

# Perpetual Conflict in the Maritime Domain: Russian Naval Strategy and European Security

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## Abstract

Russia's war against Ukraine has significantly impacted the security situation in Europe. While continuing to be a conventional land threat in the Baltic region, Russia has increasingly turned to the maritime domain to confront NATO. This article considers the interrelated influence of maritime geography on Russian strategy, and the evolution of Russian naval power toward power projection and non-nuclear deterrence. Together, these factors may contribute to a perpetuation of the current confrontation between Russia and NATO.

## Russia and NATO in the Maritime Sphere

The risk of an externalisation of the conflict in Ukraine since 2014 has reshaped NATO's strategic threat perception, resulting in an enhanced military posture in eastern Europe. Following the establishment of land and air-based deterrence measures in response to acute threats from Russia in those domains, NATO has also recently increased its posture in the maritime domain. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept explicitly named Russia as a direct threat to Euro-Atlantic security and highlighted the risks to freedom of navigation in the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans, as well as hard security challenges in the seas surrounding Europe. The inclusion of the maritime domain in the new strategic concept emphasised the importance of the maritime aspects of the confrontation with Russia post-2022 (NATO, 2022). In response to a series of sanctions from the United States and Europe, Russia adopted an increasingly adversarial posture in the maritime domain. From 2023 onward, observed adversarial behaviours varied in both nature and intensity,

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which highlighted the hybridity of Russian means and the variability of its risk tolerance vis-à-vis escalation against NATO. Ranging from suspicious shipping in the vicinity of offshore wind farms, to repeated airspace violations, to the suspected deliberate cutting of underwater power and internet cables, Russia's actions have significantly deteriorated the maritime security situation in the Baltic Sea and western Russian Arctic region. Consequently, NATO established the Baltic Sentry mission in early 2025 to increase situational awareness in the Baltic Sea and improve regional capacity to protect critical underwater infrastructure against hybrid threats, whilst deterring further Russian activities against such infrastructure (NATO, 2025).

Russian adversarial activities in the maritime domain exemplify the complexity of the security situation in the Baltics, but also more widely to the European maritime and littoral areas. The risks of a conflict with Russia in or because of the maritime domain are high because of proximity and capability, but also because of the increasing complexity of interactions between Russian and NATO forces to emphasise non-nuclear deterrence. From Russia's perspective, the sea lines of communications running through European waters, such as in the Baltics, have gained importance in light of the conflict in Ukraine and Western sanctions. Although this argument somewhat predates the current situation, Russia perceives this as a strategic risk and a long-term security issue. The following article considers two interrelated factors that shape Russian naval strategy in the Baltic Sea region and western Arctic: the influence of maritime geography on Russian threat perception, and how Russian naval power has evolved to leverage maritime geography to increase non-nuclear deterrence and power projection against NATO. The observed shifts in Russian maritime strategy over the past decade suggests that the risks are not primarily aggression or invasion against NATO but related to two long-term strategic criteria: the security of sea lines of communications and vital economic interests, and non-nuclear deterrence.

### **Russia's Perpetual Preoccupation about Maritime Geography**

Geography is a driver of Russian naval strategy and Moscow's threat perception vis-à-vis Europe. Despite its large coastline Russia is limited to four or five maritime outlets that can be blockaded due to maritime chokepoints in proximity of most of its bases. The closure of the Turkish straits to naval

shipping following Türkiye's application of the Montreux Convention in 2022, the necessity to transit the Danish straits, and the fact that the Baltic Sea is now encircled by NATO states with the exception the Kaliningrad exclave are all serious impediments to freedom of action for the Russian Navy. The war in Ukraine has effectively demonstrated Russia's geographical maritime-based vulnerabilities in terms of maritime access, sea control, and freedom of operations, but also to adversarial action in the context of littoral warfare (Patalano and Hallett, 2025). Attacks against maritime infrastructure by Ukrainian forces, particularly to oil terminals in the Black and Baltic seas, is a scenario that Russian strategists believe would be repeated should an armed conflict with NATO occur. Similarly, the Arctic ports remain limited in terms of capacity because of the harsh climate and sea ice conditions that affect navigation along the Russian Arctic coast for most of the year. The possibility of NATO forces blockading the Russian Arctic ports westward in the event of a conflict is another important geographical factor in Russian naval strategy (Kaplan, 2013).

