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Collective Defence and Bastion

The Strategic Importance of NATO's Northern Flank

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Collective Defence and Bastion – The Strategic Importance of NATO's Northern Flank

Abstract

With the end of the Cold War, allied and particularly maritime strategy lost sight of the seas in and around Northern Europe, collectively referred to as NATO's northern flank. Despite the continued security concerns of some coastal countries in the region, the strategic approach only changed with NATO's paradigm shift, when the Alliance officially recognised its new strategic rivalry with Russia at the summits in Newport (Wales) and Warsaw. During the Cold War, the area of the northern flank served, among other things, as the 'tactical northern flank', an area of operations subordinate to the 'Central European front' that was expected in divided Germany. This role changed over the course of the East-West conflict itself but also during the peace dividend years from 1990 to 2014, during the great power competition that began in 2014, and since the watershed moment ('*Zeitenwende*' in German) proclaimed by Chancellor Scholz in February 2022.

Today, NATO's collective defence and the Russian Federation's bastion defence concept are two key strategic aspects of the region. The present study looks at this development and today's strategic significance of NATO's northern flank; it discusses the different scenarios for the region during the Cold War, the role of the northern flank during the peace dividend years, and its current relevance and definition. The paper also questions whether the designation as the *northern flank* is actually still appropriate. Finally, based on the previous analysis, it outlines strategic recommendations for action in the region.

1 Introduction and Current Problem

The northern European waters are an area of strategic change and innovation where the maritime security of the Western Alliance has long been recognized to be of decisive importance in any confrontation between East and West.¹

From the Cold War to today's era of new great power competition, the sea areas in northern Europe underwent considerable change in their strategic role and thus their strategic relevance.² The current recognition of their strategic importance for Europe's and NATO's security and defence comes after almost 25 years of neglect in terms of

¹ Garde 1985: 43.

² The concept of the new great power competition follows the wording of the United States. It was initially recognised in the 2015 National Military Strategy (pp. 1–4) and became the focus of US security policy in the 2017 National Security Strategy (pp. 55 ff.). The term describes the global competition between the US, the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation. See: O'Rourke 2021: 1–3.

allied strategy in general and maritime strategy in particular.³ The scepticism of some eastern and northern European states towards the so-called peace dividend did nothing to change that. It was only at the NATO Summits in Newport (Wales) in 2014 and in Warsaw in 2016 that the new rivalry with the Russian Federation, which the Western states in the region and beyond had been confronted with, was officially recognised. The Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022 has now resulted in the general acknowledgement of a watershed moment, or '*Zeitenwende*'⁴ in German, in the European security architecture. There have been warnings about the possibility of a war on the European continent since at least 2014. Now, they have become reality.

In this context, the northern European seas, subsumed in this paper under the term 'northern flank', hold an important position not just for the Federal Republic of Germany, NATO and Europe but also for the Russian Federation. They comprise strategically important sea lines of communication (SLOC) and the area of operations for strategic submarines and their purpose of nuclear deterrence, and they are also of outstanding economic relevance. In terms of security policy, the region today also represents a *hotspot* of tensions between NATO and Russia. But that is not all. On the northern flank, the Alliance's *raison d'être*, collective defence, is in focus more than anywhere else. Yet, the flank already played an increasingly important role for both blocs during the decades-long East-West conflict. Over the years, however, not only the region's strategic importance with regard to the security and defence planning activities of allied nations has changed but also the terminological and geographical understanding of the 'northern flank' area. This strategic weight increasingly had an impact on the security architecture, on the interest of military planners and on the corresponding expenditure of material and financial resources. During the period of the peace dividend, introduced after 1990, the reduced attention on the region as a former security and defence hotspot caused an uncoordinated reduction of force structures. This was not only the case on the northern flank but also elsewhere, resulting in a Europe-wide patchwork of forces that had to be adapted to the newly recognised relevance of collective defence in 2014.

This change is the starting point for the present study. Following this introduction, the study offers a description and definition of the northern flank's geographic location in order to analyse and highlight its strategic importance and evolving character. The study then traces the northern flank's development and significance from the beginning of the Cold War to the present day by examining three consecutive time frames:

- the Cold War, from 1945/1947 to 1990, subsumed into different scenarios calculated for the region;
- the period following the Cold War, from 1990 to 2014, characterised by a transnational peace dividend;
- and the beginning of another great power competition from 2014 to the present day.

Finally, the paper provides a definition of what is currently understood as the *northern flank* from the perspective of NATO. Irrespective of its military origin, over the years the designation has become an established term in academic and security/strategic literature and has also been used in advice for policy-makers, which underlines its

³ Blount/Bergeron 2021: 10; Pincus 2020: 53–54.

⁴ Olaf Scholz, quoted from: Bundesregierung [Federal Government] 2022.

position. It should be emphasised that the term lacks a coherent definition, both at national and at alliance or NATO level. The terminology refers not only to the geographical definition, which is further specified in the following chapter, but also to the importance of the region in the strategic context of NATO. That is why this study examines the question of whether the designation as a ‘*northern flank*’ is actually still an appropriate term for the region of Northern Europe from a current NATO perspective. To this end, it initially focuses on the strategic role of the northern flank in the past decades, from the Cold War to the present day and provides an overview of the various roles the region has played in NATO’s strategic considerations at different times. In this respect, the study emphasises the increasing strategic relevance of the northern flank and its implications. How has the focus of military planners shifted when it comes to the region, for example, and which military scenarios have formed the basis for their calculations? Based on the above, the study provides an overview of the parallels and differences between the northern flank of the Cold War and that of the present, especially against the background of neglect during the period of the emerging peace dividend. This clarification is useful to emphasise Germany’s and NATO’s understanding of the region’s current strategic importance. Building on this, the discussion turns to whether the ‘northern flank’ is still an appropriate term, i.e. whether it is actually a flank in its original sense.

Based on this foundation, the analysis then focuses in detail on the strategic and security situation of the present northern flank. Today, the region is part of both NATO’s collective defence and the Russian Federation’s bastion concept to ensure nuclear second-strike capability. This section contains a description of current challenges, escalation potentials and conflict scenarios on which the subsequent recommendations for strategic actions are based. The paper concludes with a concise summary and a focused outlook on the region.

2 Geographical Location

To be able to discuss the strategic role of NATO’s northern flank, it is imperative to locate and delineate the region geographically. This is not an attempt at definitive demarcation, however. The following is a description of what is to be understood in geographical terms when this paper refers to the ‘northern flank’.

In the south, the northern flank follows the German and Polish coasts. From there, it covers Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Norway as well as the sea areas bordering the United Kingdom, Iceland and Greenland, i.e. from the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) Gap to the Norwegian Sea, the Barents Sea and the Baltic Sea⁵. Since the area also includes Central European parts of Germany and Poland, the three Baltic states in the east as well as Spitsbergen, Iceland and Greenland in the north and west, the northern flank must be distinguished from limiting terms such as Northern Europe and Scandinavia. The fact that parts of the European land mass are also included in the northern flank allows a differentiation between this particular term and the ‘Arctic’, or the ‘High North’. The Arctic is defined as the area north of the 66th latitude, between the Arctic Circle and the North Pole, which means that the Arctic and the northern flank

⁵ Archer 1988: 3.

overlap. In the east, there is overlap between the northern flank and NATO's eastern flank, as Poland and the Baltic region are part of both flanks.

Because of the strategic interdependencies within the region and the influence of the individual maritime areas of operations on one another, today's northern flank is an 'Atlantic nexus'⁶. In summary, its geographical location can be defined as the area between three strategic 'gaps': the GIUK Gap mentioned above, the Suwałki Gap between Poland and Lithuania, and the Bear Gap, the maritime corridor between Norway and Svalbard⁷.



Fig. 1 The northern flank with the GIUK Gap, the Bear Gap and the Suwałki Gap (Bundeswehr Geoinformation Service/GeoInfo Centre at the Bundeswehr Command and Staff College, Ortmann)

⁶ Blount/Bergeron 2021: 10.

⁷ Pawlak 2021: 163–180.

3 Role and Relevance: The History of the Northern Flank

3.1 The Flank During the Cold War

With the end of World War II and the subsequent division of Europe and many parts of the world into East and West – as manifested by the two alliances of NATO on the one hand and the Warsaw Pact on the other – the era of bloc confrontation and the Cold War began. Owing to the global effects of the conflict, the maritime domain was also assigned a specific role in the defence and scenario planning of NATO and its member states. Over the years, however, various changes in policy, NATO's membership structure, force organisation, capabilities and capacities as well as increasingly advanced technologies led to changes in the significance of different areas of operations within the strategic calculations of NATO. Particularly the wide recognition of Germany as a central and decisive European battlefield played an important role. A number of different scenarios can be identified for the northern flank over the course of the second half of the 20th century, however. On the basis of official documents, including some from NATO archives, Norwegian analyst Gjert Lage Dyndal defines seven examples of scenarios that show the northern flank's changing role and relevance throughout the Cold War.⁸ In the following sections, these scenarios provide a framework for analysing the significance of the northern flank at different stages of the East-West conflict and for outlining the different operational and escalation scenarios.⁹

3.1.1 US Air Offensive Against the North of the Soviet Union

At the beginning of the Cold War, i.e. the 'formative years', NATO and the US, as its most powerful member state, placed their strategic and operational focus in the maritime domain on the southern flank, specifically the Mediterranean and the Aegean. At the end of the 1950s and in light of the growing Soviet force structure, however, concern also grew for parts of the northern flank, especially the Norwegian Sea.¹⁰ The northern flank developed into *the* central maritime area of operations for US and Royal Navy aircraft carrier battle groups operating in and around Europe. Because of the dominant US Air Force's calculated use of strategic bombers, including the nuclear component that had only recently been demonstrated on Japanese territory, this part of the northern flank became its planned area of operations.

