

KRISTIAN ÅTLAND, PhD, Senior Research Fellow, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), Strategic Analysis and Joint Systems Division, P.O. Box 25, 2027 Kjeller, Norway. *Email:* kristian.atland@ffi.no
IHOR KABANENKO, Admiral (ret.), PhD, Centre for Russian Studies, Solomyanska str. 3-B, Kyiv 03110, Ukraine. *Email:* igor.kabanenko@uarpa.com

Russia and its Western Neighbours: A Comparative Study of the Security Situation in the Black, Baltic and Barents Sea Regions

KRISTIAN ÅTLAND & IHOR KABANENKO

Abstract

Since Russia's military intervention in Ukraine in 2014, the security situation of Europe's eastern 'frontline states' has undergone significant changes. In and around the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea and the Barents Sea, the scope and scale of military activity has grown, as has the frequency of Russian–Western military encounters. Despite the many similarities between the three regions, and despite the increased risk of negative spillover from one region to another, there are also noteworthy regional differences. As of today, the security challenges appear to be more severe and pressing in the southern and central part of the 'frontline' than in the northern.

THE BLACK SEA, THE BALTIC SEA AND THE BARENTS SEA ARE IMPORTANT TRAINING, patrol and transit areas for the surface and subsurface forces of the Russian Navy. The airspace above these maritime areas and the western parts of Russia's vast land territory also play an important role in Russian security policy and defence planning. The ongoing acquisition and deployment of new weapon systems, with increased range, accuracy and destructive power, have obvious implications for the security situation of Russia's western neighbours. The same goes for the post-2014 upswing in Russia's military training and exercise activity—on land, at sea and in the air.

These developments, in combination with the general deterioration of Russia's relationship with the West, raise new security concerns for Russia's neighbours in northeast, east-central and southeast Europe. In all of Europe's eastern border regions, there is evidence of a growing military competition between Russia and NATO. Russia's western neighbours, from the Arctic to the Black Sea, seem to have many concerns in common, and they may learn from each other's experiences. But, as this article will argue, there are also significant differences between the security situation in the northeastern, central-eastern and southeastern parts of Europe.

In this article, we will compare central features of the security situation in and around the Black, Baltic and Barents seas. We will place the recent developments in a historical perspective and shed light on the potential for a further escalation of the security situation in the three regions. By exploring and comparing security-related aspects of Russia's post-2014 interaction with its western neighbours, and by discussing various conflict scenarios for the three regions, we aim to advance our overall understanding of the security challenges that have emerged in Europe in the aftermath of Russia's 2014 intervention in Ukraine.

The article is organised in five sections. The first section gives a brief overview of some of the key characteristics of the three regions and introduces the approach, methodology and source material used in the analysis. In the subsequent three sections, we contextualise and discuss the security situation in, respectively, the Black, Baltic and Barents Sea regions. The region-by-region analysis, which also includes cross-regional comparisons, is based on three research questions, specified in the first section. The fifth and final section of the article summarises and evaluates the main findings of the study and offers some concluding remarks.

Research questions, methodology and sources

As observed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, 'Most threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones' (Buzan & Wæver 1998, p. 4). Partly for this reason, security interdependence is often patterned into regionally based 'clusters', or 'security complexes'. Given the importance of geography and the relevance of the geopolitical dimension in each of the three regions discussed in this article, a simple map of Europe (see Figure 1) can be a good starting point for a comparative study of regional-level security dynamics in the Black, Baltic and Barents Sea regions. The three regions constitute important 'zones of contact' between what Buzan and Wæver (1998, p. xxvi) once described as 'the European regional security complex' and 'the post-Soviet regional security complex', but with Ukraine and Georgia identifying as parts of the former rather than the latter.

As theatres of naval operations, the three maritime spaces shown in Figure 1 are distinguished by a number of factors, such as latitude, underwater topography, the number of coastal states and the size of their economic zones. In terms of water depths, the Baltic Sea is by far the shallowest, with an average depth of only 55 metres. The Barents Sea is deeper (230 metres on average), but not nearly as deep as the Black Sea (1,253 metres on average and 2,212 metres at the deepest). Whereas the Barents Sea is a marginal sea of the Arctic Ocean, easily accessible from the west through the 400-kilometre gap between North Cape and Bear Island south of Svalbard, the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea are semi-enclosed inland seas, accessible only through narrow straits and rivers.

