



POLICY PAPER

HYBRID AND HIGH-END WARFARE IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION

SAFEGUARDING OUR MARITIME DOMAIN

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Cover page photo: A crew member on lookout on patrol ship HMS Carlskrona (P04), on open water near Karlskrona, Sweden, on 4 February 2025, as part of the NATO Baltic Sea patrol activity, aimed to secure critical underwater infrastructure. Johan Nilsson / TT News Agency / AFP / Scanpix
Photo No 2: An Estonian naval ship in the Baltic Sea on 9 January 2025, AP Photo/Hendrik Osula/ Scanpix

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A2/AD	anti-access/area denial
CTF	Commander Task Force
CUI	Critical Undersea Infrastructure
FOI	Swedish Defence Research Agency
JEF	Joint Expeditionary Force
MARCOM	Maritime Command (NATO)
SLOC	Sea Lines Of Communication

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altered the status of the Baltic Sea in NATO's regional defence planning and, thus, the responsibilities of and demands on naval forces in the region in peacetime, crisis, and war.

At the force structure level, in October 2024, in Rostock, Germany inaugurated Commander Task Force (CTF) Baltic – a new tactical maritime headquarters under NATO Maritime Command (MARCOM) that will plan maritime exercises and lead operations in the region with naval forces assigned to it, as well as foster regional naval cooperation. NATO has also deployed twice to the Baltic Sea following the severing of undersea pipelines and cables: the first time in October 2023 to conduct a short-lived operation involving minehunters and additional surveillance flights; and the second time to carry out a larger deterrence activity, *Baltic Sentry*, launched in January 2025 and continuing at the time of writing. Part of the significance of these activities is that they are a NATO response to a 'hybrid' threat – a sphere that NATO has so far insisted should primarily be the responsibility of the targeted country.

To discuss these and other related issues, the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) and the ICDS, in cooperation with the Embassy of Sweden in Tallinn, convened a seminar in March 2025. Around 40 attendees, including officials, experts, and representatives of the Tallinn-based diplomatic corps, participated in two discussion sessions: the first focused on maritime hybrid warfare and the second on conventional conflict in the Baltic Sea region. This policy paper records some of their deliberations and makes recommendations for defence decision-makers.

INTRODUCTION

NATO has responded to Russia's war in Ukraine by enhancing its defence and deterrence posture in the Nordic-Baltic region and elsewhere. These enhancements have mostly been visible in the land domain, where the Allies have now deployed five Forward Land Forces contingents: in Estonia, Finland,

The most important development has been the accession to NATO of Finland and Sweden

Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. This presence complements the Alliance's longstanding (since 2004) air policing mission to safeguard Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian airspace, and the enhanced air policing (since 2014) that, in addition, operates from Poland. There have, however, been few NATO initiatives in the region in the maritime domain. The most important development here has certainly been the accession to NATO of Finland and Sweden. This has strengthened the Alliance's naval presence and power and substantially

1. HYBRID WARFARE

Russia is conducting an undeclared hybrid war against NATO Allies, including those in the Baltic Sea region. As part of this, it is widely suspected of being behind a series of recent incidents in which undersea cables and pipelines were damaged, although no formal attribution of state responsibility has yet been made by the authorities investigating these incidents. The first concrete indication that

Baltic Sea Critical Undersea Infrastructure (CUI) might be vulnerable to sabotage came in September 2022, when the Nord Stream pipelines were ruptured with explosives. Between October 2023 and January 2025, some 12 pipelines and power and communications cables (and probably at least two

Russian cables) were severed in four separate anchor-dragging incidents, three of them in the period between November 2024 and January 2025 alone (see Table 1).

In all these episodes, CUI was damaged by the dragging of anchors of ships underway at sea.

