

By Joseph E. Fallon and Robin Ashby



Is Russia a threat in the Baltic area? S.B. Ivanov, former Russian Federation Defence Minister, and Deputy Prime Minister, discussing the meaning of "threat" a decade ago, said that its content had drastically changed from the purely standard military threats to the so-called uncertainty factors, which are understood by the Russian Federation Defence Ministry to mean the situation, conflict or process, "which can bring about a significant change of geopolitical environment in the regions of Russia's vital interests, or can directly endanger its security."

The Baltic Sea is a major theatre in what's being described as the new Cold War between NATO and Russia. It is a relatively small body of water on the northeastern edge of the Atlantic Ocean surrounded by landmasses in nearly all directions. Its surface area is slightly larger than Finland's and its mean depth is only 54 metres. The Baltic Sea is connected to the world oceans only by the narrow Danish straits, which connect it to the North Sea. The Danish straits are formed by two straits immediately next to each other: The Åresund strait on the coast of Sweden and the Belt Sea on the coast of Denmark, which is comprised of the Skagerrak and Kattegat

These straits are important to Russia's economy being a key trade route for Russian oil heading by sea to markets around the world, and historically as access to warm water deep oceans "a fundamental geostrategic driver throughout Russia's history. "History is all explained by geography." - Robert Penn Warren

Russia is at a strategic disadvantage in the Baltic Sea, especially since the multiple expansions of NATO and the evolution of JEF and NORDEFCO. As Sebastian Bruns wrote in "Flooded Meadow" to Maritime Hotspot: Keeping the Baltic Sea Free, Open, and Interconnected," Baltic Sea Regional Security Initiative, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 20, 2023, "Russia's maritime geography has turned disadvantageous since 1991. The Cold War era Soviet and Warsaw Pact coast, from which the Soviets staged their power projection against NATO, has been reduced to small pieces of Russian real estate in the St. Petersburg region of the Eastern Gulf of Finland and the Kaliningrad exclave." These are further isolated by the maritime borders of the surrounding states. There has been a corresponding reduction on Russian air space as well.

With the addition of Finland and Sweden, NATO may believe it has checkmated Russia in the Baltic: That it's achieved "the supreme art of war...to subdue the enemy without fighting." As Ulrike Franke, senior fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, stated "[Sweden and Finland] make NATO much more geographically coherent. The Baltic Sea becomes a NATO lake."

But Sebastian Bruns warns "...this is a potentially dangerous, misleading interpretation. At best, it amounts to uncritical self-cheerleading; at worst, it is a self-delusion that could lead to real military and geopolitical consequences."

Abandoning neutrality and joining NATO has potential consequences that Helsinki and Stockholm have chosen to ignore. As belligerents in a war against Russia in the Baltic Sea their territories would be legitimate targets, even though they would be able to call for Article 5 support.

Northern European countries, including new NATO entrants Finland and Sweden, are strengthening their defences against possible aggression from the East, including threats to the small EU Baltic states.

The Nordic countries are extending national resilience, expanding military equipment manufacture, and extending national service. They are also ever-closer operationally.

Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark already in effect have a joint air force. Last year their

air force commanders signed a letter of intent to form the basis of the development of joint Nordic air defence so that they can operate seamlessly together as one force through developing a Nordic concept for joint air operations by using NATO methods, There will be integrated command and control, as well as operative planning and execution; flexible and resilient deployment of the air forces; joint monitoring of air spaces; joint education, training, and exercise “ with an eye on the exercises Nordic Response and Arctic Challenge Exercise as important milestones

The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) is a UK Northern European multi-national military partnership designed for rapid response and expeditionary operations. Operational in 2018, since 2021 it has included NATO members Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and the Netherlands

It can act independently in its own right, but it can also be deployed in support of NATO or other multinational activities. Late in 2023 it announced the intention of maritime patrolling in the Baltic.

The Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) consists of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The overall purpose of NORDEFCO is to strengthen the participants' national defence, explore common synergies and facilitate efficient common solutions The organisation currently stresses that it is a co-operative venture not a command structure..

In an assumed war, NATO's objective must be to defeat Russia by being in position to blockade Russia's principal ports on the Baltic Sea, St. Petersburg and Kaliningrad. This would divide and isolate the Russian Baltic Fleet, and disrupt Russia's economy.

