

## Geopolitics in the Baltic Sea Region: the "Zeitenwende" in the context of critical maritime infrastructure, escalation threats and the German willingness to lead

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# SWP Comment

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## Geopolitics in the Baltic Sea Region

The “*Zeitenwende*” in the context of critical maritime infrastructure, escalation threats and the German willingness to lead

*Göran Swistek and Michael Paul*

Due to its strategic immensity and opportunities for covert action, the maritime domain has become the most prominent arena of modern-day great power rivalry. In the shadow of this confrontation and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the Baltic Sea is now the focus of geopolitical interest and conflict. An expression of this is the increase in hybrid activities, from acts of sabotage to the use of unidentified drones. For the Western states of the Baltic Sea region in particular, all of this highlights their dependence on fossil resources, critical maritime infrastructure, and secure trade routes. In response to the war against Ukraine and Russian naval activity in the Baltic Sea, littoral states have placed their militaries on heightened readiness. In the midst of this crisis situation, NATO allies and future allies remain locked in an unnecessary dispute over force dispositions, new structures and leadership roles. As a result, there is little sign of the German “*Zeitenwende*” in the Baltic Sea region.

During the Cold War, the Baltic Sea was described by the Warsaw Pact as the Sea of Peace. In its own interpretation, this description included a *mare clausum* claim based geopolitically on the Baltic Sea as the sea of origin of Soviet naval power aspirations. De facto, the Baltic Sea was divided into the Warsaw Pact-controlled area east of the island of Fehmarn and the NATO-controlled area west of Fehmarn to the Skagerrak. Denmark, the Federal Republic of Germany and Norway secured the Baltic Sea approaches.

Moreover, with the two non-aligned states of Sweden and Finland, there was an area in the Baltic Sea that had geostrategic relevance for the control of essential sea

lines in an area dominated by the Warsaw Pact. As such, it could have been the target of Soviet aggression but had not been explicitly considered in NATO’s defense plans. However, based on their historical experience with the Soviet Union, both states had established combat-ready forces early on with total defense concepts and whole-of-society security preparedness to ensure deterrence and resilience. The geographic area of the eastern Baltic Sea, bordered by Sweden and Finland, provided a strategic military gateway for advancing behind the Iron Curtain in the event of military confrontation.

By contrast, a divided Germany, and with it the adjacent Baltic Sea, was the potential



front line of a military escalation between the Warsaw Pact and NATO. In the Baltic Sea, the Soviet Union, together with Poland and the GDR, had numerical maritime advantages with its submarines, destroyers, corvettes, fast patrol boats, amphibious assets, and minelayers. NATO naval forces focused on closing and controlling the Baltic Sea approaches as far as the Danish Straits, i.e., the Öresund as well as the Little and Great Belt. In the Baltic Sea, the alliance had about 50 missile speedboats, as well as many minesweeping and minelaying boats, 28 smaller conventional submarines, numerous coastal batteries, and about 100 combat aircraft specialized in naval warfare. NATO believed it had little to counter the Warsaw Pact's superiority in the event of a confrontation. Therefore, Soviet occupation of large parts of Danish, southern Norwegian and northern German territory was expected in the first days of a possible conflict.

From the Soviet point of view, the main strategic bottleneck was an area in and around southern Norway. This was where the sea lines of communication to the areas of operation and deployment of the strategic units of the Warsaw Pact ran, and where the access points for Russian ships and submarines of the Baltic Fleet and the Northern Fleet to the North Atlantic, the North Sea and the Baltic Sea were located. In this area, there was fear of NATO interference in Russian sea lines.

### **The new geostrategic situation**

The geostrategic reality has fundamentally changed in recent years. Reasons for this include the consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, neoimperial Russian foreign and security policy manifested in the ongoing aggression against Ukraine, and the intended NATO accession of Sweden and Finland. Today, the Baltic and North Seas are part of the larger geostrategic Arctic-North Atlantic space, which stretches as far as the Black Sea as an area of operations. From Russia's

point of view, this space is part of its strategy toward Europe, in which Moscow wants to establish an economic and security area from the Atlantic to the Pacific and to take a central and controlling position. For the countries of Eastern and Northern Europe, on the other hand, this is the region in which they face constant threats and recurring provocations.

