there are also winners at Lake Chad: Boko Haram and the so-called Islamic State have benefited from shifting water levels and extreme weather fluctuations ranging from drought to torrential rain, which make farming more difficult and strip many people of their livelihoods. According to the US military, climate change in the lake region is exacerbating the threat posed by jihadists.[10]

Where did the jihadists come from? The group Boko Haram launched an uprising in northern Nigeria in 2009, accusing the country's elites of corruption and mismanagement. Northern Nigeria is significantly poorer than the oil-rich south, which is home to the economic hub of Lagos. Many people once found jobs in the textile industry in the north of the country, but decades of mismanagement and cheap imports from China and Europe have led to its decline. Boko Haram claims that Nigeria's elites have sold out the values of the Muslim north to the West – the name "Boko Haram" can roughly be translated as "Western schools are forbidden". Rejecting Western education, the group aims to Islamize society and has increasingly become a rallying point for the impoverished masses.

From northern Nigeria, Boko Haram expanded across the borders into Niger, Cameroon and Chad. A leadership struggle split the group in

Fig. 1: Extent of Lake Chad: 1963 and 2024



Source: own illustration based on World Bank Group, Energy Sector Management Assistance Program 2024: Africa – Water Bodies, 4 Oct 2024, in: https://ogy.de/bm34 [7 Mar 2025]; Hansen, Kathryn 2017: The Rise and Fall of Africa's Great Lake, NASA Earth Observatory, 9 Nov 2017, in: https://ogy.de/e5az [7 Mar 2025]; Esri Africa, Africa GeoPortal 2024: Africa Cities, 29 Feb 2024, in: https://ogy.de/y8fy [7 Mar 2025], map: Natural Earth ®.

2016, with numerous fighters joining an offshoot of the so-called Islamic State that operates with even greater brutality. Since then, the two factions have been fighting each other for control over territory. For years, the four lake-bordering countries have attempted to combat the jihadists with cross-border military operations, albeit with little success.

The newly formed islands have become a perfect hideout for jihadist groups.

Changing water levels and climate shifts around Lake Chad have been a boon for Boko Haram and the so-called Islamic State. Driven by insecurity and unpredictable weather, rising poverty is pushing more and more unemployed fishermen and farmers into the ranks of radical fighters, while even more crucially, the newly formed islands have become a perfect hideout for these jihadist groups. They control the islands in the lake's interior, where they have set up camps, weapons depots and shelters for their fighters. From there, they spread terror along the shores. Moving in boats, they raid villages and attack fishermen, forcing them to collaborate. Time and again, jihadists kill or abduct village elders in order to seize power themselves.

The fragility of the situation was evident during a visit by the author to a village on the Chadian side of the lake: Fishermen there venture no more than one or two kilometres into the lake's shallow waters. "If we go too far, Boko Haram forces us to hand over our catch", said Toh Moussa, head of a local fishermen's association. "Only the waters close to the shore are safe." Other fishermen brought their catch to shore

as he spoke, though the haul amounted to only small and juvenile fish – the kind that thrive in the shallow waters near the village. The fisherman would have to venture farther out to catch larger fish, but that would be far too dangerous.

Intervention Force Faces an Uncertain Future

With the support of Western nations, the four lake-bordering countries of Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon have established an intervention force – the so-called Multinational Joint Task Force – for conducting cross-border operations against the jihadists. This task force has received guidance from around 10 to 20 soldiers from France, the United States and the United Kingdom to date along with tactical intelligence on jihadist movements. However, the future of this Western support is uncertain. The Trump administration is unlikely to show much interest in Africa, and Chad has just ended its military cooperation with France. This is not the only setback, though, as Niger has also significantly

Safe only near the shore: Most residents of Lake Chad no longer dare to take their boats far out onto the water. The risk of encountering jihadists is too great. Photo: © Michael Runkel, robertharding, Imago.

reduced its cooperation with the task force following a military coup in 2023.

Even under normal circumstances, the intervention force has not been particularly effective. The task force conducts air strikes against the jihadists, but its soldiers are unable to seize the militants' strongholds on the islands because the fighters quickly escape to other islands in small wooden boats known as pirogues. In the narrow tributaries, which are often only a few metres wide, the intervention force frequently falls into ambushes. Since the jihadists are able to retreat to other difficult-to-reach hideouts within the lake region, ground operations only achieve limited success. Particularly during the rainy season from May to September, when water levels rise and new waterways emerge, the fighters are extremely agile on the water.

The jihadists have effectively taken control of the lake region.

Even the lakeside villages are not safe. "Boko Haram has eyes and ears everywhere", said an NGO worker during the author's visit to the lake: "We don't know which people in the village are working for Boko Haram and passing on information." After about fifteen minutes, a crowd began to gather on the shore, and the NGO worker urged the author to leave. The four-nation task force maintains a base not far away, but it often arrives too late when attacks occur. There are no reliable data on the number of attacks carried out. As an example for insecurity, an internal report compiled by diplomats at the end of May 2024 documents more than ten jihadist attacks in the lake region, some of them in the administrative district of Baga Sola, where the United Nations operates a regional hub for humanitarian aid deliveries. More than twenty people were abducted, over one dozen killed, and several cases of livestock theft were also reported.[11]

Nevertheless, given the many ongoing crises worldwide, the situation around Lake Chad has been deemed too insignificant for international media to cover. Overall, however, the attacks indicate that the jihadists have effectively taken control of the lake region. They have even launched larger-scale operations, such as in October 2024, when dozens of Chadian soldiers were killed in an attack on a military barracks.[12] Questioning the effectiveness of the four-nation task force, Chad's president Mahamat Déby reacted with anger: Just days later, he even ordered the withdrawal of French troops,

who had been stationed in Chad since the country's independence in 1960. Déby had allegedly urged France to launch air strikes against Boko Haram, but his efforts proved unsuccessful.[13]

Many residents in the lake region would be unlikely to miss the task force. While the soldiers manage to keep the jihadists somewhat in check through their operations, they also fuel the conflict themselves by committing abuses against civilians. According to a study funded by the German Foreign Office and the Netherlands, in addition to jihadist attacks, lake-area residents also complain about military exclusion zones, where fishing is prohibited. While the military seeks to prevent jihadists from benefiting from fishing, they in fact deprive people of their livelihoods, thereby making them even more vulnerable to recruitment by the jihadists. There are also reports of abuses by soldiers, who suspect civilians of collaborating with the jihadists, confiscate fishermen's catches and demand sex in exchange for food from women: "A large number of affected respondents [...] cited security forces' harassment and the community's mistrust and frustration with security measures as reasons for re-joining armed opposition groups", the study states.[14]

Nigeria – The Main Problem

The Chadian side of the lake is relatively safe – at least, it is safe enough for the United Nations to coordinate humanitarian operations from the region. For years, this region has also served as a refuge for Nigerian civilians fleeing their villages in the wake of jihadist attacks. Not far from the UN logistics hub in Baga Sola, there is a refugee camp that from 2016 until recently housed more than 5,000 people from Nigeria. Most of these refugees came from Baga, a small town on the Nigerian side of the lake that – along with its surrounding region – has become a jihadist stronghold. Camp residents have repeatedly tried to return home, but without success. "It's too dangerous because Boko Haram is still active there", said Aachi Mai, a farmer from Baga who has made several attempts to return to his fields. Other refugees have reported that when they ventured farther out onto the lake to fish, jihadists forced them to hand over their catch.

