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Re-Thinking War in the Baltic Sea

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Re-Thinking War in the Baltic Sea

1 Preface

More than 1,000 days after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and over a decade since the initiation of Russia's war of aggression back in 2014, it is the Baltic Sea region – apart from, of course, the Black Sea and Ukraine itself – that has emerged as a pivotal area where the war's consequences are most keenly felt by NATO and the West, and where a new approach to dealing with the Russian Federation may manifest itself. This paper elucidates potential lessons and implications for the Baltic Sea in terms of the threat environment, strategic goals and challenges, and the practical defence of NATO allies. In this context, certain trends and developments are identified for the Baltic maritime area of operations, both as implications and inspirations from the Ukrainian war of defence. Although events in the Black Sea cannot simply be used as a blueprint for the Baltic, there are a number of areas that require further investigation and discussion, as highlighted by the subsequent set of topics. Thus, as a second pillar, this paper provides additional food for thought, a series of careful considerations for further examination by practitioners, strategic thinkers, academics, and analysts alike.

2 Tectonic shifts

In light of the tectonic shifts described below, a cautious analysis is essential to guide future strategic considerations. The three principal shifts framing this analysis are as follows:

First and foremost, acknowledging the necessity of updating and adapting defence plans for the region is crucial. In fact, this important step was taken at NATO's Vilnius Summit in 2023 in response to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Following a first decision to upscale NATO's Force Model taken in 2022, the member states then agreed on a fundamental upgrade and adaptation of their Baltic defence plans when they met in Vilnius: the forward presence approach consisting of multinational battlegroups, established as a low-threshold reaction to the Russian aggression beginning in 2014 and often referred to as 'tripwire force', was transformed into the plan of establishing a substantial forward defence posture.¹ This was further reinforced at NATO's 75th anniversary summit in Washington.² Aiming at improving the broad spectrum from capabilities to command and control, the overall strategic posture is being moved 'from deterrence by punishment to deterrence by denial.'³

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1 NATO 2022; NATO 2023.
2 NATO 2024b.
3 Kepe 2024.

Based on that development, the second trend encompasses recognising the dramatic needs resulting from large-scale, high-end, and thus highly attritional conventional warfare. As such, the military level is inextricably linked with its societal and economic counterparts.⁴ Current and future scenarios need to adapt to today's strategic and operational challenges whilst being aware of each conflict's specific context, be it historical or contemporary.⁵ This notwithstanding, one of the key prerequisites to avoid pitfalls is to prevent following the infamous mantra of *fighting the last war*.⁶ In this case, it is imperative to carefully differentiate between the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the circumstances of a potential Article 5 scenario for NATO following a Russian aggression against a member of the alliance.

Thirdly, the fundamental change of mindset that has taken place in both Sweden and Finland, culminating in their decision to join the NATO alliance is a symbol for the revolution of Baltic Sea security dynamics.⁷ Although close military cooperation has been developed over the years, not only between the two countries themselves, but also within the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) structure and with NATO, both countries have, until recently, followed the idea of being aligned, but not formally allied.⁸ The changes that have taken place in this regard underscore the countries' adjusted threat perception of Russia, instigated by its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as well as the continuous relevance of defensive, military alliances such as NATO, and the concept of collective defence enshrined in the alliance's Article 5, including the overall significance of (nuclear) deterrence. As a result, an even more coherent allied approach for NATO's Northern Flank to enhance collective defence becomes possible.⁹

3 Theatre Dynamics and Threat Environment

The Baltic Sea theatre matches the definition of a confined, narrow sea:¹⁰ it features an overall close proximity to coasts, multiple strategically relevant islands, large and small, like Swedish Gotland, Danish Bornholm, or Estonian Hiiumaa, as well as crucial shallows and choke points like the Danish Straits. In addition, approximately 2,500 vessels are crossing the Baltic Sea on a daily basis. Even in the absence of major conflict, these factors turn the Baltic Sea into a highly congested and challenging area of operations. Compared to blue-water environments, manoeuvrability is reduced and options for naval operations are limited.¹¹ The vulnerability of naval vessels increases, particularly in the face of detection and attack from air, land, and sea in both symmetric and asymmetric ways.

