

ISSUE BRIEF

Back to the North

The Future of the German Navy in the New European Security Environment

APRIL 2017 **MAGNUS NORDENMAN**

The European security environment is at its most volatile since the Cold War, and much of the friction between NATO and a newly assertive Russia can be found in the maritime domain, where close encounters and growing Russian capabilities are increasing unease. Beyond the current tense interactions, the maritime domain also presents NATO with long-term challenges to reinforce northeastern Europe through the Baltic Sea region during crises, as well as to deploy across the North Atlantic with US reinforcements.

Germany's navy is currently undergoing a rebalancing toward the Baltic Sea and the North Atlantic, after more than two decades of tending to crisis management tasks and maritime security operations in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. This presents a real opportunity to strengthen collective defense and deterrence in northern Europe, as the German navy is in a position to help fill some of the capability and command and control gaps found in a region where the other maritime forces are highly sophisticated, but relatively small in size and capacity. Still, the German navy cannot respond to the full spectrum of threats and challenges in the Baltic Sea by itself, but the refocusing on the Baltic Sea and the North Atlantic will present opportunities for increased cooperation among the navies of the Baltic Sea, along with the major naval powers of NATO, including the United States, the United Kingdom (UK), and France.

The Maritime Challenge in Europe's North

NATO currently faces two separate, but strategically linked, challenges in the maritime domains in northern Europe, primarily in the Baltic Sea and the North Atlantic. The nature of the threats and challenges drive the need for adjustments to capabilities, and brings together, through geographical context, different NATO members and partners in clusters of cooperation and interaction.

In the Baltic Sea, NATO faces a real challenge to the Alliance's ability to reinforce the Baltic States and to operate at and from the sea during a crisis. This is primarily driven by Russia's powerful anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) network that is currently being developed in the Kaliningrad enclave, and which consists of sophisticated and long-range air defense systems, anti-ship missiles, and ballistic missiles. The introduction of new Russian aviation assets also means that Russian

The Brent Scowcroft Center's **Transatlantic Security Initiative** brings together top policymakers, government and military officials, business leaders, and experts from Europe and North America to share insights, strengthen cooperation, and develop common approaches to key transatlantic security challenges.

This issue brief continues the Transatlantic Security Initiative's long-standing focus on security in northern Europe and in particular in the Baltic Sea region. It also builds on the long record of work on NATO's current and future role in the maritime domain.

This issue brief has been produced in partnership with the German Navy.

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airpower can conduct strikes against both land targets and shipping at sea in the broader Baltic Sea region. In addition, Russia recently deployed frigates capable of launching Kalibr land-attack cruise missiles to the Baltic Sea.

The Baltic Sea environment itself presents a challenge for maritime forces seeking to operate in and from the sea, but also provides ample opportunities for those seeking to deny access to the region. The Baltic Sea is relatively small and narrow, meaning that modern land-based air defense and naval strike systems can range over much of the operational space. The Baltic's littoral environment is dense with natural and man-made clutter (islands, archipelagos, shipping, commercial aviation) that makes surveillance and reconnaissance a taxing proposition. The undersea domain in the Baltic is especially challenging, with shallow depths and temperature and salinity layers that considerably reduce submarine detection ranges. In combination, this means that larger warships and subsurface platforms (such as aircraft carriers, amphibious ships, and nuclear attack submarines) are especially vulnerable, or not able to operate at all, in the Baltic Sea domain. In peacetime, the Baltic Sea requires effective maritime domain awareness and a credible presence of maritime forces to maintain deterrence. In wartime, the Baltic Sea requires accumulated capabilities that can overcome the developing Russian A2/AD network and help effect reinforcements of the Baltic States across the sea and air domain.