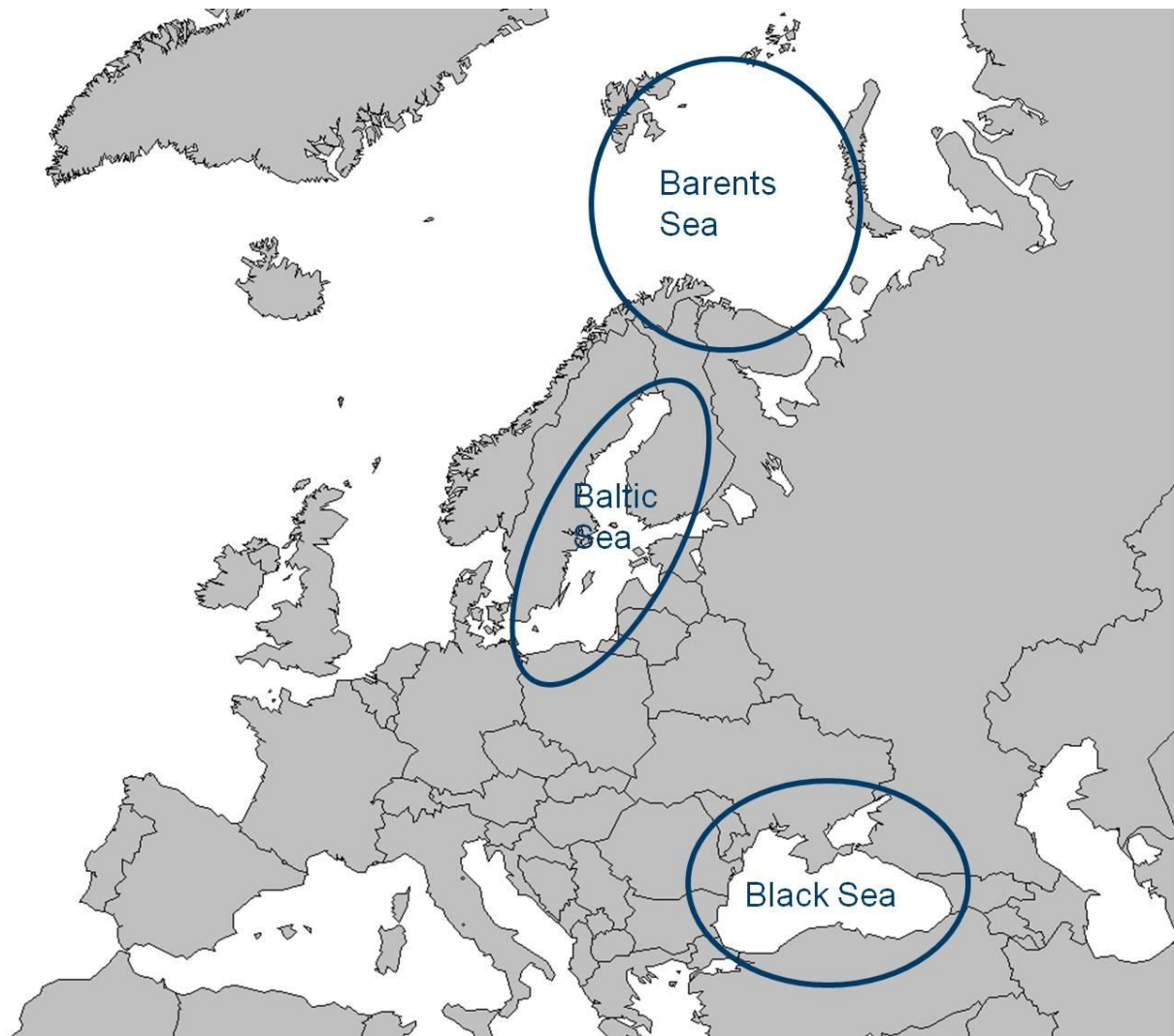


Figure 1: Europe's eastern maritime border regions (map prepared by the authors).