Date	Suspected vessel(s) (Registration)	Damaged Infrastructure	Outcome
07/10/2023-08/10/2023	<i>Newnew Polar Bear</i> , container ship (Hong Kong)	Balticconnector (Finland-Estonia gas pipeline) EE-S1 (Sweden-Estonia communications cable) Finland-Estonia communications cable [Baltika-Cable (St Petersburg – Kaliningrad)]	<i>Newnew Polar Bear</i> left the Baltic Sea before any action was taken. Its anchor was later recovered from the seabed. China has since admitted responsibility and remanded <i>Newnew Polar Bear's</i> Captain but denied that the incident was intentional. Finland and Estonia are conducting a joint criminal investigation, in which China's investigative report has been ruled inadmissible.
18/11/2024	<i>Yi Peng 3</i> , bulk carrier (China)	C-Lion1 (Finland-Germany communications cable) BCS East-West (Sweden-Lithuania communications cable)	<i>Yi Peng 3</i> crossed the location where the two cables were damaged several times before continuing its journey south. It anchored for some weeks in Denmark's Exclusive Economic Zone, where it was inspected by a team of Chinese investigators and international observers before leaving the Baltic Sea around a month after the incident. Swedish and Finnish investigations are ongoing.
25/12/2024	<i>Eagle S</i> , oil tanker (Cook Islands, (Russian shadow fleet))	Estlink 2 (Finland-Estonia power cable) C-Lion1 (Finland-Germany communications cable) Three other communication cables [Baltika-Cable (St Petersburg – Kaliningrad)]	<i>Eagle S</i> complied with Finnish Coast Guard instructions to enter Finnish territorial waters, where it was seized and held for several months. In the course of ongoing investigation, Finland has filed charges against the captain, first officer and second officer of the <i>Eagle S</i> . Shortly after the incident, in January 2025, NATO initiated the multi-domain activity <i>Baltic Sentry</i> .
26/01/2025	<i>Vezhen</i> , bulk carrier (Malta) <i>Silver Dania</i> , general cargo (Norway, Russian-operated)	Sweden-Latvia communications cable	Swedish authorities boarded and seized <i>Vezhen</i> , which was released in February when prosecutors ruled that the incident was accidental. <i>Silver Dania</i> was detained by the Norwegian Coast Guard at Latvia's request and released in February when no link to the cable incident was found.
		C-Lion1 (Finland-Germany communications cable)	Damage to C-Lion1, which limited but did not prevent the operation of the cable, was reported in February but is thought to have occurred on 26 January. Swedish and Finnish authorities initiated a sabotage investigation.

Table 1. CUI Incidents in the Baltic Sea, October 2023-June 2025.

Source: the authors, compiled from various media sources.

One incident involved a vessel of the Russian ‘shadow fleet’, a scheme put in place to evade the sanctions regime directed against Russia following its full-scale attack on Ukraine. Such ships are often ageing, have questionable levels of maintenance, are underinsured or uninsured, and frequently bear a flag of convenience from nations with weak maritime regulation, or occasionally no flag at all. In addition to being a security threat to the region and to the international rules-based order more widely, they constitute a risk to maritime and environmental safety.

While accidental damage to seabed infrastructure does happen occasionally, the frequency of these events and their location and methods point to the likelihood of a deliberate hybrid campaign

While accidental damage to seabed infrastructure does happen occasionally, the frequency of these events and their location and methods point to the likelihood of a deliberate hybrid campaign. For an attacker, these operations are relatively low-cost to execute and provide an element of deniability that can be reinforced by information operations aimed at delaying or misdirecting any response from the attacked parties.

Such incidents are most likely linked to Russia’s large-scale war against Ukraine. The extensive political, military, economic, and humanitarian support to Ukraine from all the Allies around the Baltic Sea would provide a clear motivation

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for Russia to engage in hostile actions against them. Hybrid attacks offer a means by which it can attempt to counter this support without crossing the line of open conflict.

The incidents in the Baltic Sea have taken place against the backdrop of momentous shifts in transatlantic relations, which have created uncertainty over the extent to which the US

will continue to contribute to the defence of Europe. It is also unclear to what extent NATO will build upon its *Baltic Sentry* activity and assume a greater responsibility in the hybrid sphere, or whether this role might better lie with regional formats such as the Nordic-Baltic 8, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), or perhaps with the EU. In any event, the Allies’ agreement at the Hague Summit in June 2025 to substantially increase defence spending presents an opportunity to strengthen maritime posture in the Baltic Sea to counter both the hybrid and conventional threats posed by Russia.