With Sweden and Finland joining NATO, the Baltic Sea — apart from the two areas around Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg — will be surrounded by NATO member states. The goal of establishing Russian sea power, proclaimed again in 2022 with the publication of Russia's new naval doctrine, would now not be feasible in this strategically important region. If Norway was a potential link between geostrategically important reference points from the Soviet Union's perspective during the Cold War, from the Russian view this is now the region of the Baltic States, from the Gulf of Finland to the Suwalki corridor. This includes the Swedish island of Gotland and the Danish island of Bornholm. Vital sea lines of communication run through the region, and control of this space will be a military priority for all parties in a confrontation that can no longer be ruled out. This was most recently made visible to the general public when three Russian landing ships from the Northern Fleet initially entered the Baltic Sea in early January 2022 and were resupplied in Kaliningrad. Refueled and equipped, they moved during the following days with three other landing ships of the Baltic Fleet in the sea area between Kaliningrad and Gotland. Sweden was so alarmed that it immediately increased its military presence on the island, which it has continued to expand and consolidate to this day. After a few days, the six landing ships left the Baltic Sea and sailed via the English Channel and the Mediterranean Sea to the Black Sea to reinforce Russian naval forces there in preparation for the invasion of Ukraine.

The alliance's forces will be able to more easily monitor and control the Baltic Sea's critical sea lines, when Sweden and Finland

have joined NATO. The Baltic States, as well as Bornholm and Gotland in the central Baltic Sea, are becoming increasingly important from a strategic perspective for Russian access to the exclave of Kaliningrad. Gotland will facilitate NATO's potential control of the Baltic Sea region, while Kaliningrad will become a burden for Russia. A country whose fleet does not have free access to its own bases and sea lines cannot be a sea power. Under the Law of the Sea Convention of the International Maritime Organization (IMO), a suborganization of the United Nations, Russia has legitimate rights to use vital sea lines of communication in the Baltic Sea to its territories. In the event of an armed conflict, however, that could change dramatically. NATO would have great leverage to impede Russia's exclave of Kaliningrad and economically essential access to St. Petersburg through blockades and military operations, or even to close these sea lines for Russian use. The maritime route does not end in St. Petersburg, but continues south into the Russian heartland via rivers, lakes, and canals, north to the White Sea. Before the war, maritime cargo traffic passing through St. Petersburg exceeded 300 million tons annually. In recent months, Russia has been rehearsing moving smaller warships equipped with standoff weapons such as the *Kalibr* cruise missile from the Baltic Sea to the White Sea via these inner waterways. The final of the exercise was the live firing of a *Kalibr* cruise missile.

These exercises also serve to preserve Moscow's own freedom of movement as the Baltic region becomes increasingly confined by NATO expansion. Similarly, Moscow has built forward defense and area denial capabilities with modern weapons systems in and around Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg. Sweden's and Finland's accession to NATO would allow the alliance to expand its capabilities with better reconnaissance assets and defensive or even offensive weapons systems.

## Regional conflict potential

In addition to the imminent accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO, other developments and constellations in the Baltic Sea region may precipitate an escalation between NATO states and Russia:

- The West's sanctions against Russia restrict the transit of goods to Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg.
- The West's continued and ever-growing military support for Ukraine is also coordinated and promoted through the Baltic States.
- The Baltic States are still relying on Russian energy networks.
- Along the Estonian and Polish borders, there have been more and more border violations by Russia, namely by military aircraft, warships and misdirected projectiles due to the war in Ukraine.
- Numerous hybrid activities can be observed, from the appearance of drones along critical civilian and military infrastructure to acts of sabotage such as the Nord Stream incident.
- NATO is adjusting its plans and actions to protect its eastern and northern allies and strengthen its deterrence and defense capabilities in these regions.
- The U.S. is deploying more weapons systems in the region and expanding its bilateral cooperation with Norway, among others. In the future, the U.S. Air Force will be able to use the airfields at Rygge and Sola near Oslo, as well as Stavanger, to monitor shipping at the approaches to the Baltic Sea.

In sum, such and other measures make a potential horizontal conflict escalation appear a realistic scenario, i.e., the shift of an existing conflict into another geographical area. Because of the geostrategic connections, the entire Arctic-North Atlantic area could become involved.

