

## ISSUE BRIEF

# A Maritime Framework for the Baltic Sea Region

MARCH 2016 **FRANKLIN D. KRAMER  
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**T**his issue brief recommends the establishment, and sets forth the components, of a NATO maritime framework for the Baltic Sea region. An effective maritime framework would be a critical element in an integrated NATO deterrent and reassurance strategy for the Baltic Sea region, in light of hostile Russian actions and the emerging Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) challenge in northern Europe. Such a framework would provide the Alliance the capability for sea and air control over the Baltic Sea region and, as necessary, support the requirements of reinforcement and combined capabilities including intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance, electronic warfare, and precision engagement. The framework could be built around the existing capabilities of the NATO Baltic Sea nations (with Sweden and Finland, if incorporated); enhanced over time; and, if necessary, reinforced through the high-end capabilities of the United States, France, and the United Kingdom (UK).

The analysis in this brief elaborates the proposal put forth in the recent Atlantic Council report, *NATO's New Strategy*, which stated,

The Baltic has become a much more contested arena as a result of Russia's aggressive actions. A coordinated response is necessary and a maritime framework could help provide that within the context of NATO's overall existing maritime strategy. The new framework should include NATO's Baltic littoral states—Norway<sup>1</sup>, Denmark, Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia—and should seek

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<sup>1</sup> While Norway is not on the Baltic Sea, it has an obvious substantial interest in activities there and in the allied and partner countries bordering it.



NATO maneuvering exercises in the Baltic Sea, May 2015. *Photo credit:* United States Navy/Wikimedia.

to incorporate Finland and Sweden as part of their partnership efforts.<sup>2</sup>

### The Challenge

As a result of Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine and elsewhere, NATO is moving to enhance its deterrent capabilities, including by placing a particular focus on the eastern portion of the Alliance.<sup>3</sup> Recently NATO's defense ministers stated, "Russia is challenging Euro-Atlantic security through military action, coercion and intimidation of its neighbors."<sup>4</sup>

In this new European security context, the Baltic Sea region stands out as a central zone of friction between

NATO and Russia, where crises could very well emerge in the future. Since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis, Russia's air and maritime operational tempo in the Baltic Sea region has increased by a factor of three.<sup>5</sup> Here, Russia has tested NATO, and its partners Sweden and Finland, with steeply increased air and naval activity, mock air raids, and incursions into territorial waters. Russian actions have included intrusions into Swedish and Finnish territorial waters, harassment of research and cable-laying vessels, and practice bombing runs by Russian bombers against targets in Denmark and Sweden. Russian warships have also undertaken exercises in the exclusive economic zones of the Baltic states. Russian fighter jets, flying with transponders turned off, have also come dangerously close to commercial flights out of regional airports.<sup>6</sup> Sweden's

2 Franklin D. Kramer, Hans Binnendijk, and Daniel Hamilton, *NATO's New Strategy*, September 15, 2015, p. 9, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/nato-s-new-strategy-stability-generation>.

3 *Wales Summit Declaration*, NATO, September 5, 2014, paras. 16 and 18, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm).

4 *Statement by NATO Defense Ministers*, NATO, June 25, 2015, para. 2, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_121133.htm?selectedLocale=en](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_121133.htm?selectedLocale=en).

5 Sam Lagrone, "Unusually Intense Russian Air Activity over the Baltic Sea," US Naval Institute, December 10, 2015, <http://news.usni.org/2014/12/10/finland-unusually-intense-russian-air-activity-baltic>.

6 "Dangerous Brinksmanship: Close Military Encounters between

Map 1. Incidents involving NATO and Russia



Source: European Leadership Network.

Minister of Defense, Peter Hultqvist, described the situation in the Baltic Sea region in a recent speech: “Russia is showing a more challenging behavior and violations of territorial integrity are more frequent than before. The military-strategic situation has deteriorated and the region has become less secure.”<sup>7</sup>

The European Leadership Network has compiled statistics on Russian military activities in close proximity to NATO member military forces, as well as testing the air and sea boundaries of NATO allies.<sup>8</sup> These show

that the majority of the most serious and potentially escalatory encounters have occurred in the broader Nordic-Baltic region, with most of them occurring in the maritime domain and in the air above the Baltic Sea.