Nigeria remains Boko Haram's main area of operations.

In February 2025, Nigeria and Chad agreed that some refugees should return. The first camp residents have since left for Nigeria, but they have not returned to their old villages: Instead, they have been relocated to Maiduguri, the heavily militarised capital of Borno State in north-eastern Nigeria. The Nigerian army has not been able to defeat the jihadists in Borno's rural areas, where the insurgency began in 2009. Maiduguri is now safer than it was a few years ago and has become a refuge for 300,000 people (mostly farmers who have fled from the jihadists), but very few dare to return home.

Nigeria remains the main area in which Boko Haram and the so-called Islamic State operate: Their fighters find refuge along the lake's shores and in the remote Sambisa Forest. The Nigerian army has repeatedly faced criticism for human rights violations in its fight against the jihadists.[15] However, the biggest issue remains the weak presence of the Nigerian state in Borno outside of Maiduguri and the immediate lake region. Wherever authorities fail to establish public services and to provide people with a future, military operations against jihadists remain ineffective, which is also why various military interventions have been unsuccessful, whether by France or in the case of the current Russian involvement in Sahel countries, such as Mali.

Lake Chad has receded the farthest on the Nigerian side, where there is no longer access to the remaining open water. In its place lies only a landscape of swamps, small bodies of water and islands – ideal terrain for jihadists, who are highly mobile. Neither the Nigerian army nor the four-nation task force can control this remote area, for the region has become like

hostile territory to them. The jihadists force the local population to collaborate, gathering intelligence on army movements, while soldiers often take out their anger on civilians in retaliation. This situation has further deepened resentment towards a state that provides no services such as schools or healthcare and that is known primarily for corruption and military abuses – a vicious cycle with no apparent way out.

– translated from German –

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Photo: © Sergi Reboredo, VWPics, Imago.

Water

Between Conflict and Cooperation

Israeli-Jordanian Water Management Relations

Edmund Ratka / Michael Rimmel

One consequence of the brutal escalation in the Middle East conflict since October 2023 has been increased strain on relations between Israel and Jordan. For three decades, the two neighbouring countries have been bound by a peace treaty that also involves joint management of a key resource: water. While basic cooperation has largely held up despite all the political crises, there is still plenty of potential to expand collaboration.

The Hamas terror attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 marked the beginning of a violent escalation in the Middle East that continues to reverberate throughout the region. Sparked by the Abraham Accords in the fall of 2020, hopes for a new phase of regional cooperation – and therefore of Israeli-Arab rapprochement – seem to have been shattered for the time being. However, there is still a sense among many key players that both containing conflict hotspots and building regional cooperation structures are essential when it comes to economic development and long-term stability.

A fresh dynamic could emerge from a number of sources, such as the Middle East policy pursued by the new Trump administration, the continuation and strengthening of regional cooperation focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the upheaval in Syria following the fall of the Assad regime. Iran's declining geopolitical strength is prompting a realignment in the Near and Middle East. In this context, it is crucial to explore which players can cooperate in ways that serve their mutual interests. A first step could be to adopt a practical, issue-focused approach to cooperation that begins with specific sectors. Ideally, this process would help build trust, and this trust could then be leveraged for deeper political links within the region.

Israeli-Jordanian water management relations are a clear example of how functional cooperation models can be established and maintained for mutual benefit, even amidst political tensions. At the same time, these models also highlight the vast potential for cooperation in the Middle East – a potential that remains untapped due largely to enduring political conflicts, such as the one between Israel and the Palestinians.

Jordan – Water as an Existential Resource

In springtime, the north of Jordan is transformed into a blossoming landscape. Some of the olive groves there date back to the time of the ancient Romans. In affluent West Amman, ornamental gardens and trees line the major transportation routes. Almost one hundred per cent of the population has access to clean water. But the impression is misleading: Jordan has a water problem. With three quarters of the country consisting of desert, geologists estimate that Jordan's natural water resources are sufficient for three million people. That was the size of the population in the 1980s, but since then, it has increased to more than eleven million. In addition to seeing relatively high birth rates, Jordan has repeatedly taken in refugees from neighbouring countries, most recently more than one million Syrians.

What is more, urbanisation and increased economic activity – especially in agriculture – have led to an ever-increasing demand for water. Accounting for just five per cent of the country's GDP and therefore economically less significant, the agricultural sector nonetheless consumes around half of the country's water supply. The situation is being exacerbated by climate change and the steadily decreasing levels of rainfall.

Jordan is already considered one of the most arid countries in the world, with 61 cubic metres of renewable fresh water per capita at present. Internationally, 500 cubic metres is considered the required minimum.[1] In scenarios that project current trends, a large portion of low-income households are predicted to suffer from water shortages by the end of the century, with unforeseeable consequences for the country's stability. In the short term, acute water scarcity will negatively impact key sectors of the Jordanian economy, including tourism.[2] Another concern is how long Jordan can continue to subsidise water prices so generously given its notoriously tight national budget, with potential ramifications for the country's social stability.

Jordan is dependent on cooperation with Israel.

Jordan is increasingly endeavouring to overcome these challenges, including with international support. German development cooperation, in particular, has been involved in this area for decades. The Kingdom of Jordan presented a new National Water Strategy in 2023. By combining more efficient water utilisation, integrated water management and the development of new water resources, particularly through the treatment of sewage water and desalination, the aim is to guarantee the country's water security in the long term. Underlying all this is a constant push for national water independence. For the time being, however, Jordan needs to import water – not least from Israel – in order to fully meet its needs. As a downstream country, Jordan is dependent on cooperation with Israel and Syria, with these countries controlling respectively the upper stretches of the Jordan and Yarmouk Rivers.

Jordan signed water agreements with Syria in 1953 and 1987, but these agreements were never able to realise their full potential due to recurring political tensions between the two countries. Jordan blames the construction of dams on the Syrian side and the drilling of illegal wells for the fact that the country has been receiving less and less water from the Yarmouk River. How Syria will develop after the fall of the Assad regime at the end of 2024 remains uncertain, and there is a fair amount of scepticism in Amman towards the new Islamist rulers in Damascus. However, there is nonetheless hope that good neighbourly relations will be possible with a regionally and internationally reintegrated Syria, including better cooperation in the water sector. At the same time, Israel's military advance in Syria following Assad's overthrow has meant that Israel now also has control over water sources in Syria that are important to Jordan.

Jordan currently consumes around one billion cubic metres (1,000 million cubic metres, MCM) of water per year, around half of which is used to meet fresh water needs. The majority of this water comes from groundwater reservoirs, but these are being overused and increasingly pumped dry. The share of rainwater collected by the country's 13 dams is around one-quarter. Treated sewage water is used for irrigation in agriculture and accounts for only 16 per cent of the water used.[3] The shortfall in fresh water is filled by water imports from Israel, which were set at 50 MCM per year in the 1994 peace treaty. An additional supply of another 50 MCM was also agreed upon, but – as is explained below – this is politically contentious and not a source on which Jordan can always count.