If the political goal of NATO is to effectively render Russia "landlocked" in the Baltic region - to reverse the outcome of The Great Northern War, 1700-1721, whereby a land-locked Russia gained a coast along the Gulf of Finland and Baltic Sea, establishing it as a major power in Europe - this would be a combination of hubris and folly.

The Soviet Union fell as a result of economic collapse. It was not militarily defeated as were Germany and Japan in the Second World War. In a post 1990's Europe no longer facing a threat from the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, NATO engaged in military actions outside its

borders both in Europe and overseas. These operations were failures because NATO failed to abide by Clausewitz's dictum: "The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it."

NATO should consider the limitations of its previous military operations. Bosnia remains a tinderbox 32 years after NATO's 1992 intervention. Kosovo remains volatile 25 years after NATO's 1999 intervention. Libya remains in chaos 21 years after NATO's 2003 intervention. And after 18 years in Afghanistan, 2003-2021, NATO and the U.S. suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Taliban. It could be argued that NATO's only "success" was in the war against Somali pirates, 2009-2016. This "success" had to rely on the navies of non-NATO countries, such as India, China, Japan, South Korea, and Russia.

It should also consider the influence of the academic theoreticians of the military-industrial complex, the "neo-cons" on any future US administration, especially their view that Russia now replaced the Soviet Union as the existential threat. While this might act as pressure to remain fully engaged with NATO, the existential threat to Baltic nations is rather more real.

"After the collapse of the Soviet bloc this [first] generation of neocons lost its defining purpose, but a second, younger generation emerged to take its place. This generation of neocons advocated a dramatically different strategy to that of the first: rather than a defensive strategy premised on the imperative of containing a countervailing superpower in a bipolar world, the second generation of neocons advocated an offensive military posture dedicated to preserving and extending America's newfound 'unipolar moment' by taking preventive action to preclude the emergence of rival powers, unilaterally if necessary...In essence they sought to remain -- in Charles Krauthammer's provocative formulation -- 'the single pole of world power,' which could be the 'decisive player in any conflict in whatever part of the world it chooses'...For these neocons, the new strategic touchstone for US foreign policy in the post-Soviet world would not be deterrence, the containment of threats, or the promotion of democracy, but the active preservation of America's supposed unipolarity."

Russia is not unaware of such views, and no doubt eyes such influencers warily. The risk of misunderstanding of rhetoric for reality through the prism of preconception was no better "or frighteningly" illustrated by the Soviet Union's interpretation of Exercise Able Archer in 1983. What NATO saw as a passive exercise of command and control procedures, the Politburo saw as a prelude to a US/NATO first nuclear strike. Russia's fears of NATO enlargement and encirclement - "baked in" to thinking since the famous Kennan "long telegram" - have been precipitated by their attacks and invasion of Ukraine. This might well cause them to re-interpret the evolution of JEF and NORDEFCO, seen in European nations as defensive in the vicinity of a mighty neighbour willing to go to war, as nascent aggression.

For neo-cons and the military-industrial complex, the end of Communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe and the fall of the Soviet Union was not the geopolitical objective. That goal was control of Russia, largest country on earth, from which to exert hegemony over the strategic trade routes, choke points, air spaces, undersea cables, energy pipelines, oil and gas reserves, and natural resources on land and sea in the Northern Hemisphere. In some sense that is the outcome of the last two decades – except the emerging hegemon is China.

Hubris and folly could so easily lead to miscalculation and bring combat to a sub region which has not seen it since 1945. And it would not be cost free.

For instance, with the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, it has been proposed NATO can now establish an island chain in the Baltic Sea to isolate Russia more effectively. On June 27, 2023, Henri Winberg of the Wilson Center wrote:

"Given the enlargement of NATO...it could be time for NATO to propose a Baltic Sea version of the longstanding American defence strategy in the Pacific Ocean, the island chain strategy...A similar island chain strategy should be in place in the Baltic Sea, with the region's larger islands Bornholm, Gotland and Åland at the core."

There are two problems with this plan, which needlessly pokes the Russian bear.

First, the Åland islands have been demilitarized for nearly two hundred years, dating back to the Paris Peace Treaty after the Åland War in the 1850s. Militarizing the islands would give Russia the right to launch a pre-emptive strike. A Russian occupation of the Åland Islands would place Russian troops 93 miles from Stockholm and 170 miles west of Helsinki. Helsinki would be in a vice as Russian troops would also be 187 miles to its east in St. Petersburg.