1.1. COUNTERMEASURES

The Baltic Sea states were initially slow to react to the earlier incidents of vessels suspected of anchor dragging – the *Newnew Polar Bear* and the *Yi Peng 3* were able to continue to sail and leave the Baltic Sea largely unhindered. Later responses were more robust. A summit of NATO’s Baltic Sea Allies convened in Helsinki in January 2025 triggered the launch of NATO’s *Baltic Sentry* activity, as well as a JEF-led operation, *Nordic Warden*. *Baltic Sentry* is led by the newly established CTF Baltic, while *Nordic Warden* is led by the JEF HQ, co-located with MARCOM near London.¹ While the two lines of action differ slightly in focus and geography, they are coordinated and exchange intelligence, analysis, and information. *Nordic Warden* also makes use of AI-supported analysis. Additionally, the summit put together a group of legal experts to examine ways in which international law might be employed to deal with hybrid situations.

In parallel, national and international coordination between civilian and military government agencies around the Baltic Sea has improved, and reaction times to suspected incidents or suspect vessels have become significantly shorter. Taken together, these measures – NATO and JEF operations and

¹ The JEF had also activated a ‘Joint Response Option’ in November 2023 following the severing of the Balticconnector and a little after NATO’s own response operation was launched. Several JEF nation warships were briefly deployed to the Baltic Sea.

improved national and regional coordination – increase the chances that suspects will be apprehended and can thus contribute to deterrence. At the same time, a concept of operations for this aspect of hybrid warfare has begun, albeit fitfully, to emerge.

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In December 2024, alongside a JEF summit, the leaders of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Poland, Sweden, and the UK (later joined by Germany) agreed to try to stem the CUI problem by challenging suspected shadow fleet vessels and requesting proof of insurance. In January 2025, both the *Eagle S* in the Gulf of Finland and the *Vezhen* in the Baltic Sea were challenged, boarded by border forces and coast guards respectively, and brought to Finnish and Swedish territorial waters. After several weeks of investigation by the Finnish and Swedish authorities, the ships were released, but the incidents sent important messages to ship-owners that vessels behaving suspiciously around CUI could be apprehended, possibly leading to costly delays and fines. In April 2025, Estonia also seized and detained a sanctioned shadow fleet tanker, *Kiwala*, which was sailing without a valid state flag. The vessel was allowed to proceed after two weeks once its documentation had been brought to order. However, this type of action was challenged in May, when the Gabonese-flagged tanker, *Jaguar*, refused to allow an inspection as it transited Estonia's exclusive economic zone and a Russian Su-35 fighter jet, which apparently arrived to offer protection, briefly violated Estonian airspace.

Among the most recent developments, NATO has decided to include drone operations as part of *Baltic Sentry* ('Task Force X') while the European Commission has implemented new mandatory insurance reporting for all vessels in EU waters, even if they do not plan to dock in EU ports. These moves further restrict the Russian shadow fleet but will require a rigorous and well-coordinated EU-NATO enforcement mechanism.

1.2. DETERRING HYBRID ATTACKS

NATO and EU responses to CUI incidents are also intended to have a deterrent effect. So far, this effect has perhaps been limited: two suspicious cable cuttings have occurred since *Baltic Sentry* began operating, while Russia and its shadow fleet have shown themselves ready to resort to physical acts to attempt to disrupt the actions taken by the Baltic Sea states against them – with some success. The Allies will need to consider whether there is more they can do to deter hybrid attacks of this type.

Deterrence is a central pillar of NATO strategy, but most ideas about deterrence come from conventional warfare concepts and from Cold War thinking about the role of nuclear weapons. These ideas are not directly transferable to the hybrid domain, where episodes often have more in common with criminal than military acts. While a firm response to such hostile activities is important,

The question is whether traditional concepts of military deterrence can be adapted and extended to the containment of malign behaviour in the maritime hybrid domain

effective deterrence is not just about reacting to provocations but about preventing them from happening in the first place. The question that arises is whether traditional concepts of military deterrence can be adapted and extended to the containment of malign behaviour in the maritime hybrid domain. Recent CUI incidents in the Baltic Sea can help think about this question.

Deterrence is often classified as being by denial (in which states aim to dissuade an adversary from attacking by making clear that that in their defensive actions, they will deny the aggressor the expected benefits) or by punishment (that they will impose punishing costs on any aggressor in response to an attack that would far outweigh any expected benefits). Deterrence by denial is generally considered to be more reliable as it targets the adversary's strategy itself and, in the event of

a deterrence failure, the posture established for denial is usually also the one needed to conduct defence. Traditionally, at least as far as conventional forces are concerned, this has been the more common approach.

