

Securing the Baltic:

a European necessity

Overshadowed by the military crises in the Black Sea, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, the Baltic remains a structural security challenge for Europe. Can it become the next frontline with the Russian Federation? Or is it frozen the icy waters of a “new Cold War”, made of long-term tension with no high-intensity conflict?

For the Europeans, there is no room for indifference, amnesia or negligence here, where Russia has lost its hegemony nolens volens, where NATO has gradually gained ground and where several major EU Member States are to ensure their economic prosperity and military security. On the global stage, the Baltic remains of secondary importance to the United States, whereas it is of vital importance to the EU. Europeans must not be lulled into complacency by the belief that the Atlantic Alliance alone will discourage Russian initiatives in this area. Europe is to take the lead in securing the Baltic.

Introduction • A maritime laboratory for European security

At a time when fighting is intensifying in the Black Sea, action in the Red Sea has been going on for a year and the eastern Mediterranean grappling with protracted crises, the Baltic Sea seems to be enjoying a lull - strategically, that is. Have the upheavals of the 2010s vanished? Or does its apparently smooth surface hide a latent crisis, overshadowed by the troubled waters of other maritime theatres close to Europe?

On 26 September 2022, the sabotage of the Nord Stream gas pipelines¹ gave rise to fears of an extension of the Russian-Ukrainian struggle in the Baltic. Fortunately it did not materialize and the spiral of confrontation has come to a halt: the Baltic, which has been under tension since at least 2013, did not become an area of open confrontation between Russia and the EU Member States working alongside Ukraine.

EUROPE IN
THE WORLD

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#Baltic
#EuropeanUnion

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1 https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/08/14/sabotage-de-nord-stream-berlin-emet-un-man-dat-d-arret-contre-un-ukrainien_6280552_3210.html

On the one hand, the Russian war effort has been focused on Ukrainian territory and in the Black Sea. On the other hand, recent Ukrainian actions to open up new front-lines have targeted land border areas with Russia (Belgorod region), on Russian territory (Kursk region² since 6 August 2024), on Crimea (regular attacks on Sevastopol) and on the Novorossiysk naval base, for example on 4 August 2023³. For the moment, The Baltic has not been caught up in the whirlwind of the Russian-Ukrainian war and the Russia-EU confrontation.

However, the risks posed by this almost closed maritime space deserve careful assessment, first and foremost because it brings together eight EU Member States (Germany, Poland, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and secondly because it has undergone a drastic strategic pivot. The balance of power in the Baltic and its *hinterland* has changed profoundly since the start of the war in Ukraine, with the application for NATO membership by the two historical 'neutrals' of the Baltic, Sweden and Finland, Member States of the European Union since 1995. The Baltic has become an "EU lake" in the 2000s and a "NATO lake" in the 2010-2020s, even though it was a "Soviet lake" in the 1980s. In the Baltic, Russia is now in the isolated position of the *challenger* to the hegemony of the Cold War. This double strategic revolution must not be underestimated: it creates an urgent need for Europeans to stabilise this area and ensure their own security in the absence of a major NATO naval base.

Structurally, the Baltic Sea gather many crisis factors: it concentrates maritime, commercial and energy flows that are essential to the continent's economy; it is subject to a full fledged arms race; it is the largest border area between the EU and the Russian Federation; and it has become the largest point of contact between NATO and the CSTO, both of which have the latest generation of nuclear weapons and delivery systems. With no major US or NATO permanent bases in this

area, the responsibility for securing it lies with the Europeans themselves.

I • A historic area of trade and competition between neighbouring European powers, the Baltic region is of vital interest to the European Union.

Unlike the Mediterranean and Red Seas, the Baltic is exclusively a European space. It has been the cradle of several European naval powers: they engaged in dense international trade and constant confrontation, not only for the control of maritime flows but also for the control of the rich *Hinterlands* of the area . On this sea and on its shores, Europeans are confronted not with the Other but with the Same: in the closed world of the Baltic, Europeans are confronted only with themselves.

I THE CRADLE OF THE NORDIC AND RUSSIAN GERMANIC NAVAL AND ECONOMIC POWERS

The Baltic was the birthplace of some of the world's leading European naval powers: Denmark, Sweden, Russia and Germany. The Danish and Swedish kingdoms clashed during the wars of Kalmar (1611-1613) and Torstenson (1643-1645) for the control of the Baltic and its access, the Sund. The newly born and late comer Russian Empire challenged the Swedish hegemony with the creation of the imperial capital, St Petersburg, in 1703, the development of the first modern Russian navy, the Baltic Fleet, and the Russian victory in the Great Northern War (1700-1721); it was here that the *Kaiserliche Marine* of the German Empire took off to become, in 1914, the world's second largest navy in terms of ship tonnage, just behind the British Royal Navy.

