

Europe in Search of a Broader Geopolitical Space?

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One of the most interesting statements in Ursula von der Leyen' s recent State of the Union address may have been somewhat overshadowed by her politically striking proposal to pave the way for Canada to become the European Union' s first "associate member" . The President of the European Commission said something apparently simple: **"We share one ocean, one set of values, one way of seeing the world."** This reference to the ocean should not be regarded as rhetorical embellishment. On the contrary, it acquires particular political significance when considered alongside the **European Ocean Pact**, the OceanEye initiative, the planned **European Ocean Act**, and the European Union' s broader efforts to strengthen its strategic autonomy. Perhaps for the first time with such clarity and scope, the ocean is emerging not merely as a shared environmental asset, but as a **geopolitical space**.

From Ocean Protection to Ocean Geopolitics

For decades, European maritime policy developed primarily around individual sectors: fisheries, shipping, protection of the marine environment, ports, renewable energy and marine biotechnology. Subsequently, the

revitalisation of the Integrated Maritime Policy—in 2012, under the Cypriot Presidency—and the introduction of Maritime Spatial Planning—in 2014, under the Greek Presidency—sought to bring these activities together within a more coherent framework.

Today, however, a further significant step appears to be under way. The ocean is now directly connected with energy security, critical raw materials, subsea infrastructure, defence, technology, Earth observation, artificial intelligence, climate security and, ultimately, geopolitical power.

The very meaning of European ocean policy is therefore changing. The ocean is no longer regarded merely as a space to be protected, but as one that we must simultaneously understand, plan, manage and safeguard—and, above all, be capable of defending. From this perspective, the choice of Canada as a privileged partner is particularly significant. The European Union and Canada meet across the Atlantic and in the Arctic and possess considerable potential for cooperation in ocean science, marine observation, maritime technologies, energy and critical raw materials.

It is therefore far from coincidental that von der Leyen included the **Arctic** as a **flagship joint project** within the new relationship with Canada, alongside energy, critical raw materials, technology, cybersecurity and defence. Nor is it insignificant that this approach coincides with the OceanEye initiative, through which the European Union aims substantially to strengthen its contribution to the global ocean-observation system.

Canada's undertaking to host the 12th Our Ocean Conference, to be held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in the spring of 2027, points in the same direction. Launched in 2014, the **Our Ocean Conference** is not merely another international forum for dialogue. It mobilises governments, international organisations, scientific institutions, businesses and civil society around specific, voluntary and measurable commitments to ocean protection. Canada's hosting of the Conference therefore adds institutional depth to the emerging EU–Canada convergence, bringing together marine protection,

climate action, Indigenous leadership, a sustainable blue economy and maritime security.

What is gradually taking shape is thus something broader than another bilateral partnership: the possibility of establishing a **Euro-Canadian strategic ocean space**, connecting science and data, technology and the environment, energy, the economy, security and, potentially, defence.

Ocean Knowledge as Strategic Power

The knowledge dimension is crucial. In the twenty-first century, the capacity to understand more fully what is happening in the ocean is a prerequisite both for effective governance and for strategic power. Seabed mapping, ecosystem observation, climate-change forecasting, the monitoring of maritime activities and subsea infrastructure, autonomous observation systems and digital twins of the ocean are no longer merely scientific tools. They constitute a **strategic knowledge infrastructure**.

Viewed in this light, “OceanEye” assumes a significance far greater than that of yet another European research programme. Europe’ s ambition to contribute 35% of the global ocean-observation system by 2035 now **links scientific knowledge directly to strategic autonomy**.

Within this new reality, Maritime Spatial Planning also takes on a different dimension. It can no longer be treated simply as a mechanism for locating economic activities. Its scope and role must be deepened. It is called upon to organise a maritime space in which offshore energy production, marine protected areas, shipping, fisheries and aquaculture, tourism, underwater cultural heritage, cables and pipelines, military activities and critical infrastructure coexist—alongside both longstanding and emerging seabed risks, such as the munitions (UXO etc.) from the two World Wars that still lie beneath the sea.

The envisaged connection between the revision of the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive and the future European Ocean Act is therefore of exceptional importance. The planning of maritime space can gradually evolve into a genuine **infrastructure for ocean governance**.

From National Waters to Sea Basins

This new approach has a further important consequence: the ocean does not conform to the administrative boundaries upon which most public policies have been built. Ecosystems, ocean currents, pollution, fish stocks, energy interconnections, subsea cables and maritime risks are not confined within national borders.

Consequently, the real test of the new European ocean policy will lie in its ability to move beyond the logic of separate national maritime spaces towards meaningful **sea-basin governance**.

Here, the Mediterranean—and the Eastern Mediterranean in particular—is perhaps the most complex, yet also one of the most important, European laboratories. In a sea basin connecting EU Member States with third countries, biodiversity protection, the energy transition, maritime transport, critical infrastructure and climate change intersect with overlapping or contested maritime jurisdictions, geopolitical tensions and widely differing levels of institutional capacity.

Seen from this perspective, the phrase *“We share one ocean”* may prove more important than it appears today. Not because it heralds some new form of “sovereignty over the ocean” — far from it —but because it suggests that the concept of **European strategic autonomy is acquiring a distinct maritime dimension**. A Europe seeking greater strategic autonomy must understand what is happening in its seas, protect its ecosystems, safeguard its energy and digital infrastructure, plan the uses of maritime space coherently and, at the same time, build strong alliances with countries that share its principles and interests.

In this sense, the invitation extended to Canada carries significance far beyond the institutional discussion surrounding “associate membership” . It may signal a deeper shift: the gradual transition from a European maritime policy focused primarily on the economy and the environment **towards a genuine European geopolitics of the ocean**. This may well be one of the most important—albeit least discussed—messages of the European Commission President’ s recent address.

For Greece, it is, we believe, crucial not to remain a mere observer. On the contrary, as a maritime nation par excellence, with a deeply cosmopolitan character, it should play a leading role in shaping the emerging European strategy.