

By Robin Ashby, with additional material by Joseph E. Fallon

First published at Defence Viewpoints, 23rd March 2024. Revised and updated April 2026.

Summary: The Russian Baltic Fleet is the smallest and most constrained of Russia's four fleets. NATO's encirclement is now essentially complete following Finnish and Swedish accession, and the fleet's operational freedom in the open sea is severely curtailed. Yet the conventional analysis that this renders the Baltic Fleet strategically irrelevant misreads its purpose. Its utility is not blue-water combat but denial: the ability to mine the Danish Straits, threaten critical undersea infrastructure, and hold the Baltic littoral economies at risk from Kaliningrad's missile arsenal. Since 2024, Russia has demonstrated that warfare below the threshold of conventional conflict — conducted through shadow fleet vessels and infrastructure sabotage — extends the fleet's strategic reach far beyond its naval order of battle suggests.

The Strategic Geography of Constraint

The Baltic Sea presents Russia with its most disadvantageous maritime geography. A relatively small, shallow body of water — mean depth 54 metres, surface area slightly larger than Finland — it connects to the world's oceans only through the narrow Danish straits: the Øresund and

the Belt Sea, comprising the Skagerrak and Kattegat. These straits have always been Russia's strategic vulnerability in the Baltic, but the accession of Finland in 2023 and Sweden in 2024 has transformed that vulnerability into something close to strategic encirclement.
Russia's Baltic coastline is now reduced to two isolated fragments: the St. Petersburg region at the eastern end of the Gulf of Finland, and the Kaliningrad exclave — a piece of Russian territory wedged between Poland and Lithuania, cut off from the Russian mainland by three NATO members. This is the geography within which the Baltic Fleet must operate, and it fundamentally determines what the fleet can and cannot do.
The proposition that the Baltic has become a "NATO lake" is understandable shorthand but carries the risk of complacency. Nine of the ten Baltic littoral states are now NATO members. The tenth is Russia itself. The alliance's geographic coherence in the region is unprecedented. But geographic advantage does not automatically translate into operational dominance, and history offers warnings against assuming that encirclement renders an adversary passive or predictable.

The Fleet: Order of Battle and Its Limitations

The Baltic Fleet is headquartered at Kaliningrad, with its principal naval base at Baltiysk (formerly Pillau, 30 kilometres west of Kaliningrad) and a secondary base at Kronstadt near St. Petersburg. Its order of battle as of early 2026, derived from open sources, is as follows:
Surface Combatants
• Steregushchiy-class corvettes (Project 20380/20381) — Four vessels assigned to the Baltic Fleet: Steregushchiy, Soobrazitelny, Boiky, and Stoiky. At 2,200 tonnes fully loaded, these are the fleet's most capable surface units, equipped with Uran anti-ship missiles, Redut SAMs, and Paket-NK ASW systems. NATO classifies them as frigates. They have conducted deployments to the Mediterranean and North Sea. Modern, capable in littoral operations, but of limited utility against the combined NATO surface and air forces now arrayed against them.
• Buyan-M class missile corvettes (Project 21631) — Six vessels, including Sovetsk, Odintsovo, and others. Small — around 950 tonnes — but carrying an eight-cell vertical launch system for Kalibr cruise missiles with land-attack range up to 2,500 kilometres. It was this class operating from the Caspian that struck targets in Syria in 2015, demonstrating that geography constrains submarine and surface manoeuver but not land-attack reach. The Serpukhov was reportedly sabotaged by Ukrainian special forces in Kaliningrad in 2024; status uncertain. Some units are being evaluated for deployment to Lake Ladoga.
• Soviet-era missile corvettes — Nanuchka-class (Project 1234) and Tarantul III-class (Project 1241) missile corvettes remain in the order of battle, though their operational status is variable and their capability against modern adversaries limited. These are legacy assets from a different era.
• Landing ships — The Baltic Fleet retains a modest amphibious capability, including Ropucha-class and Dyugon/Serna-class landing craft, though the Kaliningrad landing ship was

deployed to the Black Sea in 2022. Amphibious capacity in the face of NATO air superiority in the Baltic is severely constrained.