The geographic character of the Russian European maritime approach is therefore intrinsically linked to the question of maritime security in Russian strategy, and a risk for perpetual conflict between Europe and Russia. Barring a territorial expansion that would offset said geographical limitations (which invading the Baltic states, closing the Suwałki Gap, or a coup de main in Norway, Sweden or Finland would not achieve), Russia's policies and possible actions to overcome such limitations will remain a strategic constraint far beyond the current situation (Germond, 2015; Adrians, 2025). As such, Russian maritime and naval shipping is constrained to transit the 'unfriendly' waters of the Baltic Sea and the Norwegian coast to access sea lines of communications that, in the event of a conflict with NATO, could be blockaded. This reality is not lost on Moscow. The 2022 Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation clearly emphasised the continued importance of sea lines of communication in the modern interconnected world. It also saw a growing competition for resources, and consequently, a greater need for states to maintain sea lanes open and free. A new feature of the doctrine is the prioritisation of sea areas in relation to their importance, ostensibly regarding the Russian economy, but also military value. Therein are the Baltic and the Arctic categorised as vital areas, whose loss could 'jeopardise the national security of the Russian Federation and the very existence of the state' (Russian Federation, 2022, p. 5; Gioe *et al.*, 2025).

Such strategic worries are exacerbated by the Kremlin's belief that the United States seeks to contain Russia geopolitically, akin to strategic-level blockading efforts through a combination of political, economic, and military means (Mérand, 2020; Black, 2024). Sweden's and Finland's accession to NATO membership combined with an increased frequency and complexity of US and NATO military and naval activities in the Baltic, North Sea, and along the Norwegian coasts have contributed to the emergence of a Russian perception of a containment strategy. Hence there are arguments in Russian strategic thought suggesting that perceived American weaponisation of international law, particularly regarding Russia's sovereignty over the Northern Sea Route or the route's status as an international strait, or the non-recognition of claimed rights over offshore resources could eventually result in a military clash (Yevmenov, Puchnin, and Yeshchenko, 2023; Kostenko and Vakhrushev, 2024). Although such conclusions are quite drastic, the re-emergence of great power competition over transportation routes and more broadly the challenge posed by American maritime policy, in this instance, shapes Russian threat perception of containment (Buchanan, 2023). Thus far, Russian strategy has challenged the United States' policy primarily by political and legal means, whilst gradually shifting its naval strategy and capabilities to mitigate weaknesses in the military domain. With the gradual reduction of sea ice coverage in the Arctic permitting more shipping, or increased policing action in the Baltic, Moscow's tolerance of external pressure regarding its sovereignty and control over its maritime areas will likely decrease. This reaction is already being observed in the Baltic Sea, such as increasing measures to protect Russian maritime trade, including the use of military forces. This suggests this is no longer a future strategy for Russia, but possibly becoming normative behaviour with all the security policy implications it entails for NATO and European states.

Observations of Russian maritime shipping since the imposition of sanctions on Russian oil trade in 2022 highlight just how vital the Baltic Sea is for the Russian economy. The Baltic Russian terminals handle approximately half of Russia's seaborne crude trade and a significant proportion of other hydrocarbon products (Kyiv School of Economics, 2025; Stoner, 2021). Although Pacific terminals have increased exports in recent years, the absence of trans-Russia pipelines limits the ability to switch export terminals. As such, the volume of Russian oil tankers in European waters continues to be important in terms of numbers, but also in terms

of revenue for Russia. The series of incidents off the coast of Estonia in June 2025 demonstrated how seriously Russia considers the protection of its tankers, but more importantly how it is willing to take escalatory measures against what it perceives as NATO or EU aggression (Reuters, 2025a; Reuters, 2025b). Such emboldened behaviour is enabled by a change in Russian strategy over the past decade that has re-emphasised the use of conventional naval power to effect both regional power projection and non-nuclear deterrence.