#### *A2/AD in Northeastern Europe*

NATO faces an emerging A2/AD challenge in the Baltic region, which would significantly complicate NATO performance and raise the operational risk for Allied forces in a crisis or during war in the region. Ensuring that such a challenge could be met will, of course, enhance deterrence.

During a recent speech at the Atlantic Council, the Commander of US Naval Forces Europe, Admiral Mark Ferguson, commented on Russia’s intentions: “This is a sea denial strategy focused on NATO maritime forces. Their intent is to have the ability to hold at-risk

Russia and the West 2014,” European Leadership Network, London, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Speech in Paris by Swedish Minister of Defense, Peter Hultqvist, September, 23 2015, <http://www.government.se/speeches/2015/09/speech-by-minister-for-defence-of-sweden-peter-hultqvist-at-seminar/>.

<sup>8</sup> “Dangerous Brinksmanship,” European Leadership Network, op. cit.

maritime forces operating in these areas and thus deter NATO operations.”<sup>9</sup> More recently, General Frank Gorenc, Commander of US Air Forces in Europe, speaking about Russia’s efforts in Kaliningrad in an interview with the *New York Times*, said that the surface-to-air missile systems there are “layered in a way that makes access to that area difficult . . . It is very serious . . . Obviously, we continue to monitor it. They have every right to lay that stuff out. But the proliferation and the density of that kind of A2/AD environment is something that we’re going to have to take into account.”<sup>10</sup>

Much of this challenge stems from the Russian enclave in Kaliningrad, where Russia has installed an array of potent long-range weapons systems, including an S-400 air defense system and an Iskander missile system. The enclave also includes coastal defense units with missile systems. Russia’s long-range Su-34s (capable of employing the Kh-35 anti-ship missile) were deployed to the Kaliningrad enclave for snap exercises in late 2014.<sup>11</sup> And while Russia has not deployed its most potent land-based anti-ship missile systems into Kaliningrad, Moscow could do so on short notice, as it did in Crimea in the days after Moscow’s annexation of the peninsula. Russia’s Baltic Sea fleet adds to the challenge. The fleet includes two submarines, two destroyers, two frigates, eight corvettes, one amphibious landing ship, and an assortment of littoral combat craft.<sup>12</sup> While this fleet is of modest size (and has not received the same level of recent investment as Russia’s Northern and Black Sea fleets), it nevertheless contains capabilities that provide ample challenges to NATO in the Baltic Sea’s relatively small and constrained maritime space.

Due to the small size of the Baltic Sea, Russian long-range systems based in Kaliningrad reach well into and over the maritime area, entering the air and sea space

of NATO allies and partners in the region (such as the Baltic states, Poland, and Sweden). Combined with Russian air and maritime capabilities, this is a central challenge to NATO, as it contests the Alliance’s ability to operate in the air and sea spaces of the Baltic and would complicate NATO efforts to reinforce the Baltic states via the sea and air.

## NATO in the Baltic Sea

NATO has recognized the importance of the maritime domain to the current challenges. At the Wales Summit, NATO stated,

The geopolitical and economic importance of the maritime domain in the 21st century continues to grow . . . This necessitates a strengthening of the Alliance’s maritime capabilities, which should not be seen in isolation but as an integral part of NATO’s larger toolbox to safeguard the Alliance’s interests. . . . We will also investigate ways to enhance further the effectiveness of the full range of Alliance maritime capabilities.<sup>13</sup>

The fundamental challenge is determining how to use NATO’s capabilities in an integrated fashion to enhance deterrence and provide warfighting capacity, if required. A starting point is a review of NATO’s Baltic Sea member capabilities. The NATO Baltic Sea nations maintain maritime forces, which, while relatively sophisticated, have been significantly reduced in numbers since their Cold War highs. Overall, however, there is substantial capacity:<sup>14</sup>

- Germany operates five submarines, and some fifteen surface combatants, along with fifteen mine hunters and mine sweepers. This is a substantial naval force, but it must be remembered that the German Navy operates well beyond the Baltic Sea.
- Denmark has seven surface combatants in service, along with two support ships.
- The Baltic states operate a total of twenty-three small vessels, primarily focused on mine hunting and sweeping, an area in which Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia have built up considerable expertise after

9 Speech by Admiral Mark Ferguson at “Charting NATO’s Future” event, Atlantic Council, October, 6 2015, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/events/webcasts/nato-s-role-at-sea-featuring-adm-mark-ferguson>.