The aim of deterrence by denial is to influence the cost-benefit calculus of an adversary by shaping the benefits side of the calculus, i.e., by changing the adversary's perception of the benefits (or probability of securing those benefits) in relation to the expected costs of initiating aggressive actions. For CUI, options to enhance deterrence by denial might include physical hardening, requiring the adversary to invest more to cause impactful damage, or other efforts such as creating redundancy in energy and communications networks, requiring the adversary to damage more infrastructure to produce an impact. In contemporary thinking, such efforts are more usually considered under the heading of 'resilience', although they may still have deterrent properties.

A second approach to strengthening deterrence by denial is to take steps to improve capacity for surveillance and response: reliable intelligence raises the likelihood that a malicious actor will be identified and intercepted. Improving surveillance capacity is partly a technological matter. The recognised maritime picture in the Baltic region has improved recently, in particular with Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO. Even so, the picture is incomplete, and further technological improvements are necessary to provide a better picture of what happens on and under the Baltic Sea. Another means of improving surveillance capacity is simply having more (naval) ships at sea. This is NATO and the JEF's basic approach in their deployments to the Baltic region. Presence is not, however, a silver

The prospect of physical denial beyond territorial waters remains a politically and legally controversial idea

bullet. While the Baltic Sea is relatively small, it is still very difficult to monitor all CUI all the time. Nonetheless, as well as improving awareness, stronger presence also raises the prospect of physical denial – although stopping

ships suspected of attacking or planning to attack infrastructure beyond territorial waters remains a politically and legally controversial idea.

A further consideration is that a multinational naval presence, as is the case with *Baltic Sentry* and JEF missions, communicates a message that the entire Alliance (or other format) is committed to dealing with the problem. NATO has, since 2016, been clear that hybrid attacks might trigger an Article 5 response. This outcome is, however, unlikely, not least because NATO and the EU are also very clear that dealing with hybrid attacks is the responsibility of the targeted state.

Multilateral cooperation and response have grown organically in connection with the recent spate of undersea incidents and subsequent collaboration between the affected states

Nonetheless, the threat of collective response is always in the background and amplified by a NATO-wide response to any episode. To better square this circle, NATO and the EU should move towards collectivising their response in the hybrid domain just as they have, for many decades, collectivised their response to conventional military attack. In the Baltic region, multilateral cooperation and response have, in any case, grown organically in connection with the recent spate of undersea incidents and subsequent collaboration between the affected states. Putting this on a more formal footing in NATO may, however, be difficult, in part because under the Trump administration, the US is unlikely to be willing to underwrite yet another aspect of European security.

Even if hybrid response is collectivised, however, it is unlikely that NATO or any other organisation will be ready to sustain long-duration deployments to the Baltic region, despite proposals by some states that a permanent 'Baltic maritime policing' operation should be established to match the Baltic air policing mission. There is insufficient capacity across the Alliance for such an operation – in particular as few NATO warships are optimised

for operations in the confined and shallow waters of the Baltic Sea. It is also the case that Allies may expect the three Baltic states to step up their own naval posture, which has focused on mine countermeasures and coastal patrol, and thus lacks the capacity to take part in other naval tasks. Indeed, vessels of the Baltic navies have been prevented by adverse weather conditions from fully taking part in recent CUI protection operations. Furthermore, in the hybrid domain, there are advantages to involving local naval and coast-guard forces to a greater extent than visiting navies, as they are more likely to spot the anomalous indicators of a possible hybrid attack. They also have a more straightforward legal mandate to intervene with suspicious vessels.

If deterrence by denial is problematic in the maritime hybrid context, deterrence by punishment is a harder problem still. One key difficulty is attribution. While many commentators and even government officials around the region have been quick to point the finger at Russia for recent CUI incidents, no official attribution has emerged from the various investigations. With no guilty state to punish, or at least none that the countries of the region are ready to call out because the next logical step would be punishment, the credibility of this approach is clearly weak.

