Baltic Conflict

Russia’s Goal to Distract NATO?

By Courtney Herdt and Matthew Zublic

The Baltics are a key strategic region where the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russian military and economic interests overlap. Sabotage of the Nordstream 2 pipeline, regardless of who executed the attack, has signaled that conflict in the region is no longer left of bang. Gray zone operations are underway, and the United States, NATO, and their partners need to be ready to act in unity against an increasingly hostile Russia that is now trying to distract attention from its military shortcomings in Ukraine. In this effort, Russia’s playbook will test the limits and try to exploit the seams of the alliance. An exacting response is needed to deny Russia control and ensure full conflict is avoided. The NATO summit in Vilnius will be critical to strengthening resolve and a path forward to a combined strategy to deter further Russian aggression.

Conflict in the Baltics will take place in every domain—air, sea, land, space, and cyber. Russia has maintained a constant threat to the Baltic region through the full spectrum of gray zone operations, including economic coercion, disinformation and propaganda, cyber disruption, and covert military incursions. Ukraine may have changed the calculus for a Russian conflict in the Baltics by revealing significant gaps in Russia’s ability to control the land and air domains. Conflict in the Baltics would meet the same national, existential resolve that are on display in Ukraine—with the added weight of mutual defense agreements and NATO Article V commitment.

Though an invasion of the Baltic states or conflict in the Suwalki Gap is unlikely, the conflict in Ukraine has increased preparation across all domains and on every flank. Baltic states are rightfully concerned with how fast NATO can collectively respond to a crisis. Control of the maritime domain and suppression of Russian anti-access, area denial (A2/AD) capabilities will be central to that response. Ironically, the most important preparation has been the solidifying of partnerships and alliances—an unintended consequence of Putin’s war.
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The United States, NATO, the European Union, and Baltic partners should focus on three maritime strategies: hybrid gray zone operations, offensive and defensive mining, and missile defense and suppression. Increased exercises and presence are important, but building resiliency through coordinated, deconflicted acquisition and increased industrial capability and capacity will be critical to ensure this critical area remains stable and conflict is avoided.

Hybrid and Gray Zone Operations

Russia has not been fully tested in the maritime domain but is still assessed as highly capable. The Baltic region can be viewed as a microcosm of Russia’s larger global maritime intervention. Russia’s Baltic Fleet is a corner piece to its national strategy. Flexing the country’s strength is the best way to show resolve and hang on to relevance in a time of military and political uncertainty while also challenging NATO cohesion. The destruction of Nordstream 2 infrastructure has the attention of Baltic Sea governments. Neglected or underfunded maritime forces are now being charged with protecting critical maritime infrastructure, a mission very few countries can execute with current resources. Securing critical nodes such as the Baltic Pipe from the North Sea to Poland, the liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal in western Poland, and the LNG terminal in Klaipėda, Lithuania, is paramount. NATO countries should have national maritime strategies with specific missions and tasks as well as adequate resources to develop capabilities. Maritime strategies will guide acquisition and become more important as Baltic nations invest in energy endeavors such as
windfarms within their exclusive economic zones (EEZs), something Denmark has already proven as an effective energy source. Monitoring and protecting maritime infrastructure will rely heavily on the entire NATO alliance and its ability to execute the strategy until the nations of the Baltics can develop their own fleets. This will require acquisition of not only traditional gray hull vessels but smaller vessels capable of monitoring and interdicting hybrid threats on and below the surface of the Baltic.

Acquisition of traditional maritime assets takes significant investment, and these platforms require a long lead time to field (upward of five to eight years). Furthermore, the naval manning of the Baltic states and Poland (3B+P) in particular, pales in comparison to land forces. Where would the manning come for new maritime assets and expanded capabilities? This question needs to be a topic for discussion at the NATO summit in Vilnius. Traditional naval vessels may not be the best investment. Instead, an increase of coastal defense forces by leveraging law enforcement personnel could be possible if national laws allow it. A fleet of numerous smaller vessels utilizing persistent, unmanned vehicles could be part of the answer. These capabilities could more easily monitor and attribute gray zone actions in the subsurface and surface domains, leaving NATO nations currently fielding traditional naval platforms to provide presence, deterrence, and missile defense in the region.

The first step to prevent escalation is for the alliance to focus on thwarting gray zone operations and draw clear lines in the Baltics. NATO should immediately implement its own strategy for hybrid threats: prepare for and detect further attacks, deter them from happening, and defend allies. Alongside this strategy, the alliance should not allow these actions to disrupt the free flow of commerce, energy, and data. The economic impact to all Baltic nations would be considerable. Cables along the global seabed carry over 95 percent of global internet data. It is not in any nation’s interest to disrupt this flow. Furthermore, Russia must be ready to accept hardship if it chooses to escalate gray zone operations into full kinetic operations.