• Flagship — The Nastoichivy (Sovremenny-class destroyer), Baltic Fleet flagship for many years, has reportedly been decommissioned. In March 2025, the Udaloy-class destroyer Severomorsk — a Northern Fleet vessel undergoing technical restoration — was retained in the Baltic rather than returned to the Northern Fleet, apparently to bolster ASW capability and support trials of new submarines under construction in St. Petersburg. Its long-term assignment remains unclear.

Submarines

The Baltic Fleet's submarine capability is its most significant conventional weakness. The sea's shallow, acoustically complex waters — variable salinity, high shipping density — make submarine operations difficult, but also make detection harder for both sides.

• B-806 Dmitrov (Project 877 Kilo-class) — The fleet's sole dedicated submarine, now approximately forty years old, reported still in service as of 2025. Primarily used for training and anti-submarine exercises. Its endurance is 45 days and the variable salinity of the Baltic makes tracking difficult, as an unsuccessful Swedish search operation some years ago illustrated. Despite its age, it represents a real if modest threat to major surface vessels.

• Velikiye Luki (Project 677 Lada-class) — A new-build submarine that entered service in 2025, constructed at the Admiralty Shipyards in St. Petersburg. Its assignment — Baltic Fleet or Northern Fleet — was not definitively confirmed at the time of writing, but its commissioning represents a meaningful capability step if retained in the Baltic.

• Transiting submarines — Two improved Kilo-class submarines (Novorossiysk and Krasnodar), nominally assigned to the Black Sea Fleet, were operating in the Baltic and Mediterranean in 2025 as Black Sea access became contested. Two Pacific Fleet-bound submarines (Mozhaysk and Yakutsk) were also operating in the Baltic in mid-2025 in advance of their deployment east. These are not Baltic Fleet assets, but their presence adds to the submarine picture in the region at any given time.

Naval Aviation

The 132nd Mixed Aviation Division, headquartered at Kaliningrad, provides the fleet's air arm. It includes the 4th Separate Naval Attack Aviation Regiment operating Su-24 strike aircraft and Su-30SM/SM2 multi-role fighters capable of carrying Kh-35 anti-ship missiles; and the 689th Independent Fighter Aviation Regiment operating Su-27SM and Su-30SM2 interceptors, though a squadron was reportedly transferred to the Russian Aerospace Forces in mid-2024. The Mi-8 and Mi-24 helicopter capability is operated from Chkalovsk. The Chernyakhovsk and Donskoye air bases provide additional depth. This air component is a more significant element of Kaliningrad's A2/AD capability than the surface fleet.

Ground and Coastal Forces

Kaliningrad's land-based missile inventory has historically been the Baltic Fleet's most potent strategic asset. The Iskander (SS-26) nuclear-capable ballistic missiles, with a range exceeding 500 kilometres, place Copenhagen, Stockholm, Warsaw, and the Danish Straits within reach. The Bastion-P coastal defence system, mounting Oniks P-800 anti-ship missiles with ranges of 140 to 390 kilometres, provides sea-denial capability extending across much of the Baltic. This ground-based arsenal is less vulnerable to attrition than the fleet's surface vessels and has not been significantly degraded by the war in Ukraine.

The 11th Army Corps, previously under Baltic Fleet command, was transferred to the Leningrad Military District in 2024 as part of a broader reorganisation of Russian ground forces. The 336th

Naval Infantry Brigade — the fleet's principal ground combat formation — was heavily committed to Ukraine and has been reorganised as the 120th Naval Infantry Division, though reports indicate it is not staffed to doctrinal strength. The price paid in ground combat power is significant.

