

NATO'S RETURN TO THE NORTH ATLANTIC
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DEFENSE OF NORTHERN EUROPE

Stephen J. Flanagan



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- In a period of renewed great power competition, the United States and other NATO allies are once again giving attention to the maritime dimension of deterrence and defense in the North Atlantic and Northern Europe.
- Growing Russian assertiveness and the deployment of a range of new maritime surface and subsurface systems have increased the threat to maritime lines of communication across the Atlantic, which are a central area of NATO's responsibility and essential for North American reinforcement of forces deployed in Europe in the event of a major crisis.
- The US and NATO responses include an increased naval operational tempo, expanded maritime exercises, the pre-positioning of additional equipment, and the re-establishment of the US 2nd Fleet and the NATO Joint Forces Command, Norfolk, both with missions to defend the North Atlantic.
- These developments need to be further integrated into NATO and national plans for defense of Northern Europe and the Arctic, and tested through exercises and training. There may be opportunities to improve this integration in the context of Nordic/Baltic cooperation and the bilateral and trilateral defense cooperation that Finland and Sweden are pursuing with the United States.



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INTRODUCTION

The 2016 National Security Strategy of the United States and the 2017 National Defense Strategy identified the emergence of long-term, strategic competition with China and Russia as the central challenge to US prosperity and security. Moreover, in the wake of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, efforts to destabilize Eastern Ukraine, and other acts of aggression, members of the NATO alliance have agreed that a partnership with Moscow will remain elusive, and have placed renewed emphasis on deterrence and collective defense, while remaining open to political dialogue with Russia.

This paper reviews enduring US strategic interests in the North Atlantic and Northern Europe, and examines the evolution and likely future direction of US defense policy toward the wider region to advance those interests, with a focus on the maritime dimension. It offers an assessment of the key security challenges to those interests and explores how the increased US military presence and operations are designed to address them. It goes on to discuss how US defense cooperation with other NATO allies and deepening partnerships with Finland and Sweden contribute to this, and the scope for further defense cooperation in the maritime domain.

US STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC AND NORTHERN EUROPE

The strategic interests of the United States in the northern region include maintaining freedom of navigation and unfettered access to the North Atlantic Ocean as a lifeline between North America and its allies and partners throughout Europe. This is vital in view of the enormous two-way trade and investment ties, many common regional and global interests, as well as collective defense commitments to NATO members and deepening security partnerships with Finland and Sweden. As an Arctic nation, the United States has broad and fundamental interests in the region that have been reaffirmed in a succession of national strategy documents issued by the last three administrations.

Only a few years ago, the North Atlantic and Northern Europe did not figure so prominently in Washington's strategic "watch list" of potential trouble spots. US foreign and security policy sought to keep Northern Europe a secure and supportive environment for advancing mutual interests with the eight Nordic and Baltic countries, while exploring the scope for cooperation with Russia there and in the Arctic. The Trump administration's strategy documents reaffirm those interests. In the face of the deterioration of the regional security environment, the administration, with bipartisan political support, has continued and expanded efforts begun in 2014 to bolster the defense of Europe. These include new military deployments, pre-positioned equipment, and increased exercises and training, all supported by the substantial increases in resources under the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI).

RUSSIA'S GROWING NAVAL STRIKE CAPABILITIES

The major challenges to maritime security in the North Atlantic and Northern Europe relate to growing Russian assertiveness and the deployment of new, high-end maritime surface and subsurface systems that have increased the threat to maritime lines of communication across the Atlantic, which are a central area of NATO's responsibility and would be essential for North American reinforcement of forces deployed in Europe in the event of a major crisis. Russian submarine operations also pose new risks for the operation of US, UK, and French strategic deterrent forces.