Second, the model is flawed. The U.S. Pacific Island chains have failed to contain China. China broke the first island chain with the ability to project air and naval strength around Japan and to expand its military presence in the South China Sea. Pentagon war games show in a simulated clash between Chinese and American navies in the Pacific, China can break the second island chain and defeat the U.S.

In the Baltic, NATO faces the smallest fleet in the Russian navy. Established by Tsar Peter the Great May 18th, 1703, Russia's Baltic fleet is headquartered in Kaliningrad. It is based at Baltiysk (former Pillau Fortress, 30 kilometers west of Kaliningrad) and Kronstadt, located near St. Petersburg...[and] includes naval forces, naval aviation, air defense and coastal forces.

Because of its small size, many in the West misread and underestimate the Baltic Fleet. In 2019, Anders Puck Nielsen wrote in "Naval assessment of Russia's Baltic Fleet and the military implications for Denmark," Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies: "The assessment is that the Russian Baltic Fleet would be unable to stand up to NATO in a war."

In 2023, in "Is the Baltic Sea a NATO Lake?", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, John R. Deni wrote: "The current Russian assets add up to something less than a dominant naval force in the Baltic or one capable of breaking out through the Danish strait to engage and dismantle allied supply routes across the North Atlantic."

With Sweden and Finland as members, and forward deployment of "trigger" forces in the three smaller Baltic states, NATO now poses an existential threat to the security of St. Petersburg, Russia's second largest city. Finland is 250 miles to the city's north. Estonia is 195 miles to its south.

Since tanks "can travel at about 25 miles per hour on flat terrain and up to 45 miles per hour on roads! Some tanks have even gone as fast as 60 to 70 miles per hour for short periods of time," tanks based at the Finnish border could without opposition reach St. Petersburg within ten hours, possibly six. Tanks at the Estonian border could reach St. Petersburg within eight hours, possibly five., in a lightening thrust, although current numbers make this highly theoretical. Nevertheless the current geopolitical situation for St. Petersburg is much like the siege of Leningrad in 1941.

Therefore, the objective of the Baltic Fleet in a war with NATO would change to respond to these circumstances.

The goal of the Russian Baltic Fleet would not be "to stand up to NATO in a war," but to defeat

NATO by causing economic turmoil in NATO members in the Baltic region.

This would be achieved not by the Russian Baltic Fleet "breaking out through the Danish Strait," but by the Russian Baltic Fleet shutting down the Danish Straits and the Kiel Canal, and thus blocking the maritime trade of NATO members Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.

Russia would simply cease oil exports through the Baltic Sea redirecting them through pipelines to Asia. Moscow has been redirecting its energy exports to the East since the West imposed sanctions and Nord stream 1 and 2 pipelines in the Baltic Sea were sabotaged. The sabotage was likely committed either by a U.S. covert operation as described by Pulitzer-award winning investigative journalist, Seymour Hersch or by the Ukrainian government as Der Spiegel reported.

While Russia could economically survive shutting down maritime trade in the Baltic Sea, it is less likely NATO members Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania could.

As Henri Winberg noted "Many countries in the region are dependent on maritime trade, and the Baltic Sea is filled with important undersea cables and pipelines."

According to John R. Deni, "The one exception to Russia's largely underfunded navy in the region is its preservation of the capacity to engage in undersea activity—such as cutting lines of communication or undersea energy linkages between Baltic states and the rest of the region."

In the December 2023 issue of Communications in Transportation Research, in his article "Assessing impacts to maritime shipping from marine chokepoint closures" Lincoln F. Pratson wrote:

"Closure of the Danish Straits, the Bosphorus Strait, or the Strait of Hormuz would do more than cause shipping to avoid these chokepoints. It would also cut off a large fraction of trade for the countries whose only coastline lies along the enclosed sea or gulf for which the chokepoint

serves as the single shipping outlet to the open ocean."

And the Russian Baltic Fleet has the means through missiles, mines, and warships to "cut off a large fraction of trade for [Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland]...whose only coastline lies along the enclosed sea or gulf for which the chokepoint [the Danish Straits] serves as the single shipping outlet to the open ocean." The Oresund Bridge linking Sweden and Denmark by road and rail would have the same metaphorical target painted on it as the Kerch Bridges linking Russia and Crimea.

In his May 15, 2023, article for the Center for Naval Analyses, "Kaliningrad: Impregnable Fortress or "Russian Alamo,"" Steve Wills listed the missile range of the Russian Baltic Fleet. Current inventories are unknown and may have been run down to meet demands in operations against Ukraine.