Even if states were ready to launch a punishment attack, they would face the daunting challenge of designing an appropriate response. The range of possible sub-threshold responses to a sub-threshold attack is

Even in the Nordic-Baltic region, national views vary to the extent that it would be difficult to agree on what constitutes an appropriate response

obviously very broad. It could include, for example, anything from mild diplomatic measures, through financial sanctions, to a horizontal escalation in the form of physical or cyber-attacks against the adversary's own economic or military interests. Even in the Nordic-Baltic region, where threat assessments are closely aligned, national views vary to the extent that it would be difficult to agree on

what constitutes an appropriate response. Issues of proportionality, the acceptability of targets, the strength of the message sent by any response, and the uneven fear of escalation would stand in the way. But few states would be ready to go it alone with envelope-pushing actions and would wish to be sure that they would be supported by Allies. At the moment, then, if recent undersea incidents in the Baltic region are in fact deliberate Russian-sponsored attacks, it would appear that Russia is more ready to act against the west, than the west is ready to respond. At present, western states are barely ready to communicate the idea that there will be a retaliation to any attack.

Overall, then, the states of the Baltic region and their Allies are lacking in the capabilities necessary for a credible deterrence by denial strategy, and have yet to formulate a coherent concept for deterrence by punishment. In such circumstances, it is hard to imagine that there will not be further CUI incidents in the Baltic Sea.

2. NAVAL WARFARE IN THE BALTIC THEATRE

While hybrid attacks are intended to sow fear and uncertainty, they may also represent a preliminary stage of conflict, beneath the threshold of war. In Russian strategic thinking especially, conflict is conceptualised as a continuum rather than a binary state of war and peace. Russia does not appear inclined to initiate a direct armed confrontation with NATO at present. However, this situation could shift in the coming years, most notably depending on the trajectory of its war in Ukraine. If Russia succeeds in reconstituting its severely depleted military forces, a potential escalation with NATO before the end of the decade is possible and would likely be preceded by an intensification of grey-zone activities.

Russia pursues a doctrine of 'active defence', aimed at gaining control of the escalation ladder through the calibrated use of limited force. NATO must deter Russia from crossing the step from hybrid to conventional warfare. Credible naval warfare capabilities will be

needed to weaken Russia's ability to proceed with escalatory behaviour in and around the Baltic region, where success in conventional defence is closely intertwined with the capacity to resist aggression through joint and multi-

NATO must deter Russia from crossing the step from hybrid to conventional warfare

domain military efforts. While land forces are the primary bulwark against territorial incursion along the borders with Russia, success on the ground is contingent upon robust and synchronised air and maritime support, making appropriate preparations for naval warfare in the Baltic Sea of paramount importance. In such circumstances, establishing and maintaining sea control over time in the Baltic Sea region will come to the fore.

2.1. SHORTEALLS

The Baltic Sea is a complex maritime domain characterised by confined and shallow waters, significant undersea infrastructure, dense commercial shipping traffic, and substantial port infrastructure. All Baltic Sea states are heavily dependent on sea-borne trade for imports, exports, long-term national prosperity, and survival. The Sea is almost entirely flanked by NATO member states, and the small remainder by Russia, whose Kaliningrad exclave and the Saint Petersburg area host advanced anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems such as the S-400 surface-to-air missile, Iskander surface-to-surface missile, and Bastion coastal defence assets. These capabilities aim to restrict the freedom of movement of NATO forces, posing a formidable challenge to any reinforcement or resupply operation in support of the Baltic states during a conflict.

The goal must be unity of command and coherence in planning and execution

Maritime forces must thus be ready to counter the A2/AD threat from day one of any open conflict, as NATO's ability to reinforce and sustain operations in the Baltic region will hinge on establishing and maintaining secure

maritime access. NATO maritime forces will need to operate effectively in contested littoral zones. The establishment and rapid activation of CTF Baltic will be essential for achieving full operational capability and ensuring command and control across all phases of operation – peacetime, crisis, and conflict. The goal must be unity of command and coherence in planning and execution, particularly under the time pressures of a short-notice open conflict.

The proximity of air, land, and sea battlespaces in the Baltic region also necessitates effective coordination across all military domains. NATO doctrine emphasises joint and multi-domain operations in which maritime forces will contribute not only to sea control and the protection of sea lines of communication (SLOCs—which are critical for the reinforcement and sustainment of NATO's land forces as well as for the preservation of functioning societies), but also to, for example, air defence, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR), and fire support for ground operations, including long-range fires and deep precision strikes. Russia can be expected to attempt to use NATO's vulnerabilities in the maritime domain to its advantage, and weakness in the maritime domain may undermine NATO's efforts on land.