In order to meet its increasing demand for water and to conserve its overburdened groundwater reservoirs, Jordan has been working for several years on the ambitious National Water Carrier Project, which is also known as the Aqaba Amman Water Desalination and Conveyance Project (AAWDC). This project involves a large desalination plant being built on the Red Sea that is to supply 300 MCM per year to the densely populated north of the country, and plans are in place to expand this capacity even further in the future. Officially launched in the autumn of 2024 with the awarding of the contract to a French-led consortium, the project is

scheduled for completion by 2029. However, despite financial aid from several of Jordan's partner countries, including aid and loan commitments totalling 400 million euros from the European Development Bank and more than 100 million euros from Germany alone, the estimated costs of at least three billion US dollars are still not covered. Given that the potential of desalination inside the country itself has not been realised at all to date, the success of this project would be a quantum leap in terms of Jordan's water supply. Not only is desalination both costly and energy-intensive. It also poses an additional challenge for Jordan in geographical terms: the sea in southern Aqaba is hundreds of kilometres away, and the city lies at a lower elevation than the population centres in northern Jordan, where the demand for water is at its highest.

Water scarcity in the region has been a key issue for Israel from the very outset.

Israel – Water Supply as a Technological Achievement

Even in the Bible, Israel is described as a land flowing with milk and honey. This would hardly be possible without substantial amounts of water – a resource that has repeatedly fuelled conflict in the Middle East. However, this is not the only reason why water scarcity in the region was a key issue even before the state of Israel was founded in 1948. In an area that is naturally characterised by water scarcity, the founders of the state of Israel quickly realised that securing

A historic moment: Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, US President Bill Clinton and Jordan's King Hussein (from left to right) celebrating the Israeli-Jordanian peace agreement in 1994. The peace treaty also remains the basis of water cooperation between the two countries to this day. Photo: © WHA UnitedArchives, Imago.

a reliable water supply is essential to the country's survival and economic prosperity. As a result, water was a key factor in strategic considerations of the newly established state and its early development.[4]

With this early realisation in mind, Israel began to make considerable investments in the 1950s and 1960s in order to secure its water supply: the aim was not only to guarantee a supply of water to all households, which was in itself a highly ambitious goal at the time, but also to utilise water resources efficiently for agricultural production and industrial purposes. To that end, the Israeli parliament passed the Water Law in 1959, which stipulated that water is a public resource that cannot be considered private or state property in the traditional sense. This legal basis was crucial in establishing a systematic and sustainable water management system in which access to water on the one hand and its distribution and use on the other were managed through public, democratic processes.[5] Very early on, not only did Israel focus on legislative aspects, but professional administrative organisations were also set up with the involvement of the private sector in order to implement key water supply and water treatment projects in partnership with the state.

Modern technologies have made Israel a global model in the field of sustainable water management.

It is thanks to these strategies and technologies that Israel has become a world leader in the field of water treatment. However, there were always difficulties along the way. At the beginning of the 2000s, a high-profile nationwide campaign by the Israeli government under the motto "Israel is drying up" raised grave concerns among Israelis that water was still in short supply. This makes the progress made in recent decades all the more remarkable. Today, some 70 per cent of the drinking water used in Israel comes from five large desalination plants along the Mediterranean, which use state-of-the-art technology to convert seawater into drinking water, thereby relieving the pressure on the already scarce natural freshwater sources. Three further desalination plants are currently under construction and are set to further secure the country's supply of water.[6]

However, it is not only desalination that makes Israel a world leader in applied water technology. Indeed, advanced wastewater treatment systems are another key development. Today, around 85 per cent of wastewater in Israel is recycled and used for agricultural purposes, while advanced technologies are implemented to minimise water loss.

Not only have these innovations had an impact on Israel itself, but the ability to utilise water efficiently as a resource thanks to modern technologies and innovative strategies has maintained the quality of life for the population while at the same time making the country a global model in the field of sustainable water management. In a region in which water has often been seen as a strategic weapon, Israel's technological achievements have put the country in a unique position not only as a user and keeper of this precious resource, but also as a role model and partner to other countries in dealing with water scarcity.

The Israeli-Jordanian Water Cooperation

Dating back to the founding years of the two neighbouring countries, water policy relations between Israel and Jordan have developed in a complex process of conflict, competition and cooperation. As early as in the 1950s, the US attempted to mediate between its allies by proposing a regional water management programme that would also include Lebanon and Syria. Named the Johnston Plan after the US special envoy at the time, the proposal failed because it was rejected by the Arab League, which wanted to avoid implicitly recognising Israel. However, Jordan and Israel nonetheless de facto adopted some elements, which

ultimately resulted in the water-related elements of the 1994 peace treaty.

Projects have often failed due to a lack of political will.

The Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty remains the basis for water cooperation between the two countries to this day: the treaty regulates the allocation of water from the two most important rivers – the Jordan and the Yarmouk – as well as from the cross-border groundwater reservoirs. Since these sources are of crucial importance to the water supply of both countries, a joint water committee was established following the signing of the agreement. The committee organises cooperation over water management, and it functions quite well, at least at the practical and technical level. In addition, project ideas have repeatedly been developed that are focused on making more effective joint use of water resources, though these ideas have often failed due to a lack of political will.

These projects have included the Red Sea-Dead Sea Conveyance Project (RSDSC), which was agreed upon in 2015 by the governments of the two countries with the mediation of the US and the World Bank. A canal was to be built between the Jordanian harbour city of Aqaba on the Red Sea, and the Dead Sea, which is situated inland between Israel and Jordan. The aim was to supply fresh seawater to the Dead Sea, where the water level drops by one metre every year. As a project whose technical outlines were developed as early as in the 19th century and then more concretely in the 1960s, one of its remarkable aspects was the involvement of the Palestinian Authority. After years of bureaucratic delays and environmental controversies, however, Jordan withdrew in 2021, citing a lack of interest on the Israeli side.

More important for Jordan and always a politically controversial issue is the supply of 50 MCM of fresh water per year from Israel over and above the 50 MCM per year stipulated in the peace treaty. This additional amount is also laid out in the peace treaty, although the modalities are not specified in this case. Considered a necessary diplomatic compromise at the time, the provision subsequently led to repeated disagreements and delays, as in the spring of 2021, when Israeli-Jordanian relations deteriorated as one consequence of a flare-up of the Middle East conflict in East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. This situation changed abruptly when there was a changeover in the Israeli government from Netanyahu to Bennett/Lapid, with the latter making every effort to maintain good relations with the Hashemite Kingdom. In the autumn of the same year, the supply of fresh water from Israel to Jordan even reached a record high. "This is what good neighbours do," said then Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid.[7] However, since the renewed change of government in Jerusalem and with Israeli-Jordanian relations hitting a new low against the backdrop of the recent Gaza war, the additional supply of water is once again up for discussion.