During the Cold War, the Baltic was taken in a strategic freeze. It was bordered by the three Soviet Socialist Republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia (which had been part of the USSR since their annexation in 1940) and

2 <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2024/08/16/le-tournant-de-koursk-10-points-sur-loffensive-ukrainienne-en-russie/>

3 <https://lemarin.ouest-france.fr/defense/larmee-ukrainienne-affirme-avoir-partiellement-coule-un-navire-russe-7a7f402e-33ba-47e3-bbc2-1230393f6ffe>

by two powerful communist States, Poland and East Germany (GDR), which not only had the largest number of national troops in the Pact, 412,000 and 170,000 respectively in 1989, but also were home to large numbers of Soviet troops, 40,000 and 380,000 respectively in 1989.

Even though the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic's maritime outlet was limited to the Leningrad region, the Baltic was almost an internal sea of the Warsaw Pact due to the neutrality (and military passivity) of Sweden and Finland. At the time, NATO was only present at its western gateway with West Germany (FRG), Denmark and, further along the *Sund*, Norway.

After the end of the USSR, it maintained its status quo and intensified its economic activities. All the Baltic players were hoping to fish "peace dividend" in those calm waters.

THE BALTIC LABYRINTH, A UNIQUE SPACE IN EUROPE

This maritime area has specific natural, economic, geographical, political and military characteristics that need to be borne in mind in order to appreciate the risks involved, especially when compared with other European seas or maritime areas that are essential to Europeans.

Its waters are particularly shallow (an average of 55 meters, compared with an average of 1,200 meters for the Black Sea e.g.). This makes it easier to exploit subsoil resources, but it also makes it more vulnerable from an ecological point of view. In fact, it is one of the five most polluted seas in the world⁴; This characteristic also reduces the width of shipping lanes and, from a military point of view, makes underwater operations more difficult. Its surface area (377,000 square kilometres) may seem large (compared with 430,000 square kilometres for the Black Sea), but it is made up of a series of narrow gulfs and contains archipelagos⁵. The map below, dating from September 2024, highlights the bottlenecks in the Baltic maritime space, so that control of the seas is often played out on land, on either side of the straits.

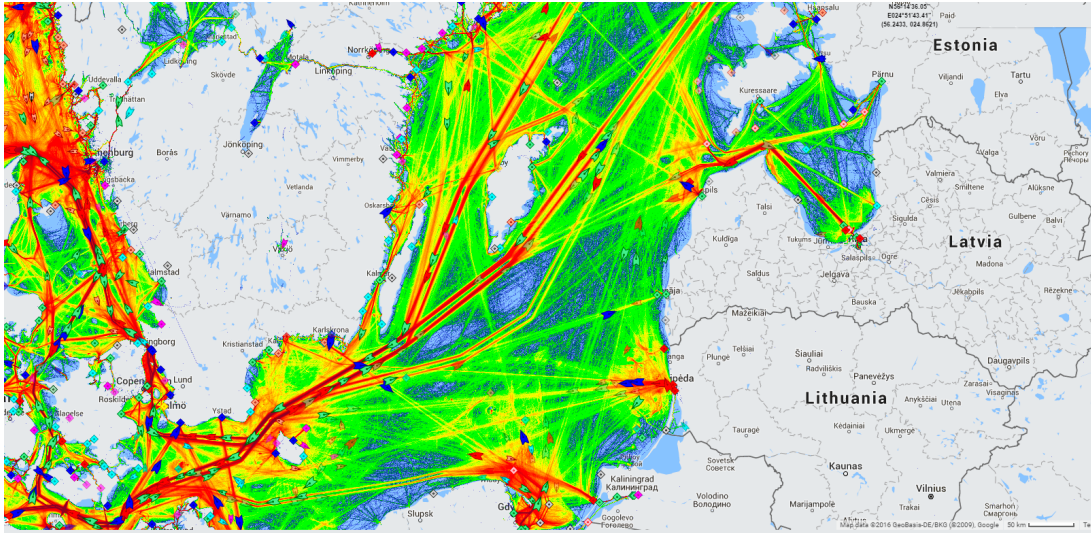


The *Sund*, the Danish-Swedish strait that controls access to its waters, is geographically and legally more open and accessible than the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles straits, which are governed by a specific international treaty, the Montreux Convention of 1936. As a result, navigation takes place in a tight space, conducive to exchanges but also to tensions and confrontations. From a strictly military point of view, the Baltic is a delicate theatre for today's major navies: ships are constantly being tracked because of the many straits and shallows; there are many navigational constraints because of the dense topography; access is easily denied by mining the waters or installing coastal batteries. In other words, it is a sea that is not very conducive to large units and vast naval deployments.