Considering the strategic significance of islands in littoral warfare, the case of Snake Island (*Zmiinyi*) in the Black Sea is a vivid, practical example. This seemingly minor outpost holds considerable value, offering critical advantages in surveillance and naval operations. However, its defence is fraught with challenges due to its inherent isolation

4 Vershinin 2024.

5 Hoffmann/Garrett 2024.

6 See for instance Freedman 2017: 62–64.

7 Lundqvist 2022.

8 Lunde Saxi 2022.

9 Pawlak 2021.

10 Vego 2003.

11 Vego 2015.

and vulnerability to air and missile attacks. The task of recapturing an island, once occupied, is further complicated by the complexity of amphibious operations. It requires extensive coordination, robust air and naval support, and precise execution to mitigate the vulnerabilities and operational difficulties inherent in such endeavours. The case of Snake Island exemplifies the pivotal role islands can play in regional security dynamics, as well as the formidable challenges involved in their defence and reclamation. On the other hand, forces, if properly used, can utilize the strategic position of islands to influence sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and choke points, or establish air defence and electronic warfare systems, all the while considering the fact that islands are by no means invulnerable.

One of the key characteristics of the Baltic Sea theatre is freedom of navigation for all vessels in its waters, including choke points and SLOCs.¹² However, the fact that the majority of countries bordering the Baltic Sea are NATO members does not necessarily amount to NATO exercising unlimited sea control. On the contrary, ongoing Russian activities in the so-called grey zone, from sabotage and influence operations to espionage and disinformation campaigns, create a constant threat from below the threshold of war. Such actions aim at destabilising not only individual societies, but the coherence of alliances as a whole. They have escalatory potential and could eventually level the field for potential conflicts in the aggressor's favour. These dynamics necessitate constant readiness and alertness, particularly regarding potential hybrid actions threatening societies, commercial shipping, and maritime and other critical infrastructure. The Nord Stream sabotage has served as a wakeup call in this respect. The infamous Russian shadow fleet is another aspect to watch out for. Not only armed forces, but law enforcement agencies, the private sector, and civil societies as a whole, are called upon to stay vigilant and build resilience against hybrid threats.

Overall, for both NATO and the Russian Federation, sea control in the Baltic Sea is no end in itself, but has implications that support broader objectives related to the strategic situation in the region. For Russia, first and foremost, the protection of Baltic SLOCs to and from the Russian mainland and its Kaliningrad Oblast is vital for economic and military purposes. The Baltic Sea is the only way to adequately complement the narrow land connection to this Russian outpost via Lithuania. In addition, currently 1/3 of Russian seaborne crude oil exports are leaving Russian Baltic ports.¹³ On the other hand, the maritime domain is a way to support land-based forces and their task to defend the Russian mainland and territories such as Kaliningrad Oblast and the Northwestern Federal District, including St. Petersburg and the Kola Peninsula. Even though the Baltic Sea is not the first priority in Russian maritime doctrine, Russia has adapted to the new NATO members in Scandinavia by adjusting its organisation of military districts and the planned re-establishment of forces along its Western border.¹⁴

¹² Siig/Kilpatrick 2023.

¹³ Reuters 2023.

¹⁴ Edvardsen 2024.

4 Outlook for NATO Defence in the Baltic Sea and Issues Requiring Further Attention

Re-Thinking War in the Baltic Sea does not only necessitate the implementation of comprehensive and adaptive defence strategies. Basically, several issues from cooperation to enemy capabilities are to be considered carefully. Ukrainian experiences, Russian adaptations and vice versa can inform and help to shape the strategic approach to ensuring security and defence in the Baltic region. Yet, current observations and certain lessons need further investigation to re-think fighting and winning wars, in the Baltic region and beyond. This chapter provides a selection of issues to ponder.

SLOCs and Baltic Peculiarities: Similarly to the Russian Federation, NATO nations pursue the objective of defending the vital Baltic SLOCs and freedom of navigation. They are crucial for the security, defence, and economic prosperity of the Baltic littorals. The example of Finland's imports and exports, 95% of which are shipped via the Baltic Sea, speaks for itself.¹⁵ The congested nature of a confined and shallow sea like the Baltic, however, provides opportunities for hostile forces to employ hybrid measures including both classic naval tactics as well as asymmetric actions from the shores and archipelagos to the sea. In contrast, in order to be able to prevail in a potential high-intensity conflict, NATO has to prepare for large parts of the naval warfare spectrum, including mining and mine countermeasures, anti-surface, anti-air, and anti-submarine warfare, as well as the possibility of limited amphibious operations. The complex environment of the Baltic, consisting of fragmented coastlines and numerous islands, offers both strategic advantages and challenges. It underscores the importance of both offensive and defensive naval operations as part of a whole range of naval tactical actions.¹⁶ NATO forces should leverage this environment to distribute their growing denial capabilities, increasing both surprise and deception, while minimizing the potential impact of long-range enemy strikes.¹⁷

