



Finnish and Swedish Naval Capabilities Will Strengthen NATO in the Baltic Sea Region

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Increased tension in a congested area

In October 1981, Sweden found a grounded Soviet Navy Whiskey-class submarine on the doorsteps of their major naval base Karlskrona, in the south of the country. The Swedish Navy discovered the beleaguered submarine while testing new equipment during a large-scale exercise. The incident became embarrassing to both countries. For the Swedes, the submarine had managed to get uncomfortably close without being detected before running aground, and the Russians were caught with their pants down, even if they tried to blame it on navigation errors. The submarine was stuck for nearly ten days before being hauled off the rocks by Swedish tugs, escorted to international waters, and handed over to the Russian Baltic Fleet. The incident was quickly named “Whiskey on the Rocks.”¹ It was arguably the most extraordinary naval incident with the Soviets in the Baltic Sea region during the Cold War, but far from the only one. Being a somewhat congested area, the Baltic States experienced numerous Russian territorial intrusions throughout the Cold War era.

Once again, tension is running high in the Baltic Sea Region, especially after the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and an increasingly more assertive and aggressive Russia, especially towards the Baltic states. The situation became even more worrisome after the overt Russian attack and war of aggression on Ukraine in February 2022, eventually prompting

Finland and Sweden to reassess their security situations and submit formal applications in May 2022 to join NATO. The deteriorating relationship between the Western World and Russia has made the congested Baltic Sea Region an arena for increased arms race and competition. This has been firmly demonstrated during the last few years by increased Russian military activity, presence and provocative posture around some of the sensitive Baltic areas, including the strategically located islands of Finland’s Åland, Sweden’s Gotland, and Denmark’s Bornholm.²

This article aims to provide insight into some fundamental maritime security aspects of the Baltic Sea Region and argues that Finnish and Swedish membership in NATO will profoundly and positively impact the military dynamics in the Baltic Sea Region in favour of the Alliance. In terms of naval capabilities, Russia will face an even more coherent potential adversary, and at the same time, NATO will grow more flexible and resilient in these confined waters. Even if the Finnish and Swedish Navy are primarily tailored for national defense, they will narrow and close some Alliance capability gaps, increase NATO’s ability to deter Russian aggression, and ultimately strengthen the defence of Allied territory in the region when required.

Geography matters

The Baltic Sea is a confined sea area enclosed by (clockwise) Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Russia,

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Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Kaliningrad (Russia), Poland, and Germany, with one main entrance from the North Sea through the narrow Danish strait.³ Being the largest brackish water system in the world, the Baltic is shallow, with an average depth of around 50 meters.⁴ It generally has low salinity, but at the same time, “salt pockets” are common. Both conditions cause problems for sensors, navigational, and surveillance equipment.⁵ In addition, the low salinity levels create widespread surface ice during wintertime, on average covering 40% of the total area.⁶ In general, the coastal areas are rather treacherous, containing archipelagos, rocks, straits, fjords, scattered islands, and jagged shorelines. These characteristics make the region relatively easy to defend with small and low signature platforms, but also create challenges when executing Sea Control and Sea Denial Operations. An examination of the geography quickly reveals that Russia only controls a small share of the Baltic Sea coastline and is enclosed by NATO countries, Finland and Sweden. The Russian Baltic Fleet primarily deploys from the major naval base in Baltiysk in Kaliningrad Oblast and secondly from Kronstadt outside Saint Petersburg in the Gulf of Finland (mainly submarines and some MCM vessels). Both naval bases and their approaches are vulnerable. Baltiysk Naval Base is not only within artillery distance from NATO territories, but also lacks a land connection to the Russian mainland, being sandwiched between Lithuania and Poland. In addition, Russian naval vessels heading to the Baltic Sea must transit the two-kilometer-long Strait of Baltiysk, which cuts through the Vistula Spit. Comparably, the Kronstadt Naval Base is a bit easier to defend. However, any vessel deploying to the Baltic Sea proper must transit the entire, relatively shallow 400 km Gulf of Finland.⁷

Considered one of the busiest shipping routes in the world, around 2,000 ships are usually at sea at any given time in the Baltic Sea, including large oil tankers, ships carrying dangerous and potentially polluting cargoes, and a substantial number of passenger ferries.⁸ In addition to the shipping component of the economy, the Baltic region also accounted for more than 40 percent of all Russian energy exports prior to the Ukraine war.⁹ Intended to provide continuous energy from Russia to continental Europe, the Nord Stream seabed pipelines run across the Gulf of Finland, through the Baltic Sea, and ultimately come ashore in



Germany. These pipelines were intended to provide continuous low-cost energy for continental Europe for decades to come. However, Russia’s annexation of Ukrainian territory drove European capitals to seek alternative energy sources after recognizing that reliance on Russian gas had made them vulnerable. Currently, the pipelines are considered non-operational after several explosions in late September 2022, that were confirmed as sabotage. The pipelines were cut at four locations, two in Denmark’s exclusive economic zone and two in Sweden’s exclusive economic zone. Though Russia has been widely blamed for this incident, no clear evidence has been provided to support a firm assessment.