In July 2017, President Vladimir Putin approved a new Russian naval doctrine, which aims to counter the ambitions of the "United States and its allies to dominate the high seas, including the Arctic, and to press for overwhelming superiority of their naval forces". The doctrine calls for strengthening the navy's abilities to defend Russia's maritime approaches and littoral waters. It also calls for improving the Navy's capabilities to strike targets at long-range with conventional and nuclear weapons and project power in strategically important regions of the world with an expanded

surface and submarine forces. The doctrine emphasizes the role that the Navy can play in deterrence, particularly against US conventional global strike capabilities, by being able to sustain deployments at distances and threaten high-value targets.¹

Russia's capacity to realize these goals remains a subject of considerable debate and uncertainty among Western military experts. There have been major delays in ship construction due to management, design, and supply chain problems, and the shipbuilding industry has been further encumbered by international sanctions. Maintenance remains a major problem in sustaining naval operations. There is broad agreement, however, that Russia is modernizing all of its aging fleets at a steady pace, including through the deployment of new classes of surface vessels, conventional and nuclear attack submarines, and long-range, precision-strike Kalibr missiles capable of delivering conventional and nuclear weapons.² President Putin stated at the July 29, 2018 Navy Day in St. Petersburg that the fleet will receive 26 new ships in 2018, including six modern warships, four of which will be armed with Kalibr.³

The Northern Fleet remains Russia's most capable naval force, including the only operational aircraft carrier and nuclear-powered heavy cruiser. The various surface combatants and submarines deploy from the Kola Peninsula on missions around the world. Its priority missions are to provide strategic deterrence with its ballistic missile submarine fleet, and to defend the maritime approaches to northwest Russia, particularly the Kola "bastion".

The Baltic Fleet is focused on protecting sea lines of communication between Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg, and on countering NATO forces in the region. Russian submarine operations in the Baltic Sea remain a challenge for regional navies because the topography of the shallow, brackish waters and extensive maritime traffic complicate sonar tracking. The deployment of two Kalibr cruise missile-equipped vessels in 2016 allow the fleet to reach targets throughout Europe with long-range precision conventional and sub-strategic nuclear weapons.

The Russian Navy is not designed to match the US and combined NATO navies but, quite possibly, to limit and contest their ability to support Western defense plans and to approach Russia's periphery. The deployment of Kalibr on a number of existing surface ships and submarines, and plans for most of their replacements to also be outfitted with this capability, provides even the smallest vessels with significant offensive capability against naval and ground targets. These capabilities are integrated with layered defenses, including ground-based aviation, coastal cruise missile batteries, and mines.⁴

While its fleet is significantly smaller than the Soviet Navy during the Cold War, Russia has increased its patrols in the Baltic Sea, the North Atlantic, and the Arctic, and demonstrated a capability to sustain a naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean during operations in Syria. In early September 2018, Russia conducted one of its largest naval exercises in several decades in the eastern Mediterranean off the coast of Syria, involving over 25 ships and submarines from the Northern, Baltic, and Black Sea fleets, as well as 25 aircraft including strategic bombers, fighters, and anti-submarine warfare planes.

According to the US Chief of Naval Operations, Russian submarine activity in the North Atlantic has risen to levels that have not been seen in 25 years.⁵ NATO commanders also report that Russian vessels have increased their jamming of Western naval vessels underway, as well as submarine activity around vital undersea cables in the North Atlantic that provide commercial and military communications and internet links, suggesting that the Russians are collecting intelligence that would allow them to disrupt these links in a crisis.⁶

THE US AND NATO RESPONSE

The increased US military posture in the northern region since 2014 is designed to maintain the credibility

1 Dmitry Gorenburg, 'Russia's New and Unrealistic Naval Doctrine', War on the Rocks, July 26, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/russias-new-and-unrealistic-naval-doctrine/>. Last accessed 10 September, 2018.

2 U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, Russia Military Power, 2017, pp. 66-70, <http://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Russia%20Military%20Power%20Report%202017.pdf?ver=2017-06-28-144235-937>. Last accessed 1 September, 2018.

3 Jason Lemon, 'Russia Rapidly Expanding Navy With 26 New Ships by End of 2018, Putin Says', Newsweek, July 29, 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-rapidly-expanding-navy-26-new-ships-end-2018-putin-says-1047261>. Last accessed 18 September, 2018.

4 Michael Kofman and Jeffrey Edmonds, 'Why the Russian Navy Is a More Capable Adversary Than It Appears', *The National Interest*, August 22, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-the-russian-navy-more-capable-adversary-it-appears-22009>. Last accessed 15 September, 2018.