The agreement on the additional supply expired at the beginning of 2024 and was not initially extended by Israel, where anger towards Jordan had grown as a result of the events of 7 October 2023. Making its voice heard on the regional and international stage despite its limited resources, the Hashemite Kingdom has increasingly voiced its criticism of Israel's actions in this regard and on other geopolitical issues since the start of the Gaza war. The forceful rhetoric from Amman was perceived by many in Israel as excessive and inappropriate. Citing the situation in the Gaza Strip, in November 2023, Jordan also put on hold the "water-for-energy" deal – an Israeli-Jordanian-Emirati cooperation project that was designed to improve Israel's energy supply and Jordan's water supply. This in turn was seen by Israel as a sign of cooling bilateral relations.

Against this backdrop, the Netanyahu government only agreed to extend the water supplies after facing considerable pressure from the US and other Western partners and in light of

Jordan's assistance in intercepting an Iranian drone and missile attack on Israel, but the agreement was only for six months and lacked the usual years-long commitment. In Amman, the conclusion was drawn that the supply of this existential resource is dependent on domestic political majorities in Israel or on developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, meaning that the resource can be used by Israel as a means of exerting political pressure. This situation is especially concerning for the Kingdom of Jordan as there has been a growing perception in recent years that Jordan's traditional allies in Israel – including the left-wing peace camp, liberal democratic forces and the military establishment – are losing influence.

As a result, voices in favour of strengthening Jordan's own national water autonomy have recently gained momentum, even though cooperative solutions with Israel would normally be technically more straightforward and therefore more efficient. What is more, Israel sells water to Jordan at preferential rates that are far below the market price in Israel itself. Moreover, in 2024, a new pipeline was completed – with US support – that is able to convey large quantities of fresh water from the Sea of Galilee to the Jordanian border.

Despite these political tensions, water cooperation remains a key component of bilateral relations. For Israel, not only is cooperation with

Domestic political headwinds: In November 2021, demonstrators took to the streets in Amman against a water-for-energy deal between Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Israel. In Jordan, voices in favour of strengthening national water autonomy have recently gained momentum – even though cooperative solutions with Israel would generally be technologically simpler and therefore more efficient. Photo: © Mohammad Abu Ghosh, Xinhua, Imago.

Jordan in the water sector a necessity in terms of diplomacy and also security policy given the countries' long shared border, but it is also an entirely practical consideration since the two nations are heavily reliant on each other in this area. While Jordan is dependent on the water supply from Israel to meet the needs of its growing population and agricultural production, Israel likewise benefits from water supplies and also from the capacity to draw water from the Yarmouk River. It is this balance of interests that has kept the cooperation stable for decades – in spite of all the crises in the region.

Cooperation is more urgent than ever.

More than Just Water Is at Stake

The Gaza war following the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023 and subsequent developments have plunged the Middle East into a deep conflict, further destabilising the already fragile geopolitical situation. Violence has increased on several fronts not only between Israel and the Palestinians, but also between regional powers such as Israel and Iran, thereby causing tensions to spread throughout the entire Middle East. However, at the same time, this crisis has triggered or intensified a process of change: in many parts of the region, there is a growing realisation that long-term stability can only be achieved through increased regional cooperation and the containment of conflict hotspots.

It has become obvious that cooperation at various levels is more urgent than ever, be it political, economic, or in the area of security. Particularly in a context in which the effects of climate change are becoming increasingly noticeable and resources such as water are becoming scarcer, countries are being forced to accept that their future can only be secured through joint efforts. The water sector is a vital area in which cooperation is of great importance and in which there are realistic chances of progress: in the Middle East, water is not just a vital resource; indeed, it is also a pivotal geopolitical factor.

The region's extreme water shortage can be expected to be exacerbated by climate change and the rapidly growing population. This situation may give rise to conflicts, but it may also increase incentives for intergovernmental cooperation, with potentially positive spill-over into other policy areas. According to a recent paper by the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), the Jordan-Israel Water Agreement has helped improve the difficult relationship between the two countries while at the same time maintaining a degree of trust in the region even though other aspects of bilateral relations are more difficult.[8] There are also some experts in Jordan who think that if lasting peace in the Gaza Strip can be maintained and the region settles down, novel progress could be made in terms of improving bilateral water and energy cooperation.[9]

A prime example of such progress would be the aforementioned water-for-energy deal. This ambitious project came about – again with American mediation – in the wake of the Abraham Accords, which inter alia facilitated the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates. An Emirati company is to build a solar power plant in Jordan with a capacity of 600 megawatts that is to be supplied to Israel. In return, Jordan is to receive an additional 200 MCM of desalinated seawater from Israel. Although the project met with resistance in some sectors of Jordanian politics and society from the outset, memoranda of understanding were signed between the governments at the UN Climate Change Conferences in Dubai in 2021 and in Cairo in 2022, and various feasibility studies were commissioned.

Although the Jordanians have since cancelled the project in the wake of the Gaza war, the idea remains compelling. Non-governmental organisations such as EcoPeace have long argued that it would be beneficial for all sides to have Jordanian-Israeli cooperation – or perhaps even Israeli-Jordanian-Palestinian cooperation – at the nexus of water and energy supply.[10] Beyond

major projects such as the water-for-energy deal, smaller cross-border measures could also be developed to be established at the local level. Promising areas include the ecological restoration of the Jordan River as well as the sharing of experience and technology in the area of agriculture.

Water will, of course, always be a political issue. However, rather than using cooperation in the water sector to pursue other political agendas, the focus should be on highlighting the beneficial results of cooperation for people on all sides. In a world in which resources are increasingly used for political leverage, this type of pragmatic and mutually beneficial cooperation could be an important step towards closer regional cooperation in the context of sustainable détente and development. The Western allies of both countries – including Germany and the EU – could take on a more active role, for instance, by committing funds for cross-border and multilateral efforts.

Jordan and Israel have been bound to each other by a peace treaty for more than three decades. While this situation quickly turned into a "cold" peace, with public opinion divided in both countries and opposition being particularly strong in Jordan, resilient cooperation has been established in specific areas, and political crises have been overcome along the way. In addition to security cooperation and border security, this progress also includes relations in the area of water management. As such, there is at least some hope that by focusing on pressing issues of common interest in the region, the political elites – and ultimately, the societies of the Middle East – will be able to overcome power struggles and historical grievances.

– translated from German –

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Water

Land between the Seas

Costa Rica's Role in Protecting the Oceans

Julia Sandner

Everyone is familiar with the annual Climate Change Conferences. However, the Ocean Conferences receive far less public attention even though life on the planet depends on intact oceans. Known as a "green oasis" and a "pioneer in sustainability", Costa Rica is set to co-host the third UN Ocean Conference in 2025. But what opportunities do these international conferences really offer, and what is the true state of ocean and environmental protection in this small Central American country?

"The ocean is fundamental to life on our planet and to our future. The ocean is an important source of the planet's biodiversity and plays a vital role in the climate system and water cycle. The ocean provides a range of ecosystem services, supplies us with oxygen to breathe, contributes to food security, nutrition and decent jobs and livelihoods, acts as a sink and reservoir of greenhouse gases and protects biodiversity, provides a means for maritime transportation, including for global trade, forms an important part of our natural and cultural heritage, and plays an essential role in sustainable development, a sustainable ocean-based economy and poverty eradication."[1] This is a quote from the political declaration issued at the UN Ocean Conference in 2022.