In the event of a conflict, the first units were to operate via Norwegian territory and parts of the Arctic towards the Kola Peninsula, the Barents Sea, and the White Sea and to attack naval and air force bases located there in order to open the way for allied bomber wings to the Soviet mainland.¹¹ To this end, some of the first extensive NATO naval manoeuvres were conducted in the Norwegian Sea, such as *Exercise Mainbrace* (with four US aircraft carriers of the Second Fleet and more than 200 allied ships in the northern waters in 1952) and *Exercise Mariner* the year after.¹² However, since the

⁸ Dyndal 2013: 4.

⁹ They mostly do not follow a chronological order (author's note).

¹⁰ Swartz 2021: 38.

¹¹ Dyndal 2013: 4–5.

¹² Earlier in 1952, the Exercise Grand Slam had already been conducted in the Mediterranean. Swartz 2021: 44; for the maritime-strategic importance of the manoeuvres, especially in the context of NATO's deterrence strategy, see: Bergeron 2021: 337–348.

naval forces employed there would have primarily been needed to protect aircraft carriers, the northern flank of the early years represented ‘primarily a military strategic independent “front” of the US Air Force bomber era of the 1950s.’¹³

3.1.2 The ‘Tactical Northern Flank’ of the Central European Front

In parallel with this development, the continental focus of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) of the 1950s also had considerable influence on NATO’s overarching strategic priorities. In addition to the previously mentioned approach of the British and US air forces over the North Sea and the Norwegian Sea, the geographical area of southern Scandinavia, the Baltic Sea and its approaches, and the Danish straits (Belts and Sounds) around Denmark were identified as another ‘tactical north flank’ that flanked the anticipated primary events of a war in Central Europe.¹⁴

A fundamental strategic change within Europe, however, quickly altered the power balance in the region. West Germany joined NATO in 1955 and would go on to become a major contributor to its military capabilities. This had a significant impact on the strategic balance in Europe and thus also resonated on the northern flank. In 1962, the *Allied Forces Baltic Approaches* (BALTAP) was founded. Led by Denmark and West Germany as the only Baltic Sea states in NATO at the time, this was a sign of the increased importance of the region. One particular reason for this increased importance was that the highly capable Baltic Fleet of the Soviet Navy at the time was clearly superior to its Western counterpart in the area, not just in terms of numbers.¹⁵ Despite the region’s being considered peripheral, the Alliance’s main focus continued to be on the defence of ‘NATO’s Central Region (i.e., West Germany) over that of the two European flanks or the surrounding seas.’¹⁶

3.1.3 The Barents Sea Bastion and the Battle for the Norwegian Sea

The strategy of both NATO and the US of advancing north from the North Atlantic via the North Sea and the Norwegian Sea went up against the potential of the Soviet Northern Fleet, owing to Admiral Gorshkov’s¹⁷ ‘sea denial’ concept in these sea areas. This approach was continuously reinforced, especially with the emergence of strategic nuclear-powered submarines (SSBNs) in the Soviet Navy. With the Barents Sea now the main operational area, the bastion concept of sea control and sea denial against any Western naval forces (in the Norwegian Sea and in the northern Scandinavian area) became important.¹⁸ The creation of a bastion to protect the Soviet second-strike capability maintained by its submarines led to the Barents Sea itself assuming the role of an independent theatre of war. Initial developments of SSBNs in the form of the Delta

¹³ Dyndal 2013: 5.

¹⁴ Dyndal 2013: 7.

¹⁵ Garde 1985: 212.

¹⁶ Swartz 2021: 71.

¹⁷ Admiral Sergei Georgievich Gorshkov was the commander-in-chief of the Soviet Navy from 1956 to 1985 and led its transformation into a globally operational ‘blue water navy’ that was to be able to challenge NATO’s naval forces – especially on NATO’s northern flank (author’s note).

¹⁸ Dyndal 2013: 8.

class submarine in the 1970s and the accompanying ‘naval arms race at sea’ thus had a considerable influence on both Soviet and Western strategy development.¹⁹ Thanks to newly designed and constantly advancing technological capabilities and the resulting military potential, for Soviet SSBNs to target their strategic goals in North America they no longer had to operate via the Norwegian Sea and North Sea into the North Atlantic, where they would have been confronted with the US Sound Surveillance System (SOSUS) and NATO blockades around the GIUK Gap.

In 1980, the Western Alliance responded with its Concept of Maritime Operations (CONMAROPS) to a Soviet Navy that had become considerably stronger in terms of both its size and its capabilities. The Soviet Navy, for its part, had now begun challenging NATO’s ambitions for maritime control over its own northern European coastal areas. To counter this and to strengthen its own defence capabilities, NATO not only pursued the objective of deterrence by means of its offensive strategy but also ordered naval forces to operate in the northern area of the Norwegian Sea. This also included US Navy aircraft carriers conducting ‘carrier fjord operations’²⁰ sheltered by the mountains and fjords of the Norwegian coast.²¹ This already close harmonisation with the US Navy became evident in the close congruence of the US Maritime Strategy of the 1980s, which was aligned with the content of CONMAROPS. The results of this linking of NATO and US strategies included ‘the innovative and aggressive forward NATO naval exercises of the mid- and late-1980s.’²² Especially on the northern flank,²³ efforts now focused on containment and defence in depth while the main goal being pursued was that of ‘keeping the initiative’ in armed conflict.²⁴

This highlights the important role of the Norwegian Sea as a strategically relevant sea area that would be contested in the event of conflict. The position of the Norwegian mainland, however, was also of major importance, even to the Soviet Union. In the context of the bastion concept, for example, not only measures at sea but also Soviet offensives on land were to be expected. The purpose of these measures was to provide additional support to the naval forces of the Northern Fleet from ashore and to minimise any potential threat posed by NATO forces deployed there.²⁵ To a lesser extent, this also applied to the territories of the states neighbouring Norway, the north of Sweden and Finland, the Faroe Islands and the Norwegian islands of Jan Mayen and Svalbard.

The essential role of NATO member Norway and its territory was thus entirely dependent on the appropriate support from naval forces (towards land and at sea). A war between NATO and the Soviet Union could ‘not perhaps be won at sea, but it could easily be lost there’.²⁶ As late as 1988, Jonathan Alford denied any possibility of defending the region long-term and described the situation as follows:

¹⁹ Dyndal 2011: 583.

²⁰ Till 2005: 330.

²¹ Børresen 2011: 98–100; Till 2005: 329–330.

²² Swartz 2021: 80. This approach, however, was also subject to criticism in allied discourse as taking this aggressive line had a negative impact on the convoy and escort qualities of NATO’s naval forces. See: Swartz 2021: 83.

²³ CONMAROPS was considered NATO’s maritime strategy until 2001 and included the northern flank – consisting of the Norwegian Sea, the SLOCs in the Atlantic and the shallow seas of northern Europe – as well as the Mediterranean. See: Bergeron 2019: 24; Børresen 2011: 3.

²⁴ Swartz 2003: 58.

²⁵ Børresen 2011: 99.

²⁶ Børresen 2011: 99.

Who controls the Norwegian Sea depends on who controls the North Norwegian airfields; who controls those airfields depend on who gets there first; and who gets there first depends on who controls the Norwegian Sea. ²⁷

3.1.4 The Northern Flank in the 'Missile Age'

In another scenario, the northern flank and the Arctic played less of a role at sea or on land than in the airspace above them. From the 1960s on, this airspace constituted the overflight routes of newly developed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) stationed on the mainland,²⁸ which represented the next evolutionary step towards the 'missile age'.²⁹ And while the United States was lagging behind the Soviet Union in terms of its ICBM capabilities and capacities, this 'missile gap', as it was called, became a driving force for further rearmament measures in Washington. The general trend eventually led to a new awareness with a considerable strategic impact – that of mutual assured destruction (MAD), which lasts until this day and extends beyond the northern flank as an overflight area for ballistic missiles.

3.1.5 NATO's Strategy of Flexible Response

Another change that was linked to the global destruction potential was NATO's flexible response strategy of 1967/1968.³⁰ This strategy had significant influence on the development of security policy and the role of the northern flank in the following decades. The mutual recognition of MAD led to the principle of refraining from using nuclear weapons as the *first* and *only* response to any conventional aggression, if possible, and thus to the move away from the strategy of 'massive retaliation'. One consequence in this respect was the strengthening of the conventional military – to reinforce non-nuclear deterrence, but also to increase capabilities for warfare without necessary nuclear escalation.³¹ In case its deterrence strategy failed, NATO also reserved the possibility of a nuclear response to an aggression as part of the following triad of options: conventional '*Direct Defence*', followed by possible '*Deliberate Escalation*', and a final '*General Nuclear Response*'.³²

With this doctrine, NATO's 'flexible response' also had considerable influence on the transatlantic sea lines of communication (SLOCs): the need for credible conventional deterrence was tied to NATO's ability to safely bring North American reinforcements from the US and Canada to the UK and the European mainland via the North Atlantic.³³ This required considerable convoy and escort capacities as well as the allied capability to fight targets below the water surface, i.e. anti-submarine warfare (ASW). After all, the calculation of possible conventional conflicts outside the Central European front led to both the northern and the southern flank increasingly being recognised as potentially independent peripheral theatres of war.³⁴

²⁷ Alford 1988: 77.

