

BALTIC SEA SECURITY AND STABILITY: CHALLENGES IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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Abstract

The security environment surrounding the Baltic Sea is characterised by a complex and escalating cycle of military posturing, driven by mutually perceived threats between the Russian Federation and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. This dynamic is rooted in a fundamental clash over spheres of influence and security paradigms. For NATO and EU states, the sea represents a critical space for deterrence, resilience, and protection of pipelines, cables, and trade arteries. For Russia, the same developments reinforce fears of strategic suffocation, economic strangulation through sanctions, and growing exposure of Kaliningrad and its maritime lifelines. Beyond geopolitical competition, the article highlights shared vulnerabilities: ecological fragility, the dangers of escalation from routine encounters, and the reliance of all littorals on uninterrupted maritime and energy flows.

Introduction

The Baltic Sea region, once envisioned as a "Sea of Peace"¹ for being a region of peaceful trade, cooperation and cultural exchange, has now re-emerged as a focal point of European security, marked by increasing geopolitical tensions, rapid changes in regional alliances, etc. Surrounded by the nine NATO allies- Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and Sweden- and bordered by the North Sea through the Kattegat Strait, it is a vital corridor for military transit, commerce, and energy supply.² It is also home to several critical infrastructure on and under water, including ports, shipping lanes, fibre optic cables and gas pipelines. Historically, the region has been marked as the frontline and transit corridor for commerce, conflict and diplomacy, a crossroad between the East and the West.³ In the wake of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the security concerns in this region have become more severe, altering the threat perceptions and strategic postures.

In the current strategic environment of 2023-2025, the Baltic Sea has re-emerged as a critical zone of confrontation, where military, political, economic, and environmental challenges converge and increasingly reinforce one another.⁴ This complex landscape demands a holistic understanding of how these domains interact, from renewed great-power competition and hybrid threats to energy security and ecological pressures, all of which shape regional stability. This analysis explores the interconnected risks and responses defining the Baltic Sea region, assessing strategic trends, evaluating adaptive measures by state and alliance actors, and considering the prospects for sustaining security in one of Europe's most volatile maritime theatres.

Strategic Significance and Evolving Geopolitics

The Baltic Sea occupies a pivotal role in European security and commerce, serving as a major artery for energy shipments, commercial navigation, and digital communications. Approximately 24% of EU maritime trade transits its waters, while a dense web of subsea cables beneath the seafloor forms the backbone of the internet and electrical connectivity across Northern Europe.⁵ This region's geography, however, also makes it vulnerable. Its semi-enclosed nature, bordered by multiple nations and accessed only through narrow straits such as those near Denmark,

creates natural chokepoints. Among the most volatile geographic features is the Suwałki Gap, a slender strip of land linking Poland to Lithuania.⁶ Major ports including Gdansk, Riga, Tallinn, and St. Petersburg serve as critical nodes for regional and global trade, especially in the energy sector.⁷

Geopolitical tensions have escalated since 2022. Russia, perceiving NATO's enlargement as a direct threat, has amplified its military presence through drills such as 'Zapad'⁸ and 'Ocean Shield',⁹ deploying advanced anti-ship and air defence missiles along its coast. In turn, NATO has strengthened its posture with rotational troop deployments, enhanced air patrols, and expanded joint exercises under initiatives like Enhanced Forward Presence.¹⁰

A major strategic shift occurred in 2024 with the accession of Sweden and Finland into NATO. Finland's extensive border with Russia and Sweden's command of key Baltic passages provide the alliance with superior operational reach and defensive depth.¹¹ Yet this development also fuels Russian perceptions of strategic encirclement, raising the potential for military miscalculation as both sides concentrate forces in an already crowded arena. Below the threshold of conventional warfare, hybrid tactics continue to redefine Baltic security. Incidents like the destruction of the Nord Stream pipelines and deliberate severing of communication cables demonstrate how non-military tools can achieve strategic effects.¹²

NATO's Northern Enlargement and Regional Defence Cooperation

The accession of Finland and Sweden to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation marks a decisive shift in the security architecture of Northern Europe. Finland's membership in April 2023, followed by Sweden's in March 2024, overturned long-standing policies of military non-alignment and effectively brought the entire Nordic region under a unified defence framework.¹³ Both nations bring modern militaries with deep experience operating in Baltic conditions. Finland's artillery forces and Sweden's submarine fleet, designed for shallow-water operations, significantly enhance the alliance's capacity to monitor and control maritime spaces. With these additions, the sea is now almost completely encircled by alliance territory, leaving Russia as the only littoral state outside the collective security framework.¹⁴ This shift carries significant implications for regional military planning and the dynamics of deterrence.