10 Rick Gladstone, “Air Force General Says Russia Missile Defense ‘Very Serious,’” *New York Times*, January 11, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/12/world/europe/air-force-general-says-russia-missile-defense-very-serious.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/12/world/europe/air-force-general-says-russia-missile-defense-very-serious.html?_r=1).

11 Damien Sharkov, “NATO Intercepts 11 Russian Jets as Wargame Continues,” *Newsweek*, March, 18 2015, <http://europe.newsweek.com/nato-intercepts-11-russian-jets-war-games-continue-314747?rx=us>.

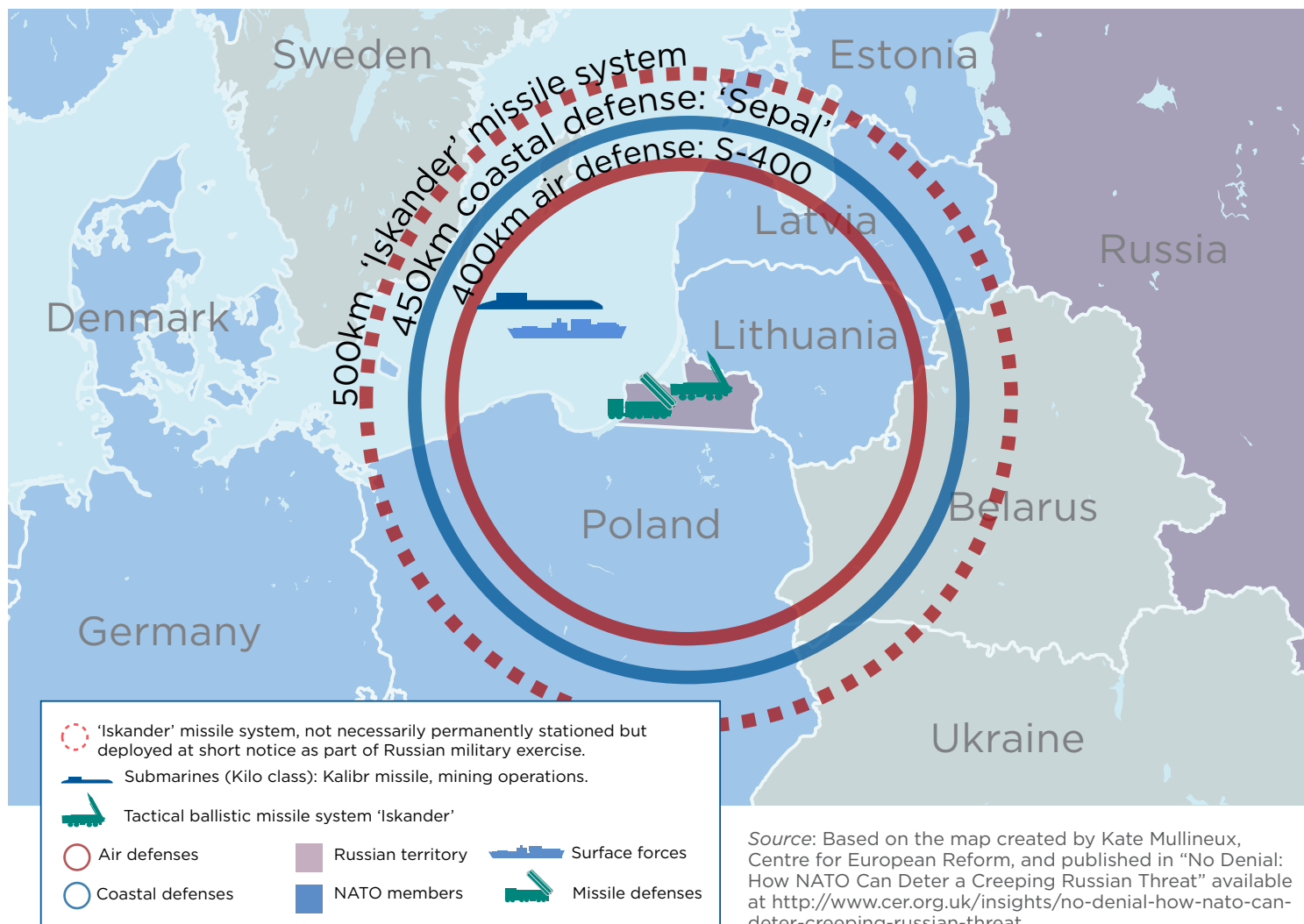
12 Gerard O’Dwyer, “Nations Respond to Russian Build Up in the Baltics,” *Defense News*, April, 12 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/show-daily/sea-air-space/2015/04/12/russia-baltic-sweden-poland-submarine-high-north-crimea/25368547/>.