Around 71 per cent of the Earth's surface is covered by ocean, and only 29 per cent is covered by land mass. Initially only used for fishing, the sea has seen the development of important trade routes over the course of human history. This development has ultimately been accompanied by military activity with the formation of huge merchant fleets and war fleets. Systematic exploration of the oceans is a relatively recent phenomenon, leading to rich deposits of raw materials being discovered and to oil, sand and gravel being extracted. One current subject of controversial debate is deep-sea mining, which seeks to extract rare earths and manganese from the seabed. The consequences of such interventions in the ocean ecosystem were long unknown and/or ignored. As a seemingly inexhaustible resource, the ocean was also used as a sink for toxic waste. Today, the oceans contain ammunition remnants, sunken ships and pollutants as well as both domestic and industrial waste.

In addition, the warming of the world's oceans as a result of man-made climate change has led to further damage, with the oceans having been impacted by factors such as coral death, rising sea levels, acidification caused by increased absorption of CO_2 and an increasing lack of oxygen.

The impact on the climate affects all countries without exception. Therefore, it is essential for nations to join forces in tackling the challenges and coming up with solutions. Since 1995, the Climate Change Conferences (COP) have become established as important events attended by representatives of states and civil society. Even though their immense costs are certainly controversial, as are the constantly increasing numbers of attendees (and the environmental impact of CO_2 emissions that this causes), such conferences are nevertheless the primary setting in which all parties to the UN Climate Convention are able to articulate their needs and discuss the progress that is being made in connection with climate change.

In 2015, after years of difficult negotiations, the global community agreed to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the UN Sustainable Development Summit, including

"Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development".[2] Based on this agreement, a UN conference – called the UN Ocean Conference (UNOC) – was held for the first time in 2017 at the UN headquarters in New York with a sole focus on Goal 14. The second UNOC was held in Lisbon in 2022 – two years later than planned due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The conference that is currently planned for 9 to 13 June 2025 in Nice will be the third UN Ocean Conference and is to be jointly hosted by Costa Rica and France.

As co-host, Costa Rica has the opportunity to boost its reputation as a sustainability leader, to make its mark on the global stage and to expand its influence in the field of international environmental policy.

As early as 2021, Costa Rica had placed 30 per cent of its marine area under protection.

Costa Rica – A Pioneer in Environmental and Climate Action

With coastlines on both the Pacific and the Atlantic, Costa Rica has long been committed to marine conservation and is a trailblazer in sustainability. In 2024, representatives from several countries gathered in San José, Costa Rica, to prepare for the UN Ocean Conference, with 26 nations signing a "Peace for the Ocean Declaration": Apart from the host countries of France and Costa Rica,[3] these nations included Germany, Spain, Sweden, Canada, Colombia, Chile, Israel and South Korea.[4] In the declaration, the countries commit to upholding existing international agreements, such as the Kunming–Montreal Global Diversity Framework; to accelerating decision-making and to pushing forward the implementation of ongoing initiatives, including a potential UN plastics treaty based on UN Resolution 5/14. The countries additionally pledge to implement national and regional sustainable blue economy strategies,[5] to expand marine protected areas at both national and regional levels and to establish conservation zones on the high seas.

Costa Rica achieved the goal of placing 30 per cent of its marine area under protection as early as in 2021.[6] It should be noted that a large portion of Costa Rica's national territory is made up of marine areas since this territory also includes Cocos Island, which is situated 532 kilometres off the coast. Costa Rica's economy was long dominated by agriculture and livestock farming, with three-quarters of its forests having been cleared.[7] However, things have changed since the 1980s, with comprehensive reforestation programmes having been implemented and numerous national parks and protected areas having been established. It is thanks to this change in perspective that Costa Rica has gained its reputation as a "green country" and established itself as a Central American hotspot for ecotourism.

Is Everything That Glitters Really Green?

Despite its green image, the model country also has its fair share of problems. Costa Rica has extensive water reserves, and the country's water reservoirs are replenished almost all year round by rainfall, which at times can be very heavy. Indeed, Costa Rica is home to the location with the third-highest amount of rainfall in the world. However, even though this means that the country's water supply is sound, with 90 per cent of the population having access to clean drinking water,[8] Costa Rica still has deficits in terms of its water supply and wastewater disposal. Large quantities of drinking water are being lost due to dilapidated infrastructure, for example, while the number of interruptions to the water supply increased tenfold in the period from 2015 to 2023. Many households are not connected to the sewage system and instead generally maintain sealed pits in which wastewater is collected and that – in the best-case scenario – are periodically emptied, with the wastewater being transported to treatment plants, where it is processed for re-use. However,

employees of water treatment plants suspect that large quantities of wastewater are disposed of illegally and are discharged untreated into rivers only to later end up directly in the sea. At the country's narrowest point, the Pacific and the Atlantic are just 150 kilometres apart, while the longest river in the country measures just 160 kilometres. In 2024, the national water supplier Instituto Costarricense de Acueductos y Alcantarillados (AyA) presented a plan to protect water resources and reduce water loss while at the same time improving and expanding the existing water supply and disposal infrastructure.

More than 135 beaches in Costa Rica have been awarded the Blue Flag.

Another issue is the high use of pesticides in Costa Rica that is reported to be one of the world's most excessive users of pesticides. Alongside modern techniques, pesticides that are known to be harmful to health – and that in some cases have already been banned – are still in use. When applied to fields, these substances enter the groundwater, rivers and oceans.

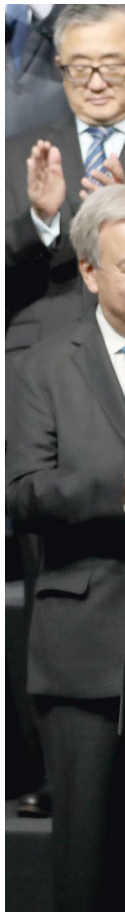
Costa Rica also has deficits in the area of waste disposal, which is not regulated in 30 per cent of municipalities. In the Limón region, for instance, which is a coastal region in the Caribbean, the rate of waste collection is just 40 per cent. This fact has a direct impact on the cleanliness of the sea,[9] with 60 to 80 per cent of marine pollution worldwide having been estimated to be caused by contamination from land-based activities.

With the aim of incentivising the population to reduce and recycle waste, in 2018, a system known as ecolones was introduced, which is a public–private partnership that now operates under the name ecoin.[10] By collecting and handing in re-usable materials, citizens can acquire so-called ecoins and manage them via an app. These ecoins can then later be used in an "e-shop" to purchase sustainable products from selected manufacturers.[11] This process raises consumers' awareness of the issue of sustainability while at the same time enabling them to contribute actively to environmental protection.

Another successful programme is Bandera Azul Ecológica (Ecological Blue Flag). The Blue Flag is an internationally established award for beaches and for municipalities located near the coast. Thus far, 51 countries have joined this initiative: Costa Rica did so in 1996, and since then more than 135 of its beaches have been awarded the Blue Flag. Criteria include the cleanliness of the drinking water (15 per cent) and seawater (35 per cent) in the region, but other aspects are also taken into account in the assessment, such as the recycling of grey water (15 per cent), the provision of waste containers (10 per cent) and the implementation of environmental education measures (10 per cent).[12]

In order to protect the oceans, the Costa Rican Ministry of Environment and Energy – together with the Ministry of Health – presented the Plan Nacional de Residuos Marinos 2021–2030[13] (National Plan to Combat Marine Pollution). With the aim of improving the living conditions of the population and protecting the marine ecosystem, various sectors were involved in the plan's conception. In addition to waste prevention and the management of waste that has already been deposited, the agenda also includes environmental education and awareness-raising among the population. Control mechanisms are to be established to monitor progress in the improvement and re-naturalisation of ecosystems, while efforts are also being made to ensure closer collaboration with the governments of other countries in the region and with international organisations.

