

Netherlands priorities for an EU Port strategy

Competitive and secure European seaports in an era of global competition

The Netherlands welcomes the European Commission's initiative to develop an EU Port Strategy (EU PS). European seaports are the Union's gateway to the rest of the world and vice versa and important drivers of economic growth and employment. Given current geopolitical challenges and the EU's need to strengthen competitiveness, this strategy is both timely and necessary. European seaports are vital players in our economy, security and sustainability. Simultaneously concerns are growing about maintaining the EU's position in the global port economy, particularly given high energy prices, foreign competition and the need to strengthen the security of supply of (critical) bio raw materials. This underscores the need for decisive government policies and targeted measures contributing to a level playing field and strengthening the economic position of European seaports.

All these developments make this Commission initiative extremely valuable. The Netherlands is pleased to share its ideas and preferences regarding the EU PS to support the Commission in their preparatory work. Hereby emphasizing the importance of building on the issues addressed in the European Parliament's report, *'Building a Comprehensive European Port Strategy'*. The Netherlands appreciates the position paper shared by Denmark and endorses the views shared therein.

To foster dialogue, the Netherlands has engaged in consultations with multiple EU Member States (EU MS) on the topic over the last year. Additionally, the Netherlands commissioned two national research institutes to conduct a study on the parameters of a strategic policy framework for the EU and its Member States, focusing on effectively managing foreign involvement in European seaports and port-related logistics.¹ Moreover a study has been conducted under the Dutch co-presidency of the North Seas Energy Cooperation concluding swift action is required to develop new port infrastructure and upgrading existing facilities for offshore wind installation and manufacturing.²

Based on this work and on continuous consultations with the port sector, the Netherlands proposes a threefold approach along the promote, protect and partner pillars of open strategic autonomy.

Promote

Strengthening the economic position of EU seaports and enhancing their competitiveness is crucial to maintain the seaports vital functions. An EU PS is instrumental for establishing a *level-playing-field*, both among EU ports and vis-a-vis ports in third countries, thereby reducing the potential for foreign actors to exploit divisions among European countries. Seaports are crucial hubs for international transport, logistics, and clusters for energy and industrial activity. As recently pointed out in the proposal for a Competitiveness Compass for the EU, seaports play a pivotal role in advancing several high-priority EU objectives like the Clean Industrial Deal. In this light, the Netherlands envisions several key measures to include in the EU PS:

- ❖ *Investment in Infrastructure:* assess the investment needs for port facilities, hinterland connections to and from multimodal nodes, and overseas territories. Ensure that funding is secured for a multimodal transport system to enhance the future competitiveness of national economies, with a particular focus on ports. Infrastructure should be prioritized in the context of the ongoing Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) discussions, with a special emphasis on renewable energy hubs, hydrogen infrastructure, and alternative fuels. The Connecting Europe Facility plays a critical role in supporting the objectives of the TEN-T Regulation, particularly for seaports within the network. Guarantee the allocation of necessary space in and around seaports to accommodate essential transitions, such as transshipment, the circular economy, and the energy transition.
- ❖ *Optimize efficiency of seaports:* EU Member States are encouraged to prioritize the allocation of adequate space for port development and explore further specialization. This with the aim to enhance the resilience and competitiveness of EU seaports vis-à-vis seaports on other continents.
- ❖ *Energy transition & cost reduction:* promote the interconnectivity of new energy infrastructure for hydrogen (carriers) and its derivatives and CO₂ between major industrial clusters. The EU PS should be aligned with the Sustainable Transport Investment Plan, ensuring European ports to play their strategic role in the production and distribution of sustainable transport fuels. As well as with the Affordable Energy Action Plan to mitigate high energy prices, ensuring European ports are not at a structural disadvantage. This is particularly important in the first years to come, when the early scale-up phase of renewable and low carbon sources is still underway. The transition to new energy sources and raw materials introduces emerging safety challenges, including incident response. To address these, it is essential to foster cooperation and knowledge exchange between ports and member states, and to develop Best Available Techniques (BAT) reference documents to support permitting processes.
- ❖ *Green transition & climate:* work towards increasing the availability and interconnectivity of an electric grid and clean fuels like infrastructure for hydrogen (carriers), as well as the physical infrastructure across the EU. Utilize seaports for e.g.