Approximately 40 percent of its energy exports flow through Saint Petersburg, as well as more than 300 million tons of maritime commerce annually, though this may be waning with sanctions. Ultimately, the Russian people will determine their nation’s future role and what they are willing to endure for their government’s aggression.

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Alliance operations to this point have aimed to shape the environment and deter the enemy; escalation will require a more aggressive approach for deterrence operations. Pipelines have already proven fair game. Will white shipping, another pipeline, or communication cables be next? Admiral James Stavridis, former supreme allied commander of NATO, captured this resource war at sea in a recent article: “There is now a vast critical infrastructure at sea, yet the U.S. and its allies have done precious little to prepare to defend it, including honing offensive skills to create real deterrence in the mind of any potential attacker.” Unfortunately, the infrastructure requirements, training, and equipment to adequately defend this vital network will take years to develop. While Russia has the same problems, it has already started to fortify its energy assets in Kaliningrad; but it also understands that an advantage is that everyone else is following rules-based order. For NATO, investment needs to happen immediately, with clearly defined tripwires across alliances and partnerships.
Creating energy insecurity is one method for Russia to destabilize the region. Winter is settling in on Europe. The main issue across Europe this winter is governments being able to keep lights and heat on for their citizens. Russian gray zone activity in the Baltic will not matter if political pressure rises due to domestic instability. By surreptitiously destroying key infrastructure, Russia can disrupt European governments by placing into question their ability to protect their people. For many Europeans, Ukraine or security concerns outside of national sovereignty issues will not matter when faced with energy insecurity. Resiliency in infrastructure and preplanned emergency management strategies are needed and will minimize Russia’s ability to enact a campaign of distraction in the gray zone.

A criterion for gray zone warning frameworks is to integrate disparate sources of information into a cohesive, actionable product. Nations of the Baltics need to ensure that communication across their interagency is funneled into the NATO Intelligence Fusion Centre. This includes the recently created Baltic Special Operations Forces Intelligence Fusion Cell (BSIFC). Special operations forces are uniquely positioned and are often the connective tissue across the armed forces and interagency, breaking down multinational boundaries. The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats located in Finland should be poised for full accreditation once Finland gains accession into NATO. Combining that capability with NATO's Counter Hybrid Support Teams will magnify NATO's ability to resolve ambiguity and counter Russian attacks. Combating misinformation and disinformation in the lead-up to and wake of gray zone actions from Russia, China, and their proxies needs to be seamless. Through consistent, trusted intelligence and offensive cyber capabilities, the entire alliance can act swiftly and as one cohesive voice.

Baltic nations, NATO, and defenders of the international rules-based order need to ensure that they do not become numb to ongoing gray zone operations. Such actions cannot be accepted as a new normal. 

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**Offensive and Defensive Mining**

Russia laying mines within territorial waters, a singularly defined transit route, or nationally defined EEZ may be one of the tripwires that leads to kinetic operations in the Baltic Sea. Ukraine has proven that conventional warfare still holds value and can advance national will over a technologically advanced adversary. Mines are a capability that Russia and many Baltic nations have in large quantities and are a proven capability to disrupt all vessels and deny access. Russia has the largest quantity of mines of any nation, approximately 250,000 munitions, and knows their Western competitors are bound by prohibition against the use of mines.

Accession of Finland and Sweden into the alliance, two nations with long-standing dissent with Russia, will bring two highly capable military forces into NATO, including mining and demining capabilities. The addition of Finnish offensive mining operations should give Russia pause. Both Sweden and Finland have been in NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) for years and have been exercising, operating alongside, and leading the Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 1 (SNMCMG1). Additionally, both nations participate in the naval exercise **Northern Coasts**, which most recently included 15 NATO and partner nations and dozens of ships and aircraft. In short, the alliance will gain new members that are already fully integrated and ready to defend all NATO members.
The Gulf of Finland is a strategic sea lane for Russia into St. Petersburg and a strategic area for contested EEZ operations. Finland, alongside the alliance, will defend those waters and can contain the Russian naval and civilian vessels in port through offensive mining. Offensive mining and minesweeping vessels will not be tenable in a nonpermissive environment. Poland, for example, will have many of its capable assets held in the port, primarily Gdynia and Gdańsk, due to the proximity of Kaliningrad A2/AD threats. As Russia has shown in Ukraine, it does not subscribe to the international rules-based order, giving it the upper hand in mining.

The use of mines is not about the quantity; it is a tool that uses the unknown and can cause uncertainty, deterring an adversary using minimal assets. Russia will likely attempt to mine the shores of NATO allies in advance of an offensive operation. NATO must be ready to immediately clear those waters to allow for the full NATO response to defend its members, prioritizing B3+P. Russian use of mines would not just be a signal of a looming offensive but would also inflict immense economic hardship on the Russian populous, especially if it is the spark to full-scale conflict. This will not dissuade Russia from taking such a step—there are no red lines in Russian strategy. Russia takes pride in its resolve to suffer more than the adversary. NATO needs to invest in demining capability and ensure freedom of navigation is maintained throughout the Baltic Sea and its entry waters.