From a strategic perspective, the incorporation of Finland and Sweden delivers substantial advantages to NATO's defensive architecture. Finland contributes not only an extensive territorial border with Russia, but also a substantial artillery force and a deeply integrated reserve personnel system. Sweden enhances alliance capabilities with modernised naval and air assets, including submarines specifically engineered for operations in the shallow and complex conditions of the Baltic. This allows for fully integrated defensive planning across the Nordic and Baltic theatres, substantially raising the complexity for any adversarial military calculus.

According to the decisions made at the NATO summit in Vilnius in 2023, NATO's regional defence plans incorporate the northern flank.¹⁵ A new Defence Plan for Northern Europe is being developed to synchronise efforts across Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland under the coordination of NATO's Joint Force Command based in Norfolk.¹⁶ Targeted investments in critical enabling capabilities further reinforce this hardening of NATO's eastern flank. These include integrated air and missile defence systems, long-range precision strike assets, intelligence and reconnaissance platforms, and more resilient logistical networks.¹⁷

Outside formal NATO channels, regional security cooperation has also deepened through supplementary frameworks. The air forces of Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden have formalised agreements to merge command structures, share bases and logistical resources, and conduct joint air policing missions.¹⁸ The United States and the United Kingdom have further reinforced this regional consolidation. The U S has established new defence cooperation agreements allowing equipment pre-positioning and facilitating rapid reinforcement. In a symbolic demonstration of deepened integration, U S strategic bombers conducted training deployments to Sweden in 2024. Britain, which leads the NATO battlegroup in Estonia, has aligned its Joint Expeditionary Force, a UK-Nordic-Baltic security initiative within NATO's command structure.¹⁹

Even within Central Europe, cooperation has strengthened in response to the shifting strategic environment. Poland and Germany, for instance, in 2024 agreed to cooperate on security and defence by pooling and coordinating their military capabilities, and bolstering joint European defence initiatives, explicitly identifying Russia as the primary threat to Euro-Atlantic security.²⁰ NATO's consolidated presence has almost certainly intensified Russian perceptions of encirclement, likely prompting Moscow to reinforce its own forces in Kaliningrad and the Baltic Fleet. Despite characterisations

of the Baltic as a “NATO lake,”²¹ Kaliningrad remains a heavily armed bastion, equipped with sophisticated anti-access/area denial systems that pose a persistent challenge.²²

Russia’s Posture and NATO Response

From Russia’s point of view, the expansion of NATO represents a direct and persistent challenge to its national security. In response, Russia characterises its military posture, particularly the deployment of advanced defensive systems in Kaliningrad and the Kola Peninsula, as a proportionate and defensive measure.²³ These assets, including integrated air defence networks, anti-ship batteries, and dual-capable missile systems, are not portrayed by Russia as tools of aggression, but as essential elements of strategic deterrence.²⁴

Their stated purpose is to offset NATO’s conventional advantage and to complicate any potential hostile operations along Russia’s western borders. Military cooperation with Belarus is similarly framed within a defensive paradigm, intended to reinforce regional stability and mutual protection.²⁵

While Russia considers the Suwałki region a zone of potential offensive action by NATO, the West describes it as a ‘weakest point’ for NATO.²⁶ Russian defence planning accounts for the possibility of NATO forces advancing through this corridor to isolate Kaliningrad or penetrate Belarusian territory. Consequently, the capacity to monitor and, if necessary, interdict movement through the Suwałki area forms a component of Russia’s broader defensive strategy, intended to ensure territorial continuity and prevent the encirclement of allied or Russian-held regions.²⁷

Russia views the actions taken by NATO in the region, be it stationing of troops, multinational alliances, accession of new members, etc, as indicative of its offensive preparations. This perception reinforces a deeply entrenched belief that NATO serves as a vehicle for American dominance, designed to systematically diminish Russia’s global influence and undermine its status as a major power. This sentiment was sharply articulated by President Putin when he remarked that Western assurances had repeatedly proven false, noting that NATO had advanced its infrastructure to Russia’s very doorstep.²⁸

Military strategies in the Baltic region have undergone profound changes over the past decade, reflecting broader geopolitical shifts. Poland has emerged as a central actor, pursuing one of Europe's most ambitious military modernisation programs. Its acquisitions include advanced Patriot missile batteries, F-35 fighter aircraft (acquisition in the pipeline), and HIMARS rocket systems, signalling a clear intent to bolster deterrence against potential aggression.²⁹ The country serves as a logistical and operational hub for NATO's eastern flank, hosting rotational allied troops and supporting large-scale exercises.³⁰