5 Geoff Ziezulewicz, 'Navy's top officer warns of increased Russian and Chinese activity in the Atlantic Ocean', *Navy Times*, August 10, 2018, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2018/08/10/navys-top-officer-warns-of-increased-russian-and-chinese-activity-in-the-atlantic-ocean>. Last accessed 15 September, 2018.

6 Michael Birnbaum, 'Russian submarines are prowling around vital undersea cables. It's making NATO nervous', *The Washington Post*, December 22, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russian-submarines-are-prowling-around-vital-undersea-cables-its-making-nato-nervous/2017/12/22/d4c1f3da-e5d0-11e7-927a-e72eac1e73b6_story.html?utm_term=.b9a10b965cb1. Last accessed 10 September, 2018.

of US collective defense commitments to NATO members and to bolster the security of partners. The significant growth in resources for the European Deterrence Initiative supports deterrence of Russian aggression, improves the readiness of US forces in Europe, and enhances interoperability with allied and partner forces. Following the invasion of Ukraine, the Obama administration sought \$985 million in Fiscal Year (FY) 2015, and these resources have risen steadily since with bipartisan support in the US Congress, growing to \$3.7 billion in FY 2017 and \$6.5 billion in FY 2019. These funds have supported the increased rotational presence of US air, ground, and maritime forces throughout Europe, improved infrastructure to allow for greater responsiveness across Europe, enhanced the pre-positioning of equipment, and intensified efforts to improve the capacity of newer NATO members and partners to join US forces in combined operations.

In terms of naval forces, the US has deployed four Aegis-Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD)-capable ships in Rota, Spain, which have played an important role in supporting US and NATO reassurance activities in the Baltic and Black Seas. The US has also increased its maritime operation tempo in the waters around Europe. The character of NATO and US-sponsored multilateral exercises, including the annual BALTOPS maritime-focused exercise in the Baltic Sea, has also shifted from simply developing interoperability to preparing allied and partner navies for potential high-end maritime conflict.

At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO leaders highlighted their concerns about the evolving maritime challenges in the Baltic and Black Sea regions, the North Atlantic, and the Mediterranean in light of Russia's strengthened military posture, increase in its military activities, and deployment of new high-end capabilities. The leaders declared their commitment to being prepared to deter and defend against threats in the North Atlantic, including against sea lines of communication and maritime approaches to NATO territory, and agreed to take further steps to strengthen the allied maritime posture and comprehensive situational awareness. Following meetings in February and June 2018, NATO Defense Ministers finalized plans to establish the Joint Forces Command (JFC), Norfolk to oversee protection of shipping lanes in the North Atlantic and anti-submarine warfare activities. The Allied Maritime Command in Northwood, UK will continue to have responsibility for day-to-day NATO maritime operations. In a related decision, ministers approved

plans to establish the Joint Support and Enabling Command (JSEC) in Ulm, Germany as a strategic hub responsible for organizing and protecting movements of personnel and equipment within the Supreme Allied Commander Europe's area of responsibility, from Greenland to Africa, European territory, and the surrounding seas.

With respect to the Baltic Sea region, allied leaders noted the value of the deepening partnerships with Finland and Sweden on a broad range of issues, and the contributions of both governments to NATO-led operations. NATO committed to pursuing "regular political consultations, shared situational awareness, and joint exercises, in order to address these common challenges in a timely and effective manner".⁷ A number of these commitments are beginning to be realized through more concrete action and operations, including the Swedish government's invitation to seven NATO countries to participate in its Aurora 17 military exercise, with the goal of testing the Host Nation Support treaty it signed with NATO in 2016, and the engagement of Finnish and Swedish armed forces in NATO's Trident Juncture 18 exercise.

In August 2018, the US Navy formally reactivated the 2nd Fleet in Norfolk, Virginia under its Fleet Forces Command with assigned ships, aircraft, and Marine landing forces for potential operations along the East Coast and in the North Atlantic. In making this move, the Navy's leadership noted that increased Russian submarine patrols and other activities are challenging US sea control and power projection, such that the United States now needs to maintain a large-scale ocean maneuver warfare unit in the Atlantic region.⁸ The 2nd Fleet's area of responsibility extends from the East Coast of the United States across the North Atlantic to the Arctic and the Barents Sea. Efforts are underway to rebuild the command into an operational warfighting organization, and it will achieve full operational capability in a phased approach. About the same time, the British government announced plans to designate the North Atlantic as a new Joint Area of Operations and to undertake more regular deployments of Royal Navy ships and Air Force aircraft to the region.