## The maritime space is becoming more conflictual and unstable

The maritime space is one of the areas most affected by the changes in the security environment in recent years. Increasingly, the boundaries between internal and external security are becoming blurred, while aspects are being added that were before hardly considered from a security policy perspective. These include issues of energy security, protection of trade and business locations, transnational crime, sabotage, or targeted influence on societies in information and cyberspace. In this context, the maritime space has become more unstable and vulnerable to hybrid threats. At least seven factors characterize this development:

(1) Maritime spaces are theatres of geopolitical competition. Globally, the competition between the USA, China and Russia is decisive. Regionally, further power competitions can be observed, for example between Turkey and Russia in the Black Sea and the Middle East or between Turkey, Greece and Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean, combined with increasing militarization. At the same time, the maritime environment offers strategic depth beyond territorial waters and an area below the water's surface that is difficult to monitor even with state-of-the-art satellite reconnaissance.

(2) Unresolved territorial disputes and territorial claims in the Mediterranean, the Pacific or the Arctic mark a situation of increasingly disputed spaces and thus a development from "mare liberum" to "mare clausum". For example, the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific collides with Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea.

(3) Maritime spaces are connected channels for illegal transnational activities, for example, drug trafficking, illegal migration, arms trafficking, and terrorism.

(4) In the maritime region, competition is growing over access to large, partly untapped resources and their utilization. This, above all, concerns crude oil, natural gas and rare earth metals, but also fish and

hydropower as a regenerative energy source or desalinated seawater in times of dwindling drinking water resources.

(5) The consequences of climate change are particularly severe in the maritime region. Sea levels are rising, land and sea ice are receding, permafrost is thawing, and seawater is warming. The latter entails changes in marine biology and pollution of freshwater resources.

(6) Vital sea links, transport and communication routes are becoming more fragile. Examples include the blockade of the Suez Canal by the wrecked container ship *Ever Given* in March 2021 and the disruption of global grain supplies as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

(7) The dependence on critical infrastructure, such as energy and communications, is clearly evident in the maritime space. The attacks on Nord Stream 1 and 2 are a striking example.

At least four of these factors can be identified in the Baltic Sea region, namely threats to critical maritime infrastructure, potential disruption of vital sea lines, the growing and sometimes provocative presence of military units, and the impact of climate change on marine biology.

Destabilization of maritime spaces along these factors has direct consequences for states and societies and their functioning. States without direct access to the open sea are also affected. Economic interdependencies are the main cause of the far-reaching and transboundary impacts of destabilizing activities. Therefore, the Baltic Sea should be understood not only as an adjacent sea, but as a larger geopolitical space that is closely linked to other adjacent spaces and regions. From a global geostrategic perspective, one can even see a parallelism between many regions and conflicts. From the Arctic to the North Atlantic, the Baltic Sea and Eastern Europe to Southeast Asia, political, economic and military instruments are used to exploit the aforementioned factors in the pursuit of self-interests.

## Critical maritime infrastructure in the Baltic Sea region

Of the four factors mentioned above, it is the critical maritime infrastructure in the sea and on the coasts as well as the sea lines that gives cause for concern in the Baltic Sea region. In Germany, maritime critical infrastructure has so far been the least integrated into government security concepts and measures, as they are predominantly privately operated. Infrastructures are indispensable lifelines of modern, efficient societies. This was emphasized by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Berlin in December 2022, when he praised the German-Norwegian initiative in improving underwater security, especially of critical infrastructure, within the framework of the alliance. Since the first Russian submarine activities in 2015, the vulnerability of allied nations to their extraterritorial maritime infrastructure has played an important role in military planning. This includes the risk of external powers taking control of this infrastructure, using it to subvert existing security concepts, and thereby destabilizing individual nations or even the alliance as a whole. Critical infrastructure thus becomes defense-relevant and the subject of military planning or protection needs. The recent acts of sabotage and destruction have ensured that the topic has now also landed on the political agenda and is being discussed publicly. In its new strategic concept of June 2022, NATO places the actions of state actors, for example China, and the threats to the long-term security of the alliance's members from external influence in context. It notes, for example, that the People's Republic "seeks control over key technological and industrial sectors, critical infrastructure, and strategic materials and supply chains."