²⁸ Dyndal 2013: 9.

²⁹ Brodie 2007.

³⁰ North Atlantic Military Committee 1968.

³¹ Børresen 2011: 98.

³² North Atlantic Military Committee 1968: 10–11; Dyndal 2013: 11.

³³ Børresen 2011: 98.

³⁴ Dyndal 2013: 564.

3.1.6 Direct Access to the Atlantic for the Soviet Union

The Soviet interest in direct access to the Atlantic for its own naval forces was evident, among other things, in the *Okean* manoeuvre conducted in 1970, which was intended to underline the global claim of the Soviet Union and the capabilities of its ‘blue water navy’. ‘History’s largest peacetime fleet exercise’³⁵ at the time involved 84 surface warships, more than 80 submarines (15 of which were nuclear-powered) and 45 auxiliary and intelligence-collection ships, accompanied by several hundred aircraft. As it had units operating in parallel in the Atlantic and in the Pacific, the potential of the Soviet Navy could not be ignored.³⁶ With its wide range of surface, underwater and air combat capabilities as well as expanded bases on the Kola peninsula and elsewhere, the Soviet Navy underlined its intention and capability to operate globally – and thus also across the Norwegian Sea into the North Atlantic, NATO’s geographic heart and ‘line of life’. At the same time, however, the Soviet Navy was also able to ‘protect its own strategic submarines, defend its homeland at increasing distances, support operations against the NATO flanks, and counter NATO’s strategy of forward defense at sea’.³⁷ Because NATO experienced not only a lack of the required escort capacities but also of capabilities to effectively combat underwater platforms (ASW) at that time, the transatlantic SLOCs were identified as being particularly vulnerable. Calculations showed that in the first year of any potential war in 1977, about 1,500 commercial and transport vessels would have been lost.³⁸ To this day, the global reach of a great power navy and the associated potential to operate within NATO’s line of life, the North Atlantic, remain matters of strategic relevance.³⁹

3.2 Post-Cold War and Peace Dividend Period – 1990 to 2014

With the end of the Cold War, the subsequent period was characterised by significant structural changes of and within European armed forces due to the emerging peace dividend. For naval forces, this particularly included a decrease in capabilities for intensive naval warfare and in their size.⁴⁰ This process of change and reduction in armed forces was based on the epochal shift brought about by the events of 1990 in Germany and Europe as well as in the former Soviet Union, events whose effects radiated throughout the world. Many of the now independent Eastern European states quickly sought to integrate into NATO and the EU, which significantly changed the strategic balance in Europe. By 2004, the former so-called Soviet Sea, namely the Baltic Sea, already had six NATO neighbours where previously there were two, and every neighbouring state – except for the Russian Federation – was or would become part of the EU. A rapid development of flourishing political, economic, infrastructural and cultural connections was the positive result that benefitted practically *every* state situated on the northern flank and on the Baltic coast especially.

³⁵ Polmar 2020.

³⁶ Polmar 2020.

³⁷ Swartz 2021: 68–69.

³⁸ Dyndal 2011: 580.

³⁹ Foggo III/Fritz 2016: 18–22.

⁴⁰ Stöhs/Pawlak 2019: 242–254.

The political ‘rapprochement’, which also included Russia, strengthened relations between the East and the West and also permitted practical and operational elements of cooperation, including between armed forces. In 1994, the first exercise of NATO’s new Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme was entitled *Cooperative Venture 94* and conducted in the Norwegian Sea with the participation of, among others, the Russian Navy (*Военно-морской флот Российской Федерации*, ВМФ).⁴¹ Afterwards, the former Soviet adversary began to regularly participate in the long-standing NATO and US-led *Baltic Operations* (BALTOPS) manoeuvre in the Baltic Sea.⁴²

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the adherence to the peace dividend in the Western community of states, the northern flank at the time was mostly⁴³ regarded as an area of rapprochement between the West and the East. NATO’s maritime operations and missions also changed in this respect, partly as a result of fewer activities and requirements on the northern flank but also because NATO shifted its focus to other areas. In doing so, European NATO forces and US forces abandoned not only many of their previously relevant capabilities for high-intensity naval warfighting and anti-submarine warfare but also many parts of their military infrastructure along the northern flank. The SOSUS network in the North Atlantic and the ASW bases in the Azores and the Bermudas, for example, were abandoned in 1994/1995.⁴⁴ In 2004, the multinational *Standing Naval Force Atlantic* (STANAVFORLANT), established in 1968, was transformed into the *Standing NATO Maritime Group 1* (SNMG1) and from then on was supposed to open up to the adjacent sea areas on the northern flank.⁴⁵

Once again, however, the operational focus of the Western Alliance turned to the southern flank. Formative, allied maritime operations of the time included *Operation Sharp Guard* in the Adriatic Sea, *Operation Ocean Shield* off the Horn of Africa, the US-led ‘War on Terror’ in the wake of 9/11, and *Operation Unified Protector* off the Libyan coast, with which NATO invoked the mutual defence clause for the first time.⁴⁶ This strategic change placed special emphasis on achieving operational objectives such as ‘littoral sea supremacy’, strike and amphibious operations conducted by maritime units at home as well as peace and support missions (then referred to as ‘military operations other than war’, MOOTW), while other objectives, such as that of vast naval supremacy on the high seas (‘open-ocean sea control’), became less important and thus received little attention.⁴⁷ In summary, it must be noted that Western naval forces

⁴¹ Swartz 2021: 94.

⁴² Russia took part in this manoeuvre for the last time in 2013. See: French/Dombrowski 2018: 188.

⁴³ While the Russian Federation was making various political attempts at rapprochement with the West, it also pursued certain foreign and security policy tactics that caused increasing unease among Western states with regard to Moscow’s intentions, including the cyber attacks against Estonia in 2007 and the war in Georgia in 2008 (author’s note).

⁴⁴ Swartz 2021: 89.

⁴⁵ Today, SNMG1 is one of four standing NATO multinational task forces under the command of NATO’s Allied Maritime Command. These include Standing NATO Maritime Groups 1 and 2 as well as Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Groups (SNMCMG) 1 and 2. SNMG 1 and SNMCMG 1 are active in the North Atlantic, the North Sea and the Baltic Sea, while SNMG 2 and SNMCMG 2 primarily operate in the Mediterranean Sea and the adjacent sea areas (author’s note).

⁴⁶ Despite its vital role, the maritime domain of many campaigns was often seen only as a supporting element to more important land operations (author’s note).

⁴⁷ Swartz 2021: 89.

increasingly moved away from rather traditional operations and missions, such as the anti-submarine warfare for which large parts of their fleets had originally been designed, and tended to take on simpler tasks, such as the hunt for pirates along and on sea routes that were important for Western economies.⁴⁸

3.3 Since 2014: The Northern Flank in the Great Power Competition

Despite Russia's previous activities against some of its neighbouring countries, such as Estonia in 2007 and Georgia in 2008, the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2014 was perceived as a shock that rocked the European security system and the status quo of almost 25 years. Exactly 20 years after the beginning of NATO's PfP programme and its first joint naval exercise with naval forces of the Russian Federation, a new and unmistakable antagonism between the East and the West began to spread. The aforementioned developments in the period of the peace dividend and the era of reconciliation were now, more or less suddenly, relicts of the past. Adjusting and re-focusing on security and defence policies just as suddenly became the focus of attention once again. This led to necessary adjustments of budgets and resource planning, procurement, strategies and operational concepts. The previously uncoordinated reduction of capabilities and capacities of European armed forces now involuntarily appeared in an alarming light.⁴⁹

NATO's resulting defence plans were adapted to the new security situation and showed a fundamental paradigm shift back to collective and territorial defence of the allies, especially on the eastern and northern flanks. Decisions concerning the *Readiness Action Plan* (RAP) were laid down at the NATO Summit in Newport (Wales) and underpinned at the subsequent meetings in Warsaw and Brussels.⁵⁰ The consequences in the region were primarily characterised by NATO's reassurance measures regarding its Eastern allies and its adjustments of strategic concepts and force structures. Particularly notable reactions included the deployment of NATO battlegroups (enhanced forward presence, EFP) to the three Baltic states plus Poland on a rotational basis, the strengthening of the *Baltic Air Policing Mission* (BAP) in the Baltic States, the establishment of new *NATO Force Integration Units* (NFIU), of NATO's new Atlantic Command *Joint Force Command Norfolk* (JFC-NF) on the US East Coast, the planned *Baltic Maritime Coordination Function* (BMCF), and the increase in multinational manoeuvres and exercises in and around the Baltic Sea as well as the Norwegian Sea. The manoeuvres and exercises included, among others, *BALTOPS*, *Northern Coasts*, *Cold Response* and *Trident Juncture*, which have increased in size and number of participants. In 2018, the latter was not only the largest NATO manoeuvre since the end of the Cold War (as well as the largest one held in Norway since 1980) but also the first since then to include a US aircraft carrier strike group operating in the Norwegian Sea. While the primary purpose of *Trident Juncture 18* was 'messaging to Russia', the majority of smaller manoeuvres and exercises, on the other hand, helped to strengthen operational cooperation and demonstrate capabilities.⁵¹ Through its links to

⁴⁸ Stöhs/Pawlak 2019: 243.