Command and Structural Changes Since 2024

The original paper noted as a "stop pres" that the Baltic Fleet has been subordinated to the Leningrad Military District, headquartered in St. Petersburg, rather than the former Western Military District, but with no analysis of the significance. This structural change reflects two realities. First, the threat axis along Russia's north-western frontier — from Finland and the Baltic states — is now treated as a unified operational theatre requiring integrated command. Second, the Kaliningrad exclave, geographically isolated but strategically pivotal, falls within the Leningrad District's area of responsibility, placing the Baltic Fleet's principal base under unified command with the forces that would defend the landward approaches to St. Petersburg.
This reorganisation reflects a strategic logic rather than a bureaucratic convenience. St. Petersburg, Russia's second city and a major centre of naval industry, faces a changed security environment. Finland is 250 miles to its north. Estonia is 195 miles to its south. NATO enlargement has compressed the warning time for any land threat to the city in ways that the Soviet-era planners of the Leningrad Military District would have found familiar but alarming.

What the Baltic Fleet Is Actually For

Western analysis of the Baltic Fleet frequently begins and ends with its inability to contest NATO maritime superiority in the open Baltic. This is true but analytically insufficient. The fleet's strategic purpose has never been to fight a conventional naval battle it cannot win. It is to complicate, deny, and threaten — and in that function it retains real utility.

Mining and Strait Denial

Russia possesses an estimated 250,000 anti-ship mines. If the Baltic Fleet were to mine the Danish Straits and the Baltic mouth of the Kiel Canal, the disruption to the maritime trade of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland — all of whose seaborne trade must pass through those chokepoints — would be severe. Mine clearance in a contested environment is one of the most difficult tasks in modern naval warfare: slow, dangerous, and requiring specialist vessels that NATO has in limited numbers. The Baltic Fleet's minelaying capability

provides an asymmetric threat disproportionate to its conventional combat power.
Closure of the Danish Straits would not merely disrupt military resupply. It would throttle the economies of the Baltic states. As Lincoln Pratson argued in Communications in Transportation Research in 2023, closure of a single-outlet chokepoint cuts off a large fraction of trade for countries whose only coastline lies on the enclosed sea. Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland fit precisely this description.
Kalibr Strike Capability
The Buyan-M corvettes' Kalibr land-attack missiles, with ranges up to 2,500 kilometres, give the Baltic Fleet a strategic strike capability that its surface combat power alone does not convey. These are not weapons for fighting the Danish navy in the Øresund; they are weapons for striking land targets deep in NATO territory. The 2015 Caspian strikes on Syria and the 2022 strikes on Ukraine from the Caspian demonstrated the operational reality: a land-locked or sea-constrained fleet can still be a land-attack missile platform of strategic significance.
There is also an emerging secondary bastion dimension. Russia has been evaluating the deployment of Buyan-M and Karakurt-class corvettes to Lake Ladoga, located north of St. Petersburg and only 40 kilometres from the Finnish border. Simulated launches from Lake Ladoga were reportedly conducted in autumn 2024. A fleet positioned on Lake Ladoga would be difficult to target and would extend Russia's land-attack coverage into the Baltic region from a new angle. This development has received insufficient attention in Western analysis.