¹ Clingendael & Erasmus UPT: "[Port politics: Strategic autonomy and European ports | Clingendael](#)", 20 September 2024

² Royal HaskoningDHV, North Seas Offshore Wind Port Study 2030-2050, <https://offshorewind.rvo.nl/blog/view/d032ccbb-66e7-4464-aada-048a61cd9868/north-seas-offshore-wind-port-study-2030-2050-in-english>, 30 November 2023.

renewable energy solutions, sustainable aquaculture, carbon capture, utilization and storage (CCUS). Promote trade, storage, refinery and transformation of alternative raw materials with an eye on a circular economy. Integrate climate adaptation into the strategy and work towards a joint approach for future-proof and climate-resilient seaports..

- ❖ *Regulatory efficiency & workforce development:* assess where administrative processes can be streamlined, reduce excessive regulatory burdens, and minimize regulatory red tape. Provide pilot possibilities for ports and industrial clusters. Support workforce training in renewable energy, automation, and digital logistics through upskilling programs, EU-wide standards, and industry-aligned apprenticeships.
- ❖ *Digitalization & innovation:* encourage port digitalization programs to enhance efficiency, automation, and competitiveness.

Protect and prepare

The security environment of European ports is rapidly evolving amid growing geopolitical turbulence. In recent years, foreign investments and operational control in the maritime sector, including by state-owned enterprises from strategic competitors have grown significantly with the potential of being used as economic tools to exert influence for political gain. Seaports hereby play a pivotal role as facilitators of critical logistics and supply chains of energy and critical raw materials. This underscores the need to safeguard the open strategic autonomy of the sector and the Union as a whole, by limiting harmful foreign influence, protecting vital infrastructure and mitigating data- and cyber risks. While also addressing the renewed military and defense significance and the need to tackle organized crime. Key measures to include:

- ❖ *Address foreign Influence:* conduct an EU-wide risk assessment of foreign involvement in seaports, identifying vulnerabilities related to ownership, operational control, and strategic dependencies. Improve cooperation and knowledge sharing between EU Member States on the screening of Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) and enable EU Member States to strengthen their national FDI screening mechanisms to prevent excessive foreign influence over ports.
- ❖ *Cyber & data security:* establish minimum cybersecurity standards for port IT systems, and promote the adoption of relevant IT and OT security standards, particularly in port community systems and container terminals. Define guidelines for trusted technology use, focusing on third-country hardware and software risks, including ship-to-shore cranes and scanning equipment. Strengthen information-sharing mechanisms on software and data exchange vulnerabilities and cyber threats like Artificial Intelligence to improve resilience.
- ❖ *Open strategic autonomy & crisis preparedness:* identify and mitigate strategic dependencies within port logistics, ensuring supply chain continuity in times of crisis. Support EU MS in developing contingency plans for major disruptions, including deliberate foreign interventions. Conduct regular crisis simulation exercises to enhance maritime-logistics crisis management capabilities.
- ❖ *Combatting organized crime:* align with the European Ports Alliance (EPA) to enhance port resilience against organized crime, focusing on information-sharing, monitoring and reporting, and detection of corruption in ports. The points raised in the non-paper on an effective EU Ports Alliance and EU Ports Strategy to tackle organized crime by the Coalition of European Countries against Organized Crime are important. The Netherlands invites the Commission to assess how to shape the cooperation between the European Ports Alliance and relevant third countries on topics such as combatting organized crime.
- ❖ *Military mobility:* ensure that seaports and hinterland connections are fit for purpose in facilitating military mobility and host nation support. Ensure the allocation of sufficient funding for military and dual-use infrastructure projects under the MFF, by looking at a broad range of financial options. Support EU MS, where needed, in arranging assured access and services agreements with port **authorities** and/or stevedoring companies, as well as suitable legislation for permits, accessibility and prioritization.

Partner

Strengthening the competitiveness of EU seaports and related logistics, while limiting harmful foreign influence and mitigating security risks requires extensive collaboration between EU MS, as well as with non-EU partners, and the private sector. Key measures to include:

- ❖ *Enhanced Cooperation:* foster greater collaboration and dialogue between the European Commission, member states, and seaports, focusing on boosting competitiveness and economic vitality. Leverage the global international contacts of European seaports.
- ❖ *Coordinated risk monitoring & decision-making:* create an expert forum within the European Commission for national and port experts to discuss security- and cyber risks in seaport-related logistics.
- ❖ *EU and international collaboration:* ensure alignment with existing platforms, such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the European Sea Ports Organisation (ESPO) and International Association of Ports and Harbors (IAPH).

- ❖ *Training & awareness:* enhance education programs for national and EU-level experts and port personnel on (economic) security threats, corruption, cybersecurity, and foreign influence risks. Promote joint training exercises for national agencies and port authorities.
- ❖ *Communication & outreach:* increase engagement with policymakers, the maritime sector, and the general public to raise awareness of emerging risks and share best practices. Support business in seaports in becoming more resilient.