The Black Sea is surrounded by six coastal states—Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia and Turkey. Three of them—Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey—are members of NATO. Two—Ukraine and Georgia—aspire to become NATO members. Russia's *de facto* expansion of its exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in this region after the Russian–Georgian war in 2008, the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the building of the Kerch Strait Bridge in 2015–2018 have complicated the picture. Russia's enforcement of coastal state jurisdiction in the northwestern, northeastern and eastern parts of the Black Sea, as well as in the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov, is creating new security challenges for the whole region. In the Baltic Sea, the maritime areas under Russian jurisdiction are relatively small. The Baltic Sea is surrounded by no less than nine coastal states—Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, Germany, Poland and Denmark. Six of them are NATO members and all but Russia are EU members. By the Barents Sea, there are only two coastal states—Norway and Russia—and their economic zones are large and more or less equal in size.

The security challenges that have emerged, or deepened, in the eastern border regions of Europe since 2014 are obviously linked to the Russian–Ukrainian conflicts over Crimea and Donbas and the subsequent deterioration of Russia’s relationship with the West, NATO and the EU. At the same time, it can be argued that many of the current tensions are rooted in historical, cultural and other factors that go further back in time. As noted by Buzan and Wæver, ‘The ability of a securitising actor to securitise a neighbouring country in military terms depends on the length and ferocity of historical enmity, the balance of material capabilities, and various signs of hostility (rhetorical as well as behavioural)’ (Buzan & Wæver 1998, p. 86). Thus, the application of a more ‘longitudinal approach’ (Snetkov 2014, p. 3) may add to our understanding of the context within which the ‘securitisation’ takes place and serve as a basis for reflections on how Russia’s interaction with its western neighbours may evolve in the years ahead. Cross-region comparisons may also provide valuable insights into these issues.

The research design chosen for this study is inspired by the method of ‘structured, focused comparison’, as outlined by Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett (2004, pp. 67–72). The comparative analysis below is focused in the sense that it deals only with certain aspects of Russian–Western interaction (mainly related to the field of security), and in a small number of regions (three). The analysis is structured in that it is based on a limited number of research questions that reflect the overall research objective described above. Our data collection and case analysis have been guided by three main questions. First, which historical and geopolitical factors may explain the current nature of interstate relationships in the Black, Baltic and Barents Sea regions? Second, what characterises the current pattern of military activity in the three regions? Third, how do Russia’s neighbours view the potential for a further escalation of the security situation in the three regions?

With these three questions in mind, and based on a wide range of Russian, Ukrainian and Western sources (research publications, expert analyses, statements by political and military leaders, and news media reports), the article will explore the past, present and future of Black Sea, Baltic and Barents Sea security. Since the immediate effects of Russia’s intervention in Ukraine have been most strongly felt in the southern part of NATO’s eastern flank, we will start with the Black Sea region and work our way towards the Barents Sea.

The Black Sea region

In order to get a deeper sense of the factors that have shaped current interstate relationships and rivalries in the Black Sea region, it is necessary to look at the history and geopolitical realities of the region. Since ancient times, this region has been a crossroads for different ethnic groups, civilisations, empires and nation states. At times, the

Black Sea has served as a natural barrier or buffer zone, hampering the region's civilisational development along the north–south axis. At other times, cooperative cross-sea relationships have been formed, to the benefit of those who inhabit the Black Sea coastal regions and hinterlands.

History and geopolitics

When Islamic civilisation, covering the Black Sea on three sides, expanded towards the northern shores of the Black Sea, it encountered growing resistance by the Russian Empire (Kovalevs'ka 2016). From the mid-seventeenth century, the Russian and Ottoman empires entered a phase of rivalry and confrontation, during which tsarist Russia pursued the goal of eliminating the Ottoman Empire. The Black Sea territories of Crimea, Bessarabia, Caucasus and the adjacent parts of the Balkans were key areas in Russia's effort to establish itself as an imperial power as well as to ensure unimpeded passage for Russian ships and vessels through the Black Sea straits: Bosphorus and the Dardanelles.

Since then, the geostrategic goal of Russia has largely been to dominate the maritime spaces of the region (the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov) and to strive for 'Slavic (Orthodox) unity' on the southern frontier. Supported by South Slavic national liberation movements, Russia pursued its own imperial interests in the region, aimed at annexing new territories. Those living in the annexed lands, particularly indigenous groups, were often subjected to cruel treatment or forced deportation. The ideological basis of Russia's Black Sea expansionism in previous times, focusing on the need to protect Slavic Orthodox Christians from Ottoman oppression, shows many similarities with the ideological basis of Russia's current policy in the region. For instance, the 'protection of Russian speakers' was an important part of the ideological basis for Russia's military interventions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 (Karagiannis 2014, p. 415).