The Shadow Fleet and Hybrid Maritime Warfare

The most significant strategic development in the Baltic since the original paper was written is the emergence of Russia's hybrid maritime campaign as a documented, sustained programme rather than a collection of suspected incidents. Since October 2023, at least eleven undersea cables have been damaged in the Baltic region. Seven of those incidents occurred between November 2024 and January 2025 alone. The pattern is no longer ambiguous.
The instruments are shadow fleet vessels: ageing tankers and cargo ships operating under flags of convenience, with opaque ownership structures, frequently disabling their AIS transponders, and sailing routes that place them over critical undersea infrastructure. The method is anchor dragging — a technique that offers plausible deniability while causing damage that takes months and significant expense to repair. The targets have included the Estlink 2 power cable between Finland and Estonia (severed Christmas Day 2024, disrupting Estonian electricity supply), fibre-optic cables connecting Sweden and Lithuania, Finland and Germany, Latvia and Gotland, and Estonia and Finland.
The Eagle S, a Cook Islands-registered tanker seized by Finland in late December 2024, was found to have been shipping military goods between Russia and Iran in addition to its role in suspected cable damage. The Fitburg, seized on 31 December 2025 en route from Russia to Israel, had a 10-kilometre anchor drag mark in its wake and was carrying sanctioned Russian steel. These are not rogue commercial vessels; they are instruments of a deliberate campaign.

NATO's response has been the Baltic Sentry mission, launched in January 2025, adding maritime patrol vessels, aircraft, and naval drones to the region. The EU introduced an Action Plan on Cable Security in February 2025. But the scale of the challenge is formidable: the Baltic Sea covers approximately 149,000 square miles through which as many as 4,000 ships pass each day. Attribution remains difficult; prosecution more so. The legal frameworks — UNCLOS, the 1884 Convention for the Protection of Submarine Telegraph Cables — were not designed for this kind of grey-zone campaign.

More than 60 percent of Russian seaborne crude oil exports pass through the Baltic Sea via shadow fleet tankers. The fleet is thus simultaneously an economic lifeline for Moscow, a vehicle for sanctions evasion, and an instrument of infrastructure warfare. It operates below the threshold of conventional military action and above the threshold of peacetime commercial activity — precisely the grey zone that NATO's structures are least equipped to police.

The Island Chain Question and Strategic Overreach

The proposal to establish a Baltic island chain strategy — centring on Bornholm, Gotland, and Åland — to mirror US Pacific strategy has gained currency since Finland and Sweden joined NATO. The strategic logic is superficially appealing: control the key islands, dominate the maritime approaches, bottle the Baltic Fleet in its ports.

The Åland Islands present an immediate legal and political complication. Demilitarised under the Paris Peace Treaty following the Åland War in the 1850s and confirmed by subsequent international agreement, their militarisation would require renegotiation of settled international law and would provide Russia with grounds to characterise any NATO move as aggressive. A Russian occupation of Åland would place forces 93 miles from Stockholm and 170 miles west of Helsinki — a result precisely opposite to the strategic benefit sought.

The Pacific model itself offers a cautionary tale. The US island chain strategy has not contained China. China has broken the first island chain's constraint through expanded naval and air power projection. Pentagon war games have suggested Chinese naval forces can contest the second island chain. Translating a strategy that has failed against a peer competitor in a much larger ocean into a confined sea with different geography requires more justification than its proponents have offered.

The deeper risk is what Fallon identified as the hubris of strategic overreach: the assumption that Russia can be rendered strategically impotent in a region it has contested since Peter the Great. History suggests that great powers do not accept permanent strategic emasculation without response. The question is not whether Russia is weakened in the Baltic — it manifestly is — but whether the manner of that weakening creates incentives for the very escalation it is designed to prevent.

The Baltic Fleet in 2026: Assessment

The Russian Baltic Fleet in 2026 is a constrained force with a clear and coherent, if limited, strategic purpose. Its conventional naval power cannot contest NATO maritime superiority. Its surface combatants cannot break out through the Danish Straits without transiting under continuous NATO air and naval observation. Its submarine capability, though modest, is real and has been incrementally reinforced by new construction. Its naval infantry has been heavily committed to Ukraine and will take years to reconstitute.

What it retains is the ability to threaten. The Kaliningrad missile arsenal — Iskander ballistic missiles, Bastion-P anti-ship missiles, Kalibr-armed corvettes — gives Russia a land-attack and sea-denial capability in the Baltic that is not dependent on surface naval superiority. The mining threat to the Danish Straits remains real and would be extraordinarily difficult to neutralise under fire. And the shadow fleet campaign has demonstrated that maritime hybrid warfare can impose significant costs on Baltic NATO members without triggering Article 5.