13 Wales Summit Declaration, para. 71, op. cit.

14 Data for the below summary were drawn from “The Military Balance 2016,” International Institute for Strategic Studies (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany) 89-103, (Latvia, Lithuania) 114-117, (Norway, Poland) 124-129, (Sweden) 143-145, (UK) 151-154



Map 2. A2/AD in the Baltic Sea region



more than twenty years of clearing World War II and Cold War-era mines and unexploded ordnance from their coasts and shores.

- Poland operates a modestly sized navy, with five submarines, two frigates, one corvette, and twenty-one platforms for mine hunting.
- Norway's Navy operates six submarines, five frigates, and six corvettes. The Norwegian Navy also operates a number of small coastal defense ships. Although Norway has operated and exercised in the

Baltic Sea, Oslo's focus remains, understandably, on the sea and air domains in the High North.<sup>15</sup>

NATO's partners in the region, Sweden and Finland, also operate maritime forces that are of potential value to the Alliance as it generates its approach to defense and security in the broader region.

- The Royal Swedish Navy consists of seven corvettes (five of them with stealth characteristics) and five

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Ekspertgruppen for Forsvaret av Norge, *Et Felles Løft*, Norwegian Ministry of Defense, 2015, <https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/departementene/fd/dokumenter/et-felles-loft-webversjon.pdf>.



US landing craft air cushion vehicles during a Baltic Operations 2015 interoperability exercise, February 2015.  
*Photo credit: United States Navy/Flickr.*

submarines, along with twelve patrol boats with limited anti-submarine warfare capabilities.

- The Finnish navy operates eight fast-attack craft, along with four mine layers, as well as other mine hunting and mine sweeping assets. Finland also operates a coastal defense system that includes land-based, long-range anti-ship missiles.

In addition, several countries have planned modernization efforts. Poland has announced a major naval program, which includes both new surface combatants and a new class of submarines. Sweden is also set to acquire a new class of submarines for its navy. Norway recently acquired a new class of frigates, and is planning to procure a new submarine class as well. The German Navy is also planning to acquire a new class of surface combatants.

The littoral states of the Baltic Sea region operate a considerable range of tactical airpower, and this has

bearing on the Baltic Sea security environment too, as airpower plays a significant role in operations at or from the sea:

- Denmark operates forty-four F-16s, with recent high-end operational experience from Libya and Iraq
- Poland operates forty-eight F-16s, along with a smaller set of MiG-29s
- The German Air Force has 129 Typhoons and ninety-three Tornados, some of them with electronic warfare capabilities
- Norway operates forty-seven F-16s, many of them focused to Norway's High North
- Finland operates a fleet of fifty-five F-18 Hornets
- Sweden has a fleet of eighty-nine JAS-39 Gripen



The region also contains some capabilities for airborne Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) and Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW), with fourteen P-3 Orions operated around the region.<sup>16</sup> These assets have, however, not been focused on ASW in recent years, due to the demand for airborne ISR missions in out-of-area operations. The countries of the region are eyeing the next generation of airpower for its militaries, with Denmark making a decision soon on its next fighter jet, and Finland in the early stages of evaluating replacements for its Hornet fleet. Norway has already acquired the F-35, which will be brought into full service over the coming years. Meanwhile, Sweden is upgrading its own Gripen fleet with new sensors and extended range.<sup>17</sup>

Along with the Baltic littoral states there are a number of other NATO members that could quite possibly play a role in the Baltic Sea region, in peacetime as well as during a crisis or war. The UK, France, and also the Netherlands (with its submarines), are in close proximity, and could bring maritime, air, and other capabilities that are useful for defense and deterrence in the region. Indeed, the UK participated in the recent BALTOPS 15 exercise with an amphibious ship and the Royal Marines, while the Netherlands has recently exercised with its submarines in the Baltic Sea.<sup>18</sup>