Flexibility, Awareness and Communication: Implementing joint force principles and a unified command and control (C2) system by overcoming still existing national barriers is essential to effectively address issues ranging from grey-zone conflicts to high-intensity warfare. This requires advanced maritime situational awareness and preparation for scenarios where intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities may be compromised, and satellites and surveillance aircraft will be targeted. Supplementing the defence of the Baltic shores and ensuring mobility and flexible basing by rotating vessels are essential ways to avoid detection and destruction. This applies to air assets as well, with islands offering strategic and operational opportunities, but limited numbers of basing options – which can become valuable targets in terms of Russian long-range strike capabilities. The Baltic littoral states themselves should continue procuring and deploying mobile denial systems, such as shore-based anti-ship missiles, to enhance flexible area denial and strike capabilities.

¹⁵ Yle 2023.

¹⁶ Vego 2020.

¹⁷ Kaushal/Balletta 2024.

Interoperability: Apart from the aforementioned, interoperability with national law enforcement agencies, such as coast guards and police forces, is crucial for the defence and security of the Baltic shore areas. This cooperation is particularly valuable with regard to protecting critical infrastructure and controlling territorial seas, thus ensuring a comprehensive approach to regional security. The impact of destroyed bridges, ports, or blocked choke points can prove much more disastrous than single vessel incidents, as Ukrainian drone strikes against Russian energy infrastructure in the Baltic have shown.¹⁸

Mutual Denial: Looking at the higher end of a potential escalation ladder, the issue of sending high value assets into the Baltic and areas within the potential range of denial capabilities remains a point of discussion. In this context, it is reasonable to anticipate that both NATO and Russian forces would attempt to deny the other side access to certain areas of the Baltic Sea, basically achieving mutual denial in a joint environment.¹⁹ On a smaller scale, this mutual denial shows similarities to Krepinevich’s ‘maritime no man’s land’ in the context of a maritime precision strike regime.²⁰ Although denial capabilities do have a certain effect, in the current state of affairs actors might not be able to utilize the maritime theatre to their own advantage without first achieving a sufficient disruption of the other’s capabilities – eventually resulting in a highly contested, and thus perilous, area of operations.

Naval Mining: Mine Warfare is considered a central topic in the Baltic Sea, particularly due to certain geographical conditions such as in the Gulf of Finland and the Danish Straits.²¹ Through blockades or the disruption of SLOCs, it can be used to effectively shape the respective naval area of operations. History provides insights into how this was operationalized in the past, but warnings can be heard that ‘much of NATO’s institutional knowledge’ has been lost.²² Apart from such knowledge, the number of capable units is limited, and their survivability during a high-intensity conflict is by no means guaranteed. From another perspective, in this day and age, the Baltic SLOCs are of even greater economic and military significance than in the past. In the Black Sea, the risk of collateral damage from mines persisted in its western and north-western parts, even as a result of a relatively limited mining campaign.²³ In any potential endeavour in the Baltic, allies would have to carefully consider SLOCs and existing own maritime dependencies in light of the extensive need for mine countermeasures following own mining campaigns, but even more so following the opponent’s respective actions, which could take place during an armed conflict or even prior to that.

Uncrewed Systems: Along with the general, unprecedented use of uncrewed systems in the war in Ukraine, its naval aspect is mostly known for Ukraine’s successful use of naval drones.²⁴ Their potential role for naval strategy and operations in the Baltic

¹⁸ Black 2024; Osborn/Rodionov 2024.

¹⁹ Warnar 2023.

²⁰ Krepinevich 2014.

²¹ Reuters 2024.

²² Laanements 2024.

²³ NATO 2024a.