This almost enclosed sea is home to nine riparian states (compared with five for the Black Sea and 25 for the Mediterranean). In addition to these states, there are non-riparian

4 https://maritime-forum.ec.europa.eu/map-week-regional-sea-conventions_en

5 <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/cartes/Mer-Baltique-2016-07>



countries with very close economic, cultural and military links to this area: Norway, Iceland and Belarus. The Baltic area is home to between 20 and 80 million Europeans, depending on whether you take a narrower or broader view (including the *hinterlands*). The Baltic the European Union's economic centre of gravity. In 2023, of the EU's GDP of €16,970 billion, €6,185 billion was produced by the countries bordering the Baltic⁶. In other words, 39% of European GDP in 2023 was produced by one of the Member States bordering the Baltic. This does not mean that 40% of European GDP is "Baltic", but that the Baltic riparian states alone account for a large proportion of European wealth. The economic dynamism of the Baltic area is illustrated in the maritime sectors: between 1997 and 2019, maritime traffic doubled, as Arnaud Serry points out⁷. This positive trend can be explained by the catch-up effect of the economies of the "new member states" following the 2004 enlargement, but also by the quality of the connections between the port terminals and the continent.

Its economic weight is limited by its maritime fragility: for five of its EU neighbours (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Finland), the Baltic is the only access to international waters. The *Sund* is essential for a whole part of Europe that is economically and commercially active. The Baltic is not one of the major globalization corridors because it is

a maritime dead-end. But for European key players, it concentrates essential flows, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

As for the economic importance of the Baltic for Russia, it is real, even if it is not essential. Before the invasion of Ukraine, the Baltic was Russia's economic outlet in Europe and the West. Even after 2022, a quarter of Russia's oil exports still pass through the Baltic. In military terms, there are also significant flows to the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, annexed by the USSR in 1945.

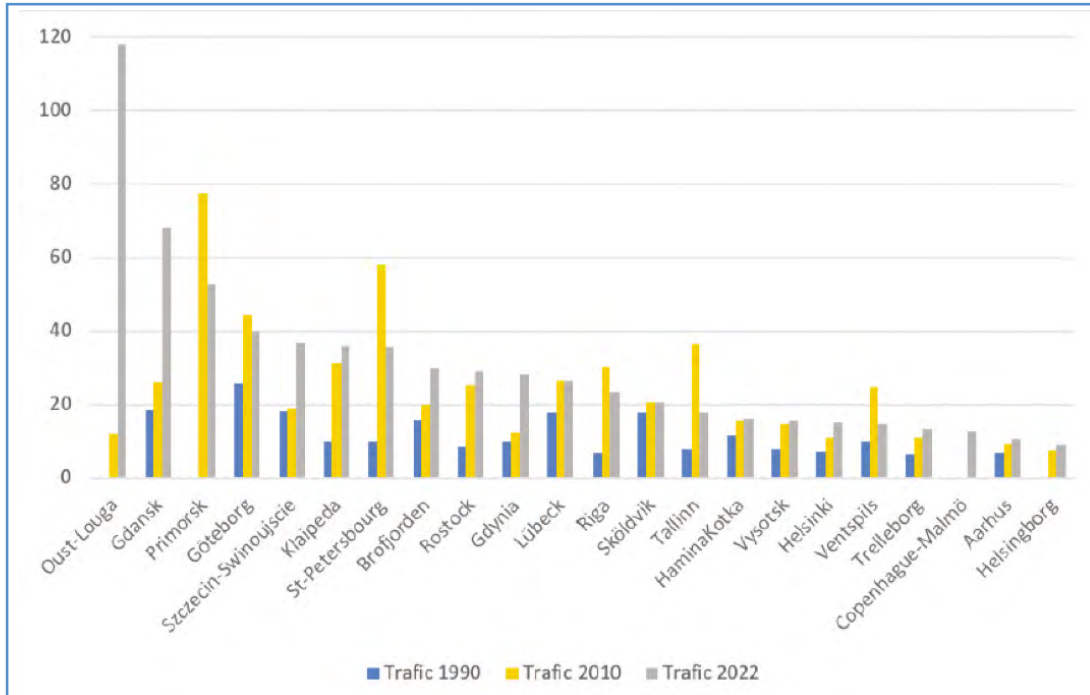
■ A MARITIME BACKYARD OF THE GLOBALIZATION BUT A CENTRAL CROSSROAD FOR EUROPE

Historically, the Baltic Sea has been an area of trade between economic powers and of confrontation between kingdoms, empires, military alliances and European thalassocracies. However, unlike the Suez Canal and the Straits of Malacca, crucial passage between Asia and Europe, the Baltic Sea remains a theatre of regional rather than global interest.