The plan explicitly highlights the negative consequences of marine pollution, and these consequences go beyond environmental policy concerns since there are also socio-economic implications. Families in coastal regions whose income depends on fishing are particularly



An important forum for the protection of the oceans: In 2022, Portugal and Kenya (in the centre of the photo, the two then presidents, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa and Uhuru Kenyatta) co-hosted UNOC-2, the second UN Ocean Conference. In mid-2025, Costa Rica, alongside France, will co-host UNOC-3. Photo: © Pedro Fiuza, Zuma Press, Imago.

affected by marine pollution, as is the tourism sector, which in Costa Rica is very much oriented towards the country's natural treasures and biodiversity. Despite covering a surface area of just 51,060 square kilometres, Costa Rica is home to nearly half a million species, which represent between five and six per cent of the world's biodiversity. In comparison, Germany's land area is roughly seven times larger, but only 71,500 species have been identified there.[14] Fishing and tourism likewise pollute the oceans. According to studies, lost or inadequately discarded fishing nets – so-called "ghost nets" – account for up to 50 per cent of marine plastic.[15] Shipping traffic releases particulate matter, nitrogen oxides and sulphur dioxide into the atmosphere and the sea in addition to packaging waste and faeces. Because tourism encroaches on wildlife refuge areas, it can affect species in their habitat and disturb their resting areas. Accordingly, the National Plan clearly points out that failing to protect the environment, climate and species today will result in far higher costs in the future.

The National Plan to Combat Marine Pollution also emphasises the importance of innovation in this regard. In order to avoid single-use plastic, for instance, extensive databases are available with details of novel substitutes, for which such items as sugar cane, waste products from the coffee industry and avocado pits are used as

a basis. A list of raw materials that can be used instead of plastic has been compiled in recent years, and this work is to be continued: Indeed, small though it is, Costa Rica already has more than 35 listed suppliers of such alternative products. An active dialogue with the science community is also recognised as a key requirement for the further development of measures and the relevant impact assessment, while the implementation of the ten-year plan is intended to ensure continuity beyond changes of government.

President Rodrigo Chaves has rolled back progressive decisions on marine conservation.

However, the Informe Estado de la Nación (State of the Nation Report) – published in November 2024[16] – indicates that progress has stalled in recent years. The government that came to power in May 2022 under President Rodrigo Chaves has been accused of damaging the country's historically green image and jeopardising its pioneering position.[17] Throughout almost ten legislative terms, Costa Rica pursued a clear course with regard to nature conservation, but in the political discourse, environmental protection is now increasingly framed as a barrier to economic growth. Progressive decisions have also been rolled back in the area of marine conservation in this regard: Protected zones have been reduced, trawling is set to be reintroduced and more than 200 species have been approved for fishing, including turtles, sea cucumbers and marine iguanas. However, the report does highlight some positive developments: In mid-2024, the legislative assembly approved a proposal to protect coastal biodiversity. This plan includes a fund for payments to support marine ecosystem services in coastal areas that aims to provide financial assistance

Inconsistent rhetoric: While Costa Rica's president Rodrigo Chaves continues to cultivate the country's image as a green pioneer on the international stage, environmental protection plays at best a minor role on his domestic agenda. Photo: © Rafael Pacheco Granados, Newscom, GDA, Imago.

for fishers who work in coastal and water conservation.

The press and nature conservation organisations criticised the fact that President Chaves failed to mention the issues of climate change and nature conservation in his May 2024 address and in the corresponding report on his second year in office, or only referred to them in passing in connection with other areas.[18] The almost-140-page report contains nine focus areas, but these topics are not among them.[19]

Named after Escazú, the Costa Rican town where it was signed on 4 March 2018, one of the most important regional environmental protection agreements to date came into force in 2021. Many of the countries involved held back due to the scope of the agreement since they feared that their powers would be restricted too much in decisions that intervene in the natural environment, thereby placing economic interests above environmental protection. Even the host country of Costa Rica was among those that hesitated when it came to signing the agreement.[20]

In February 2023, Costa Rica's legislative assembly finally voted against continuing the accession process. The reason stated was that the regulations enshrined in Costa Rican law were already far-reaching enough and adequately reflected the requirements set out in the agreement. However, this decision sends out a powerful signal, and not just at the national level: Indeed, for other Latin American countries that have not yet completed the ratification process or that have not yet signed the agreement, there are now fewer incentives to continue the process.[21]

The Ocean Decade and UNOC

On the international stage, President Rodrigo Chaves continues to align with the established narrative of Costa Rica as a model nation. At the meeting of high-level politicians in San José in June 2024 in preparation for UNOC-3, he expressed his hope that Costa Rica's accomplishments in marine conservation would be recognised as examples of good practice that could serve the international community.[22]

Financing is likely to be one of the most controversial issues.

Held as part of the UN Decade of the Ocean (2021–2030), the preparatory meeting for the conference was entitled "Immersed in Change". The aim was to achieve a sustainable approach to the oceans by identifying and promoting innovative and sustainable solutions. Under the motto "The Science We Need for the Ocean We Want",[23] action strategies, international research projects and educational campaigns are to support the goal of restoring clean oceans by 2030, thereby enabling them to be used sustainably and to serve as a habitat for species while at the same time being available for economic development.

One such measure is the establishment of a global ocean observation system for pooling the necessary information. This system will enable early warning systems to be developed that are capable both of identifying extreme weather events and tsunamis at an early stage and of monitoring the spread of invasive species or other threats to biodiversity. There are additionally plans to create a digital twin of the ocean – that is, a dynamic virtual image – that will provide free access to comprehensive scientific data. Central goals of the Ocean Decade are "Clean Ocean" and "Healthy and Resilient Ocean". The focus is on preventing the discharge of pollutants and on rehabilitating the ocean habitat. The importance of the targeted use of research and innovation is also clearly emphasised in this connection.[24]

A milestone on the way to achieving these goals will be the UNOC-3 Ocean Conference, which is to be held in Nice in June 2025 and where efforts will also focus on securing commitment and advancing voluntary pledges on the part

of participating states. SDG 14 is currently the most underfunded United Nations Sustainable Development Goal. According to the German KfW bank, the global financing gap is estimated to be 150 billion US dollars per year.[25] The motto of the conference in Nice is "Accelerating action and mobilising all actors to conserve and sustainably use the ocean". However, without further financial commitments, this motto will be difficult to put into practice.