The North Atlantic, on the other hand, faces different challenges from an assertive Russia and a resurgent Russian Northern Fleet based out of the Kola Peninsula, only a short distance from NATO's territory in Norway. The Northern Fleet is renewing its power projection capabilities with new and sophisticated submarines that, in some instances, approach the capabilities of current US submarines. The Northern Fleet is also

increasingly active in the broader North Atlantic, at rates, according to NATO's Maritime Command, not seen since shortly after the end of the Cold War. There is growing concern that, during a crisis, Russia would be able to constrain or put pressure on reinforcements coming across the Atlantic; a task made more important by the moderated permanent presence of US forces in Europe in the post-Cold War era. If able to access the broader maritime domain during a crisis, Russian submarines would also be able to attack land targets across northern Europe using land-attack cruise missiles, such as the Kalibr system.¹

To be sure, the Northern Fleet and its submarine force is considerably smaller than during the Cold War, but its growing sophistication and advanced submarines mean that, for example, detection ranges are shorter than they used to be during the Cold War, while the Russian capability set is broader than during the Cold War. In addition, NATO's anti-submarine warfare (ASW) skills have atrophied during nearly twenty years of focus on expeditionary operations and low-end maritime threats (such as piracy and terrorism). Furthermore, regionally focused command and control structures for maritime operations, such as in the North Atlantic and the Baltic Sea, were removed during the post-Cold War period, leaving NATO with the relatively small Maritime Command in the UK. In addition, the US maritime focus in Europe also shifted away from the north to the south, with the move of the sixth fleet headquarters from the UK to Naples, Italy, and a reduction in US maritime forces permanently based in Europe. The North Atlantic, too, requires enhanced maritime domain awareness in peacetime, along with the ability to detect and track Russian submarine movements in the region. In wartime, NATO and its members must be able to exercise sea control to ensure the free flow of reinforcements from North America to Europe, as well as to prevent long-range strikes from the sea against key infrastructure and installations in northwestern Europe.

The Future of the German Navy in the Baltic Sea and the North Atlantic

Germany's "White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr" from 2016 signals a considerable reorientation of German defense and security policy from the earlier White Paper released in 2006. The new White Paper certainly notes and

¹ William Perkins, Alliance Airborne Anti-Submarine Warfare, Joint Airpower Competency Center, June, 2016, 49



German warship and helicopter operating together during a NATO maritime exercise. *Photo credit: Allied Joint Force Command Brunssum/Wikimedia.*

remains mindful of global security challenges, including those stemming from non-state actors, but there is an unmistakable shift toward Europe and the risk of state-on-state war and challenges to the rules-based international order. This includes a renewed German focus on bolstering NATO's "cohesion and capacity to act" and Berlin's preparedness to "assume responsibility and lead in order to make joint action possible." Furthermore, the White Paper declares it a strategic priority for Germany to promote "the close interlinking and progressive integration of European armed forces [and] the strengthening of NATO's European pillar."² In addition to this strategic reorientation and new level of ambition, the current German government has also signaled and begun preparing for significant increases in German defense spending in the coming years.³ This will have implications for the German navy.

2 See German Federal Government, "White Paper 2016 on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr," Federal Ministry of Defense, Berlin, Germany, 2016.

3 Lars Hoffman, "German Defense Spending Hike Reflects Regional Trend," *Defense News*, March 24, 2016.

Given the new and developing European security environment, the German navy has begun to pivot back to northern Europe after nearly two decades of focus on expeditionary operations and crisis management efforts in regions far from the Baltic Sea and the North Atlantic, such as the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean.⁴ In some ways, this signals a return to the more traditional role of the German navy with a focus on sea control and as a key force provider in the Baltic Sea and the North Atlantic. But, the future is unlikely to be a return to Cold War practices; new capabilities, different resources levels, and the complexity of the new Russian challenge to European security all mean that a Cold War approach would not be likely to work nor would it be sustainable in the long term. In addition, the German navy will likely have to maintain a considerable some level of attention to maritime security challenges in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean in the coming years, given the continued turbulence in North Africa and the Middle East and Germany's dependence on

4 Sebastian Schulte, "Steady as She Goes," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Volume 53, Issue No 24, June 15, 2016, 26

international trade and therefore on free passage in the global maritime domain.⁵

Current and future capabilities

The German navy was significantly reduced in numbers in the wake of the Cold War, going from twenty-eight combatants in the year 2000 to twenty-three today; nonetheless, in several areas, the navy experienced enhancements of platform and system quality.⁶ For example, the German navy introduced its new 212-class submarine during this period. The post-Cold War period also saw a German navy reorientation toward crisis management in terms of both training and ship procurement, such as the F125 Baden-Wuerttemberg frigate, which was optimized for low-intensity and expeditionary operations. Still, German maritime forces are by far the largest in the Baltic Sea region, and the current fleet has a number of capabilities that are relevant to contemporary challenges in the region, such as sea-based air defense, mine counter-measure capabilities, and anti-submarine warfare. Furthermore, current German navy investment plans will also help bolster needed capabilities for the Baltic Sea and the North Atlantic.