The United States, of course, plays an important role in the region already, and could bring unique maritime and air capabilities as well, including long-range strike from the sea, amphibious platforms, ship-to-shore connectors, airborne ISR, and even airborne deployment of sea mines (demonstrated during BALTOPS 15).<sup>19</sup>

In sum, the littoral states of the Baltic Sea, along with other NATO allies in northern Europe, plus the United States when required, bring a robust set of maritime and air capabilities for defense and deterrence in the region. NATO has also begun to plan and exercise for maritime contingencies in the region, with additional bilateral and national exercises as complements. However, without closer coordination and a regional approach to the Baltic maritime domain, current efforts and capabilities will not substantially increase NATO's capacity to ensure sea and air control, allow reinforcements from the sea, or provide strike from the sea during a crisis or wartime scenario in the region.

### A New Maritime Framework for the Baltic Sea

A NATO maritime framework for the Baltic Sea could borrow heavily from the framework nation approach that was adopted by the Alliance at the Wales Summit. Such a framework could gather and focus the efforts of the regional NATO allies (Germany, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Denmark, and Norway) and also help draw in partner contributions from Sweden and Finland, in the Alliance's approach to collective defense and deterrence in northeast Europe. Furthermore, a framework approach would enable other NATO nations outside of the region (such as the UK, the Netherlands, and France) to better identify their potential contributions and roles in a Baltic Sea contingency.

Key aspects of a fully developed maritime framework for the Baltic Sea should include considerations for capabilities development, exercises, enhancement of existing regional cooperation, domain integration, command and control, and the role of the United States in the region, as well as the potential benefits for framework development across the Alliance.

### Capabilities

Given recent strategic developments in the Baltic Sea region, the high likelihood that Russia will continue its aggressive posture against allies and partners in the region, along with its continued development of an A2/AD challenge in Kaliningrad, NATO should develop a robust response to ensure that the Alliance can provide sea control, sea denial, and the ability to undertake

A framework approach would enable other NATO nations outside of the region to better identify their potential contributions and roles in a Baltic Sea contingency.

16 See, for example, Maritime Patrol Aircraft and Surveillance Conference content, London, United Kingdom, September 29-30, 2015, <http://www.maritimerecon.com/MediaCenter.aspx>.

17 Gerard O'Dwyer, "Sweden, Brazil Pursue Deeper Cooperation with \$4.7B Gripen NG Deal," *Defense News*, October 24, 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/2015/10/24/sweden-brazil-pursue-deeper-cooperation-47b-gripen-ng-deal/74415116/>.

18 "BALTOPS 15 Daily Update," US Naval Forces, June 6, 2015, <http://cne-cna-c6f.dodlive.mil/baltops-2015-daily-report/>.

19 "Minot B-52s Participate, Train with Allies in Baltops, Saber Strike Exercises," US Air Force, June 7, 2015, <http://www.af.mil/News/ArticleDisplay/tabid/223/Article/598476/minot-b-52s-participate-train-with-allies-in-baltops-saber-strike-exercises.aspx>

amphibious landings to reinforce allies in case of a crisis in the region. This will mean that regional maritime forces should strengthen and sustain a range of capabilities, including maritime intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; anti-submarine warfare; mine hunting; and mine warfare.

In this regard, the subsurface domain deserves special consideration. The Baltic Sea presents an almost uniquely complicated space for submarine and anti-submarine warfare, due to its geography and hydrographic characteristics. The region contains three skilled submarine operating nations (Germany, Sweden, and Norway) and another with ambition to significantly enhance its subsurface warfare capabilities (Poland). In addition, recent ASW efforts against suspected Russian submarines deep in Finnish and Swedish waters point to the need for increased submarine hunting capacities.

The Baltic Sea maritime framework must also consider how it integrates air- and land-power components when addressing the emerging A2/AD challenge in the region. The Baltic Sea region is relatively small, with the Baltic Sea having a maximum width of only 120 miles. This means that ground-to-air and ground-to-ground systems such as the Iskander missile and S-400s based in Kaliningrad can reach across the Baltic states, into Sweden across the Baltic Sea, and can cover much of Poland as well.