For NATO and the EU, it is one of the many areas of tension with the Russian Federation (along with the Arctic, MEDOR and the Black Sea, etc.); for the United States, it does not have the global strategic importance of the Mediterranean, as demonstrated by the

6 <https://www.touteurope.eu/economie-et-social/le-pib-par-habitant-des-pays-de-l-ue/>

7 <https://www.inshs.cnrs.fr/fr/cnrsinfo/evolution-des-trafics-portuaires-de-la-baltique-miroir-dune-geopolitique-maritime>



absence of a major US naval base such as Souda; for Russia, it is not (and no longer is) the preferred place for deploying its naval and air power. The bulk of the world’s naval projection capabilities are concentrated in the White Sea, particularly with the SSBNs. For the European Union and its Member States, however, the White Sea is vital. It is home to two of the largest armies in the European Union in terms of manpower (202,000 for Poland and 182,000 for Germany) ⁸.

Undoubtedly, the Baltic is a secondary theatre for powers such as the United States and the Russian Federation, but that it is at the heart of Europe. As such it has to be treated as a key challenge for the Europeans by the Europeans.

II • From 2004 to 2024, the “NATOisation” of the Baltic gradually but profoundly changed its strategic status.

During the 1990s, the Baltic was an area of balance and a zone of co-operation between Europe and Russia. Today, it has become the largest area of direct friction between the EU, NATO, the Russian Federation and the CSTO. Unlike the Aegean Sea, there are no territorial or maritime disputes in the Baltic Sea: no riparian states openly make territorial or maritime claims; unlike the Eastern Mediterranean, there are no incompatible claims over the definition of maritime spaces or the distribution of hydrocarbon resources.

In other words, there is no frozen conflict in the Baltic comparable to that in Moldova or Cyprus: Finland is not challenging the annexation of Karelia, a historic Finnish region, which was enshrined in 1944 in favour of the USSR; Poland is not challenging the annexation of Kaliningrad by the USSR; nor is Russia claiming any territory. But since 2004 and the extension of NATO to Russia’s borders, tensions have increased.

8 <https://www.touteurope.eu/l-ue-dans-le-monde/carte-les-effectifs-militaires-des-etats-de-l-union-europeenne/>

I THE “NATOISATION” OF THE BALTIC SEA ⁹

From 2004 to 2022, in less than two decades, the Baltic Sea has become a “NATO lake¹⁰”, provoking strong reactions from Moscow, which has been reduced to “Baltic isolation” in one of its channels of power projection towards Europe. The accession of Poland and the three Baltic States to the EU and NATO in 2004 aroused Moscow’s mistrust, ire and revanchism. This simultaneous integration was often interpreted in Moscow as a division of labor between the military alliance (NATO) and economic integration (EU) against Moscow’s historic influence in the Baltic.

Slowly but surely, NATO has been expanding and consolidating in the Baltic, once a veritable “strategic comfort zone” for Russia. It incorporated the main power in the Eastern Baltic: Poland, which was already a pillar of the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War. Poland’s “economic miracle”, largely aided by European funds, is now well known: in current US dollars, the country’s GDP rose from \$67 billion to \$808 billion between 1989 and 2024¹¹, with a marked acceleration from 2004 onwards.

NATO has not set up a military base in the Baltic but has chosen Estonia to host its cyber defence centre of excellence, Lithuania for its energy centre of excellence and Latvia for its communications centre of excellence. It should be pointed out that this “NATOisation” of the Eastern Baltic states has not been accompanied by “Americanisation” in the sense of a significant permanent US presence, as at the Incirlik base in Turkey or the Souda base in Greece. In fact, the number of American troops stationed in the Baltic is small: for example, in 2019, out of approximately 83,000 American military personnel stationed in Europe, only 9,000 were stationed in contact with Russia in Poland or the Baltic States.¹²

In the Baltic the Russian obsessional complex has been soaring. Europeans should not underestimate this point and hide behind the idea that it is against the expansion of NATO that Russia has arched its neck in the Baltic. Russia’s revanchism is also directed against the 2004 enlargement of the EU. Of course, the independence of the Baltic States from the Russian Federation in 1991 was achieved peacefully. However, Russian nationalist circles still remember the decisive role played by the Baltic States in the dissolution of the USSR, and their refusal to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as most of the former Soviet Socialist Republics did in 1991. As for integration into the European Union, it has provoked and continues to provoke a “Baltic resentment” in nationalist circles in Moscow, accentuated by the vigorous economic growth of the “Baltic tigers” during the decade 2000.