⁴⁹ Stöhs 2019 provides an overview of the history of European naval forces up to this point in time.

⁵⁰ Meyer zum Felde 2018: 101–117.

⁵¹ Bergeron 2021: 340.

the *Baltic Protector* exercise led by the Royal Navy, for example, *BALTOPS 2019* demonstrated the capabilities for countering possible aggression in NATO's area of responsibility in northern Europe.⁵²

In addition to these measures taken by NATO, the allies have also carried out individual as well as bilateral and multilateral initiatives in the region. These include the annual *Baltic Commanders Conference* initiated by the German Navy in 2015, the newly established *DEU MARFOR* German Maritime Forces Staff and the *Baltic Maritime Component Command*. Measures of the US armed forces, in particular, must also be mentioned, such as the (re-)establishment of the US Navy's Second Fleet, the setting up of a new destroyer task group for sub hunting in the Atlantic (*Task Group Greyhound*) as well as the increased stationing of US forces and corresponding material to the northern and eastern flanks, especially to Poland and Norway.

3.3.1 Parallels and Differences: Baltic States and Collective Defence, Barents Sea and Bastion

Thus far, this paper has outlined the changed role and the associated change in relevance of NATO's northern flank over the past decades. From here on out, the focus will be on strategically relevant parallels and differences between the northern flank of the Cold War and that of the present.

The importance of the northern flank, especially during the Cold War, was reflected in changing strategic perspectives, operational plans, political constellations as well as technical developments and their strategic implications. Accordingly, the terminology, the geographical and the strategic importance of the northern flank have changed over the years and decades.⁵³

Originally, the Baltic approaches around the Danish straits (Belts and Sounds), the Øresund and the neighbouring southern part of Scandinavia were considered the centre of NATO's northern flank. Due to the different influences outlined previously, the centre of the northern flank moved north towards the Norwegian Sea and the Barents Sea. This region thus became a core element of NATO's strategic and operational planning in the 1980s. After 1990, in almost quarter of a century following the Cold War, the former region of confrontation, the northern flank in general and the Baltic Sea region in particular, became a region of rapprochement. As a result, many former flank countries seized the opportunity to join the transatlantic Alliance and the European Union. Ultimately, however, the region of the northern flank is now once again subject to a relationship of strategic rivalry between Russia and the West. Today, it is a *hotspot* of tense relations in the context of competing systems and great powers.

Despite sometimes vast technical developments, we can identify similarities between NATO's northern flank of the present and that of the Cold War era, in particular with regard to the military planning scenarios for the northern flank of the Cold War described in Chapter 3.1. Due to the largely constant geographic conditions on the northern flank, the 'free access of the Russian fleet to the Atlantic', for example, is still relevant today⁵⁴; a globally operating blue water navy is still regarded as a symbol of a

⁵² Bergeron 2021: 339.

⁵³ Dyndal 2013: 13.

⁵⁴ Davis/Russia Maritime Studies Institute 2015: 22.

great power. Nuclear deterrence and the associated MAD are still current aspects, too, although they are not limited to the northern flank.

In this context, NATO is once again confronted with the bastion concept of the Russian armed forces in northern Scandinavia, starting from the Barents Sea.⁵⁵ Even though the Russian Navy today has fewer capacities than the Soviet naval forces had, it still has sufficient capable units available to pursue the bastion concept, challenge allied naval forces in the region and protect the SSBNs of the Northern Fleet, which are a strong foundation of Russia's nuclear deterrence triad because of their second-strike capability. As part of a potential activation of the bastion, the threat of a military invasion of parts of the mainland in northern Scandinavia, especially in the Norwegian county of *Troms og Finnmark* and on Spitsbergen, is also recognised. Securing the coastal region and the archipelago would be of considerable importance for effective control of the northern maritime areas.⁵⁶

What is more, the European NATO states continue to depend on their North American allies, especially the United States, for support in their defence in the event of an armed conflict with an equal or superior military actor on the European continent or in adjacent maritime areas. As a consequence, the transport of reinforcements, such as combat units, support forces and relevant material, via the North Atlantic is fundamental for allied defence and NATO's conventional framework of deterrence. The fact that the maritime domain in this respect continues to play a subordinate role to the focus of many NATO states on the land domain is referred to as 'sea blindness'⁵⁷ and constitutes another parallel to the northern flank of the Cold War.⁵⁸

Today, there are also differences with regard to the *former* northern flank, however. Military planners' considerations regarding an air offensive across parts of Scandinavia into Russian territory and the status of a 'tactical northern flank' are no longer up to date, not least due to extensive changes in NATO territory. The accession of the Eastern European member states to NATO has led to a regional adaptation of defence plans. In the event of a crisis, defence units would no longer just have to be transported to Central Europe but to the eastern periphery. Now, NATO's logistical chains and SLOCs do not end at the ports of Antwerp or Bremerhaven but in Riga, Tallinn and Klaipėda.

Completely new options for combat and warfare have also emerged and go beyond the technological developments of existing systems. Military use of capabilities in cyber and information space has now opened up a new, overarching domain of conflict and conflict management. Strategically relevant changes have also occurred in the geography of the northern flank, which has largely remained constant over time. Climate change and global warming are causing Arctic ice melt, which affects the use of sea areas and SLOCs in the region. Shipping frequency is also expected to increase in Arctic approaches such as the Norwegian Sea. Global warming is not just an environmental crisis, however, but also offers the Russian Federation in particular the opportunity to open up and use new shipping routes and to benefit from the commercial use of these routes by others. In the long term, the Russian Federation will also be able to use the

⁵⁵ Hestvik/Bonnar 2021.

⁵⁶ Expert Commission on Norwegian Security and Defence Policy 2015: 20–22.

⁵⁷ Feldt 2013.

⁵⁸ Swartz 2021: 3; Young 2019.

many resources of the area,⁵⁹ which means that there will be an increase in the capabilities and presence of Russian naval forces in the region and thus also on the northern flank.

3.3.2 Truly a Flank?

After having reviewed the developments of the past decades, compared the parallels and differences with the current situation, and defined the area, the actors involved and the strategic framework, this paper now seeks to answer the question of whether the designation as the ‘northern flank’ is still appropriate from NATO’s perspective.⁶⁰

The designation as a ‘flank’ is derived from military terminology. In the tactical sense, a flanking attack is an approach that does not directly target the adversary’s central concentration but rather its (less or barely prepared) sides, the flanks. This was already emphasised in Sun Tzu’s ‘The Art Of War’ and in von Clausewitz’s ‘On War’.⁶¹ It is also worth noting that such manoeuvres aimed at the tactical flanks have been decisive not only in historical land battles but also in tactical naval warfare manoeuvres.⁶²

If this understanding is applied to the region discussed in this paper, it becomes clear that the designation as the ‘northern flank’ is based primarily on the calculation of the Cold War in expectation of a comprehensive and decisive land and tank battle in Central Europe, especially in central Germany. This is why the regions north of Germany were identified as an additional but secondary flank to the main action on German territory.⁶³ Although the northern flank increasingly became an independent theatre of war during the Cold War, little changed in the further course of the East-West conflict in terms of the reality of military planning. The role as a ‘peripheral theatre of war’⁶⁴ and the concentration of NATO’s security and defence efforts on the central front in Germany were largely maintained.

Even after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the designation of the ‘northern flank’ has remained in use, especially since the return of strategic competition and security challenges in the region. Nowadays, however, the ‘northern flank’ is less understood as a flank in its traditional sense. As the present study shows, its geographical location now conforms more to a strategically relevant region which has (so far) not followed a uniform definition.⁶⁵

In conclusion, the northern flank today is a comprehensive and strategic flank. Geographically, it comprises the operational areas of the North Atlantic, the Norwegian Sea, the North Sea and the Baltic Sea as well as the adjacent land masses and can be defined by the overarching strategic area in the triangle of the three ‘gaps’⁶⁶.

⁵⁹ Till 2009: 93.

⁶⁰ From Moscow’s perspective, the region represents Russia’s western flank.

⁶¹ von Clausewitz 2007; Sun Tzu 1971.

⁶² Hughes Jr. 1997: 25–49.

⁶³ The northern flank was parallel to the southern flank in Turkey and the Mediterranean, which was sometimes considered the more relevant one.

⁶⁴ Dyndal 2013: 564.

⁶⁵ It is worth noting that for the states along flank, it is not ‘merely’ a flank but rather their strategically important area of operations (author’s note).

⁶⁶ Pawlak 2021.

4 The Current Strategic Situation

The above overview of military planners' shifting attention to the northern flank and possible Cold War scenarios illustrates the flank's increasing strategic importance over the decades. The comparison of existing similarities and differences between the past and the current situation in the region and the applicability of the term 'flank' provides a basis for an understanding of today's northern flank. In the following, the current strategic situation as well as related challenges, conflict scenarios and escalation potentials will be discussed on the basis of the previous chapters, and in the light of the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022.