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#### *Enhancing Current Cooperation*

The Baltic Sea region has a long record of defense and security cooperation. Nordic Defense Cooperation was established in 2009 and includes all of the Nordic nations, with the Baltic states as close observers. The region also includes a number of bilateral cooperation agreements, such as those that Sweden has created with Finland, Denmark, and Poland, respectively.<sup>20</sup> Regional cooperation in the maritime domain has already been particularly effective, with the establishment of *Sea Surveillance*

*Cooperation Baltic Sea*, a regional effort to enhance maritime situational awareness through information sharing, to include classified or sensitive information in some cases. A maritime framework for the Baltic Sea could build upon the habits of cooperation already established in the region, and more closely align the regional players in meeting the defense and deterrence challenges in the broader Nordic-Baltic region.

#### *Domain Integration and Command Relationships*

A key element in an effective response for the Baltic Sea will be an integrated effort among allies and partners. The framework nation approach will allow nations to work together to provide the structure for such an effort. Along with agreement on the framework, NATO

should also consider a regional air and maritime command that can not only coordinate exercises and develop contingency plans, but also lead joint operations during a crisis or in war. This command could play a regional role in times of war and crisis under NATO's Maritime Command in Northwood, UK. Furthermore, the Baltic Sea maritime framework could also play a role in operating with, and enabling the operations of, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) and other reinforcing forces in the broader Nordic-Baltic region. A maritime framework would also enable planning and preparations for VJTF and other naval and amphibious operations in the region.

While Multinational Corps Northeast has now been in existence for some time, and plays an increasingly important role for defense and deterrence in northeast Europe, it may not be suitable for it to take on additional maritime duties, as its focus, and heritage, is primarily land-centric.

#### *The Role of the United States, the UK, and France*

The role of US, UK, and French forces in the region must also be considered, as they will be central to a range of operations during a crisis, ranging from amphibious landing operations to strike from the sea. The UK and France can add amphibious capacity, along with sea-based air defense, and long-range strike. That would result in substantially increased capability. Even more critically, given that NATO's members and partners in the region have useful but not full-spectrum capabilities,

20 O'Dwyer, Gerard, "Sweden and Denmark Reach Bilateral Defense Agreement," Defense News, 21 January, 2016, <http://www.defense-news.com/story/defense/international/europe/2016/01/21/sweden-and-denmark-reach-bilateral-defense-agreement/79112018/>



the United States will have to bring to bear for high-end capabilities, such as strike from the sea, amphibious landings, command and control support, electronic warfare, airborne ASW, and high-end ISR. Indeed, the United States is currently adding substantially to its long-range sea control capabilities through naval missile upgrades.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the United States may well want to examine its Air-Sea Battle concept, originally developed for the Pacific, in a Baltic Sea context, to determine how elements of Air-Sea Battle may be applicable to the requirements of the region. US political leadership of and support for the concept of a maritime framework for the Baltic Sea is also crucial to generating regional action on this effort.

#### *Broader Benefits*

A NATO maritime framework for the Baltic Sea may also have broader benefits for the Alliance as it orients itself toward the new security challenges in and around Europe. For example, a maritime framework for the Baltic Sea may serve as a test bed for other maritime domains currently under stress, such as the High North, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean (although the challenges in those spaces are, of course, very different). A maritime framework may also further engage Germany in security arrangements for Europe's northeast, a most welcome development indeed as Berlin explores its future role in European security. Finally, capabilities developed under the maritime framework, such as maritime ISR, would very likely have broader applicability across the Alliance.

#### **Conclusion**

The Baltic Sea region faces an urgent security challenge stemming from a newly assertive Russia that is using its military power to express its ambition and oppose NATO. The emerging A2/AD challenge in Kaliningrad is clearly designed to deny allied maritime forces access to the eastern Baltic Sea, and to frustrate allied efforts to reinforce the Baltic states in case of a crisis or during war. While current NATO and national efforts to bolster defense and deterrence in the region through exercises, rotational deployments, and commitments to rebuild capabilities are a good thing, it is time for the Alliance to put its maritime approach to the region also on a long-term footing.

A maritime framework for the Baltic Sea would enable the Alliance to start long-term development of maritime and air capabilities and planning in a way that would focus NATO and national efforts and avoid gaps in both capabilities and contingency planning. It would also send a powerful message to Moscow that the Alliance is indeed prepared to defeat the A2/AD challenge in northeast Europe, and is committed to the defense of its allies on both sides of the Baltic Sea.

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21 Gibbons-Neff, Thomas, "This US missile is about to get a ship-killing upgrade," The Washington Post, 5 February, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/02/05/this-u-s-missile-is-about-to-get-a-ship-killing-upgrade/>

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