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## France sets course for integration

**With its new national maritime strategy, France is aiming to integrate industrial, environmental and security policy for the entire sector. Andrew Spurrier asks whether this is an ambition too far**

Andrew Spurrier - mercredi 16 décembre 2009

THE French have a phrase for a construction that is so large and complicated in its conception that it ends up serving virtually no useful purpose. They call it a *usine à gaz* — a gas factory, meaning something that produces little except useless gases.

The phrase came to mind when the French government announced it had adopted the blue book containing its freshly formulated “integrated” maritime policy this month under the title National Strategy for the Sea and the Oceans.

It was not just an extended shipping and ports policy under another name. The new strategy aims to cover the whole range of human activity related to the sea, whether it be in the form of business or leisure.

It seeks to formulate a policy that is applicable to oyster farmers and fishermen as much as to operators of giant cargo vessels and the great ports that receive them, to beach users and leisure sailors as much as to shipyards and offshore energy producers.

The objective is ambitious to say the least. Indeed, one wonders whether it is not too ambitious — if, in aiming to have a global approach to the sea and all that is done in, on and around it, one does not risk ending up with something that serves the interests of no one or, perhaps worse, serves the interests of some to the detriment of others.

For shipping and the industries associated with it, the danger clearly would be that vote-winning environmental considerations should gain such political ascendancy as to make the exercise of their activities unreasonably difficult or even impossible.

Those involved in drawing up the new policy do not see this cohabitation of different and even conflicting interests necessarily as a problem, however.

Bernard Richelet of the Secretariat General of the Sea, which co-ordinates French government action in the maritime and marine sectors and has played a key role in the formulation of the new integrated maritime policy, argues that, for good or ill, the integrated approach reflects the world as it is today and the position of the maritime sector within it.

“It is the evolution of the 21st century,” he says. “Maritime policy can only be integrated and global. The sectoral [approach] does not work any more.”

No maritime profession or interest group could lay claim any more to a reserved zone of activity, he says. Fishermen have to share their space with merchant shipping, windfarm operators and others.

The objective of the new integrated maritime policy is to promote dialogue between the different interest groups in such a way as to enable each to advance.

“It is the general satisfaction via particular satisfaction,” says Mr Richelet. “Everyone loses five small percentage points, but at the price of redistributing them to the others.”

The path to France’s new maritime policy has been a relatively long one and stretches back to the early part of the current decade.

The policy was largely prefigured by the Poseidon report in December 2006. A group of personalities from different maritime sectors, who were commissioned by a previous government to come up with proposals for a new French maritime policy, said that such a policy needed to be “integrated” if government action in the maritime sector was to be efficient.

Research was carried out at the time into integrated maritime policies in other countries, with particular attention given to models in use in Canada, the US, Australia, Japan, Norway and the UK.

Jean-François Minster, scientific director at the Total oil group and a former member of the Poseidon group, recalls that approaches differed considerably from country to country according to the perceived priorities of each.

In Canada, he says, the starting point was the need to defend Canadian interests in the Arctic; in Australia, it was the need to protect the Great Barrier Reef.

In its own way, however, each country was confronted with the same basic problem — how to reconcile the need to protect marine and coastal eco-systems with the need to exploit the seas and oceans through economic activity of various types.

In France, the elaboration of an integrated maritime policy seems to have arisen from the conjunction of a series of political currents rather than the need to find a solution to a particular environmental problem.

The election of Nicolas Sarkozy to the French presidency in May 2007 brought the maritime sector to the front of the national stage as it had never been before.

But it also gave unprecedented prominence to environmental questions, placing responsibility for shipping and transport questions with the Ministry for Ecology, Energy and Sustainable Development under “super minister” Jean-Louis Borloo.

It should be noted, too, that Mr Sarkozy’s arrival in power occurred as the European Union was putting the final touches to its own first integrated maritime policy, which was adopted in October 2007.

The French president won his maritime credentials by committing himself to carrying out a long-awaited reform of the governance and functioning of major French ports and then ensuring that the French state took a 33% blocking stake in the STX France shipyard following STX’s takeover of the former Aker Yards France last year.

In July this year, however, he went much further, with a landmark speech calling for the adoption of a new policy for the whole of the maritime sector before the end of the year.

“We must reconstruct a policy and maritime ambition for France around new challenges: those of a planet that is exhausting its resources; those of a planet that is rediscovering its renewable energies; and those of a globalised planet that breathes through international trade,” he said.

Mr Sarkozy laid out the broad lines of the policy that was adopted last week by prime minister François Fillon and other senior ministers participating in the first inter-ministerial committee for the sea for five years.

The 40-page document is essentially a statement of guiding principles and objectives, constructed around four themes: protection of the marine environment, development of the marine economy, promotion of the marine dimensions of French overseas territories and the reinforcement of France’s role as a maritime power at international level.

The government was careful, however, to give these guiding principles concrete form through the announcement of a series of measures for immediate application.

These included a number of environmental and administrative initiatives. For the shipping sector, though, the most emblematic was the launch of a “ship of the future” programme to develop “cleaner, safer, more intelligent” vessels with reduced fuel consumption.

A council for research and innovation in shipbuilding and other naval activities is to be set up to oversee the programme.

The government also pledged to give early ratification to the Hong Kong Convention for safe and environmentally sound recycling of obsolete vessels and to set up a parliamentary commission to study the prospects for developing ship recycling in France.

A central coastguard-type body is to be established to oversee the country's coastal surveillance and rescue services, which at the moment are run on a regional basis, while merchant navy training is to be streamlined under the aegis of a new national merchant navy higher education establishment.

French Maritime Cluster chairman Francis Vallat, who was closely involved in the consultations that preceded publication of the new policy, admits to having had some serious fears as to the balance the new policy would strike between environmental and economic objectives.

In the end, he says, he is relieved, considering that the "excesses" he had feared had been avoided in the final document adopted by the government last week.

Asked whether he does not consider that the scope of the policy risks rendering it ineffectual, he says: "At the conceptual level, it is very French. From the point of view of the French maritime community, it is a complication, but it is a complication we have to learn to live with."

"Like it or not is not the question," he adds. "We no longer have the choice. There is no other choice apart from an integrated maritime policy."

Jean-François Minster, a former head of French marine research institute Ifremer, is not concerned about the wide-ranging nature of the new policy or the problems that might arise from efforts to apply it.

"We will not be doing everything at the same time," he says, arguing that the new policy will be less a new administrative constraint than an instrument that would help to promote a change of culture that was already taking place.

It will encourage closer contract between the different sectors and interest groups involved, he adds.

"Everyone needs to move towards sustainability," he says "They must integrate it into their daily activities."