Today's strategic situation on the northern flank is characterised in particular by systemic rivalry and great power competition between the Russian Federation and NATO, especially the U.S.⁶⁷ At first glance, the area is dominated by a superior number of NATO and EU states reaching from the GIUK Gap to the Baltic region and to the North. However, a closer look reveals the military imbalance with regard to the Russian Federation's potential: compared to the NATO units available in the region, Russia has an overwhelming force posture, which has been reinforced with significant (offensive) capabilities in recent years. These forces comprise Russia's Baltic and Northern Fleet, as well as the land and air forces of the Western military district, including Kaliningrad Oblast, sometimes referred to as outpost.⁶⁸ After being neglected during the post-Cold War era, it was particularly Kaliningrad and the Baltic Fleet, partly based in the Oblast,⁶⁹ whose status was enhanced by a massive increase in military potential.⁷⁰ Drawing on available assets and the capacity to muster forces equipped with significant capabilities at the border region demonstrated during regular manoeuvres such as *Zapad* or in the run-up to the war in Ukraine, Russia could take action against its smaller neighbouring NATO countries in the event of a conflict.⁷¹

The fact that Belarus would play a strategic role in this context, both geographically and militarily, has only recently been noted by NATO planners.⁷² Geographically and strategically, Belarus has regularly assumed the role of a transit area both to the east and to the west throughout its history, and could serve as a bridgehead for Russian military operations towards the Suwałki Gap, as seen during the attack on Ukraine in February 2022.⁷³ Although the Russian Federation and Belarus have so far only been loosely tied together in an alliance called the *Union State of Russia and Belarus*, this development confirms the strategic importance of Belarus and its relevance for Russian military planning in the region. This is demonstrated, for example, by the fact that radar systems have been installed on Belarusian territory and that Belarus and the Russian Federation have a common air and missile defence system.⁷⁴ While these Russian capabilities meet

⁶⁷ In the global context, this also includes the People's Republic of China (author's note).

⁶⁸ Felgenhauer 2021; Kjellén 2021; Muzyka 2021.

⁶⁹ The two largest bases of the Baltic Fleet are located in Baltiysk, Kaliningrad, and in Kronstadt on Kotlin Island in the Gulf of Finland.

⁷⁰ Kofman 2021; Roblin 2021.

⁷¹ It should be emphasised that deep operations require more than mere 'combat power' but also logistic capabilities. See Vershinin 2021 (author's note).

⁷² Even though this mainly concerns NATO's 'eastern flank', the overlaps become particularly evident in this regard (author's note).

⁷³ Howard 2021: 8–12.

⁷⁴ Sukhankin 2021: 334–336.

almost all the requirements of Belarus, which is completely dependent on Russia for its air defence, it allows Russia to expand its layered defence in the region, especially with regard to its proximity to Kaliningrad.⁷⁵ In addition, the two states have adopted a new common military doctrine intended to ensure a higher level of interaction and achieve greater coherence in defence policy in ‘response to pressure from the West’.⁷⁶ The doctrine suggests that the objective is to achieve full interoperability between the two armed forces so that the Belarusian military ‘in practice, at the operational level, [...] will be part of the Russian forces’.⁷⁷

When putting the focus on the maritime domain, it is necessary to take a closer look at the Russian naval forces primarily based on the northern flank, and their strategic importance. They include the Baltic and Northern Fleets mentioned above. As previously indicated, the Baltic Fleet, which is subordinate to the Western Military District, and the entire force structure within the Kaliningrad Oblast have changed significantly as a result of the annexation of Crimea. Those parts military planners had long neglected after 1990 have now also entered the modernisation process initiated by Russian military leaders. Since the Baltic Fleet does not only comprise seagoing units as its name suggests, this modernisation also includes land and air units stationed there as well as electronic warfare elements.⁷⁸ The fact that the strategic air defence system in Kaliningrad Oblast has been reorganised almost from scratch since 2016 reflects concerns about NATO’s ability to engage ground targets from the air.⁷⁹ In addition, the MiG-31 combat aircraft stationed in Kaliningrad and equipped with *Kinzhal* air-launched ballistic missiles (ALBM, NATO reporting name AS-24 *Killjoy*) send clear signs of deterrence towards NATO.⁸⁰

At the maritime level, the role of the Baltic Fleet is particularly linked to the strategic importance of the Baltic Sea for the Russian Federation. This importance is mainly economic in nature, and the share of Russian trade⁸¹ conducted via the Baltic Sea as well as infrastructure such as the Nord Stream gas pipelines underline Russia’s economic dependence on navigable sea routes and an open Baltic Sea. The fleet itself is tasked with general maritime operations, such as combat operations, ASW, mining and amphibious operations, as well as territorial and national defence.⁸² Its area of operations is mainly limited to the Baltic Sea and the North Sea, but it also has oceangoing units such as frigates and corvettes allowing operations far beyond these two areas.⁸³

The Northern Fleet with its headquarters located in Severomorsk on the Kola Peninsula, in contrast, is the largest fleet of the Russian Navy. On 1 January 2021, it also became the only one that constitutes its own military district, the Northern Military District. Geographically speaking, the Northern Fleet is responsible for covering areas

⁷⁵ Boulègue 2020: 8.

⁷⁶ Tass 2021.

⁷⁷ Dynner 2022: 2.

⁷⁸ Kjellén 2021: 42–55.

⁷⁹ Kjellén 2021: 42–47.

⁸⁰ Newdick 2022.

⁸¹ In 2017, about half of Russia’s trade and container transport was moved via the Baltic Sea, see: Kjellén 2021: 27; ITE Transports & Logistics 2017.

⁸² Kjellén 2021: 56–65; Bogdanov/Kramnik 2018.

⁸³ Kjellén 2021: 69–70.

with a focus on the Arctic and parts of Russia's northern coastline as well as the adjoining waters. The fleet has also been part of the modernisation of the Russian armed forces for several years, especially with regard to the replacement of materiel and infrastructure projects resulting from the changing climatic and geographical conditions in the Arctic, i.e. in the north of Russia. Another special capability provided by the Northern Fleet is the maritime part of the nuclear deterrence component represented by the Russian SSBNs. By providing and safeguarding sea-based nuclear deterrence, the Fleet pursues the primary mission of the Russian naval forces.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, the Northern Fleet also regularly operates outside the Barents Sea and the Norwegian Sea, for example in the waters extending towards the North Atlantic.

A look at the Russian Federation's Maritime Doctrine of 2015 reveals Russia's long-term strategic objectives, for example, in the Atlantic Ocean and the Baltic Sea. The Baltic and Northern Fleets are the main players aimed at realising these intentions. Specifically, Russia's objectives include both ensuring sufficient naval presence in the Atlantic and expanding military capabilities, such as the Baltic Fleet.⁸⁵ The implementation of the doctrine in the Arctic is also determined by the priority of ensuring free access of the Russian fleet into the Atlantic. In this context, the Northern Fleet explicitly plays a decisive role in the defence of the country from the sea.⁸⁶ The *Naval Doctrine*, which was approved by President Vladimir Putin in 2017, is also aimed at countering the ambitions of the United States and its allies on the world's oceans. This includes the intention to defend Russia's maritime approaches and territorial waters and underlines the role of the Russian Navy in projecting power and providing deterrence.⁸⁷

In the event of a military conflict at the upper end of the intensity spectrum, Western Allies will not be able to defend themselves and the region unless they join forces. Such a mutual dependence is underlined both by the presence of forces of various NATO member states stationed and operating in the region and by allied commitments to joint defence support laid down in the North Atlantic Treaty and accentuated by NATO's concept of deterrence – in terms of a conventional and a nuclear response.⁸⁸

4.1 Challenges Facing the Allied Armed Forces

Today, the allied, transatlantic Alliance forces are faced with a northern flank defined by a multi-domain area of operations posing a variety of challenges below, on and above the water surface. The significant technical development and proliferation of highly effective weapon systems for different platforms and the resulting '*mature maritime precision-strike regimes*' hamper naval forces operating freely in these areas. Instead of surface combatants being the only competitor to seek '*command of the sea*', forces from all domains are involved in today's maritime battlefield, illustrating the complexity and difficulties of '*multi-domain operations*'.⁸⁹ However, potential targets are not limited to seagoing units but also include other key assets such as critical infrastructures, e.g.

⁸⁴ Bogdanov/Kramnik 2018: 22.

⁸⁵ Davis/Russia Maritime Studies Institute 2015: 19–20.

⁸⁶ Davis/Russia Maritime Studies Institute 2015: 22.

⁸⁷ Gorenburg 2017.

⁸⁸ To read more about the deterrence capability of NATO's presence in the Baltic states, see: Noll/Bojang/Rietjens 2021.

⁸⁹ Krepinevich 2014: 88.

‘command-and-control facilities, logistical hubs, and airbases’.⁹⁰ With regard to the Russian naval forces, *Kalibrization* and *Tsirkonization* are two keywords representing the deployment of such capabilities on a wide scale. The terms are based on the Russian missiles *Kalibr* (NATO reporting name SS-N-27 *Sizzler*) and *Tsirkon* (SS-N-33). Particularly in the context of military modernisation, these systems were widely deployed, turning even smaller units into combat-capable platforms achieving potential long-range effects.