The 2016 Atlantic Council issue brief “A Maritime Framework for the Baltic Sea” identified several capabilities gaps that needed to be filled in order to help bolster maritime defense and deterrence in the Baltic Sea region. They included anti-submarine warfare, mine counter-measure capabilities, sea-based air defense, domain integration and command and control, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.⁷ A German navy more oriented toward the Baltic Sea could help address several of these gaps. Current and projected German maritime capabilities include:

Surface Warfare

The German navy currently operates fifteen surface combatants with a range of anti-ship missile systems, including Harpoon and RBS-15. In addition, the navy plans to procure five new corvettes, along with a new anti-ship missile system from Norway that will have the capacity for long-range land attack missions.

5 Sebastian Bruns, “The Baltic Sea and Current German Naval Strategy,” CIMSEC, July 20, 2016.

6 Bryan McGrath, NATO At Sea: Trends in Allied Seapower, American Enterprise Institute, September, 2013, 5

7 See Franklin D. Kramer and Magnus Nordenman, “A Maritime Framework for the Baltic Sea,” Atlantic Council, April 6, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/a-maritime-framework-for-the-baltic-sea-region>.

Sea-Based Air Defense

Germany operates three frigates of the Sachsen class, with primarily an air-defense role. The Sachsen-class frigate features both the evolved SeaSparrow system and the SM-2 system, along with an active phased array radar. The air-defense frigates entered into active service in the early 2000s, and can now be considered matured capabilities within the German navy.

Anti-Submarine Warfare

Germany currently operates six highly capable conventional submarines of the 212 class, along with eight P-3C Orions acquired from the Netherlands in 2006. The P-3s are scheduled for modernization and “re-winging” in the coming years to extend their active service lives. Moving forward, Germany plans to procure two additional 212-class submarines together with Norway, along with a new class of at least six MKS-180 frigates that will have an enhanced ASW capability.

Mine Warfare

Germany operates ten mine hunters in its fleet, which makes it the largest in the Baltic Sea region. The fleet, however, is reaching the end of its service life and a new class of mine-hunting platforms is being procured. The next generation mine-hunting capability will, in part, be based on unmanned and autonomous systems that are currently being tested in the Baltic Sea.

Command and Control

Germany is currently developing and building a Baltic Maritime Component Command (BMCC), headquartered in Rostock. This is a national initiative, which will be combined with the national Maritime Operations Center that will be moved to Rostock as well. The staff will consist of roughly one hundred German personnel, and will also be able to accept another twenty-five multinational staffers during peacetime operations. The BMCC will be able to command and control operations in the Baltic Sea region and beyond; the command architecture is fully compliant with NATO standards.

International and regional cooperation

Over the years, the German navy has developed a range of cooperative efforts with other NATO nations. For example, the British Royal Navy conducts surface-warfare training and exercises for the German surface fleet, while German surface units have integrated into US carrier strike groups during deployments to the Middle East. Polish and German submarine

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cooperation is also deepening, as evidenced by Poland joining Germany’s submarine operating authority in late 2016.

In addition to hard capabilities and command arrangements, Germany’s navy undertakes an array of initiatives that can help foster maritime communities of interest and develop concepts of operations for the Baltic Sea. For example, the German navy initiated the annual Baltic Commanders Conference, which brings together senior naval leaders from the Baltic Sea region to share perspectives and generate ideas for further cooperation. Germany is also the framework nation for the NATO Center of Excellence for Operations in Confined and Shallow Waters (COE-CSW), which develops concepts and doctrine for operations in the littorals, as well as providing subject-matter expertise and contributions to NATO training and exercises related to the field.⁸ In addition, as one of NATO’s framework nations, the German navy is leading a number of sub-clusters, including in anti-submarine warfare.