The Russian Baltic Fleet

Since most of the air, land, and naval forces in Kaliningrad are organized within the Baltic Fleet, it is better understood as a joint command rather than a single service naval force.¹⁰ The Russian Baltic Naval Fleet is mainly equipped for coastal operations, consisting primarily of smaller combat units. Despite the ongoing Russian naval modernization programs, the Baltic Fleet is mainly composed of Cold War-era ships. The larger combatant vessels in the Fleet have become somewhat outdated, with the destroyer *Nastoychivyy* of the *Sovremenny*-Class and two frigates of the *Neustrashimyy*-class, all developed during the 1980’s. Significantly more potent for littoral warfare are the three different corvette-class combat vessels recently developed. To date they have built four blue

water capable Steregushchiy-class multi-purpose corvettes equipped with modern anti-surface and anti-air missiles, three of the Buyan-M corvettes, and three of the Karakurt corvettes, mainly equipped with anti-ship cruise missiles. Several more of these smaller combat vessels are under construction. The Fleet also contains various older coastal combatant vessels, such as the Parchim, Nanuchka, and Tarantul class corvettes, one Kilo-class conventional submarine (primarily used for commercial training), and more importantly, a dozen mine warfare and mine-countermeasure vessels. Russia is known to maintain the largest sea mine stockpile in the world, estimated to be approximately 250,000 munitions.¹¹ A fair amount of these mines are likely essential to the Russian A2/AD concept in the Baltic Sea region.

Russian Baltic-based air forces, ground-based air and missile defenses, and naval infantry forces, with four amphibious tank landing ships and numerous smaller amphibious landing crafts constitute important additions to the Baltic Fleet. Of note, is the 152nd Guard Missile Brigade in Kaliningrad, equipped with Iskander-M missiles¹² and the 25th Coastal Missile Brigade, equipped with Bastion and Bal anti-ship missiles. These weapon systems provide a flexible and powerful ground-based surface missile threat, covering the entire southern part of the Baltic Sea Region. Furthermore, Kaliningrad is well equipped with air defense weapons. The 44th Air Defense Division has regiments with S-400 and S-300V4 missiles, and the 22nd Guards Air Defense Regiment has short-range Tor-M2 systems. There are also potent deployed artillery systems in Kaliningrad, such as the Uran

multiple rocket launcher system (MLRS), as well as the Msta.¹³ Even if the Russian air forces in Kaliningrad may fluctuate in numbers due to the level of tension and activity, it typically consists of fighter squadrons with upgraded Su-27 and advanced Su-35 fighter jets. In addition, there have been reports of MiG-31 fighters with Kinzhal hypersonic missiles deploying to the Naval Air Base in Chkalovsk.¹⁴ The major ground forces in the Baltic Fleet Coastal Troop Command are the newly formed 11th Army Corps, the 25th Coastal Missile Regiment, and the 336th Guards Naval Infantry Brigade. Over the last few years, the latter has been modernized with new armored vehicles and other equipment. Parts of these ground units have also been involved in warfighting in Syria and Ukraine.

The Baltic Naval Fleet serves several purposes. Broadly, the main tasks in peacetime and during low-level tension are maritime presence and deterrence operations. The Fleet contributes to the Russian presence in the Baltic Sea, ensuring territorial integrity, surveillance, and monitoring of NATO activities. In addition, it contributes to Russia's ambition internationally. On several occasions, the Baltic Naval Fleet has deployed its modern combat vessels to the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and even the Red Sea. In crisis and armed conflict, it is meant to play a crucial role in denying NATO access to the Baltic Sea Region by conducting Sea Denial Operations within a layered Anti Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) concept. Even if most of Russia's A2/AD capability in the Baltic Sea is concentrated around its ground and air forces, one should not overlook the Fleet, especially its mine and anti-ship cruise missile capabilities.¹⁵ One may



Russian warships on the Neva River, St. Petersburg, 28 July 2022.
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argue that despite a decrease in the actual number of platforms, there has been an increase in combat power during the last years, mainly due to Russia's strategic emphasis on developing new guided-missile systems such as the Kalibr missile family. With an operational range of up to 2500 km, these cruise missiles may target surface vessels, submarines, and land objectives.