"In 2022, the Baltic Fleet contained 52 surface warships, including four of the new, cruise missile-armed Steregushchiy-class corvettes, one Kilo-class submarine, and numerous support vessels. Two of the fleet's Buyan-class corvettes mount the Kaliber land-attack cruise missile. (Depending on variant, these can deliver a 500kg conventional or nuclear warhead almost anywhere in the Baltic)

Kaliningrad, while the headquarters of the Russian Baltic Fleet, also includes the Chernyakhovsk, Donskoye, and Kaliningrad Chkalovsk air bases. The land-based missile inventory of Kaliningrad is extensive, including the nuclear-capable Iskander (SS-26) ballistic missiles (with a range of over 300 miles) and the antiship Bastion-P missile system, featuring Oniks P-800 missiles (with a range of 75â€"210 nautical miles). Within the range of the SS-26 ballistic missiles are Copenhagen, Stockholm, the Danish Straits, and the region's larger islands of Bornholm and Gotland.

While Russia's Baltic Fleet can lay mines in the Danish Straits and at the Baltic mouth of the Kiel Canal, "...the West lacks the ability to conduct large-scale minesweeping in nonpermissive environments. Mine-hunting and minesweeping are inherently difficult tasks, but they are even more difficult to perform under fire. Russia has, by at least one estimate, as many as 250,000 anti-ship mines. If any of these mines are deployed from Kaliningrad or St. Petersburg, allied sea lines of communication could be significantly hampered or cut off completely." (*Extensive mining is another feature of the current conflict in the Black Sea*)...

Russia's Baltic Fleet has one submarine, the Project 877EKM Dmitrov, primarily for anti-ship and anti-submarine operations. Variable salinities in the Baltic would make tracking it difficult, as an unsuccessful Swedish search a few years ago illustrate, so that despite the sea's relatively shallow average depth, its 45 day endurance would make it a potent threat to any major NATO warship or large nuclear submarine. Others in the class sold to India have a land attack capability.

Steve Wills has written "A map from a 2021 Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) report on the force posture of Russia's Western Military District shows the depth of Russia's militarization of the [Kaliningrad] oblast."

Since he notes Russian losses in Ukraine don't affect the Baltic, the advantage in a war goes to the Russian Baltic Fleet.

Amongst other Russian weapons is the agreement with Finland on the 43 km Saima which connects the Saimaa lake system to the Gulf of Finland near the Russian city of Vyborg, with nearly half of the canal located in an area leased from Russia. It is a key route to and from Eastern Finland, through which over 1 million tonnes of freight is transported annually Central Europe (principally timber products) each year. Although legally alteration to the lease requires bilateral agreement, closure could be enforced by the Baltic Fleet in Kronstadt, or by disabling locks. Alternatives have been considered by Finland as part of its resilience planning, but these would at least considerably add to freight costs.

The size of the militaries of Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are significantly smaller than Russia's. So despite their current military growth efforts, they would depend on massive reinforcement from other NATO members.

By shutting down the Danish Straits and the Kiel Canal, the Russian Baltic Fleet would not only disrupt their economies but block most military support and supplies from NATO. In such an eventuality, plus attacks on civilian populations, the capabilities of the NATO Baltic states to continue to participate in a war against Russia would be severely - perhaps unbearably - depleted

If unreversed, such outcomes would have the geopolitical impact of establishing Russia as a dominant power in the Baltic Sea comparable to what the Russian Baltic Fleet achieved for Russia in the Great Northern War.

As shown above, it could be argued that the threat is in both directions. Russia can easily interpret new joint defensive initiatives including NATO membership as intended to limit their historic desire for access to warm water and the world's oceans, and act accordingly.

The effects of the devastation that could result, particularly in the more compact and inter-dependant European countries, is hugely uncertain. But will politicians act responsibly or even rationally?

STOP PRESS – since the final draft of this article it has emerged that :

- * The Northern Fleet has been transferred to the Leningrad Military District
- * There's been a shake-up of its senior commanders
- * Two SSBNs already designated for the Pacific Fleet have been reassigned to the Northern Fleet
- * Other submarines equipped with Kalibr missiles and Tsirkon hypersonic-capable in service or expected later this year have also been assigned to the Northern Fleet
- * Most of the missile loads are within range of Riga (2000Km)

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