For centuries, the Black Sea region was a theatre of military operations. Bloody Russo–Turkish wars were fought on land and at sea. There were no less than ten such wars. During the Russo–Turkish War of 1768–1774, Russia won a number of Crimean territories, and after the signing of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774, it took the opportunity to engage in maritime trade and create naval forces in the Black Sea. In 1783, the Crimean Khanate was annexed by the Russian Empire, as were the Ukrainian lands between the Southern Bug and the Dniester, in 1791. In the wars of the first half of the nineteenth century, Russia advanced to Bessarabia, Moldavia and Wallachia. Russia's defeat in the Crimean War of 1853–1856 suspended and limited Russian expansion in the region for 15 years. Under the terms of the 1856 Paris Peace Treaty, Russia was deprived of its right to maintain a fleet on the Black Sea, and the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia were returned to the Ottoman Empire.

Following the Russo–Turkish war of 1877–1878, Russian soldiers and power returned to the southern part of Bessarabia. The Karsk region, which was inhabited by Armenians and Georgians, as well as the strategically important port city of Batumi, were annexed. A series of victories over the Turkish army in January 1878 allowed Russian troops to reach the outskirts of Constantinople. Only British naval deployments in the Sea of Marmara and political and diplomatic efforts by Britain and Austria–Hungary forced the Russian tsarist government to abandon further offensive actions.

Black Sea rivalries came to the fore during World War I and World War II, as well as in the postwar period of the twentieth century. However, with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, Russia’s focus shifted from the ‘North–South’ axis to the ‘East–West’ axis. Friendly relations were developed between the newly formed Republic of Turkey and Bolshevik Russia. The Montreux Convention, signed in 1936, ensured the free passage of warships through the Turkish-controlled straits of Bosphorus and the Dardanelles for Black Sea states not at war with Turkey, and simultaneously introduced restrictions on the naval presence of non-Black Sea powers in the region. The horizontal ‘hard power’ vector became dominant in the USSR after World War II, when the Kremlin took control over most of the Black Sea countries as well as the Balkans and continued on to North Africa and the Middle East. Turkey’s entry to NATO in 1952 led to major adjustments in Soviet naval strategy, which from the 1970s was based on the formula ‘keep Turkey below the 43rd parallel and the US beyond the 23rd meridian’ (Kabanenko 2019, p. 38).

At the end of the Soviet era, Russia lost influence over the Black Sea territories occupied or annexed during the bloody wars of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as former Soviet republics and satellites became independent states. When Romania and Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004, NATO’s role in the region grew, but the Allied footprint in the region remained modest, particularly in the early 2000s (Toucas 2017a). Some Russian naval bases, including Sevastopol in Crimea, continued to function, but their status was not clear. The Russian–Ukrainian Black Sea Fleet agreement, signed in May 1997, gave Russia a 20-year lease on the naval base at Sevastopol. In 2010, this agreement was prolonged to 2042 by the so-called Kharkiv Agreement (‘Agreement between Ukraine and Russia on the Black Sea Fleet in Ukraine’) signed by presidents Viktor Yanukovych and Dmitrii Medvedev (Götz 2015, p. 4).

Throughout its 236-year history, the Russian Black Sea Fleet has been a key instrument in Russia’s southwestern policy. The Fleet’s capabilities have changed over the years, but it has been, and remains, offensively oriented. During the Cold War, it was seen not only as a regional naval force, but also as a ‘blue water’ power

projection instrument. The Sevastopol-based Russian Black Sea fleet, including its naval infantry units, played a crucial role in the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Ostapenko 2017).

As noted by Tsygankov (2014, pp. 42–43), Russian geopolitical thinkers have often emphasised the need for territorial expansion in this and other regions, based on real or imagined threats to ‘Orthodoxy’, ‘Slavic Unity’ or ‘Russian speakers’. By comparison, Ukrainian thinkers, such as Stepan Rudnytsky (1877–1936) and Yurii Lypa (1900–1944), focused on state-building opportunities within the country’s national territories (Kovalevs’ka 2016, p. 28). Interesting in this regard is the concept of peaceful coexistence between Hetman-ruled Ukraine and Turkey, which appeared in the seventeenth century. This facilitated the development of Ukrainian statehood and national identity in a certain historical period, while simultaneously allowing for resistance against Russian expansion. A similar approach was developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in connection with the desire to liberate the Ukrainian state from Russia. The need for a Ukrainian partnership with Turks and Crimean Tatars was seen as an integral part of the latter strategy, and as appropriate to Ukraine’s interests (Kovalevs’ka 2016, p. 28).

