

Analysis: Rome hosts Maritime Day

Mediterranean must become an economic priority, says Antonini

Fincantieri executive says all countries along the Mediterranean's shores have an obligation to boost its financial muscle

John McLaughlin

AS GEOGRAPHIC frontier and cultural symbol, historic battleground and trading thoroughfare, the Mediterranean Sea lies at the very heart of European life and the European imagination.

Yet as Corrado Antonini argues, it is a long time since the Mediterranean was accorded the attention it merits from those plotting Europe's economic development. And that, he says, must change.

The veteran Fincantieri executive is also president of the Federation of the Sea, which groups Italy's major shipping industry associations — shipowners and builders, agents and forwarders, class and insurance — and aims to raise awareness of maritime development issues.

As part of the European Commission-sponsored maritime day jamboree in Rome, which runs from today until Wednesday, he will chair a high-powered conference on maritime culture and development in the Mediterranean Basin. At the very least, he hopes it will refocus attention on this most critical of waterways.

"The development of the Mediterranean maritime economy and its port system should be considered a priority for the development of the countries ranged along its shores," he said.

There is already ample evidence of the economic benefits maritime trade can generate, whether through the proliferation of transshipment ports or the development of motorways of the sea.

"Thus, the Mediterranean economies can trade not just raw materials, but finished or semi-finished products. That in turn helps accelerate the development of strong, free economies capable of competing with the other great areas of the world," he said.

Yet this remains more aspiration than fact. According to Mr Antonini: "A certain lack of maritime culture has meant that the development of commercial traffic, ports and their connections with the road and rail network has long been seen as a secondary issue.

"Just look at the obstacles put up by successive governments in Italy to financial autonomy for port authorities or a solution for the dredging problems at many of our ports.

"Even the process of creating a Mediterranean free trade zone is not focused, as perhaps it should be, on improving the ports and maritime shipping networks."

As a good European at a time of deep financial uncertainty, Mr Antonini believes there is also scope for concerted action in other maritime areas.

In his own shipbuilding sector, where demand has almost disappeared since September of last year and where many anticipate little change until 2011, the situation is becoming critical.

"Yards in the European Union are starting to have worrying gaps in their workload and that can only get worse over the coming months," he said.

"This is an industry made up of a few large companies specialising particularly

in building passenger ships, which have large orderbooks that are now beginning to shrink, and numerous small- to medium-sized companies that are financially weak and have modest workloads.

"Typically, in the face of economic crisis, companies tend to close in on themselves simply hoping to survive, so the opportunities for industrial co-operation are slim.

"But concerted action at a European level seems more practical, through temporary efforts to stimulate demand that would benefit all.

"This might be through schemes for the elimination of obsolete ships from European waters, for environmental and safety reasons, but also through incentives for demolition and specific financial instruments to help companies through the current credit crisis."

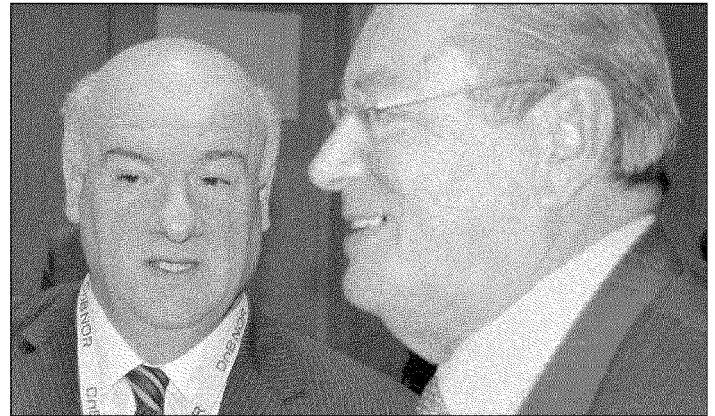
Mr Antonini said such efforts could have "a double benefit".

"On the one hand, they would head off protectionist measures at a national level that distort competition.

"On the other, they could influence demand without producing over-capacity, for instance by encouraging the construction of new-generation ferries that are safer, and more efficient and eco-friendly than their predecessors, to the benefit of the entire European community."

As he noted, there is at least one area of potential co-operation in the Mediterranean where movement is already under way: research and development.

Italy's national maritime technology platform, in concert with the European Commission, is launching a technology platform for the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, closely tied to Europe's Waterborne programme.



“Yards in the European Union are starting to have worrying gaps in their workload and that can only get worse,” says Corrado Antonini, pictured (right) with European Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Joe Borg.