The Baltic Sea states themselves must continue to enhance their own naval capabilities

While NATO provides strategic scale in terms of aggregate capabilities and capabilities that can be deployed to the Baltic theatre, the Baltic Sea states themselves must continue to enhance their own naval capabilities to maintain a credible national presence at sea and ensure the credibility and effectiveness of collective deterrence and defence. Naval mine warfare, often underestimated in modern military planning, will play a pivotal role in any Baltic conflict. The confined waters of the region are ideal for the employment of sea mines to control chokepoints, deny enemy movement, and protect key maritime approaches. Accordingly, both offensive minelaying and mine countermeasures capabilities must be prioritised.

Overall, to build effective deterrence, the Allies in the region must invest in: improved sea surveillance systems, not least in the Gulf of Finland; air defence systems; coastal defence missile systems; ISR and targeting capabilities; diverse minelaying platforms; and upgraded surface fleets. Incorporating lessons from the ongoing war in Ukraine, such as the utility of unmanned systems and the threat from long-range precision fires, new designs should emphasise resilience, modularity, and multi-mission flexibility. However, innovation should be balanced with operational reliability, avoiding unnecessary technological risk – something the three Baltic states and their small navies are particularly concerned about.

Sweden, Germany, and Poland should also pursue cooperative endeavours in developing a new generation of submarine capabilities suited for Baltic Sea conditions – perhaps including Denmark, too, should its military reconstitution include regenerating these capabilities. These capabilities would play a critical role in ensuring secure SLOCs for Allied operations.

2.2. DETERRING CONVENTIONAL CONFLICT

Deterrence of conventional conflict, however, is not merely about the employed concept but fundamentally about timing. NATO must focus its deterrence efforts on the decision-making phase of its adversaries – before choices are made and paths are locked in. This is particularly relevant in the case of Russia, whose leadership has historically taken months to prepare operations, shape domestic narratives, and ready forces before launching large-scale actions. There is thus often a substantial lag between strategic intent and military execution, with the period before intent is finalised representing the critical window for deterrence. Once decisions are made, narratives constructed, and mobilisation set in motion, the space for deterrence narrows rapidly. At this point, concerns over sunk costs, political prestige, and regime stability make de-escalation increasingly difficult.

This means that NATO has far less time to deter Russia than is commonly assumed. Looking beyond the end of its war in Ukraine, deterrence must begin well before Russia completes its military reconstitution or visibly masses forces. Strategic decisions on aggression can – and likely will – be made while Russia's force posture still appears constrained. This, in turn, implies a need for flexible response and employment based on capabilities, as deterrence by denial will take time to ramp up – critical time that the Alliance cannot afford to lose vis-à-vis a revisionist Russia.

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The fundamental dilemma is thus that NATO must deter potential aggression at a time when many of its European members are still in the process of rebuilding their own defence capabilities. Personnel shortfalls, limited sustainment capacity, and critical gaps in areas such as air defence and ISR will remain unresolved. The Allies must thus be prepared to intervene early, so as to act before its adversaries' plans solidify; to signal decisively and send clear messages that aggression will result in unacceptable consequences and will fail to achieve its aims; and to demonstrate capability, to prove that NATO is not only willing but also able to respond rapidly and effectively. NATO will not need to match Russian forces one-for-one in every domain, but it will need to demonstrate the will, cohesion, and operational readiness to impose costs and deny objectives, quickly and visibly.

Symbolic gestures and verbal warnings alone will not deter a determined adversary. Deterrence must force a calculation. It must convince decision-makers in Moscow that the cost of aggression will always outweigh any potential gain. Under current conditions, credible deterrence requires focused and visible action, including priority measures such as: mobilising substantial forces at the first signs of a threat, not after the fact; conducting large-scale, joint-force exercises to display cohesion, capability, and intent; maintaining sustained military readiness, not episodic shows of force; pre-positioning assets and command structures to allow rapid and

flexible response; and enhancing intelligence sharing and early warning mechanisms, particularly along NATO’s eastern flank. In parallel, NATO must invest in strategic communication to effectively underpin this recalibrated deterrence posture. Mixed signals or policy hesitation invite miscalculation. Adversaries must see clarity, consistency, and unity from the Alliance.