### **The Return of Naval Power in Russian Strategy**

The use of naval power is therefore regaining importance in Russian strategy as an instrument of non-nuclear deterrence. After a period of decline following the collapse of the Soviet Union when the Russian Navy suffered from underinvestment and growing obsolescence, naval power has re-emerged as a strategic symbol of power, but more importantly in pragmatic applications of hard power. The development of non-nuclear deterrence in Russian strategic thought reflected a growing emphasis on asymmetric means to achieve strategic objectives. This line of thought, along with Russians' observations of Western naval operations since 1991, helped to break away from the Cold War mentality and highlighted the possible deterrent value of a Russian Navy armed with conventional long-range cruise missiles (Adamsky, 2018). While the 2014 Military Doctrine re-acknowledged the continued necessity and limitations of nuclear deterrence, it also introduced a concept of military and non-military means to decrease the risks of regional conflicts and protect interests against the perceived degradation of the security environment with NATO and thus, formally introducing non-nuclear deterrence (Russian Federation, 2014; Jonsson, 2019).

In parallel with emerging thoughts in Russia on the concept of new generation warfare, the Russian Navy began a modernisation process to increase its power projection and ability to effect deterrence below the threshold of nuclear conflict. The development of new weapon systems, such as the *Kalibr*-family of cruise missiles, empowered this modernisation. Starting in the mid-2010s Moscow used naval power to reaffirm its continued relevance on the international stage by conducting long-range strikes against targets in Syria, deploying a carrier strike group to the Mediterranean and exercising anti-access and area denial in the Arctic. Russia followed the publication

of the 2022 Maritime Doctrine with a new naval strategy that will likely include a series of capital projects under the State Armament Programme for 2027–2036, and out to 2050 (Kremlin, 2025). The importance of the naval strategy is underlined by the appointment of a close aide to President Vladimir Putin, Nikolai Patrushev, to the chairmanship of the Maritime Collegium in 2024, a state organ tasked with coordinating maritime and naval strategies and policies to make the Russian Navy great again. While ground forces remain the main pillar of Russian conventional hard power, so potently demonstrated in Ukraine since 2022, Russia has increasingly opted for naval power to effect non-nuclear deterrence against Europe.

The evolution and adaption of Russian naval power projection capabilities, particularly weapons of the *Kalibr* or *Tsirkon* type that can reportedly be fitted with conventional or nuclear warheads, are likely to pose strategic risks for NATO far beyond the end of the conflict in Ukraine. The range and versatility of these weapons provide the Russian Navy with the capability to project power on a regional basis and enhance littoral operations to defend Russian sea lines of communications on a different scale than in previous generations (Henrotin, 2011). The Russian Navy's general-purpose forces now reflect a more limited and defensive, but conversely better suited mission set for addressing the security situation in European waters. The introduction of smaller multi-purpose, but relatively well-armed frigates and corvettes is indicative of a shift away from traditional Soviet naval missions on the interdiction of NATO carrier groups in the Atlantic, towards one of projecting power at the regional level. The experience of the intervention in Syria in 2015 and the sea-based strikes against Ukraine since 2022 have demonstrated the strategic potential of such ships, and the weapons they carry, as their mere presence in the Baltic Sea or off the coast of Norway alters NATO's calculus. Since the 2010s, Russia has gradually moved away from building heavy platforms, such as cruisers, and has invested instead in smaller versatile frigates and corvettes which speaks to the smaller ambitions and scope envisioned for the navy. The loss of the Black Sea Fleet flagship *Moskva* in 2022 and the announcement of the decommissioning of the aircraft carrier *Kuznetsov* further precipitated the shift towards a more limited mission set for the Russian Navy's surface fleet. Also relevant is the deployment of coastal defence cruise missile batteries in both the Kaliningrad Oblast and in the Arctic. Together with air forces, air defences, and surface combatants, these weapons form layered defensive systems to protect Russian territory and influence NATO's strategic risk calculus.