At the Brussels Summit in July 2018, Allied leaders confirmed plans to establish Joint Forces Command,

7 NATO, 'Warsaw Summit Communiqué', Warsaw 8–9 July 2016, Press Release (2016) 100, paras 23, 48, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm. Last accessed 24 August, 2018.

8 Wesley Morgan, 'Navy re-establishes Atlantic fleet to check Russia', *Politico*, August 24, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/08/24/navy-atlantic-fleet-russia-751660>. Last accessed 15 September, 2018.

Norfolk. The US 2nd Fleet will serve as the framework command, which would transform into NATO command in the event of a conflict.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NORTHERN EUROPE AND FINLAND

Further work will be required to integrate these new initiatives in North Atlantic defense into NATO and national plans for defense of the Baltic and High North regions, which form the eastern end of the North Atlantic maritime security zone. As the United States and other governments move to ensure their capacity to execute reinforcement of Europe from North America in a more contested maritime environment, allied and partner governments on the receiving end will need to continue to make efforts to strengthen their ability to support the reception, staging, onward movement, and integration of forces and equipment.

Developing the connectivity between NATO's JFC, Norfolk and JSEC, Ulm will be an important task for allied governments. However, it would also be valuable for Finland and Sweden, as key partner governments seeking to improve their capabilities to receive and provide security assistance, to also be involved in this process.

The governments of Finland and Sweden have been taking important steps to improve their operational defense cooperation with NATO countries, including through participation in exercises such as BALTOPS and Trident Juncture. Trident Juncture 18, the largest NATO exercise since 2015, with Norway and Iceland serving as host nations, will comprise a Live Exercise and a separate Computer-Assisted Command Post Exercise that will train command and control procedures for NATO Response Force 2019 – a highly capable joint multinational force able to react in a very short time to the full range of security challenges from crisis management to collective defense. The exercise will take place in October and November primarily on Norwegian territory, with some limited activity in Finland and Sweden and the adjacent waters, including the Baltic Sea. The exercise will involve a collective defense (Article 5) scenario, emphasize training in Arctic terrain in freezing temperatures, and seek seamless integration of Finnish and Swedish forces. The Norwegian government sees the exercise as a stress test of its ability to receive Allied reinforcements efficiently, and of

its “total defense” concept.⁹ Finland and Sweden might consider hosting subsequent NATO training events to deepen interoperability and effective coordination of defense efforts, which would enhance their capacity to receive military assistance in the event of major aggression, and strengthen deterrence in peacetime

There may also be opportunities to advance this trans-Atlantic maritime integration in the context of NORDEFCO, the Nordic-Baltic (NB8) cooperation, and the cooperation that Finland and Sweden are pursuing with the United States under their bilateral and trilateral Statements of Intent. The trilateral SOI calls for developing practical interoperability at the policy and the military levels, and expansion of mutual situational awareness in the Baltic Sea region. Nordic and Baltic governments would do well to look at opportunities to improve burden sharing in the Baltic maritime domain. The navies of the region have deep experience of operating in this challenging maritime environment, and recent exercises have helped advance trans-Atlantic defense integration by giving the US Navy and Marine Corps, as well as other NATO maritime forces, additional experience operating in the region.

The planned expansion of the US military presence in Norway from 300 to 700 personnel plus the pre-positioning of additional equipment stocks also create opportunities to deepen this cooperation in defense of the Barents and the land areas of the Arctic. Finland could explore options to support US and NATO amphibious operations in the North Cape and aerial surveillance of the northern maritime domain, as well as expanded maritime domain awareness in the Baltic Sea. Such initiatives would allow the two countries to reach a new level of strategic interoperability and to cooperate more effectively in the event of a possible crisis in the Baltic Sea or Arctic regions.

⁹ The exercise will involve 40,000 participants, 130 aircraft and 70 vessels from more than 30 nations. NATO Press Office, 'Press briefing on Exercise Trident Juncture 2018 with Admiral James G. Foggo III, and Vice Admiral Ketil Olsen', June 11, 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_155888.htm. Last accessed 15 September, 2018.