**Anti-ship Cruise Missiles**

The stage is set for kinetic operations across the Baltics, with mining operations likely serving as a prelude to full-scale, multi-domain war. In such a scenario, A2/AD becomes the key to controlling the conflict. NATO and Russia already have anti-ship cruise missiles in place, which makes assistance from outside...
the Baltics critical. NATO nations with naval assets within the Russian A2/AD envelope will likely seek refuge outside of it or risk being eliminated in port. Military personnel in the 3B+P region will be focused on protecting critical infrastructure and getting civilians out of immediate danger. Kaliningrad’s proximity to all Baltic Sea nations presents great danger. NATO strikes to remove A2/AD capabilities in Kaliningrad will be met with equal strikes against NATO. This lends credence to the assessed primary Russian strategy to utilize the full range of nonattributional gray zone activities to inflict chaos and fear rather than rapidly moving to full-scale war.

No metric available captures the effectiveness of deterrence, but missile capability that denies access to operating areas, keeps ships in port, and can target population centers is a significant conventional measure. The Baltic region is a geographically constrained environment; should kinetics escalate, both sides will likely be contained in their respective ports until missile defense systems, and neutralization of Russian capabilities, can ensure safe operations at sea.

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Baltic Air Policing needs to transform into a defensive role, ready to neutralize missile threats. In coordination with air superiority, Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM) needs to be ready to stifle
Russian naval activity outside the Danish straits. In a full-scale conflict, ships and submarines capable of inflicting strikes in the Baltics will employ their capabilities from the Atlantic Ocean. The United States and NATO need to be ready for an anti-submarine (ASW) campaign to suppress the Russian submarine threat. The combined ally ASW capability is strong, but where industry can help is a vast increase in the number of sonobuoys and static hydrophone networks to track the subsurface threat.

Control of the Baltics will rely heavily on air superiority in addition to ASW and integrated missile defense. The comprehensive combined strategy for the Baltics that should come out of the NATO summit in Vilnius needs to clearly define the requirements to ensure NATO A2/AD.

**Conclusion**

Presence and deterrence operations in the Baltic Sea need to be increased, but this will not keep a revanchist and retaliatory Russia at bay. The recently released National Security Strategy (NSS) states, “Russia now poses an immediate and persistent threat to international peace and stability.” The nations of the region, alongside their partners and allies, need to take immediate additional steps, particularly because the invasion of Ukraine has already diminished the available decision space.

**NEAR-TERM ACTIONS:**
- **Bring Sweden and Finland into NATO.** The ratification of these two nations needs to move forward without delay. Elevating them from strong partners to alliance members changes the calculus of a Baltic conflict significantly. The alliance can immediately leverage these two nations to increase strategic depth.
- **Forward stage capabilities.** Mines, anti-submarine capabilities, missile defense, and secure supply and logistics infrastructure should be forward staged across all domains, increasing deterrence.
- **Increase patrol.** A whole-of-government approach from each Baltic nation and its allies is needed to ensure that energy, communications, and sea routes remain secure. This includes Baltic Air Policing, readiness to shift the balance of A2/AD, and the monitoring and protection of maritime infrastructure.
- **Strengthen command and control.** Existing multi-domain command and control should be tested and ready for use. The need for effective command and control will be swift and will require resilient disaggregated nodes, though an eye should also be kept on future capability.

**MEDIUM-TERM ACTIONS:**
- **Expand NATO MARCOM exercises and presence.** Exercises should immediately be revamped to increase gray zone scenarios and offensive and defensive mining operations. They should also include joint operations across NATO and the European Union to ensure Russian A2/AD capabilities can be rapidly neutralized to allow the full range of maritime operations. Exercises should test the tripwires and response time to support allies on the front line.
- **Address capability targets.** The acquisition cycle should be shortened to help allies meet requirements, especially for coastal defense capabilities. This can enable the deployment of new platforms quicker than traditional naval vessels.
- **Increase industrial capability.** The United States and its allies need to invest in industrial capacity to support replenishment efforts following support for Ukraine. They should further forecast deficiencies in supporting a NATO conflict, including munition factories and undersea monitoring capabilities.
LONG-TERM ACTIONS:

▪ **Maintain a strong industrial capacity.** NATO and their partners need to invest in a strong and resilient industrial base. Existing capacity should be leveraged and supporting infrastructure should be protected and robust.

▪ **Continue relevant training.** Exercise and presence operations should evolve to mirror the threat, move beyond “standard” deterrence, and never accept “new normal” baselines.

This list is far from comprehensive. What is critical is that allies and partners in the Baltic Sea region take immediate action. The NATO summit in Vilnius this summer needs to have concrete guidance and a unified way forward. Let there be no doubt that the alliance’s resolve is clear in the face of geopolitical threats.

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