Ensuring internal and external security is increasingly interdependent. New threats from state actors are now directed against energy supplies, trade routes and economic resources. As an element of an overall strategy, such threats could prepare for or partially complement conventional military activities. Therefore, military defense plan-

ning must take into account these aspects, which are critical to national security and welfare.

Even before Russia's attack on Ukraine, there was an increase in hybrid activities that are difficult to attribute. These include the influencing of groups and opinions in the information space, the use of drones along critical military and maritime infrastructure, the escalation of confrontative rhetoric on the part of the Russian leadership toward the West, and attempts to weaken European energy security. It is now clear that energy security, economic policy, and cyber and information activities are increasingly intertwined with state and military security.

The main psychological goal of such activities is to frighten, unsettle, or even destabilize Western European societies. Examples include the destruction of Norwegian submarine cables and sensors, drone flights over Swedish nuclear power plants, Norwegian military facilities and energy infrastructure, and German military training areas, and the sabotage of Nord Stream 1 and 2.

The attacks on these two pipelines have shown how vulnerable the maritime areas and the critical infrastructure there are. However, this has not provided any impetus for closer cooperation between partners and allies in the Baltic Sea region.

## "Zeitenwende" in the Baltic Sea region

Three days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, Chancellor Olaf Scholz delivered his "Zeitenwende" speech in the German Bundestag. Since then, the German government has repeatedly expressed its ambition to develop Germany into a leading military power in the alliance while assuming responsibility for NATO in the Baltic Sea region by providing certain regional command elements or headquarters.

In the maritime domain, the German government would like to establish a German-led regional maritime headquarters.

Such a command element was already offered to NATO in November 2020 as part of the so-called Baltic Maritime Coordination Function. At that time, this coordination function was to provide a framework for regional activities in peacetime and in emerging crises. In the event of conflict or war, it was then to be handed over to one of the three joint force NATO headquarters, based on the existing command and control structure. However, a political decision by the Alliance on the offer has not been taken to date.

According to a new German proposal, the maritime headquarters should assume military command of naval forces in times of peace, crisis and war. However, since the question of the command element remains unanswered, a decision in this regard is unlikely to be made soon. In addition, NATO is reviewing its command structure based on the new security environment and the adjustments that will be required. This could cause additional friction if, according to the alliance's new force model, certain responsibilities in peace and war are to be delegated more often regionally to national units or bi- and multilateral cooperation.

At present, however, a competition within the alliance and among its partners over the leading role on the northern flank and in the Baltic Sea, as well as over the regional shape of military contributions, appears to be hampering the implementation of the decisions taken at the Madrid summit. For example, the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) under British command claims to assume responsibility for and leadership on NATO's northern flank and in the Baltic Sea. To this end, the United Kingdom provides a national command framework and, where available, weapon systems. The nine other countries participating in the JEF are also expected to contribute their capabilities. For many participating nations, the JEF is seen as an umbrella under which they can access certain heavy military capabilities that also provide clear strategic signaling. These may include amphibious landing platforms, helicopter carriers, or even aircraft carriers and other large warships. In recent years,

however, the JEF has been unable to assemble significant numbers of platforms and units, except for short periods during certain key exercises. Their ambition was revived by the heads of government of the JEF nations at a 2022 meeting in Riga. In the course of 2023, a strategy paper for the next ten years is to be drawn up for this purpose. The JEF wants to demonstrate its relevance and unity on the northern flank and in the Baltic Sea region this year by holding one of the largest-scale military exercises in Europe, entitled Exercise JEF Warrior. In particular, throughout March 2023, three separate and long-planned exercises will be conducted under the JEF framework and jointly created by the JEF Warrior superstructure. At the same time, however, the debate is spreading as to whether the United Kingdom will be able to keep its NATO commitments at all.

The future accession to NATO of Sweden and Finland, both of which are also members of the JEF, once again underscores the theme of regional cooperation and leadership. While accession will extend the common border with Russia by some 1,340 km, it will at the same time provide an opportunity to significantly constrain Russian A2/AD capabilities in the sub-Arctic region through NATO-owned defense and effect systems. In preparation for impending NATO membership, the Scandinavian countries are also looking to revitalize and intensify their defense cooperation within the framework of the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO). In addition to the expansion of joint capabilities and structures, the revitalized NORDEFECO is to focus primarily on joint defense planning and preparations for conducting joint operations. Exercise Cold Response, hitherto planned and led by Norway, is to be transformed in 2024 into Nordic Response, a major military exercise which the Scandinavian states will host jointly. At the same time, this is to form part of a series of interlocking major NATO exercises for 2024 along the northern flank to the Baltic Sea.