Russian naval strategy utilises geography to its advantage in the Baltic Sea. As opposed to larger stages such as the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom Gap or the Atlantic Ocean that offer both lateral and vertical depth, Russian forces can easily detect, track, and target NATO forces due to the constrained spaces of the Baltic Sea. Russia's conventional forces stationed along the littoral of the Baltic Sea and the Kola Peninsula are equipped and positioned to project such power against NATO's sea lines of communications. The emphasis is on overlapping intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets, backed by hard power, to increase situational awareness and, if necessary, conduct sea denial operations (Pic, 2025). The layering of sensors and weapon systems, such as coastal defence batteries and a suite of land attack weapon systems, in the Kaliningrad Oblast and the western Russian Arctic, is consistent with an anti-access and area denial strategy (Tangredi, 2013). Conversely, Russian forces in Kaliningrad are well within range of NATO artillery and aircraft. Ironically, despite the cost of heightened tension in the Baltic region, this increased posturing might have the benefit of balancing power and generating enough deterrence effect to prevent escalation.

To reiterate, a confrontation with Russia in the maritime domain in the Baltic and Arctic seas is already happening. The nature and the character of this confrontation are, however, significantly different than those faced by Ukraine or by NATO during previous eras. For Russia, the nature of this confrontation in the Baltic region is primarily about deterring aggression from the United States through NATO, not necessarily territorial gain (Gloe et al., 2025). As such, Russia has adapted its means to suit its strategic goals in the Baltics and the Arctic, while avoiding a direct military confrontation with NATO. Russia does not seek an absolute dominating position in the Baltics, but rather to deploy sufficient naval forces (complemented by ground and air forces) to mitigate a perceived negative correlation of forces, and to achieve a regional deterrence effect on a perceived superior adversary. Such naval strategy is not new. However, the focus on targeting non-military assets and exploiting civilian and/or structural risks and vulnerabilities in the maritime space is an important distinction. Increasing geopolitical competition, access to natural resources, and increasing dependence on critical underwater and maritime infrastructure are the likeliest long-term risk security challenges by Russian actions and policies (Swistek and Paul, 2023). Moreover, the possibility of targeting these vulnerabilities lays

the foundation for perpetuating the confrontation with NATO without escalating beyond the threshold of armed conflict.

Deliberate or not, the targeting of civilian critical infrastructure, civilian ships, and aircraft, is an evolution of the character of modern war that comes with many implications from the strategic down to the tactical levels. Paraphrasing Russian Chief of General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, modern war is not limited to times of armed conflict but begins before the outbreak of combat using non-traditional and non-military means (Jones, 2021). The use of non-military means, such as research vessels and oil tankers, or the targeting of civilian infrastructure by military means to achieve strategic effect, is consistent with Russian new generation warfare thinking, as well as its concept of strategic deterrence (Kofman et al., 2020). In recent years, activities like damaging underwater internet and power cables in the Baltic Sea by Russia-linked ships have had disproportionately important consequences in relation to their cost. Other behaviours, such as suspicions of mapping the sea floor, identifying nodes of underwater critical infrastructure and submarine cables, and enabling or facilitating the damaging of underwater cable by vessels associated with the Russian Main Directorate for Deep Sea Research, are very concerning. This type of activity would be consistent with strategic-level reconnaissance activities with much more obscure objectives. Meanwhile, these incidents and activities highlight both future risks, but also result in current impacts on communications, maritime and air safety, economic trade, power generation and supply, along with environmental costs, to name but a few. This imposes not only immediate costs, but a cascading effect of consequences on the civilian systems and population. Taken holistically, these activities by Russia point to a vastly different conceptualisation of the character of modern war than what is understood in Western states.

