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Charting the Course: Ireland's Ocean Diplomacy

by Heather Burke

Introduction

Ocean diplomacy, ocean governance, maritime strategies, the blue economy and resilience of coastal communities have emerged in recent months as key concerns of the EU institutions and many Member States. All are themes that Ireland – as a small island nation surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean and situated at the western-most edge of the EU – is well-suited to champion at an EU and international level.

This Explainer examines the adoption of the new EU Ocean Pact, the ratification by the EU and some EU Member States of the “High Seas Treaty” (the BBNJ), in advance of the third UN Ocean Conference, and Ireland’s Presidency of the Atlantic Strategy Committee in 2025. This suggests a course that Ireland can continue to leverage in its upcoming Presidency of the Council of the EU (July-December 2026). Furthermore, this opportunity is amplified by the fact that Cyprus – another small island nation – will assume the Presidency immediately before Ireland (Jan- June 2026) and has publicly committed to implementing the EU Ocean Pact during its Presidency¹.

Charting the Waters of Ocean Governance

On 5 June 2025, the European Commission adopted the European Ocean Pact which aims to integrate the existing patchwork of ocean policies into one comprehensive framework. Due to the sheer breadth of issues covered by ocean governance (from climate change mitigation to maritime economies and biodiversity conservation to protection of undersea cables), a sprawling list of regulations, directives, policies, pacts and committees had previously attempted to govern and guide the EU’s approach to the ocean and sea basins. Now, the European Ocean Pact offers a synergistic strategy that will focus on six priorities:

1. Protecting and restoring ocean health;
2. Boosting the competitiveness of the EU sustainable blue economy;
3. Supporting coastal, island communities and outermost regions;
4. Advancing ocean research, knowledge, skills and innovation;
5. Enhancing maritime security and defence;
6. Strengthening EU Ocean diplomacy and international ocean governance.

Governance of the European Ocean Pact will operate on a multi-level, cooperative basis within the EU between countries, regions, stakeholders such as fishers, and will include innovators, scientists, investors and citizens.

It was clear that Commission President von der Leyen and Costas Kadis, the Cypriot Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans, were keen to get agreement on the European Ocean Pact in advance of the UN’s [third Ocean Conference](#) (UNOC3), which was held in Nice, France from 9-13 June 2025 to establish its leadership credentials in this area and to demonstrate its strong commitment to responsible and sustainable ocean governance and to multilateral cooperation. The outcome that emerged from the UN Conference was a political declaration entitled: [“Our Ocean, Our Future: United for Action”](#) that affirms the need for an integrated, interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral approach to global ocean stewardship. An Taoiseach Micheál Martin addressed the delegates at the UN Ocean Conference, stating that as a country “with a coastline of more than 7,400km and a maritime space seven times that of our land, the importance of conserving and safeguarding our marine areas cannot be understated.” Notably, he referred to Ireland’s Presidency of the Council of the EU as an opportunity to focus on key marine and maritime priorities².

¹ <https://cyprus-mail.com/2025/06/09/cyprus-commits-to-stronger-regional-ties-for-marine-protection>

² <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-the-taoiseach/speeches/3rd-un-ocean-conference-national-statement-ireland-taoiseach-miche%C3%A1l-martin/>

For Ireland, the focus of ocean governance will be the Atlantic Ocean, where it plays a leading role as President of the [Atlantic Strategy Committee](#) (ASC) for 2025. The ASC consists of representatives from the four EU Member States that border the Atlantic, alongside members from the European Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee. The ASC is the governing body of the Atlantic Strategy, first launched in 2011 to enable more open and effective cooperation between Ireland, France, Portugal and Spain. As the strategy has matured and EU political priorities evolved, so too has the Atlantic Strategy. In 2013, its priorities were to:

1. Promote entrepreneurship and innovation;
2. Protect, secure and enhance the marine and coastal environment;
3. Improve accessibility and connectivity;
4. Create a socially inclusive and sustainable model of regional development.

By 2017, and as a result of a mid-term review, the strategy was redirected to achieve more ambitious targets in respect of coastal economies.

In 2020, the [Atlantic Action Plan 2.0](#) (AAP 2.0) restated its economic ambitions for coastal communities, and in particular ports, while emphasising the significance of climate change adaptation and mitigation. Its priorities are:

1. Ports as gateways and hubs for the blue economy;
2. Blue skills of the future and ocean literacy;
3. Marine renewable energy;
4. Healthy ocean and resilient coasts.

By 2025, three new points of emphasis were added by the EU Ocean Pact to the ambitions of the AAP 2.0, namely:

1. Boosting competitiveness (in line with political priorities of the new European Commission);
2. Enhancing maritime security and defence (given current geopolitical threats to trade routes, sub-sea cables, offshore energy infrastructure and issues associated with deep-sea mining of ocean seabed);
3. Strengthening EU Ocean Diplomacy and international ocean governance.