Meanwhile, Poland, another Baltic Sea riparian and ally, is forging its own path.

The Polish ambition is to develop its armed forces into the strongest in Europe. In bilateral cooperation with the United States, new capabilities are being acquired, structures and units are being established, and the size of the armed forces deployed on Polish soil is being increased. If the government in Warsaw can sustain these ambitions and their funding through the coming elections, the Polish land forces would probably become the largest and best-equipped army forces of the European allies in the medium term. In the maritime domain, on the other hand, there are no signs of a similarly ambitious form of modernization and repositioning, even if the claim to regional leadership in the Baltic Sea remains unchanged.

At the Madrid summit, NATO paved the way for strengthening its deterrence and defense efforts in the Baltic Sea region with troops and capabilities. The biggest challenge to implementation is currently the leadership dispute between the allies. If Germany would take the lead and establish the regional maritime headquarters, it would have two effects: Firstly, the repeatedly expressed commitment to assume greater responsibility in the alliance and to contribute more to burden sharing could produce some substance; and secondly, Germany would consistently pursue its foreign policy goals. As such, the proclaimed “*Zeitenwende*” would result in action.

Regardless of whether or not Germany prevails with its regional maritime leadership bid, the core of the challenge for the armed forces in the Baltic Sea region remains key; namely, to create a basis for ongoing bilateral and multilateral cooperation to be bundled and used effectively. This is primarily about interoperability from a technical perspective. The basic idea, for example, is to use a common network to exchange information and situation reports – even classified ones if the nations involved want to – with a direct link to NATO. This does not require any other major projects or large, special budgets.

## “*Zeitenwende*” in the European context

As a result of the decisions taken at the 2022 NATO summit in Madrid, Germany is required for the first time to draw up its own defense planning, and list its capabilities, forces and measures in the event of national and collective defense in peace, in developing crises and in war. At a minimum, this must include the protection of identified allied and defense-related critical infrastructure – from certain sea lanes, ports, data cables, pipelines, to offshore installations within its own territory (and, because of German legal requirements, in the extended economic zone). A broader approach would also encompass the contribution that can be made on the high seas to protect critical infrastructure – whether bilaterally to multilaterally, or in support of individual allies in their territorial waters. The German Navy already practiced the latter at the end of October 2022: Three German frigates with surface and underwater situational awareness capabilities were deployed to Norway to protect critical maritime infrastructure, especially gas and oil platforms.

Another promising approach is the joint German-Danish action plan of August 2022, which includes aspects of maritime security and cooperation in the Baltic and North Seas. The strong interest, especially on the Danish side, in bilateral cooperation could open up new possibilities for action in the short term to achieve perceptible progress in key areas and thus send appropriate political messages regarding the “*Zeitenwende*.” This includes the establishment of the regional maritime headquarters in Rostock, the improvement of situational awareness and an increased presence at sea.

Improved maritime situational awareness will also be possible through Anglo-German-Norwegian cooperation in the Arctic-North Atlantic area once their forces are fully equipped with a new generation of maritime patrol aircraft – the Boeing P-8A *Poseidon*. Boeing delivered the first aircraft of this type to Norway back in November



2021. This is important not only with regard to Russia, but also in light of China's future maritime activities in the Arctic-North Atlantic area. However, the "Zeitenwende" would take a fatally wrong turn if Germany were to have not more but fewer maritime reconnaissance aircraft available in the future. So far, the plan is to acquire only five instead of the previous eight aircraft, even though far more reconnaissance aircraft would actually be needed.

Against this background, Germany and its allies in the wider Baltic Sea region should aim for a permanent presence in the North and Baltic Seas. To this end, they should rotate units in a joint effort, preferably under the direction of a regional maritime headquarters. The purpose of this effort would be to improve situational awareness and maritime situational awareness, protect critical maritime infrastructure, secure sea lanes, and maintain a necessary deterrent.

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