Bilateral cooperation and the approach to NATO

Sharing a long and intertwined history as close neighbours, Finland and Sweden have developed strong military ties during the last decade. They have signed several defense cooperation agreements, including a memorandum of understanding on defense cooperation and host nation support for military activities.¹⁶ Becoming gradually more concerned about the security situation in the Baltic Sea Region given an increasingly revisionist and aggressive Russia, both countries have steadily ramped up their defense spending and have sought closer bilateral cooperation. Some recent major initiatives have been the shared use of naval bases, mutual support and partial integration of their respective air forces, and the development of a combined Finnish-Swedish Brigade Framework that includes force integration and interoperability. However, with the blatant Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, it became evident to both countries that they needed to reassess their somewhat similar long-term national security policies. It culminated in May 2022, with both countries determining to submit applications for NATO membership. These decisions were not taken lightly, nor without a thorough political and public discussion. Even with both countries being close NATO partners since 1994¹⁷ and establishing even closer ties with the U.S. during the last decades, applying for NATO membership was obviously a game-changing strategic decision not just for each country, but also for the entire region. Finland and Sweden have historically maintained a pragmatic, defensive, and non-provocative profile towards Russia. At the same time, both countries have evolved in recent years to become two of NATO's most active partners. They have prioritized a permanent presence in NATO's command structure and organizations and providing a long-standing engagement in the NATO Response Force. They have also proved to be invaluable contributors to NATO-led exercises in the North, as well reliable partners in operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Finnish and Swedish naval capabilities

Contrary to the "peace-dividend" posture adopted by most European countries, Finland has maintained a strong national defense force since the end of the Cold War. Based on conscription, the Finns have Europe's largest and arguably one of the most well-trained Reserve Forces. This long-lasting defense strategy has remained unchanged mainly due to geographical and historical reasons, given the 1340

km common border with its Eastern neighbour and having experienced three wars with the Russians in the 20th century.¹⁸ The Finnish Navy is a relatively small service compared to its Army for obvious geographical reasons. Based on this geographical driver, the Navy is primarily configured for littoral operations, with essential capabilities for surface warfare, mine warfare, anti-submarine warfare, and coastal unit mobility and fire support. It employs approximately 1400 people, and about 3200 conscripts are trained annually.¹⁹ Its major tasks are to defend Finland and its territorial waters and protect sea lines of communication, bearing in mind that about 90% of Finnish imports and exports are transported by sea.²⁰ Noteworthy to more traditional maritime capabilities, Finland is a major designer of the world's icebreakers and operates a fleet of nine state-owned icebreaking vessels. Arguably, being world-leading in that regard will become valuable for NATO in the future. Currently, NATO members only have a handful of icebreakers at their disposal. In contrast, Russia has approximately 40 icebreakers.²¹

Sweden chose a different path after the Cold War. As the threat from Russia was perceived to fade away, the Armed Forces were dramatically reduced in the 1990's. Priorities were realigned from a territorial defense posture to include more "Out of Area Operations" and peacekeeping missions worldwide. In 2000, the Swedish Coastal Defense Forces were downsized and reorganized, and in 2010, conscription was abandoned. Consequently, the Swedish Navy became a purely professional force with no Reserve Forces. However, this was reversed in 2014 when defense spending was boosted, and conscription was reintroduced. Currently, the Swedish Navy has about 1300 personnel and 900 dedicated amphibious forces. The Swedish Navy's major combat assets are five non-nuclear submarines (SSK), five highly advanced stealth corvettes, four patrol craft with guided missiles and torpedoes, seven mine warfare ships, and 129 fast patrol boats. Major tasks are similar to the Finnish Navy, including defensive coastal operations and protecting Sea Lines of Communication.