Since 2014, past efforts to bring all of the Black Sea states together in stability-enhancing cooperation arrangements, economic as well as security-related, seem to have stalled. The 12-nation Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), which was established in 1992 and acquired ‘organisation’ status in 1999 (Pavliuk 2004, p. 8), still exists but has largely failed to produce any viable results. Diverse as they are, the Black Sea states do not seem to share a joint political vision, and they have not been particularly successful in their efforts to establish cooperative structures aimed at addressing regional, including maritime, security problems (Toucas 2017a).

Recent military developments

Russia has in recent years created a so-called ‘anti-access/area denial’ (A2/AD) zone, which extends well into the ocean and airspace off the coast of Crimea (Toucas 2017a, 2017b). An important feature of such zones is the combination of naval missile capabilities and offensive and defensive combat support systems based on land and in the coastal zone (fixed and mobile coastal missile complexes, ground-based aircraft and anti-aircraft missile systems, and electronic warfare assets). Such zones do not allow foreign vessels to enter the theatre without risking destruction by long-range naval or coastal defence missile systems (Kurdarcan & Kayaoğlu 2017). The Chief of the Russian General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, recently described the establishment of a Russian A2/AD

zone in the Black Sea as a necessary move to ensure an appropriate ‘balance of forces’ in the Black Sea region. He added that Turkey could no longer be called the ‘master’ (*khozyain*) of the region.¹

The Russian Black Sea Fleet’s offensive capabilities have more than doubled since 2014. The fleet is being replenished with new surface ships and submarines. The new vessels include *Krivak* V-class frigates, improved *Kilo*-class submarines and *Buyan*-class corvettes. In the coming years, Russia plans to increase the total number of such vessels to 18. Almost all of them carry anti-ship and cruise missiles. The Fleet’s new naval strike capabilities include *Yakhont* and *Onyx* anti-ship missiles, with ranges of 250–500 kilometres, and *Kalibr* cruise missiles, with a range of up to 2,000 kilometres. New coastal defence missile systems, such as *Bastion* and *Bal*, have also been deployed and put in operation (Kabanenko 2019, pp. 45–46).

More than 60,000 Russian troops were deployed to Crimea in 2014–2017.² This is up to five times more than Russia kept in Crimea before the annexation in 2014. Russia’s naval infantry units have been strengthened and modernised, and new coastal defence units have been formed.³ The Russian Black Sea Fleet’s land component has received modern attack and transport helicopters, tube and rocket artillery, as well as several batteries of the newest short- to medium-range air defence system, *Pantsir*. Russia’s long-range air defence, strike, early warning and electronic warfare capabilities have also been significantly strengthened.⁴ Additionally, there have been reports about Russian activity at (tactical) nuclear munitions storage facilities in Sevastopol and Theodosia, and efforts to renovate Soviet-era underground shelters.⁵

¹ ‘GenShtab: Chernomorskiy flot Rossii mozhet unichtozhit’ desant protivnika eshchë v portakh’, *TASS*, 14 September 2016, available at <http://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/3619937>, accessed 11 October 2019.

² ‘Gruppirovka rossiyskikh voysk v Krymu sostavlyayet na segodnya okolo 60 tysyat’ chelovek – eksperty’, *Zerkalo Nedeli*, 3 June 2017, available at https://zn.ua/UKRAINE/gruppirovka-rossiyskih-voysk-v-krymu-na-segodnya-sostavlyayet-okolo-60-tysyach-chelovek-eksperty-250339_.html, accessed 11 October 2019.

³ ‘Morskaya pekhota v Krymu perevooruzhena novymi bronetransporterami’, *Parlamentskaya gazeta*, 20 May 2017, available at <https://www.pnp.ru/politics/morskaya-pekhota-v-krymu-perevooruzhena-novymi-bronetransportyorami.html>, accessed 11 October 2019; ‘Tri armeyskikh korpusa beregovykh voysk sozdany na SF, BF and ChF’, *TASS*, 24 May 2017, available at <http://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/4276282>, accessed 11 October 2019.