[From Ireland's ASC Presidency to Presidency of the Council of the EU](#)

The emphasis in the EU Ocean Pact on ocean diplomacy will have a particular resonance for Ireland in 2025 as current President of the rotating Atlantic Strategy Committee and as it prepares for its Presidency of the Council of the EU. Ireland's leadership of the ASC over the course of the year has seen it host the [European Maritime Day](#), held in Cork in May 2025. On 13 November 2025, Ireland will also host the 12th [Annual Stakeholder Platform Conference](#) at the Marine Institute in Galway in tandem with [Interreg's Annual Atlantic](#) event.

The 2025 Annual Stakeholder Platform Conference will offer an opportunity for current stakeholders including European institutions, national and regional authorities, investors and researchers to gather and explore the future alignment of the Atlantic Action Plan with the European Ocean Pact.

This is an opportunity for Ireland to lead in ocean diplomacy efforts at EU level. Ocean diplomacy refers to the use of diplomatic strategies and negotiations to address global challenges related to the ocean and sea basins including the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean is one of the most ecologically significant regions in Europe but is a complex region, encompassing nine EU Member States and 13 non-EU countries. Arguably, its weak governance structures could necessitate the use of diplomatic tools to support an integrated approach

with non-EU neighbours to the South and East. Furthermore, ocean diplomacy could be an important channel to develop deeper ties with enlargement candidate countries, where the Mediterranean Sea, as a shared resource, necessitates an integrated and mutually beneficial approach.



Source: Atlantic Strategy Committee

Cyprus, Ireland and an East-West Equilibrium

Cyprus will host the European Maritime Day in May 2026, coinciding with its Presidency of the Council of the EU, one month before Ireland takes over the reins. Cyprus will prioritise the link between ocean diplomacy and raising awareness about the importance of seas and oceans and the promotion of sustainable practices in the maritime and blue economy sectors as well as regulations supporting small scale fisheries, which are also of interest to Ireland. Furthermore, President Niko Christodoulides of Cyprus recently affirmed that Cyprus supports a dedicated sea basin strategy for the Eastern Mediterranean, given not just its ecological and economic importance and significance for maritime security for EU supply routes, but also the geopolitical importance of a secure and stable East Mediterranean region for the wider security of the EU. Cyprus and Ireland represent the eastern and western-most peripheral regions of the EU. The concerted efforts of their two presidencies to strengthen maritime strategies could rebalance an EU that has turned its attention increasingly towards its eastern land borders and could foster strategic partnerships and a web of trade agreements with new neighbours in the Middle East and North Africa region.

Conclusion

The events of 2025 are a bellwether for the growing importance of ocean diplomacy and ocean governance in the EU. Ireland has an opportunity to encourage the swift ratification and implementation of the recent international and EU ocean treaties. One milestone is the [UN High Seas Treaty](#) (BBNJ agreement) which has already been ratified by 51 of the 60 countries required to pass it before the end of September 2025 (including by the EU and by individual Member States such as Cyprus and 3 of the Atlantic 4 group, but not yet by Ireland).

A second milestone, the EU Ocean Pact agreed in June 2025 is a non-binding strategy to unify ocean-related policies and promote a sustainable blue economy, however, the proposed Ocean Act, which will provide a binding legal framework for it is expected only to be introduced by 2027.

The new focus on maritime security, including energy infrastructure protection, maritime surveillance, migration, and protection of trade/transport routes introduces a political dimension to ocean diplomacy, beyond its economic and ecological priorities to date which underscores the importance of fostering collaboration, international engagement and diplomatic networks with international partners.

From a geopolitical perspective, the Atlantic Sea Basin Strategy provides an anchor and a framework for cooperation between the Atlantic 4 countries on the Western Periphery of the EU, and the West-Mediterranean region and its Southern shores, and the Black Sea Basin which links Europe to the Black Sea region, the Caucasus and beyond, mirroring the trajectory of the forthcoming enlargement of the EU and increasing Ireland's diplomatic footprint with the countries involved.

While implementing the new agreements may not be plain sailing, Ireland will be well-placed to join up the dots on progress made in the areas of ocean governance and ocean diplomacy between its Atlantic Strategy Presidency in 2025 and its subsequent Presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2026. In turn, when Cyprus passes on the Presidency baton to Ireland on 1 July 2026, it will continue to play an important role in the southern and East Mediterranean and may also shift its international focus to the post of President of the UN General Assembly, for 2026-2027, for which Cyprus is presenting a candidate in the election in June 2026.

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This paper is part of the Future Proofing Europe project, which is kindly supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and do not represent the views of the IIEA.



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