Even if the Finnish and Swedish naval forces are primarily designed for homeland defense, there are arguably capabilities within both countries' navies that will close gaps and significantly enhance NATO's ability to defend, deter and counter any Russian aggression within the Baltic Sea Region. A way of assessing what the Finns and Swedes would bring to the "maritime table" in the Alliance could be by assessing their current capabilities, using some of NATO's Joint Functions as a point of reference.²²

Maneuver and fires

The Finnish Coastal Fleet Command operates from Pansio Naval Base in the southwest archipelago and from the Upinniemi Naval Base, which is part of Coastal Brigade base further to the east. It comprises all combat

vessels, including eight fast missile attack craft of the Rauma and Hamina class, both of which have recently undergone mid-life updates. The main armament on the Rauma class is the Swedish-developed RBS-15 long-range fire-and-forget missile, primary for anti-surface warfare but also land attack capable. The main weapon system on the Hamina class is the PTO2020 Gabriel, a surface-to-surface missile with a range of more than 200 km. Both missile systems enable the attack crafts to cover the entire Gulf of Finland from covert inshore positions, making it challenging for any Russian naval assets to deploy in or out of the naval base in Kronstadt. The missiles can also neutralize fixed and mobile sensors, C2-nodes, weapon systems, and installations onshore in the littorals. It is also worth mentioning that the Finnish fast missile attack crafts have some anti-submarine warfare capabilities, mainly used to ensure the protection of sea lines of communication. Bearing in mind that the narrow, shallow straits and myriad islets along the Finnish coastline are highly suitable for minelaying, most naval vessels also have this capability.²³ In addition, the Finnish Navy has several up-to-date inshore mine countermeasure platforms and minelaying vessels, which would be a much-appreciated capability within the Alliance. Surely, both Finland and Sweden would be requested to participate regularly in the Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Groups (SNMCMG) and even in the NATO Standing Maritime Groups (SNMG) in the future. For NATO, Finnish sea denial capabilities are likely to play a vital role in denying the Russian Navy's freedom of maneuver in the Baltic Sea region, protecting NATO territory with potent anti-surface warfare and minelaying capabilities. The Finnish Navy also includes two marine-type formations, the Coastal and Nyland Brigade. Both brigades specialize in naval reconnaissance and warfighting in the littorals, operating mainly in the southern part of the country in the Gulf of Finland. Being highly mobile and accustomed to operating in the region throughout the year, these forces could also play an essential role in supporting the NATO defense of the Baltic countries.

In 2015, the Finns officially launched its Squadron 2020 project, which focuses on the future development of the Finnish Navy. A vital part of this project is the building of four multi-role Pohjanmaa class corvettes, which would be the country's largest surface combatants since the 1930s. With an ice-strengthened hull, the 115m long corvettes will include anti-surface, anti-air, anti-submarine, and minelaying capabilities. In addition, they will be able to operate a medium-sized helicopter and unmanned maritime systems.²⁴ Latest estimates suggest the first ship will be operational around 2030. These multi-role combatant vessels, which could be considered small frigates, promise to further enhance NATO's ability to deter and defend against any Russian aggression in the Baltic Sea Region,

including degrading any potential Russian A2/AD.

The Swedish Navy operates mainly out of Karlskrona Naval Base, strategically located in the south, already chosen by the Swedish King Charles XI in 1679. The base has favorable ice conditions during the winter, enabling the Navy to have a permanent presence at the southern entrance into the Baltic Sea. Its warfighting capabilities are mainly organized and suited to conduct defensive littoral operations. The Navy uses a combination of stealthy coastal anti-ship missile vessels, small submarines, mine warfare vessels, and mobile amphibious forces. The small, fast in-shore attack crafts can maneuver and discreetly deploy anti-ship missile defenses within the ragged coastline. For NATO, the Swedish Navy would likely provide support in protecting Allied forces entering the Baltic Sea by employing anti-surface, anti-air, anti-submarine, and mine warfare capabilities. Simultaneously, Sweden may deny Russian naval and air forces operating forward in the western part of these confined waters by supporting the defense of the strategically important Danish Island of Bornholm.

The Muskö Naval Base, with its large underground facility on the Stockholm archipelago's east coast, has recently been reactivated. This base could enhance the Navy's flexibility and resilience, providing shorter deployment distances eastwards into the Baltic Sea and to the strategically important island of Gotland, set in the middle of the Baltic Sea. Gotland lies just 300 km from the major Baltic Fleet Naval Base in Baltiysk in Kaliningrad,²⁵ and has recently been re-militarized. Arguably, the island could be considered a possible future base for NATO air defence assets, enabling it to cover most of the Baltic Sea in a crisis and armed conflict. As described by Rutger Banholtz, former head of the Swedish Home Guard, Gotland may be considered an aircraft carrier controlling most of the Baltic Sea.²⁶