Now, the entire northern flank is exposed to potential risks. The Baltic Sea, for example, which is almost completely landlocked due to its geography, is an area of operations that can be significantly affected by activities launched from the surrounding coastal areas, e.g. by using *anti-access/area denial* (A2/AD) capabilities. It is especially the combination of (mobile) coastal defence batteries, quiet submarines and aerial operations that poses a significant threat to seagoing units in the Baltic Sea. In this respect, operating within ‘*striking distance*’, i.e. within the effective range of enemy weapons such as precision-guided missiles, is a fact that Western naval forces must learn to deal with despite the deterrent effect of these weapon systems. This does not only apply to the Alliance’s territory but also far beyond the northern flank.⁹¹ With regard to these multi-domain challenges in such an operational environment, the mantra ‘to be seen is to be targeted, and, more than likely, killed’ is true for each and every operator.⁹²

Another fact that should not be underestimated is the need for allied naval forces to adapt to the already considerable and growing challenge below the water’s surface – not only in the regional areas of the Baltic Sea and the North Sea, but also, and especially, in the deep waters from the Barents Sea to the North Atlantic. With the (re-)establishment of the Russian naval forces, the Alliance has seen a systematic increase in Russian submarine activities for several years already, mainly on the northern flank and in the Atlantic.⁹³ In addition to the threat to transatlantic SLOCs, this also constitutes a risk factor affecting part of NATO’s nuclear deterrence component. This includes the SSBNs of the United States, the United Kingdom and France, which sometimes operate in the Atlantic.⁹⁴ The ongoing development of *unmanned maritime systems* (UMS)⁹⁵ as well as high-intensity sensor systems, including systems capable of seabed warfare, makes it even more difficult to maintain operational capability. At the same time, it offers opportunities to use these systems against potential adversaries.⁹⁶ While the North Atlantic region is no longer regarded as a stage for a Fourth Battle of the Atlantic as in previous concepts of the Cold War and the World Wars, it is understood as a potential ‘battlespace that cannot be ignored’ as emphasised by Vice Admiral Andrew L. Lewis, Commander of the U.S. Second Fleet and the JFC-NF.⁹⁷ This makes the ASW capability of the Alliance an essential core competence for the

⁹⁰ Stöhs 2021: 32.

⁹¹ Stöhs 2021: 32–35.

⁹² Fox 2021.

⁹³ Bonnar 2019: 11.

⁹⁴ Flanagan 2018: 3.

⁹⁵ This includes unmanned surface vehicles (USV) and unmanned underwater vehicles (UUV).

⁹⁶ Angelopoulos 2019.

⁹⁷ Eckstein 2020.

northern flank region.⁹⁸ ‘*Theatre-level ASW*’, referring to a wide-scale submarine hunt conducted in an area of operations, is therefore a significant element of future ASW. The nature of the northern flank lends itself to the development of such capabilities that could be realised, for example, in the operational areas of the North Sea or the Baltic Sea.⁹⁹

In addition to the confrontation with ‘*high-end*’ challenges and capabilities of three-dimensional naval warfare, the Alliance is also confronted with complexities below the threshold of armed conflict. Examples include subversive and hybrid activities or the growing need to protect the steadily increasing number of submarine cables in the North Atlantic as well as in the North Sea and Baltic Sea.¹⁰⁰ It is in particular the role of the North Sea that must not be underestimated, although it is often neglected in the debate. As a physical connection between the maritime areas of operations of the Baltic Sea, the Norwegian Sea and the North Atlantic, the North Sea is characterised by its economic relevance to the regions bordering the above-mentioned seas. At the same time, however, it is of primary importance to the SLOCs in view of supply and support measures provided from North America, representing another decisive element of NATO’s northern flank.¹⁰¹

4.2 Conflict Scenarios and Escalation Potentials

Chapter 3.1 outlines different military-strategic scenarios for the northern flank developed during the Cold War period. In the following section, conclusions will be drawn with regard to potential but not necessarily imminent conflict scenarios and escalation potentials in today’s region on the basis of the above description of the current strategic situation.¹⁰²

Basically, the potential for escalating conflicts within the area of the northern flank can be found across the entire intensity spectrum of military conflicts: from the higher to the lower end. The latter includes subversive attempts to undermine Western states in the ‘grey zone’, as mentioned earlier. Since it is difficult to trace them back to their origins, activities conducted below the threshold of armed conflict are considered measures of hybrid warfare. The spectrum ranges from targeted disinformation campaigns to cyberattacks on state institutions and sabotage of infrastructure, all aimed at seriously destabilising countries without any direct, open intervention by armed forces or state actors.¹⁰³ In the event of an increased cumulation of such activities, a member of the Alliance could eventually be forced to invoke Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty to request consultation of the allied partners within NATO if the extent of activities directed against the member is considered a threat to its national integrity. In such a case, there is no need for a clearly visible and classical military attack on the state or territory to take place; such destabilisation alone may lead to a potential

⁹⁸ Blount/Bergeron 2021: 11.

⁹⁹ Sproule 2021: 4–8.

¹⁰⁰ Murphy/Schaub Jr. 2018.

¹⁰¹ Granholm 2021.

¹⁰² Due to the specific challenges described above, the following list of potential escalation scenarios will remain rather abstract.

¹⁰³ Granholm 2019: 77–79.

escalation of NATO invoking its mutual defence clause in accordance with Article 5.¹⁰⁴ There is a risk, however, that the Russian side might interpret the support and increase of regional NATO forces initiated by its allies with the aim of stabilising the Alliance partner as a preparatory step to launch an offensive act. Following this logic of escalation, these actions, identified as ‘deployment’, might be countered with a preemptive strike.¹⁰⁵ It is imperative that this type of dynamics is included in collective defence calculations.

Moreover, bilateral disputes between a NATO country on the one hand and the Russian Federation on the other may involve considerable potential for tension. A rather simple dispute could result in a profound crisis since Russia’s current leadership is not likely to submit to any of its small neighbouring countries even if it is wrong.¹⁰⁶ As pointed out above, the geographical situation and Russia’s force structure allow the country to muster its armed forces at the border with one of the NATO states as required. Western infrastructure and systems, sensors and C2 can be disrupted at an early stage by means of electronic warfare and activities in the cyber and information domain in order to create confusion at the political, social and military level. This, however, is a course of action that may pursue a *fait accompli* without necessarily triggering Article 5.¹⁰⁷

The resulting uncertainty in the affected area may be exploited precisely for this purpose and present the Western Alliance with *faits accomplis*, for example, the military occupation of a territory, within a short period of time. With events unfolding suddenly, a subsequent or delayed response by NATO – in terms of a large-scale military operation to regain territory – would be tantamount to a vertical escalation. Concrete regional examples are the Baltic region in particular, but also the northern region of Norway, which is located in the area covered by the Russian bastion concept as shown in Chapters 3.1.3 and 3.3.1. Should it be activated as and when deemed necessary by Russia, a deployment of military assets to secure the region is to be expected.¹⁰⁸

The overall context shows that a crisis in a different region would also hold a considerable potential for such an operation in northern Scandinavia. From a Russian perspective, the possibility of horizontally escalating an – initially – regionally limited crisis would be a means to protect its SSBNs, i.e., its maritime nuclear deterrence component, in the long run. The active deployment of Russian military forces to protect the Barents Sea would seriously challenge the territorial integrity of NATO member Norway, illustrating the way the various operational areas along the northern flank are closely interrelated. The protection of Russian strategic submarines in the Barents Sea involves a sea denial strategy in the Norwegian Sea up to the GIUK Gap. This, in turn, affects the freedom and security of operations of allied naval forces in their northern European home waters, including the movement of troops from North America to the United Kingdom, Scandinavia and mainland Europe. This means that a regional escalation, such as in the Baltic States, is considered to bear enough potential to produce

¹⁰⁴ Expert Commission on Norwegian Security and Defence Policy 2015: 56–57.

¹⁰⁵ Kühn 2018: 2.

¹⁰⁶ Expert Commission on Norwegian Security and Defence Policy 2015: 55.

¹⁰⁷ Jackson 2016.

¹⁰⁸ Expert Commission on Norwegian Security and Defence Policy 2015: 54–55; Holst-Pedersen Kwam 2018: 52–54; Kühn 2018: 3.

immediate effects upon the entire northern flank.¹⁰⁹ Against this background, NATO's concepts for the defence of the three Baltic states and Poland as well as northern Norway are closely related; these interrelations symbolise the strategic melting pot today's northern flank represents.

The two NATO partners Sweden and Finland, too, are part of this melting pot. While they are not members of NATO yet, they are not considered neutral states either. They are members of the European Union and partners in multilateral organizations for security and defence cooperation in the region, such as the *Nordic Defence Cooperation* (NORDEF), as well as beyond Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea. Although they are not official allies of NATO, there is a special relationship between them and their Western partners – '*aligned but not allied*'¹¹⁰ – and they are essential to maintaining stability along the northern flank, securing NATO's defence capability.

Finally, the structural framework of the challenges outlined in the previous subsection, such as A2/AD capabilities, high-tech sensor systems and precision-strike regimes, has a considerable impact on the operational capability of the Western armed forces at sea, on land and in the air in each of these scenarios. In this context, supply and defence of the Eastern Allies in the event of a conflict would involve combatting and overcoming these risk factors, which may eventually lead to mutual and widespread escalation.¹¹¹ At the end of the day, the threat of spiralling into nuclear war hangs over any conventional escalation scenario. It may be the use of tactical nuclear weapons in a regional confrontation, 'de-escalation' strikes, or a perceived existential threat to the Russian Federation legitimising a nuclear strike launched in self-defence.¹¹²

In this context, it is necessary to clarify what the considerations presented in the different conflict scenarios really mean. First of all, it must be stressed that any scenario should be treated with caution – not only the ones described in this sub-chapter. In general, explanations and calculations of potential scenarios help to identify what may happen, taking into account not only organic capabilities and structures, but also an adversary's capacities. Such considerations, however, are *neither* predictions *nor* forecasts of events that may take place in exactly the same way as shown.¹¹³ Ideally, they are intended to help shed some light on aspects that need improvement, and provide useful recommendations for action.