In addition, as a reaction to the Russian Federation’s annexation of Crimea and its role in the war in Donbass, from 2016 onwards the States party to NATO organised a “forward presence”¹³ in the Eastern Baltic to assert their deterrent posture. The aim was to provide the Baltic States with the necessary reassurance against the “tests” of sovereignty regularly conducted by the Russian armed forces at the limits of these extremely intertwined maritime, air and land spaces. The Baltic area was protected by Baltic, non-Baltic (French, British, Romanian) and non-European (Canadian) players. From a military point of view, the Baltic has been internationalised through NATOisation, despite the small number of troops involved.

A spiral of tension has been set in motion, leading to demonstrations of force in the form of regular military exercises (BALTOPS on the NATO side) and asymmetrical operations on the Russian side (cyber-attacks, broadcasting of Russian-language media to Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic States). The Baltic pivot was confirmed by

9 <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/expressions/otan-la-baltique-deviendra-t-elle-un-lac-de-securite-atlantique> and <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/12/from-flooded-meadow-to-maritime-hotspot-keeping-the-baltic-sea-free-open-and-interconnected?lang=en>

10 <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/expressions/otan-la-baltique-deviendra-t-elle-un-lac-de-securite-atlantique>

11 <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPD@WEO/POL?zoom=POL&highlight=POL>

12 <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength/assessing-the-global-operating-environment/europe>

13 https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/2206-factsheet_efp_fr.pdf

the Kingdom of Sweden's and the Republic of Finland's applications¹⁴ to join NATO in March 2022, in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This represents a political revolution in the international stance of these two traditionally neutral states. And it represents a substantial change in the geopolitical status of the Baltic: previously experts in preserving the balance between East and West, most of the countries bordering the Baltic are now united by their mistrust of Russia, the development of their military capabilities (not just naval) and their contribution to NATO.

In short, between 2004 and 2022, the Baltic region in the broadest sense has seen a reversal of alliances and of the balance of power between Russia and NATO, as well as a gradual but steady rise in tensions.

I THE REMILITARIZATION OF THE BALTIC REGION

On the Western side, this has resulted in the rapid and extensive remilitarization of the Baltic region, particularly in terms of air and land forces. Within NATO, Poland has embarked on a rise in power that is all the more impressive because it draws its resources from the "economic miracle". Thanks to a massive recruitment drive, Poland is now the third largest armed force in NATO, after the United States and Turkey¹⁵. And since 2013 and Euromaidan movement, its defence spending has varied between 1.9% and 2.3% of GDP. There has been considerable modernization of the forces, with the acquisition of PATRIOT air defense missile batteries¹⁶ in particular.

Initially outside NATO, Sweden and Finland have also started this effort. Sweden halted the decline in its military spending in 2017 (1% of GDP), bringing it up to 1.5% today¹⁷; it remilitarised the island of Gotland from 2017¹⁸, on the route of the Russian Baltic

Fleet; it reinstated military service¹⁹ to achieve a strategic "total defense" posture mobilizing the entire population; and it is relaunching its submarine fleet. As for Finland, it has also stepped up its defense effort since the 2010s and launched a number of emblematic defense acquisitions from American (64 F35 combat aircraft) and Israeli (David's Sling anti-missiles batteries) manufacturers.

On the Russian side, efforts began in 2004 and were stepped up at the turn of the decade: the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad²⁰ gradually became home to several essential military surveillance, patrol and intervention infrastructures, including long-range missiles equipped with nuclear warheads. This territory can be seen as a way for Russia to remedy its Baltic isolation by putting pressure on maritime routes and on the Baltic States' land connections with the rest of the EU (via the Suwałki corridor). Finally, a new military region has been created in contact with Finland in reaction to the country's entry into NATO.