The transfer of the fleet to Leningrad Military District command, the evaluation of Lake Ladoga as a missile bastion, and the incremental submarine modernisation programme all point toward a Russian strategic conception of the Baltic Fleet as a component of a broader A2/AD and deterrence architecture rather than a conventional naval fighting force. Understanding it on those terms — rather than measuring it against a standard of blue-water combat power it was never designed to meet — is the prerequisite for an accurate assessment of the threat it poses.

NATO's task in the Baltic is not to celebrate the encirclement of the Russian fleet. It is to close the grey-zone gaps that the shadow fleet campaign has exposed, to maintain the mine-clearance and ASW capabilities that deny Russia its most asymmetric advantages, and to resist the temptation of provocations — such as the militarisation of Åland — that would give Moscow escalatory options it does not currently possess. The Baltic is a NATO lake. It is not, yet, a NATO pond.

Baltic Fleet: Order of Battle Summary (Early 2026)

Sources: Wikipedia Baltic Fleet article (updated April 2026); open-source naval tracking; Naval News; Army Recognition. Figures are best estimates from open sources. Operational status of older Soviet-era vessels is variable and in some cases unknown.

Principal Surface Combatants

• 4 × Steregushchiy-class corvettes (Project 20380/20381) — Steregushchiy, Soobrazitelny, Boiky, Stoiky — Baltiysk
• 6 × Buyan-M class missile corvettes (Project 21631) — Including Sovetsk, Odintsovo; Serpukhov status uncertain after 2024 sabotage
• 3 × Nanuchka-class missile corvettes (Project 1234) — Soviet-era; variable operational status

• 4 × Tarantul III-class missile corvettes (Project 1241) — Soviet-era; variable operational status
• Flagship — Severomorsk (Udaloy-class destroyer, ex-Northern Fleet) — retained in Baltic from March 2025; Nastoichivy reportedly decommissioned
Submarines
• B-806 Dmitrov (Project 877 Kilo-class) — ~40 years old; in service 2025; training and ASW role
• Velikiye Luki (Project 677 Lada-class) — Commissioned 2025; assignment Baltic/Northern Fleet unconfirmed
Naval Aviation (132nd Mixed Aviation Division, Kaliningrad)
• 4th Separate Naval Attack Aviation Regiment — Su-24 strike aircraft; Su-30SM/SM2 with Kh-35 anti-ship missiles
• 689th Independent Fighter Aviation Regiment — Su-27SM, Su-30SM2; partial transfer to Aerospace Forces 2024
• 125th Independent Helicopter Squadron — Mi-8, Mi-24 — Chkalovsk
Key Land-Based Assets (Kaliningrad)
• Iskander (SS-26) ballistic missiles — Nuclear-capable; range 500+ km; targets include Copenhagen, Stockholm, Warsaw, Danish Straits
• Bastion-P coastal defence system — Oniks P-800 missiles; range 140–390 km; covers much of the Baltic
• Mine warfare capability — Russia estimated to hold up to 250,000 anti-ship mines; minelaying from surface vessels and aircraft
Ground Forces (now Leningrad Military District)
• 120th Naval Infantry Division — Formerly 336th Naval Infantry Brigade (Baltic Fleet); reorganised December 2025; heavily attrited in Ukraine; not at doctrinal strength
• 11th Army Corps — Transferred from Baltic Fleet to Leningrad Military District 2024

Robin Ashby is Chair of the Eurodefense Russia Observatory

Joseph E Fallon is a Senior Research Associate with the U K Defence Forum

This paper is part of Russian Naval Power :ÂÂÂ A Systematic Assessment, a Russia Observatory work programme which commenced in April 2026, and which includes updates to previously published papers here in Defence Viewpoints.ÂÂÂ