¹⁰⁹ Pawlak/Bruns 2019: 20–34.

¹¹⁰ Pesu 2022.

¹¹¹ Kühn 2018: 3.

¹¹² Kroenig 2018: 323–338.

¹¹³ Granholm 2019: 77.

5 Strategic Recommendations for Action

Looking at the past of the northern flank helps to understand the region's strategic importance and the way its role in military planning has developed over time. However, political and military decision-makers should beware of applying successful solutions of the past, if any, to problems of the present and the future indiscriminately. While they can serve as a basis to draw lessons and conclusions, the practical implementation of security and defence plans must reflect the present situation.

This situation currently requires NATO to increase, in the broadest sense, the defence capability and sense of security of the member states, not only on the eastern flank, but also on the northern flank, as a result of Moscow's willingness to violate the territorial integrity of its neighbouring countries even by the use of military force, a fact observed as early as 2014 and reconfirmed during the war against Ukraine since 2022. Within the Alliance, this means that conventional defence and deterrence capabilities must *generally* be strengthened to raise the price of military intervention, especially against Eastern European NATO members.

It is necessary to bolster both defence and deterrence capabilities since applicable doctrine calls for two types of deterrence to be implemented: '*deterrence by denial*' and '*deterrence by punishment*'.¹¹⁴ While the first type of deterrence is usually directly related to a specific region and concerns local approaches aimed at making military intervention appear unprofitable, e.g. by establishing strong regional defence structures, '*punishment*' is accentuated by taking higher-level measures throughout NATO, both in terms of military and other means.

'Traditional' demands for increased military presence on the northern flank and, if possible, permanent troop deployment as well as the strengthening of local capabilities can be attributed to the spectrum of '*deterrence by denial*'. Considering the geographical location and proximity of the three Baltic states and Poland to Russia, it is understandable that they particularly advocate NATO intensifying this type of approach to complement the '*denial*' approach adopted by their own armed forces and, in part, their social structures oriented towards this deterrence and defence approach.¹¹⁵ It can also be assumed that reinforcing military structures in the region will make it more difficult for a potential aggressor to take action by demonstrating that the costs of an attack would be too high (as shown by the case of the *fait accompli* described in Chapter 4.2).¹¹⁶

Due to the war against Ukraine and the resulting change in the military security situation, it is appropriate to deploy military contingents and capabilities to the territories of Eastern European NATO members. Previously, such reassurance for the Eastern Allies was interpreted as something provided on a rotating, non-permanent basis in consideration of the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act formulating a pledge not to station any substantial combat forces in the Eastern part of the Alliance on a permanent basis. This was also a way to avoid potential allegations of breach of contract.

¹¹⁴ Mazarr 2018.

¹¹⁵ Noll/Bojang/Rietjens 2021: 124–125.

¹¹⁶ Noll/Bojang/Rietjens 2021: 115–116.

These restrictions, however, applied to the European security environment as identified in 1997 (*‘in the current and foreseeable security environment’*)¹¹⁷. Since the attack on Ukraine in February 2022, things have changed: with Russia’s overt aggression against its neighbour, and its contempt for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territory, the existing security architecture has been invalidated, and the restrictions on NATO defence capabilities accepted under the NATO-Russia Founding Act no longer apply. Changes in the security environment can lead to the deployment of permanent reinforcements deemed necessary to counter the potential risk of aggression against NATO allies (*‘reinforcement may take place, when necessary, in the event of defence against a threat of aggression’*).¹¹⁸ As a consequence, Alliance members should stop pursuing an approach of merely establishing infrastructures and important logistic chains for allied *‘follow-on forces’* to facilitate the deployment of allied units within the Alliance territory to strengthen their *‘denial posture’*. In this new threat environment, it is also necessary to consolidate NATO’s direct defence capabilities on its eastern flank, in the Baltic states and, especially, on the northern flank. In this situation, it would be advisable not to rely solely on exercises and manoeuvres that take months, or even years, to plan, but to demonstrate responsiveness by conducting realistic *‘hard exercises’* – giving a strong signal to both NATO allies and the rest of the world.¹¹⁹

This implies the need to invest in defence spending to such an extent that the requirements on the northern flank can be met, something that particularly applies to a large number of European NATO countries that would have to move their troops quickly into the region in the event of a conflict, such as Germany. Boosting these defence capabilities and budgets would also serve to limit their over-dependence on the U.S. and its armed forces to a healthy degree. All too often, the American partners are still taken for granted to compensate and ‘fill the gaps’ in those capabilities where European NATO states fall short.¹²⁰ One of these gaps concerns high-intensity warfare capabilities, as evidenced by the offensive and defensive *‘missile gaps’* of Europe’s naval forces.¹²¹

It must be emphasised that the transatlantic Alliance has numerous ways and means to deter attacks on its member states. This includes the choice not to meet the challenges on the northern flank with a symmetric military response, i.e., instead of clinging to the ‘last war’¹²², the Alliance should – in addition to the nuclear deterrence component – attach more importance to its significant *‘deterrence by punishment’* capability to supplement its existing *‘denial’* capabilities to be further developed. With regard to technological and operational development trends, and with a view to conflict scenarios to be expected today and in the future¹²³, basically rebuilding the Maginot Line of the 1930s makes no sense. The same applies to reviving the German Navy’s Fast Patrol Boat Flotilla¹²⁴ or projecting strategic conditions from around Fulda dating back to the 1980s to the Suwałki of the present. Preserving the territorial integrity of the member

¹¹⁷ NATO 1997.

¹¹⁸ NATO 1997.

¹¹⁹ Lucas/Hodges/Schmiedl 2021: 15.

¹²⁰ Lucas/Hodges/Schmiedl 2021: 16.

¹²¹ Stöhs 2021: 35–41.

¹²² Lucas/Hodges/Schmiedl 2021: 13.

¹²³ Kofman 2016.

¹²⁴ Formerly known as ‘Federal Navy’ (*‘Bundesmarine’* in German, author’s note).

states is fundamental to the Alliance, which is primarily defined by collective defence. This is why the above-mentioned improvements to high-intensity warfare capabilities, logistics, infrastructure and deployability are of such great importance, and why the Alliance must be more closely involved in the strengthening of social structures and the ability to withstand non-military interference, i.e. the strengthening of community resilience.

However, more attention should be paid to the fact that Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty does *not* limit assistance and defence to a certain region¹²⁵, i.e. that regional defence capabilities must not only be increased in the Baltic states in particular, but also along the entire northern flank. But instead of taking an uncompromising stance and blindly fanning the flames of the security dilemma on the northern flank or at Russia's borders by permanently stationing ever larger numbers of NATO and U.S. forces, NATO should distribute its own defence capabilities wisely. It must also be stressed that the Alliance has the potential of responding at a global level applying a '*deterrence by punishment*' strategy. The Alliance and its members have a wide range of options available to respond to threats. They especially include a broad spectrum of military options, and a series of other measures, such as financial or economic sanctions. These courses of action should be taken into careful consideration and communicated as such to deter potential adversaries. This makes it indispensable for the members of the Alliance to demonstrate and emphasise their willingness and resolve.¹²⁶ NATO states should not feel compelled to meet threats with a symmetric response, but maintain flexibility in their choice of methods and area of operations. This applies to both the operational and the strategic level, and ultimately serves to maintain the principle of deterrence. The aim must be to demonstrate to any potential adversary that any action against NATO partners would carry a heavy cost (financially, militarily and politically) and be difficult to implement, and to leave no doubt that the Alliance is committed to bearing the cost of any necessary defensive and retaliatory measures, underlining the Alliance's cohesion.¹²⁷

In addition to this overarching approach, the Alliance members and their partners on the northern flank should, above all, try to optimise the strategic framework for the course of action described above. A coherent threat assessment, for example, is crucial for ensuring and organising defence capabilities. In spite of NATO's framework and specific capability requirements, there are discrepancies when it comes to implementing defence measures at the regional level. These discrepancies are sometimes aggravated by subjective perceptions of political decision-makers affected by historical and cultural aspects.¹²⁸ Instead of an uncoordinated buildup of capabilities, an objective, all-encompassing threat assessment helps to structure capabilities, and to coordinate and develop procurement programmes to strengthen common defence capabilities.

The same applies to optimising the exchange of ISR (*intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance*) capabilities and, in particular, to compiling maritime picture of the northern flank, both of which are of outstanding importance to the responsiveness of the armed forces and their planning and conduct of operations. Sharing information among

¹²⁵ Kofman 2016.

¹²⁶ Mazarr 2018: 2–3.

¹²⁷ Maass 2021.