Therefore, the topic of financing is likely to be one of the most controversial issues, just as it is at the Climate Change Conferences. The relevant passage in the initial draft of the final declaration of UNOC-3[26] is rather vague and does not refer to any concrete pledges. Although more funding is recognised to be urgently needed, the subsequent wording tends to focus on the idea of "encouragement": The private sector – including banks, insurers and investors – is to focus its investments more on the transition towards a sustainable ocean-based economy, with particular emphasis being given to the importance of non-governmental organisations and private donors. As a result, more far-reaching financial commitments to ocean protection cannot be expected at the state level. Nevertheless, the conference has a crucial role to play in reinforcing the importance of protecting the oceans as a fundamental resource for human life both by raising political awareness and – through global media coverage – by fostering a broader public understanding of the issue.

The report of the Ocean Panel, a Norwegian-initiated body set up in 2018 for the sustainable management of oceans, coasts and coastal areas,[27] puts it in a nutshell: "Health, prosperity and well-being of the world and its people depend on the ocean".[28] Given that the world is now more interconnected than ever, this means that protecting the oceans is an urgent challenge that concerns every country and every individual. International conferences cannot solve all the problems, but they are important platforms for raising awareness, highlighting the importance of the topic and providing the necessary impetus for further action at the political, economic, scientific and social level.

At UNOC-3, Costa Rica has the opportunity to make its mark on international environmental policy once again, reinforcing its good reputation in terms of ocean conservation. What is more, presidential elections are due to be held in the country in 2026: A change of government would offer Costa Rica another chance to take a stronger stand in favour of environmental protection and to credibly defend its role as a green country.

– translated from German –

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Interjection

Other Topics

The Sun Rises in the Morning, Not in the Evening

On the Self-inflicted Causes of the Crisis in Journalism

Christoph Plate

The economic hardships facing many media outlets are currently stifling any discussion about these organisations' own culture of error and the urgent need for humility among journalists. However, journalism can only survive if it gets back to basics by refocusing on its core responsibilities and distancing itself from mere propaganda, activism and sensationalism.

When Edi Rama chats with journalists, it rarely bodes well for a fruitful discussion. At least, that is certainly what many media professionals in the Balkans believe. After all, the Albanian Prime Minister does not think very highly of journalists – or at least, not of those in Albania. Rama is a charismatic artist, a former basketball player and a scion of the Stalinist elite that ruled when his country was as isolated as North Korea is today. All three elements – that is, art, sport and an elitist mindset – underpin his political style. However, unlike many other Balkan politicians, Rama still talks to journalists. In fact, he even carries on talking when there's hardly anyone left to listen.

When Rama was due to address an international media conference in the Hotel International's conference hall in Tirana in the autumn of 2023, the Prime Minister entered with long, lanky strides, acting as if he wasn't the least bit aware of the generally hostile atmosphere among the journalists present. A politician who is currently busy getting his country into shape for EU membership, Rama is widely regarded as someone who thinks that media was at its best in Western Europe in the 1990s. On stage, he flips over the speech script prepared by his office and scribbles a few notes on the back. Rama is a shrewd operator – a master of rhetoric whose relaxed, even condescending manner ruffles his opponents' feathers as he makes no secret of his air of superiority. Rather than deliver a statesmanlike speech at the Hotel International, he chooses to share his personal take on modern journalism: He's been derogatorily called a homosexual in addition to having been accused of extramarital affairs and child abuse, he says, and he wonders how this sort of reporting – or in some cases, outright defamation – is supposed to help move the country forward.

The reactions in the room – and in front of the Albanian TV cameras – are unmistakable: Some listeners hiss back in disrespect, while others ask questions in a shaky voice that are in fact not genuine questions at all, but merely attempts to defend the journalistic profession. There is no discussion of the fact that Rama's criticisms are at least partly accurate: namely that many media outlets could improve how they deal with errors and that a culture of impunity in journalism leads to sloppy work and even activism.

Most of the journalists present refuse to engage with the core of the debate or simply ignore the opportunity for dialogue. However, up there on the podium sits a man who – although he handles dissent rather harshly and has even been accused of intimidation – is making a deliberate, pointed contribution at this media conference to call attention to wounds that many media professionals would rather ignore. And this is not just happening in Albania or in the Balkans; in fact, it is also happening in Western Europe, including in Germany. Serious, well-grounded journalism must be able to distance itself from poor-quality reporting, and it must be accountable both to its audience and to itself. It seems that journalism needs to get back to its roots and recommit to its core mission and standards.

What the debate in Tirana makes abundantly clear is that many journalists are all too willing to defend their profession wholesale without pressing for a clear break from those who engage in

entirely different practices, such as activism or propaganda. In troubled times such as these, it is not only in Albania that a form of journalism has to be called out that is not truly what it claims to be despite often being regarded as such by the public. Even those who reject sensationalist reporting still seem ready to stand by their profession, adhering to the old adage that one crow never plucks out another's eye. While doctors or architects might openly criticise serious errors made by their peers and lodge complaints with their respective associations, journalism tends to be marked by a sense of solidarity that is rationalised time and again by the need to defend the freedom of the press.

Journalism must rekindle the awareness of political issues among media consumers.

Quality media in other countries are also not always on top of things, often responding with a self-satisfied, blustering sort of defiance. The self-righteous way in which Der Spiegel dealt with the case of the award-winning fabricator Claas Relotius speaks volumes, as do the failings of his superiors, especially when the magazine's own shortcomings are boldly spun into a grand literary narrative. The top brass at Süddeutsche Zeitung also responded in a rather petulant manner to criticism of its coverage of politician Hubert Aiwanger and to probing questions about the journalistic accuracy of its former deputy editor-in-chief, who had been accused of plagiarism. An inquiry eventually concluded that while there was no evidence of outright copying, she had indeed flouted journalistic standards.

Moreover, if even the seasoned pros are openly ignoring such standards, what are young journalists supposed to think? In the summer of 2024, an international conference for young investigative journalists was held on the picturesque Croatian coast near Dubrovnik. Every kind of journalism should actually be probing and inquisitive – or in other words, investigative; therefore, the very notion of "investigative journalism" is itself something of a tautology. However, what was even more striking was that at the start, young journalists from Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Serbia, Bulgaria and several other south-eastern European countries were handed their conference materials in a linen bag, as it is common practice at such events, with the bag often being emblazoned with a catchy slogan. The bag that was distributed in Dubrovnik bore the stark warning: "Don't copy-paste – investigate". The fact that a reputable conference had to spell out the obvious – namely that plagiarism is simply unacceptable – speaks volumes about the gravity of the situation.

It goes without saying that journalism can and should be political: Indeed, it must rekindle the awareness of political issues among media consumers. However, according to media manager Leila Bičakčić, who works for an investigative portal in Sarajevo, it is a problem if political opinion outweighs journalistic expertise.[1] Media expert Fidel Hadebe adds that those in charge of newsrooms should never exploit their privileged positions to engage in partisan battles. Hadebe is from South Africa, where attempts to politically influence newsrooms are a daily reality.[2] What sort of journalism awaits us when objectivity is no longer an option – when everyone sees that it simply doesn't exist, asks the UK's Economist, warning that if everyone begins concocting their own version of reality, chaos is inevitable.[3] Meanwhile, in Tirana, Edi Rama quotes British historian Timothy Garton Ash, who once remarked that opinions are always free, but facts come at a price.