In 2022, we could have feared an increasingly strong and direct confrontation between Russia, NATO and the EU in the Baltic zone, which has no buffer zone. This was not the case, and the missiles fired from the Caspian Sea at the start of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict had no equivalent from the Baltic Sea. As if by a principle of communicating vessels, the high waters of the Ukrainian fronts coexist with a period of low water stability in the Baltic. Does this mean that there is no longer any risk?

14 <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/expressions/revolution-geopolitique-pour-la-finlande>

15 <https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/07/16/poland-has-natos-third-largest-military-new-figures-show/>

16 <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/08/12/poland-beefs-up-military-defences-with-purchase-of-48-new-patriot-launchers>

17 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?end=2022&locations=SE&start=1960>

18 https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2017/02/15/dans-la-baltique-la-suede-remilitarise-l-ile-de-gotland-face-aux-russes_5079931_3214.html#:~:text=Pièce%20maîtresse%20de%20la%20défense,la%20droite%20s.

19 <https://plikverket.se/om-myndigheten/in-english>

20 <https://theconversation.com/kaliningrad-russias-unsinkable-aircraft-carrier-deep-in-nato-territory-182541>

III • Deceptively calm waters in the Baltic Sea: keeping up the pressure while avoiding a crisis

Although no military storm is currently raging in the Baltic, the concentration of military forces (conventional and non-conventional) in a small area and the proximity of the Ukrainian theatres of war make military slip-page and contamination possible. As Kant emphasised in his *Project for Perpetual Peace*, the accumulation of troops and equipment makes their use tempting²¹. And the proximity of the fighting can have a contagion effect.

For the moment, the protagonists in the Baltic rivalry are maintaining their investment in the area but are wary of starting a crisis there. The sea is not oily, but all the protagonists are avoiding clashes and reefs.

Since 2022, Russia's moderation in the Baltic has been largely subdued compared with the previous decade. Personnel and equipment, staff resources and budgetary appropriations have naturally been concentrated on the land (Donbass) and sea (Crimea) fronts, to the south of the Baltic area. Opening up a crisis in the Baltic Sea would compromise the main war effort. This explains why the modernisation of the Baltic Fleet (which is reduced in size) is not a priority and why the new North-West military region is not being set up at breakneck speed. Furthermore, confrontation with NATO in the Baltic no longer offers any immediate political gain compared with other areas of intervention such as the North Atlantic. Even so, Russia is keen to organise joint military manoeuvres with China in 2022 as part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in the Baltic hinterland of Belarus.

As for the "NATOisation" of the Baltic, this is inevitably taking place gradually, with the gradual integration of Finnish and Swedish forces already involved in NATO's Partnership for Peace exercises. And from a capability point of view, it is limited, if not held back, by the transfer of military equipment from neighbouring states (Germany, Denmark, Poland) to Ukraine. The measured pace of the "NATOisation" of the Baltic is particularly

visible in the naval field: no neighbouring state has a large or even growing fleet on its waters. The Russian Baltic fleet has a total of just 75 ships; the Finnish navy has neither corvettes nor frigates; the Polish navy has not acquired any first-rate ships since the 2000s, and so on. NATO's annual naval air exercises, BALTOPS, have gradually increased in size to bring together some fifty ships from 19 allies. But NATO's naval presence remains intermittent. Despite a real military presence and diplomatic visibility, NATO is in reality keeping a low profile in the Baltic, less to restore a stable balance with Russia than for lack of significant strategic investment.

Compared with the 2010 decade, the protagonists in the Baltic rivalries have all chosen more or less the same posture: a gradual and steady build-up of their capabilities, the construction of a mutual deterrent, a moderation that is largely imposed by a principle of communicating vessels with the Ukrainian theatres and an avoidance of the crisis.

IV • Three scenarios for the Baltic

As the conflict in Ukraine approaches the end of its third year, the United States is preoccupied with the presidential election campaign and the European Union struggles to resolve the situation in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, the situation in the Baltic Sea has at least three possible developments ahead of it: stabilization at a high level of tension in the form of an reversed Cold War; covert, clandestine and unstable conflicts; and an open crisis leading to direct confrontation between NATO and Russia.

I THE "ARCTIC OCEAN" SCENARIO: GENERAL GEOPOLITICAL GLACIATION

A constant and measured level of tension between the Baltic riparian States in the wake of the current balance could lead to a reverse Cold War situation: the Baltic would enter a period in which NATO would be the dominant power in the area for the long term, faced with a Russia in the position of a *challenger*, supported by its Kaliningrad exclave and

21 Third preliminary article.

its non-riparian ally, Belarus. This would be a repeat of the Cold War scenario in the Baltic, where the USSR froze the situation in its favor. One condition of this scenario would be a continuation of the high-intensity conflicts in Ukraine. None of the protagonists would then have the means, the incentives, nor the will to challenge the *status quo* in the secondary front of the Baltic.