Deterrence must also be calibrated to the Alliance’s political realities. NATO’s defensive posture and its consensus-based decision-making structure impose both strengths and limitations. Article 5 remains the bedrock of collective defence, but it also discourages pre-emptive or escalatory measures, especially in ambiguous situations. Restraint may be politically necessary but can also be operationally constraining. Russia understands this well and seeks to exploit it through hybrid tactics and calibrated escalation. NATO must, therefore, find ways to act within its framework while preserving the ability to respond with speed and firmness. Failure to do so risks ceding the initiative to Russia, particularly in vulnerable regions such as the Baltic states, where time and distance favour the aggressor.

CONCLUSION: SAFEGUARDING BALTIC WATERS

NATO faces undeclared hybrid warfare in the Baltic Sea region (and elsewhere). The Baltic Sea itself could become a key and complex operational theatre in the event of a NATO-Russia conflict. As a priority, NATO needs strengthened and credible naval capability here, both to deter Russia from believing it can conduct

Deterrence must begin now, despite the fact that most European Allies are experiencing a period of transition and vulnerability

hybrid aggression free from consequences and be emboldened to escalate towards conventional conflict and, in the event of conflict, to ensure sea control in an Alliance context to keep sea lanes open. The stakes are high, and the timeline is short. Deterrence

must not wait for perfect conditions. It must begin now, despite the fact that most European Allies are experiencing a period of transition and vulnerability. Success depends on political resolve, operational readiness, and early, visible action. Allied nations, both in and outside the Baltic Sea region, should:

- Continue to deepen regional cooperation, evolve maritime strategies, and ensure the readiness of forces to operate effectively in a contested and dynamic environment. Only through joint, integrated, and proactive efforts can the security and sovereignty of the Nordic-Baltic region be assured in the face of mounting threats.
- Improve joint situational awareness. They should continue to investigate and implement technological solutions to strengthen maritime surveillance in the Baltic region and seek cooperation to the greatest extent possible in sharing information. Intelligence cooperation goes beyond the transfer of data – it also involves shaping future surveillance networks. This wider effort should also include NATO partners, especially those in the Indo-Pacific.
- Increase maritime assets in and available for the Baltic Sea region, including:

A drone programme is the fastest means for ensuring operationally available air, surface, and sub-surface assets able to augment current operational effect

- By instituting a collaborative crash-programme for drones. A drone programme is the fastest means for ensuring operationally available air, surface, and sub-surface assets able to augment current operational effects. While ships can conduct a broader range of tasks over a longer time, they take longer to design and build. Lessons from the ongoing war in the Black Sea can provide pointers for the implementation of new drone technologies and their tactical and operational integration.

- By creating a Standing NATO Maritime Group for the Baltic Sea region, commanded by CTF Baltic. This would be a logical step for regional Allied navies and would provide for a long-term, centralised solution, as well as ensuring a better balance of naval responsibilities across the whole Alliance. Such a development could take advantage of the new platforms. It would contribute to a wider understanding among regional and visiting Allies of the tactical, operational, and oceanographic circumstances of the Baltic Sea.
- For the Baltic states, by investing in a robust and modern naval presence as an appropriate complement to augmenting land defence, thus being able to participate in a wider range of cooperative naval activities with regional and other Allies; and in parallel by improving their understanding of the military, legal, economic, and environmental aspects of the maritime environment of the Baltic Sea.
- Balance planning for hybrid war and high-end operations. There is a risk that the ongoing hybrid war might draw focus from the possibility of high-end conflict in the Nordic-Baltic region. In practical terms, greater investment may be required in policing and coast and border guard assets to allow navies to concentrate on conventional roles. Naturally, extensive coordination between these agencies will be vital.
- Discuss options for deterrence by punishment approaches to maritime hybrid attacks. It is critical to understand the common ground and differences between affected states. Developing responses to specific scenarios, which could potentially include a punishment option, should be elaborated and executed jointly, not by the individual states.

There is a risk that the ongoing hybrid war might draw focus from the possibility of high-end conflict in the Nordic-Baltic region



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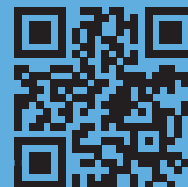
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