¹²⁸ Lucas/Hodges/Schmiedl 2021: 13.

the partners as well as comprehensively evaluating this data in real time, e.g. by existing formats such as the *Sea Surveillance Co-operation Baltic Sea* (SUCBAS)¹²⁹ in the Baltic Sea or the EU's *Maritime Surveillance* (MARSUR), is of strategic relevance to immediate maritime surveillance in order to reconnoitre any activities in the area of operations at an early stage¹³⁰. Building on this, and starting with the Baltic Sea region as an almost enclosed maritime space, the Alliance members and their partners should aim to establish permanent and complete *maritime situational awareness*, and fully share this situation picture with all partner states to provide decision-makers with 'timely, relevant and accurate information'.¹³¹ NATO's future *Baltic Maritime Coordination Function* could be used to achieve this objective.

Ideally, this approach should be incorporated into a maritime strategy defining the northern flank as an overarching strategic area between the three strategic *gaps*, which in turn comprises individual zones of operation. The aim of this approach is to take account of the security situation and the specific challenges of the region – above all in the multi-domain operational environment and with a particular focus on NATO's collective defence capability. Maintaining the SLOCs that are fundamental to the Alliance's collective defence, not only across the North Atlantic but also across the Baltic Sea, and operating within an adversary's layered A2/AD capabilities are two significant challenges that must be taken into account. NATO's new strategic concept expected to be issued in the summer of 2022 could be used to identify solutions to these challenges.

The Federal Republic of Germany, too, however, is in a position to strengthen security and defence; all it has to do is to embrace its role. The policy statement delivered by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, on 27 February 2022¹³² marked a paradigm shift in German security policy. Even before that day, Germany had the largest defence budget on the northern flank, and ranked among NATO's top financial investors. Also, the Bundeswehr is one of the largest armed forces in the region, boasting the largest and most effective Western naval forces in the Baltic Sea region. With initiatives such as the *DEU MARFOR German Maritime Forces Staff* and its application for NATO's *Baltic Maritime Coordination Function*, the Bundeswehr takes a leading role in serving as a strong supporting partner for allies, especially in the maritime domain.

Nevertheless, doubts have been raised about the 'intentions and abilities'¹³³ of Germany to actually provide security guarantees in the region. Such scepticism was based on Berlin's sometimes troubled relationship with its armed forces and the fact that its foreign and security policy approach was not always easy to comprehend for partners and allies. However, the announcement to increase the defence budget to more than 2 percent of Germany's gross domestic product, the €100 bn special fund for the Bundeswehr, the end of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and the arms deliveries to Ukraine – all measures which were *de facto* adopted within only a few days – reflect a fundamental

¹²⁹ Analogous to Sea Surveillance co-operation Finland Sweden (SUCFIS), which originated in Finland and Sweden; the two NATO partner countries have been at the forefront of cooperation and integration of armed forces on the northern flank.

¹³⁰ Mahnken/Sharp/Kim 2020.

¹³¹ Metrick/Hicks 2018: 20.

¹³² Bundesregierung [Federal Government] 2022.

¹³³ Lucas/Hodges/Schmiedl 2021: 16.

change initiated by the ‘traffic light’ coalition in the light of Russia’s attack on Ukraine. In addition to supplying the armed forces with adequate equipment as envisaged, it is also recommended to extend security and defence cooperation with international partners in order to support specific efforts to strengthen the regional security architecture. The cooperation with Norway is a positive example, as recently illustrated by a joint procurement programme for Type 212CD submarines¹³⁴; however, it would be advisable to foster and intensify links with Eastern European states, especially with Poland.

All in all, the German government now seems to have adopted a higher profile within the Alliance with regard to its economic relations and international diplomacy and to accept a *realpolitik* view on the new security situation in Europe. This development is to be welcomed for several reasons: firstly, it allows Germany to align not only its armed forces, but also its non-military capabilities and instruments with NATO members’ broad approach of ‘*deterrence by punishment*’; secondly, it strengthens the Allies’ confidence in Germany; and thirdly, it helps Germany to underline its reliability as a member of the Alliance.

6 Summary and Outlook

The first part of this study looked at the development of the strategic character of the northern flank from the Cold War period and the subsequent peace dividend years to the present day, showing how different roles were assigned to the region in different scenarios, starting with the second half of the 20th century. From a strategic point of view, the northern flank has developed from a peripheral part of the Central European front that existed during the Cold War to a much more important region, not least because of its essential maritime component. This has led to the current observation that nowadays, the northern flank represents a strategic area between the GIUK Gap, the Suwałki Gap and the Bear Gap. While western NATO members will continue to refer to it as the ‘northern flank’, it no longer serves as a flank in its original sense used in military tactics as was the case at the beginning of the East-West conflict; nor is it likely that the term will be used again in this sense of the word, either now or in the near future.

This historical background served as a basis to focus on the current strategic situation and its significance. After identifying similarities and differences between the northern flank of the Cold War and that of the present and examining the concept of the northern flank, this study presented challenges, conflict scenarios and escalation potentials in the region. The military-strategic challenges and scenarios that have been identified are being addressed, particularly by the Allies, but also by the states on the northern flank, acting on their own initiative, across different domains. Nevertheless, support for European countries by the U.S. and its armed forces is crucial, both in terms of deterrence and defence. Looking at these circumstances reveals aspects that need improvement and produces recommendations for action. There are, for example, still many opportunities for the development of regional defence structures as well as

¹³⁴ The Norwegian government’s strategy paper for Germany published in 2019 states: ‘Germany [...] is Norway’s most important partner in Europe’ (author’s note); German Navy Press and Information Centre 2021.

bilateral and multilateral cooperation on the entire northern flank.¹³⁵ In the event of a conflict, difficulties remain, i.e. maintaining the SLOCs required for the *overall defence* of the region, operating within the distinct layering of Russian A2/AD capabilities and being able to counter them in a timely manner. In principle, however, the NATO alliance and its member countries are recommended to make full use of all their strengths. On the one hand, collective defence on the northern flank, i.e. the need to strengthen regional defence structures applying a ‘*deterrence by denial*’ approach, is one of NATO’s ‘traditional’ tasks. On the other hand, NATO and its member states should emphasise their options to act on a global level not only in the military field but also in the economic and financial sector. In view of its changing security paradigm, Germany has a particular responsibility to use its outstanding economic capabilities and its political role for the benefit of the transatlantic Alliance and the defence of its Allies on the northern and eastern flanks.

Nevertheless, NATO member countries and their partners must also prepare for a multitude of additional challenges to be expected on the northern flank in the coming decades. These challenges, which could only be marginally addressed in this study, are manifold. They include rising temperatures due to global climate change, melting polar ice caps and the ensuing growing global interest in the region. The disappearance of the ice sheet not only facilitates the extraction of valuable raw materials, but also creates new shipping lanes, opens up new SLOCs and shortens maritime transport routes from Asia to the North Atlantic. At the same time, there will be new potentials for conflict in the region. Both the North Atlantic and the Norwegian Sea will not only attract greater interest, but also see more civilian, commercial and military shipping activities. With this in mind, it can be assumed that the presence of Chinese and Iranian naval units observed on the northern flank will not be the last of their kind. The possibility of being confronted with parallel or coordinated activities of various non-allied naval forces in NATO’s home waters in the future would pose new difficulties for the Alliance. Therefore, NATO and Western forces have a responsibility to plan and coordinate their security and defence efforts in the region and beyond with care and foresight.

In view of all these aspects, the Alliance must decide in the interest of its members as to how it will deal with its strategic flanks in the future.

Whereas, following 2014, it was advisable to maintain communication channels with the Russian Federation and keep options open for a possible low-level rapprochement on the northern flank, such as maritime Search and Rescue (SAR) operations or cooperation in the areas of climate change and environmental protection, these efforts are to be abandoned as well after the attack on Ukraine. Moreover, given the Russian aggression against its neighbouring countries, the issue of NATO membership of the northern flank countries Sweden and Finland has never been more important. Although both states interact with different NATO members on a bilateral and multilateral level, they are not part of NATO’s collective defence. It remains to be seen whether Sweden and Finland will decide to apply for membership in the Alliance in the face of the new threat environment.

Eventually, there can be no compromise within the Alliance on security assurances for peripheral NATO member nations – neither today nor in the future. The strategic and political relevance of these members is just as crucial to NATO as that of any other

¹³⁵ Hodges/Lucas/Schiedl 2021.

member state, irrespective of their regional designation as ‘flank’. Any failure to defend any part of the Alliance would not only put that part at risk, but would question the very reason for NATO’s existence: if NATO is unable to protect even its most geographically distant members, ‘this would delegitimize Article 5 and the entire *raison d’être* of the Alliance.’¹³⁶ This is why it is of such great importance for NATO to clearly signal its defence readiness and defence capability to deter potential adversaries.

The nature of the Alliance obliges NATO member countries and their armed forces to prepare for any type of conflict scenario. In this context, NATO’s 360-degree approach is an important step towards responding to the full range of threats and challenges the Alliance and its members are facing. However, the difficulties in implementing it will be to avoid reducing compromise to the lowest common denominator when a powerful defence and deterrence strategy is required, as is the case on NATO’s northern flank – both in a regional maritime and an overarching NATO strategy.¹³⁷ This includes the indispensable ability to fight high-intensity military conflicts and successfully defend the members of the Alliance. The ultimate aim of the Alliance must be to develop and implement a coherent strategy including the key requirements needed to project substantial and credible deterrence in the long term. The Federal Republic of Germany is in a position to make an important contribution to achieving this aim – all it needs to do is to make a start.

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¹³⁶ Stubbs 2017: 47.

¹³⁷ Roberts 2018.

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