⁴ ‘V Krymu Rossiya razvernula raketnyi kompleks S-400 ‘Triumf’’, *InfoResist*, 7 October 2017, available at <https://inforesist.org/v-krymu-rossiya-razvernula-raketnyiy-kompleks-s-400-triumf/>; ‘Rossiya perebrosila v Krym aviapolk bombardirovshchikov i sovremennykh istrebiteley’, *Fakty*, 4 May 2014, available at <http://fakty.ua/181079-rossiya-perebrosila-v-krym-aviapolk-bombardirovcshikov-i-sovremennyh-istrebitelej-video>, accessed 11 October 2019.

⁵ ‘Lavrov zayavil, chto RF imeet pravo razmestit’ v Krymu yadernoe oruzhie’, *Nezavisimoe byuro novostei*, 15 December 2014, available at <http://nbnews.com.ua/ru/news/138856/>, accessed 11 October 2019.

Thus, since 2014, Russia has turned Crimea into a ‘peninsula fortress’, with formidable military capabilities. In the northwestern part of the Black Sea, off the coast of Odesa, Russia is illegally extracting Ukrainian natural resources, with an annual production rate up to two billion cubic metres of natural gas.⁶ Threatening to use military force, Russian Black Sea Fleet units (combat ships, aviation and air defence assets, as well as Special Forces) aggressively deny the Ukrainian Navy and State Border Service access to this area (Kabanenko 2019, p. 46). Similarly, in November 2018, the northeastern part of the Black Sea became the arena of a violent clash between the Russian Coast Guard and three Ukrainian naval vessels attempting to transit from Odesa to Mariupol via the Kerch Strait (Kabanenko 2018b).

Russian exercise and patrol activity in the region is high and growing. The exercises often involve amphibious landings, conducted from the sea or air (see for instance Krymova 2017). The Russian naval command also attaches great importance to the need to train and demonstrate Russia’s new naval strike capabilities. This is done by launching missiles of various types during live-fire exercises.⁷ Since the annexation of Crimea, Russia has also resumed the Cold War practice of harassing foreign civilian and military vessels operating in the Black Sea through provocative manoeuvring and demonstrations of military power.

One category of such incidents includes Russian strike aviation’s numerous provocative overflights of NATO ships. The first such incident took place in April 2014, when a Russian Su-24 tactical bomber made several low-altitude passes over a US Navy destroyer—the USS *Donald Cook* (Kabanenko 2019, p. 44). Since then, NATO ships have been exposed to several mock attacks and provocative overflights by Russian combat aircraft. In September 2014, a group of Russian Su-24s manoeuvred dangerously close to the Canadian frigate HMCS *Toronto* (Kabanenko 2019, p. 44). In June 2016, a group of NATO ships visiting Constanta (Romania) experienced a simulated attack by Russian fighters and fighter-bombers (Klimenko 2016). In February 2017, four Russian fighter jets made several low passes over the US Navy destroyer USS *Porter*, which at the time was operating in

⁶ In the summer of 2019, Deputy Foreign Minister of Ukraine, Olena Zerkal, reported to the to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague that Russia has extracted 9 billion cubic meters of gas from the Ukrainian shelf in the Black Sea since the start of the occupation of Crimea, see ‘Over 9 bcm of gas stolen from Ukraine by Russia: Zerkal in The Hague’, *UNIAN*, 11 June 2019, available at <https://www.unian.info/economics/10582614-over-9-bcm-of-gas-stolen-from-ukraine-by-russia-zerkal-in-the-hague.html>, accessed 11 October 2019.

⁷ See for instance ‘Raketnye strel'by proshli v Chernom more’, *Gazeta.ru*, 5 April 2019, available at <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/2019/04/05/12830011.shtml>, accessed 11 October 2019.

the international waters of the Black Sea. A US European Command spokesman later described the move as ‘unsafe and unprofessional’ (LaGrone 2017).

In another category of military encounters, aircraft from NATO countries have been approached or intercepted in dangerous or provocative ways by Russian combat aircraft. One of the most dangerous incidents to date, at the time of writing, took place in May 2017, when Russian fighters came within six metres of a US P-8 *Poseidon* maritime patrol aircraft (Gromenko 2017). A similar episode occurred in January 2018, when a Russian Su-27 jet performed an unsafe interception of US Navy surveillance plane at a distance of 1.5 metres (Noack 2018). Both of these incidents took place in the international airspace over the Black Sea.