²⁴ Zafra et al. 2024; Sutton 2024.

requires careful consideration, from the perspective of an attacker as well as from that of a defender. Both NATO and Russia are expected to adapt to these developments, enhancing their own uncrewed capabilities for defensive and offensive purposes alike. The bandwidth of these systems offers opportunities to increase maritime situational awareness (MSA) and expand ISR capabilities, to further develop uncrewed minelaying, or to monitor and defend critical infrastructure. In addition, even with their limitations, the systems could serve both as means of denial against Russian vessels and as alternatives to operating in restricted, high-risk denial environments. The Baltic littoral states, however, must be prepared to counter UxS threats on, above, and below the water surface against vessels, but particularly against port installations and other critical infrastructure, and closely consider Russian perspectives and developments in this regard. Notably, the characteristics of the Black Sea theatre of operations are quite specific and cannot simply be applied to the Baltic. Differences and limitations, such as durability or the effects of weather conditions, and the ‘technological game of cat and mouse’ call for a precise, forward-thinking development of uncrewed systems.²⁵ Eventually, the disproportional amount of attention bestowed on these systems should not distract from their effective, combined use under the continuous missile threat at sea.²⁶

Russian Adaptation and Capabilities: The recent Russian naval performance should not lead to the erroneous belief that the Russian armed forces and the country’s defence industry would not aim at adapting to the experiences and developments in the Black Sea. Even today, i.e., adaptations in port defence installations and own drone developments are taking place.²⁷ Foreseeably, adaptations of Russian offensive and denial capabilities in areas like the Baltic as part of its active defence²⁸ should not be excluded prematurely. In addition, its deep-sea and seabed warfare capabilities offer further opportunities not only for subsea, but also for asymmetric, grey-zone approaches within the Baltic and along NATO’s Northern Flank.²⁹ In addition to the ongoing adaptation in terms of uncrewed systems and related operations, naval construction rates and weapon procurement in Russia are increasing, new vessels are being put into service. As stated by the Chief of the German Navy, Vice Admiral Kaack, it would be a fallacy to expect Russian naval forces along Europe’s Northern shores to be weakened due to events in the Black Sea.³⁰ Rather, its ‘global power projection capabilities are undiminished.’³¹ Whilst blue water capabilities enabling the conduct of naval battles should not be expected in the Baltic, the ‘Russian naval threat’ consists of more than its truly capable SSBNs.³² Although confronted with a shorter coastline and limited naval means, in this scenario Russian Forces could utilize a low-threshold, asymmetric approach against the larger NATO force in the Baltic. As pointed out by Mike Petersen, ‘[t]he Russian military [...] actively seeks asymmetries in its favour, either via technology development or

²⁵ Zafra et al. 2024; see also Redford 2024 as another paper of the series at hand.

²⁶ Tallis 2024.

²⁷ Sutton 2023.

²⁸ Kofman et al. 2021: 10–17.

²⁹ Axe 2024; Galeotti 2023.

³⁰ ntv 2024.

³¹ Petersen 2024.

³² Kaushal 2024.

innovative concepts of operations or both.³³ Being aware of the existing asymmetry in the naval domain, Russia could be able to circumvent their limited anti-ship maritime strike capability by leveraging missile strikes, coastal defence systems, and tactical aviation with air defence capabilities in a region like the Baltic.³⁴ The result of potentially successful strikes on Western high value targets, from ports to headquarters, military installations and capitals, in immediate Russian range creates strategic and political issues to worry about.³⁵

5 Conclusion

Rethinking contemporary warfare in the Baltic Sea necessitates a nuanced understanding of naval dynamics, particularly in light of insights drawn from the ongoing war in Ukraine and the Black Sea. While this war offers valuable lessons, it cannot serve as a one-size-fits-all model for other seas like the Baltic. The rise of uncrewed vessels, for example, while garnering significant attention, must be contextualized within their actual operational impact, which may not align with public perception.

Strategically, the ability to harness the potential of the maritime domain will remain crucial for the defence of the Baltic Sea region. To achieve, exploit, or deny sea control in a theatre like the Baltic demands close, joint and combined cooperation. Likewise, allies need to prepare for confrontations with Russian capabilities in the region which will not necessarily always be symmetric.

For NATO, eventually, deterrence not just in the Baltic region encompasses strategic preparations for adversarial action across the entire spectrum from the ongoing strategic competition towards high-intensity conflict. The necessary preparations must be matched by strong political resolve. The alliance needs to be prepared for the possibility of both conventional escalation and nuclear coercion. In a kinetic conflict in a collective defence scenario, decision-makers will face tough choices, such as neutralizing significant portions of the conventional threat in the Baltic Sea region.³⁶ A strong, credible posture of deterrence must go hand in hand with pivotal decisiveness towards handling escalatory efforts, from grey zone activities to a high-intensity conflict scenario and potential nuclear blackmailing.³⁷

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³³ Petersen 2023: 220.

³⁴ Kofman 2023: 117; Kaushal 2024.

³⁵ Petersen 2023: 225.

³⁶ Pawlak 2024.

³⁷ Stubbs 2017.

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