Implications and Opportunities for NATO and the United States

The reorientation of German security and defense policy will have implications and present opportunities for both NATO as a whole and for the United States in particular. At the maritime level, it will also present new occasions for regional and international cooperation around building capabilities, leading operations, and strengthening defense and deterrence in the Baltic Sea region, and to some degree in the North Atlantic. Indeed, this could advance the aforementioned goal from the new German Defense White Paper of bolstering the “close interlinking and progressive integration of European armed forces [and] the strengthening of NATO’s European pillar.”⁹

8 Center of Excellence for Operations in Confined and Shallow Waters, “The Mission and the responsibilities of COE CSW,” <http://www.coecsw.org/faq/>

9 German Federal Government, “White Paper 2016.”

This reorientation should be welcomed by Washington and the countries of the region. Indeed, Washington should encourage this development as it is one example of a European NATO-member stepping up its level of engagement in order to help take responsibility for defense and security in its broader neighborhood, in this case northern Europe. Furthermore, most of the US navy’s ships are ill-suited for operations in the confined waters of the Baltic Sea, meaning that the introduction of higher-end naval platforms into the Baltic by US friends and allies should be welcomed. The other nations of the region certainly operate sophisticated and advanced navies that are tailor-made for the conditions of the Baltic Sea, but they do lack some of the capabilities needed for a non-permissive operating environment. The return of the German navy to the Baltic Sea will help alleviate some of those regional shortcomings.

Given these developments, the United States and the countries of the Baltic Sea region should consider the following opportunities for US-German and regional cooperation:

The Baltic Sea

- *US engagement in the BMCC.* The US Navy should consider sending a liaison officer to serve at the BMCC. This would help grow US understanding of the Baltic Sea operational environment and increase familiarity with maritime capabilities in the region. It would also create personnel linkages that would be useful during a crisis or wartime.
- *Give future iterations of the European Deterrence Initiative a Naval Dimension.* The US-led European Deterrence Initiative has provided key resources for continued US military engagement in Europe, ranging from exercises to updating needed infrastructure; however, much of it has been ground-focused in nature. Future iterations of this support for European security should be given more of a maritime dimension and focused, in particular, on the Baltic Sea region and the North Atlantic. This could include a deployment of Littoral Combat Ships to the Baltic Sea for exercises with allies and partners in the region.
- *Align naval cooperation with a Baltic Sea focus.* Current German cooperation with the United States, France, and the UK could be given a Baltic Sea dimension in the coming years. The navies of the United States, France, and the UK will be

needed during a crisis or war in the Baltic Sea to provide high-end capabilities, such as long-range strike, electronic warfare, and to provide forcible entry options. Orienting future cooperative efforts toward the region would provide opportunities to develop habits of cooperation in a regional context, build needed capabilities, and increase regional familiarity within the navies of the United States, UK, and France.

- *Look for naval opportunities in defense cooperation with Sweden and Finland.* Both nations are seeking to deepen their defense cooperation with Germany, and given the geography of the region and the current and future capabilities of Sweden and Finland, it would make sense that the cooperation would be primarily maritime in nature. This cooperation would be especially important, and unique, given that both Sweden and Finland are NATO partners—not members—but play important roles in the Baltic Sea region.

The North Atlantic

- *Consider a German role in cooperation around the North Atlantic.* The UK, Norway, and the United States are currently deepening their cooperation around capabilities and exercises in the North Atlantic and the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap. The German navy should look for opportunities to play a role in this cooperation as well, in particular, around blue-water ASW-capabilities building and

exercises. Germany's fleet of P-3 Orions should be of special interest in this regard, as the North Atlantic region is currently facing a shortage of airborne ASW platforms.

Conclusion

The Baltic Sea region is one of the key friction zones between NATO and a newly assertive Russia; a dynamic that is likely to remain for many years to come. While NATO has made promising initial steps to bolster defense and deterrence ashore with the deployment of multinational battalions in the Baltic States and Poland, the Alliance must also address the maritime and air domain in the region. The German navy's return to the Baltic Sea region is an important development that will do much to bolster the capabilities and capacities in the Baltic Sea. However, the region will still have to rely on increased cooperation and coordination in order to help grow key capabilities and lay the ground work for cohesive multinational operations during a crisis or wartime. A fully developed German focus on the Baltic Sea region, along with growing attention to the North Atlantic, in combination with deepened regional cooperation and continued US engagement would do much to address the current insecurity at sea in northern Europe.

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