Journalism is a noble calling. There is a clear distinction between producing bricks or biscuits and engaging in journalism that sifts through information for the public and helps shape opinion. The latter comes with the obligation to handle responsibility conscientiously. Far too many journalists today seem driven by what Tübingen media scholar Bernhard Pörksen calls a "yearning for certainty"[4]: People want to be able to believe in something, to declare it to be the truth

and to be entitled to an opinion – all in order to define their own position and to feel like they are part of a like-minded community. However, the deeper the research goes, the more it reveals a host of answers – and with them, also plenty of uncertainty. Furthermore, sometimes, that very uncertainty is laid bare, ultimately leading to the honest admission that in the end, we simply cannot be absolutely sure.

Anyone who churns out shoddy bricks or bakes bland biscuits is bound to disappear from the market eventually. Sometimes, though, consumers might give them another chance – simply out of curiosity in order to see what the failing manufacturer will do to save himself, or other times because they've trusted the product for generations, be it detergent or the daily newspaper. Journalism can also benefit from a measure of consumer leniency, but this cannot happen too often. Without a willingness to embrace self-criticism and the humility needed to respect both the audience and the profession, journalism simply cannot fulfil its purpose.

We need journalists who constantly question whether their work serves the search for truth or merely fuels self-promotion.

So why aren't journalists more inclined to adopt practices that have long been embraced by others? If athletes are willing to come clean about doping and the Catholic Church is forced to confront the painful truth that perhaps only open

United in mutual dislike? Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama speaks to the press in December 2022 at the EU Western Balkans Summit in Tirana. Many journalists see him as someone who looks down on the media. He himself complains about the spread of false reports, including about his private life. Photo: © Pixsell, Imago.

debate about abuse can save it, then the media should also be prepared to engage in a frank discussion about their own culture of error. They ought to explain why they choose to cover one story and not another, what significance they attach to a given story, how they stumbled upon it and how they tracked its development. Consumers are entitled to all this information, and they are often genuinely interested in the details.

Journalism is needed now more than ever, and especially the kind of serious reporting that takes time. The big wide world – and even the little one we inhabit ourselves – is becoming increasingly chaotic, more difficult to explain and nearly impossible to understand. Journalism that dares to go where things stink and that asks questions that hurt can at least help us make sense of it all. We need journalists who constantly question whether their work serves the search for truth or merely fuels their own agenda and self-promotion.

Media professionals need to be able to distance themselves from propagandists and activists.

Bosnian media manager Leila Bičakčić recounts how she discovered that the young journalists she had hired already held strong opinions on issues – opinions that might have been welcomed if these journalists had not been solely geared towards finding evidence to back up their own personal prejudices. Moreover, anyone working in Sarajevo – such as Bičakčić – knows all too well how dangerous such prejudices can be, especially given the history of religious and ethnic hatred in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The young Bosnian journalists were let go because they were activists – champions of a supposedly worthy cause, but not real journalists.

Media professionals need to be able to distance themselves from propagandists and activists. The greatest threat to journalism is not just fake news, propaganda or figures such as Vladimir Putin with his trolls and disinformation campaigns; rather, it is also those who do a poor job and slap the label "journalism" on their results, be it out of convenience, a lack of resources or activist zeal. In an era when journalism is mimicking social media, as Swiss publicist Roger de Weck points out, it is becoming increasingly difficult to truly reach audiences. Journalism also requires a willingness to be self-critical: If journalists are constantly telling politicians and managers what they can do better, they should also show a willingness to listen themselves, demands de Weck.[5]

Some media consumers yearn for a medium that simply states things as they are – one whose journalists are not on an endless self-promotion trip and in which substance comes before style. A wall is white and not yellow, and the sun rises in the morning and not in the evening – end of discussion. Just like the good old news agencies of the past, which did not editorialise, but merely reported the facts.

One man in Montenegro is striving to do exactly that, and he has been successful because he consistently navigates the turbulent social forces in his country with credible claims to impartiality. When you visit physicist Jasa Jovicevic and his team, the first thing you notice is a socialist block of flats and a bare room filled with computers. However, what the co-owner of the MINA news agency in Podgorica's Stari Aerodrom district has to say about their work quickly makes you forget all about the drab concrete setting. Over the past 20 years, Jovicevic – along with several partners and with the then support of USAID – has built something that appears to be nothing short of a small miracle in a country of barely 600,000 inhabitants: He and his team of one and a half dozen journalists produce up to one hundred or more news reports a day and boast subscriptions from Montenegrin media, embassies in Podgorica and various government ministries. The agency has been consolidated with the backing of a telecommunications firm that was sold profitably a few years ago, a state-of-the-art TV studio in the basement rented out

to external producers and a lucrative cloud business. For Jovicevic, it's all about credibility in an extremely polarised society, with the aim being to establish the agency as a reliable news source. Amidst the country's political divides, the enterprise adheres to the old-fashioned credo of a good news agency, reporting only what has truly been verified.

Some time ago in Podgorica, for instance, a rumour was circulating that former Thai Prime Minister Sinawatra might have obtained Montenegrin citizenship. Being a news agency, MINA reached out to the Thai ministries and the local residents' registration office, but no one was willing to confirm the report. Instead of running a story merely to note that unverified rumours were circulating, the agency opted not to publish it at all. Even some reputable media outlets in Germany might have been tempted to run such a story, perhaps with a disclaimer that it was unclear how much of it was true. In Podgorica, it eventually emerged that the former Thai Prime Minister was indeed the holder of a Montenegrin passport; however, as Jovicevic points out, that lost story is simply the price to be paid for reliability. Along with his editor-in-chief Milan Zugic, Jovicevic says that 15 years ago, the whole race was simply to be the first to publish a story. "I never imagined that today, being accurate, precise and reliable would become so crucial", says Jovicevic. He believes in the future of news journalism, says the businessman who has evolved into a passionate publisher.

Journalism often resorts to outrage – much like as is seen on social media. And this phenomenon is not limited only to the Balkans. Indeed, in South Africa, Nigeria and even Germany, cancel culture is spreading as if journalism were some kind of cult – and in a cult, there's no room for deviation from the norm. Is cancelling then merely a timid and unsophisticated reaction on the part of journalists to the complexities of our modern world? Is it a defiant response to working conditions that haven't actually improved? Do we simply dismiss a person or their views because we lack the time or inclination to engage with the subject? Or do we fall for the deliberate provocation of a newspaper such as Die Welt – and then become indignant about the printing of a second-rate piece by Elon Musk, the head of X?

The situation is serious: It is a matter of survival for informative journalism that contextualises and helps guide decisions. Not all journalists seem to grasp how dramatic things have become – especially those who don't have to worry about a financial plan for their medium because they're backed by philanthropists. Some time after the scene with Edi Rama in Tirana described above, an Albanian journalist representing a respected, award-winning investigative platform – one that is funded by Western grants – declared that anyone who shares a panel with Rama to discuss press freedom is complicit simply because Rama is notoriously unfriendly to the Albanian media. The environmental editor got so worked up that a previously peaceful lunch was nearly derailed. However, journalism that circulates exclusively within its own cult-like peer group – that is, within a group that refuses to engage in dialogue with opponents – is unlikely to have a future, be it economically or – ultimately – ideologically.

– translated from German –

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