The motivations of the protagonists would be derived from those observed today: a desire to concentrate its capability resources and its strategic efforts on other theatres; a desire not to multiply the number of open crisis areas so as not to increase the sources of risk; difficulties in developing genuine naval capabilities; obstacles on the Russian side to really developing the north-western military region; a slowdown in the “NATOisation” of Finland and Sweden, delays in defence supplies, etc. This stabilisation in tension could make the Baltic strategic situation resemble the Arctic Ocean: frozen for most of the time, often forgotten, far from the epicentre of world geopolitics, it would free up the energy resources of the Baltic Sea. This stabilisation in tension could make the Baltic strategic situation resemble the Arctic Ocean: frozen most of the time, often forgotten, far from the epicentre of world geopolitics, it irregularly releases dangerous icebergs that must be carefully avoided, controlled and circumvented.

In terms of international cooperation, temporary and partial thawing of tensions could be seen *at the very least* in the lowering of tensions during naval and air military exercises in the Baltic, and at most in Russia’s re-association with the Council of Baltic Sea States. However, no reopening of Nord Stream could be envisaged at this stage.

This scenario is consistent with the strategic culture of balance of the Nordic players. It would also be guaranteed by a fundamental difference with the situation in Ukraine, the Black Sea or the Caucasus: the military alliances in place are “locked in” and cemented and therefore deterrent. Strong transatlantic ties combined with a high degree of Russian-Belarusian cohesion would prevent the risk of local blunders and remedy accidents. What’s more, the European Union would have the means and

the will to support this scenario: the Polish government is currently very committed to the pursuit of European integration and the former Estonian Prime Minister, Kaja Kallas, will be heading up the External Action Service.

I THE “SARGASSO SEA” SCENARIO: A LOW-KEY SEARCH FOR IMBALANCE

The desire to upset an increasingly unfavorable NATO balance could lead Russia to regain the initiative in the Baltic area without causing an open and massive crisis with the neighboring countries. Similarly, NATO could be tempted to destabilise Russia, without causing a conflagration, in order to relieve the Ukrainian fronts.

This resumption of tension aimed at imbalance could take several forms on either side: infiltration operations by land, sea or air to alert and “test” the adversary; actions in cyberspace to disorganize and disorientate the adversary; incursions at the limits during military exercises; deployments of strategic weapons in the area; clashes with fishing fleets; organization of flows of illegal migrants; incursions by unidentified drones over critical civilian and military infrastructures, organized ecological damage (fires, pollution), etc. No “Baltic war” would be started in the area by the adversaries. But a series of civil-military crises would punctuate the situation and prevent it from stabilizing.

The Baltic Sea would then be like a geopolitical Sargasso Sea: a place where contradictory currents converge, a space of unpredictable whirlpools, far from the shores of the geopolitical ocean, it would also be a concentration of reefs drifting at or below the surface, making lasting calm impossible. Europeans would then be at the mercy of an “accident” in the Baltic that they could not control.

On the Russian side, such a strategy would be tempting because of its position as a relatively isolated *challenger* in this theatre: as things stand, Russia is not in a position to upset the strategic balance in the Baltic by using conventional military means in its favour. A lasting stalemate (or even a controlled withdrawal) on the Ukrainian fronts could lead it to shift its initiatives

(and some of its unconventional resources) to other theatres: the Baltic Sea has the advantage over the eastern Mediterranean, far from the naval bases of the far north, of being directly accessible from Kronstadt and Kaliningrad. And it offers a more fluid space than the Caucasus, where all the levers of power can be activated. Another opportunity to trigger these operations would be the start of peace negotiations on Ukraine after a ceasefire on the Russian-Ukrainian front line: Russia would then shift its pressure onto Ukraine's supporters, at the risk of provoking a disproportionate reaction.

NATO could also be tempted to call into question the current *status quo* in order to push its advantage, to fix Russian forces in the Baltic, to relieve the Ukrainian fronts for example if new shortages of equipment and troops were noted on the central front in the Ukrainian forces. But this organized and measured instability in the area would be to the detriment of the European Union. The Baltic theatre would have the advantage, for NATO initiatives, of putting its new Nordic members under tension and of taking place far from the other current hotbeds of crisis (Israel-Palestine, Red Sea) without the risk of contamination. In the event of Russian-Ukrainian peace negotiations, too, unclaimed Western actions would have the advantage of exerting pressure on Russia at a time of vulnerability.