## Discussion

This paper discussed the relationship between the influence of geography on Russian strategic threat perception, and how it factors into the evolution of naval strategy in the Baltic Sea and Western Russian Arctic regions. It argued that both factors may contribute to a perpetuation of confrontation between Russia and NATO long after an end of the war in Ukraine.

For Russia, unimpeded access to sea lines of communications in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic are and will remain both vital internal and external strategic interests that need to be defended. Despite its desire to pivot to Asia, Russia remains dependent on maritime access in the Baltic, Arctic, and Black seas for economic reasons. Changing this dependency requires time and significant resources to achieve. Again, the risk is not primarily one of invasion or of aggression against NATO in terms of territorial conquest. Instead, it should be seen within the wider context of great power competition between the US, the EU, Russia, and China in which global maritime trade is a key pillar. With both Nord Stream pipelines out of action and a significant reduction of hydrocarbon flows going to European markets, Russia has had to refocus its shipping method on oil tankers and shift its markets. Facing the risk of economic strangulation because of precarious access to sea lines of communications in the Baltic and western Arctic – and one may relevantly add the Black Sea in the current circumstances – Russia is following a preventative strategy in the face of what it perceives as gradual containment by the United States and NATO. This translates into the increasingly adversarial behaviour observed in the Baltic Sea. In terms of time and space, the development of alternative trade routes is slow and insufficient to sustain economic activity and thus, Russia considers it necessary to take military action to protect its maritime shipping. At the risk of falling into a deterministic trap, this means that Russian shipping and Russian naval forces will continue to transit through European waters. Russia's response to European policing actions against its shipping, either because of dangerous behaviour or of sanctions, demonstrates how important it considers the maritime domain.

The challenging aspect of this confrontation between NATO and Russia is its multi-dimensional character that exceeds a purely military aspect. While NATO's policy since 2013 has focused on deterring Russian land aggression against member states, Russian activities since 2023 point to an increasing role of the maritime (and air) domain in terms of its role in non-nuclear deterrence while limiting escalation toward an armed conflict. Whether in response to NATO's own deterrence efforts or as an evolution of Russian military doctrine, Russia's shift towards non-nuclear deterrence will shape its approach to maritime security for the foreseeable future. Russia's behaviour in the maritime domain cannot be downplayed because it is already affecting NATO and European security on multiple levels.

Beyond the immediacy of risks associated with Russia's shadow fleet, escort operations, and underwater reconnaissance, longer-term shifts in posture may affect both the state of deterrence against the non-nuclear states in the Baltic region and raise questions regarding the threshold for the use of conventional force. The proliferation of long-range precision weapons in the Russian inventory might alter the regional power dynamics and not simply for countries adjacent to Russian territory (Minic, 2025). This also includes Denmark and Norway, given geography and those countries' ability to blockade the Baltic Sea or interdict Russian maritime shipping to strangle Russian sea lines of communication. The growing persistent conventional threat with limited yield, such as that posed by *Kalibr* weapons, could be used in a surgical manner either pre-emptively as a warning, or as a tit-for-tat, such as punishment to having provided advanced long-range weapons to Ukraine and then used for deep strikes within Russia. In any case the objective is to deter a behaviour that Russia perceives to threaten its security, but without risking an escalation of force (Schmitt and Tumchewics, 2025; Kofman et al., 2020). Russia's intentions are already being demonstrated through a combination of increased aggressive actions to protect shadow fleet tankers, increased persistent presence of Russian navy assets in the Baltic and North seas, and publicised firings of advanced deterrence weapons.

While these notions are not new, they translate into possibly risky strategic policy decisions for NATO and its individual member states. The new reality is that despite setbacks in its war against Ukraine, Russia remains a credible and capable actor with the ability to seriously influence European security. In the maritime domain, its fleet's composition and disposition, although much more limited in terms of symbolism, is conversely much better suited to effect strategic deterrence and protect Russian interests in the current security context in Europe (Mommensen, 2016). The factors of proximity and geography, which combined with Russia's naval and hybrid maritime capabilities, are certain to contribute to a confrontation in the maritime domain that will endure far beyond the current context in Ukraine.

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