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have reintroduced conscription or expanded reserve forces, embracing a "total defence" model inspired by Nordic partners. This approach integrates civilian institutions and resources into national defence planning, ensuring societal resilience during crises.³¹ Their armed forces, though small, are increasingly focused on anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, including coastal defence missiles and tactical unmanned systems.³²

The current standoff in the Baltic region presents a textbook example of a security dilemma, a dynamic where one state's efforts to bolster its own safety are inevitably interpreted by its rival as a threat. This triggers a counter-move, sparking a cycle of action and reaction where defensive preparations fuel mutual insecurity. The situation is especially volatile because modern weapons systems are inherently dual-use; it is often impossible to distinguish between forces postured for defence and those readied for attack. This ambiguity forces planners on both sides to prepare for worst-case scenarios, locking them into a dangerous feedback loop where fear becomes the primary driver of strategy.

Maritime and Undersea Infrastructure Vulnerabilities

The stability of the Baltic Sea region is increasingly tied to the security of its submerged infrastructure. A dense network of fibre-optic cables criss-crosses the seafloor, forming the backbone of regional and global digital connectivity. These cables facilitate everything from financial transactions to government communications, and their disruption would have cascading effects on both national economies and collective

security.³³ Incidents including suspected tampering and the unexplained damage to the Nord Stream pipelines, highlight the tangible risks facing these unprotected assets.³⁴ Energy infrastructure, including newer projects like the Baltic Pipe and existing electrical interconnectors such as Estlink, is similarly vulnerable.³⁵ The challenge is compounded by the difficulty of monitoring vast and murky underwater environments, where intentional interference can be disguised as accidental or environmental damage.

In response, nations such as Sweden and Finland have increased investment in maritime surveillance technologies, including autonomous underwater drones, towed sonar arrays, and satellite-based monitoring.³⁶ NATO has established new coordination cells focused specifically on undersea infrastructure protection, and multinational exercises now routinely include scenarios involving pipeline and cable repairs under duress.³⁷ But the issue of attribution remains a persistent obstacle.

Non-Military Threats: Environment, Economy, and Energy

The security of the Baltic Sea region extends well beyond traditional military concerns, encompassing a series of pressing non-military challenges that directly impact its stability. Long-standing environmental issues such as severe eutrophication caused by agricultural discharge, the ongoing leakage of toxins from World War II-era chemical weapons dumped at sea, and the ever-present danger of large-scale maritime accidents, continually threaten both the region's ecological balance and the economic well-being of its coastal communities.³⁸ At the same time, the shift toward renewable energy, particularly through expansive offshore wind farms, introduces new strategic dependencies and physical vulnerabilities even as it reduces reliance on external fossil fuels. Major ports in Gdańsk, Riga, and Tallinn function as critical nodes within pan-European logistics and energy networks, meaning that any operational disruption, whether from sabotage, accident, or hybrid attack, would ripple across continental markets.³⁹

Multilateral Cooperation: EU, NATO, and Regional Groupings

The security architecture of the Baltic Sea region is fundamentally shaped by overlapping frameworks of multilateral cooperation. NATO serves as the primary

guarantor of collective defence through its Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroups stationed in Poland and the Baltic states, complemented by continuous air policing missions that maintain vigilance over allied airspace. Parallel to this, the European Union contributes through its Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) mechanism, which supports collaborative projects in domains such as maritime surveillance, cyber defence, and military mobility.⁴⁰

Regional organisations provide complementary platforms for addressing non-military security challenges. The Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) foster dialogue and coordination on issues including environmental risks, civil protection, and public health crises.⁴¹ Military interoperability is further advanced through recurring multinational exercises such as BALTOPS and Spring Storm, which enhance readiness in amphibious warfare, air operations, and electronic combat.⁴²

Despite these layered cooperation mechanisms, achieving full cohesion presents ongoing difficulties. Varying national threat assessments, with some states emphasising territorial defence and others prioritising hybrid or cyber threats, sometimes hinder unified policy responses. Additionally, disparities in financial contributions and military capabilities can strain burden-sharing arrangements. Sustaining an integrated approach to regional security will therefore require continued diplomatic effort and a renewed commitment to reconciling divergent strategic priorities.