A future Swedish naval program worth mentioning is the development of two new submarines of the Blekinge class (A26). Although their delivery is somewhat delayed, they will replace the submarines of the Södermanland class by 2028. In parallel, the three Gotland class submarines are undergoing a mid-life upgrade. These small but highly capable Swedish diesel-powered submarines have already impressed the international naval community. During an exercise in 2005 with the U.S. Navy, HSwMS Gotland conducted several simulated torpedo attacks on the USS Ronald Reagan without being detected by the carrier or its anti-submarine escorts. The U.S. Navy later leased the submarine and its crew for two years to conduct anti-submarine exercises.²⁷ There are also future naval development plans to acquire four new surface combatants to supplement the five existing Visby-class corvettes from 2030. The Visby-class corvettes will also undergo a mid-life upgrade which, among other things,



A Swedish Combat boat 90 and a Finnish Jehu-class landing craft brake together during BALTOPS 22, Foto: Finnish Navy.

will add new anti-submarine warfare and medium-range surface-to-air missile systems.²⁸

Intelligence and C2

There is no doubt that geography plays an essential part when it comes to developing and maintaining situational awareness of a potential adversary. As a case in point, Finland never stopped monitoring Russian military activities, even during the years immediately after the Cold War. This long-term commitment is key to maintaining a deep and up-to-date understanding of Russian intent, capabilities, and modus operandi. It will only serve to benefit NATO's intelligence community in the Baltic Sea Region. Both Finland and Sweden have mobile platforms and fixed installations with sensors to assess Russian military activities in the region. In addition, it is worth mentioning that the Swedish intelligence-gathering vessel HSwMS Orion, which was rammed by a Soviet Nanuchka-class corvette in 1985 after she got too close to a Soviet naval exercise in the Bay of Gdansk,²⁹ is soon to be replaced by a new SIGINT ship, the HSwMS Artemis.³⁰ Since both Finland and Sweden are tracking Russian military activity daily and in general, have a deep understanding of Russian operations in the Baltic Sea, a more formalized information sharing regime within the NATO Intelligence community will surely create synergies for the entire Alliance. It will improve situational awareness and understanding within the Alliance and enhance the ability to detect changes in Russian

posture, presence, and profile, especially in times of increased tension, cases of crisis, and armed conflict.

NATO Command, Control, Communications, Computer, and Cyber Information Systems (C4IS) may also take advantage of Finnish and Swedish territories being adjacent to Russia and Russian military activities. Having the opportunity to maintain a permanent NATO C4IS presence in these countries creates resilience and enhances the ability for early indications and warnings of Russian activity and hostile intent. At the same time, when firmly integrated into NATO, both countries may offer their own C2 capabilities, such as headquarters facilities for NATO operations.

Sustainment and Force Protection

Finland and Sweden have naval bases primarily fitted for national-level operations. However, the Swedish Navy has recently introduced two new naval logistics formations established at the Karlskrona and Haninge garrisons, operational from autumn 2023.³¹ Arguably, both Finland and Sweden will in the future be able to sustain NATO naval forces. Indeed, it could evolve into a key component of maintaining a permanent NATO naval presence in the region, enhancing flexibility and resilience. In times of crisis, Finnish and Swedish bases would also increase the replenishment options for Allied forces in the region, critical to force survival. Noteworthy is the port of Gothenburg, strategically located on the west coast of Sweden, and with more than 11,000 visits

annually, already a major logistical hub for the entire Scandinavian peninsula.³² If required, the port could become a key strategic entry point for reinforcing NATO forces into the region.

As already mentioned, Russian A2/AD in the Baltic Sea Region may become challenging for NATO naval forces to penetrate. With Finnish and Swedish operational forces already in place, the odds of success for Allied in the area increase. They may conduct shaping operations and support overall force protection, enhancing the freedom of operations for NATO follow-on forces to the Scandinavian Peninsula and into the Baltic Sea.

Closing remarks

Once again, the Baltic Sea Region has become a contested arena for increased competition and influence. Finland and Sweden joining NATO will definitely be game-changing for both countries, and even so for Russia and the Alliance. Although relatively small, tailored, and highly specialized for national operations, the Finnish and Swedish Navy will solidify the Alliance's ability to deter and defend NATO territory. Both navies have capabilities that enhance NATO's ability to challenge Russian A2/AD in the region, especially in shaping operations, sea denial operations, and warfighting in the littorals. Being close partners to NATO for almost two decades, they already have intimate knowledge about Alliance doctrine, planning, and execution of naval operations, even if it will take some time to be fully integrated and interoperable. With modern platforms, sensors, and weapon systems in the maritime domain, the two countries will undoubtedly strengthen the northeastern NATO flank in the future, making the Alliance more resilient and capable of facing the security challenges of the 21st century.

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