I THE "ROARING 40S" SCENARIO^{ÈME} : STORM IN THE BALTIC

A major and direct crisis between NATO and Russia cannot be dismissed, even if it is the least likely for the moment and requires precautions. It would break with the tradition of balance in the area and be out of step with the current geopolitical situation. But it would be in keeping with the rising tensions and the arms race of the previous decade. The Baltic would then enter the storms of the "Roaring 40^{ème}", named after the area of the South Pacific where navigation is constantly perilous. These are extreme scenarios, but impossible to rule out given the volatility of the Russian-Ukrainian fronts and the "fog of war".

On the Russian side, triggering or provoking this crisis could be a reaction to a drastic

increase (in quantity and quality) in Western military support for Ukraine, in particular to strike deep into the territory of the Federation. Opening a direct front with NATO member states would present a great risk for Russia. But if transatlantic ties were called into question (by the election of Donald Trump or an economic crisis) and if "Ukrainian fatigue" spread among Western public opinion, a window of opportunity could open up in the Baltic for Russia. These actions could take the form of strikes on Baltic or Polish military infrastructures on the grounds or pretext that they have been used to attack Russian troops in Ukraine or Russian territory itself. They could also invoke the same pretext as for the war in Donbass: the protection of Russian-speaking minorities within the Baltic States. In this case, the operations would be land-based and confined to certain areas of Latvia or Lithuania.

On the Western side too, a spiral of direct confrontation could be initiated under certain conditions, despite the Alliance's defensive nature. In the event of a massive Russian collapse on the Ukrainian front, NATO could be tempted to engage in direct confrontation to take advantage of a unique military window of opportunity where Russian reactions would either be unpredictable or weakened. Catching the Russian armed forces in the Baltic zone off guard by means of a debacle in Ukraine would be a breakthrough scenario. Symmetrically, a clear Ukrainian defeat involving the fall of Odessa and/or Kiev could also lead to a NATO initiative to "punish" Russia for its victory. These operations could focus on the Kaliningrad exclave in the Baltic, either to destroy or dismantle its infrastructure by remote strikes, or to take control of it (in the event of the collapse of the Russian chains of command, for example). They could also focus on Russian Karelia, a historically Finnish region, and Belarus.

Even if this is a breaking and unlikely scenario with a limited probability, a major open and lasting crisis in the Baltic can not be overruled. The Baltic Sea would then be the site of the first, biggest and most dangerous direct confrontation between NATO and Russia.

Conclusion • The future of the Baltic and Europe's security

For Europeans, the Baltic Sea is no longer the source of growing tension it was in the 2010s. Russian and Ukrainian war efforts, and then those of NATO, have instead been directed towards the continent and the Black Sea. And the extension of NATO in the region prevents a Ukrainian scenario : the entire region is now put under the umbrella of the North Atlantic Treaty.

However, Europeans should be wary of neglecting the Black Sea and underestimating its potential for destabilisation. Its gradual "NATOisation" from 2004 to 2024 does not transform it into a NATO lake whose security and stability are guaranteed by Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. The arms race, the size of the direct contact zone with Russia, the proximity of the Ukrainian fronts and the strategic importance of Kaliningrad, as well as the slow military renaissance of the great neutrals Sweden and Finland, all underline the fact that the stabilisation of the Baltic is not yet assured under the NATO umbrella.

Particularly in maritime and naval terms, the Baltic must be monitored by the Europeans themselves. Exports from Europe's economic heavyweights, Germany, Poland, Finland and Sweden (accounting for almost 40% of the European GDP in 2023), depend on security in the Baltic. European defence solidarity will sooner or later be put to the test by Russia in the former Baltic Soviet Socialist Republics, because "dying for Vilnius" cannot be an American objective. It may, however, become a European necessity. Europe's vulnerabilities in the Baltic are numerous: shipping

lanes remain cramped and therefore fragile, marine and submarine infrastructures are inadequate, and there is a need for a European defence strategy.

And the defense efforts of the neighbouring countries are significant but are struggling to bear fruit in the strictly maritime dimension. It is up to Europeans not to be lulled into a sense of security by the NATOisation of this area. Particularly in the Baltic, they need to take responsibility for their own defence, because there is always the possibility of a disconnect between Washington's global objectives and Brussels' regional imperatives. To ensure the security and prosperity of Europeans, the NATOisation of the Baltic will not be enough. The Europeans are now in charge.

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