Hybrid Warfare and Legal Challenges

The Baltic Sea region has become a testing ground for a new kind of conflict, one fought in the shadows. Here, security isn't always about tanks and missiles; out at sea, the situation is even murkier. Unmarked ships have been spotted loitering near wind farms and data cables, while commercial pilots and ship captains regularly report their GPS signals being mysteriously jammed or spoofed, throwing navigation into chaos.⁴³

The problem is that international law struggles to deal with these ambiguous attacks. While treaties like the Law of the Sea are great for settling arguments over fishing rights or maritime borders, they are not effective against an enemy that leaves no

return address. This legal grey zone often leaves countries with few options beyond imposing sanctions, measures that often feel inadequate against the scale of the threat. The legal experts and policymakers are now debating new rules of the road. There's a growing push for a specific international treaty that would finally make it a crime to tamper with undersea cables and pipelines, drawing a clear line in the sand.⁴⁴

Future Prospects and Strategic Recommendations

Looking ahead, the Baltic Sea will remain an arena of strategic competition, where military, economic, and environmental pressures intersect. Climate change will likely open new Arctic shipping routes, altering the region's economic geography, while technological advancements in unmanned and cyber systems will introduce new domains of conflict.

To navigate these changes, regional actors should consider the following priorities:

- **Enhanced Surveillance and Intelligence Fusion.** Improve real-time maritime domain awareness through integrated NATO and EU platforms, incorporating satellite data, underwater sensors, and artificial intelligence to detect anomalies and potential threats.
- **Infrastructure Resilience.** Mandate stricter security requirements for public and private operators of critical undersea infrastructure, including redundant systems and pre-positioned repair capabilities.
- **Civil-Military Integration.** Expand “total defence” approaches to include private sector actors in energy, telecoms, and logistics, ensuring that civilian resources can be rapidly mobilised in a crisis.
- **Environmental Security.** Increase funding for HELCOM and cross-border environmental response initiatives, mitigating ecological threats that could destabilise societies or ignite political disputes.
- **Legal and Normative Development.** Work within the UN and other international forums to clarify laws applicable to hybrid threats and subsea infrastructure protection, reducing gaps in accountability.

India's role

India's role in Baltic Sea security, while indirect, is gradually expanding through diplomatic and strategic engagement with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The recent decision to open an Indian embassy in Lithuania signals a concrete, deliberate effort to build stronger relationships.⁴⁵ The focus is on practical collaboration in areas of mutual benefit, especially technology, digital governance, and infrastructure development. On the economic front, India views the Baltics as a gateway to the wider Nordic and EU markets. Trade missions are becoming more frequent, and there's genuine mutual interest in teaming up on everything from tech start-ups and IT services to green energy solutions.⁴⁶

When it comes to security, they find common ground in a shared belief in a rules-based world order, even if their immediate neighbourhoods are oceans apart. India is focused on the Indian Ocean, while the Baltic countries are fixated on the Baltic Sea. Yet, they're discovering their security concerns are starting to align, especially on modern threats. Cybersecurity, countering disinformation, and protecting the underwater cables that power the global internet are becoming shared priorities. There's even talk in diplomatic circles about connecting security strategies between the two maritime regions, recognising that a threat to a cable in the Baltic could ripple all the way to the Indian Ocean.⁴⁷

Russia is a significant elephant in the room. The Baltics, given their history and geography, view Russia through a far more urgent and threatening lens. India's long-standing reliance on Russian military equipment and its careful, neutral stance on the war in Ukraine mean that overt security alignment with the Baltics is off the table for now.⁴⁸ This reality acts as a natural ceiling on how deep the partnership can go in the near term, keeping cooperation focused on economic and non-traditional security areas instead of hard military alliances. Still, opportunities exist for quieter, practical cooperation in domains such as cyber-defence and information sharing, counter-disinformation initiatives, technology transfer and dual-use innovation, maritime domain awareness training, etc.

Looking ahead, India's participation in European and Nordic-Baltic dialogue platforms and its growing presence in multilateral forums suggest a deeper engagement with the region's security architecture. As global challenges like hybrid warfare and critical

infrastructure vulnerabilities increasingly transcend borders, India's role in supporting Baltic resilience is likely to evolve from diplomatic and economic engagement toward more concrete, though careful, strategic collaboration.

Conclusion

The Baltic Sea region stands at a crossroads, facing complex challenges that require a comprehensive and cooperative approach. The issues facing the region cannot be solved by any single country alone; its security will significantly depend on how deeply the military, government and commercial entities in the region work together. While the geopolitical issues don't fade away soon, a focus on resilience, innovation, and multilateralism can help manage the risks and maintain stability in this vital region. The decisions made today about defence investments, environmental protection, and strengthening legal norms will shape Baltic region's security for decades to come.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

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