A third category of incidents involves the provocative use of Russian ship-based radars and radar targeting systems, particularly in connection with blue water NATO exercises in the Black Sea.⁸ Russian forces routinely track NATO vessels during their manoeuvres in the Black Sea and keep them in sight as targets for Russian anti-ship missile systems.⁹ The use of electronic warfare systems (that is, jamming) is also a part of Russia’s current mode of operations (for details, see Kabanenko 2019, pp. 53–58).

Incidents and episodes such as the ones mentioned above can be seen as a reflection of Russia’s geopolitical ambitions and the country’s view of the Black Sea as an internal Russian ‘lake’. The behaviour of Russian vessels and aircraft has heightened the risk of a military escalation and potentially severe accidents. All of the incidents discussed here took place in or above international waters, where the freedom of navigation and other principles apply, as outlined in the 1958 Convention on the High Seas and the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS). Under international law, no state has the right to extend its sovereignty to any part of the high seas or to the airspace above it. Neither can a state ‘unreasonably’ prevent other states from exercising their rights in these spaces, including the right of unhindered navigation and overflight.

The Kerch Strait Bridge, which Russia began building in 2015, shortly after the annexation of Crimea, and Russia’s growing naval and coast guard presence in the Sea of Azov, also represent a threat to regional

⁸ ‘V rayone provedeniya ‘Si Briz-2016’ obnauzheny rossiyskie korabli-razvedchiki’, *112.ua*, 27 June 2016, available at <https://112.ua/obshchestvo/v-rayone-provedeniya-si-briz-2016-obnaruzheny-rossiyskie-korabli-razvedchiki-327694.html>, accessed 11 October 2019; ‘Za ucheniyami ‘Si Briz’ v Chernom more sledyat korabli-razvedchiki Rossii’, *Gordonua.com*, 28 July 2016, available at <http://gordonua.com/news/politics/za-ucheniyami-si-briz-2016-v-chernom-more-sledyat-korabli-razvedchiki-rossii-142932.html>, accessed 11 October 2019.

⁹ ‘Shoigu rasskazal, chto Rossiya sledaet s flotom NATO y Kryma’, *Pravda.ru*, 6 February 2017, available at <https://www.pravda.ru/news/world/06-02-2017/1324015-nato-0/>, accessed 11 October 2019.

stability. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and even more so since the opening of the road bridge across the Kerch Strait in May 2018,¹⁰ Russia has enforced a restrictive regime in the Sea of Azov, which strongly affects the traffic of merchant vessels in and out of Ukraine's Azov Sea ports of Berdyansk and Mariupol (Laurenson 2019). Numerous vessels—close to 150, according to the Ukrainian Ministry of Infrastructure¹¹—have so far been exposed to selective Russian inspections in connection with their passage through the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov. Many of them have been delayed for several days. Some vessels have even been boarded for Russian inspections in Ukrainian littoral waters. The new Russian regulations and enforcement measures in the Sea of Azov clearly violate important principles of the UNCLOS convention, such as the freedom of navigation. Ukraine's exports of grain, steel and crude iron from the Azov Sea ports have fallen dramatically since construction work started on the Kerch Bridge in 2015 (Kabanenko 2018a). Thus, the economic losses for Ukraine are already significant.

Russia's post-2014 military build-up in Crimea and the adjacent maritime areas seems to indicate that the country is in the process of positioning itself for further territorial expansion in the region. This brings us to the third question stated in the introduction: how do Russia's neighbours (above all, Ukraine) view the potential for a further escalation of the security situation in the region?

Escalation potential

In recent years, Russia's approach to the Black Sea region seems to have become more holistic, in the sense that its strategy presupposes the combination of efforts within the military, political-diplomatic, economic and informational domains. Political dominance in the region is to be achieved through hybrid warfare tactics and the concerted use of regular and irregular means of influence (see Figure 2). In the low to medium-intensity (left) end of the spectrum, 'covert' or 'irregular' means of influence, such as propaganda, subversion, infiltration and the use of proxies, will undoubtedly play a major role. In the high-intensity (right) end of the spectrum, we may see more of an 'overt' or 'regular' use of military force.

When it comes to the question of how, in the coming years, Russia will use its regular and irregular means of influence and warfare in the Black Sea region, and how it will interact with its five Black Sea neighbours,

¹⁰ The bridge is scheduled to be opened for railroad traffic in December 2019, see 'Zh/d soobshchenie po Krymskomu mostu startuet 9–10 dekabrya', *TASS*, 9 June, available at <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/6532571>, accessed 11 October 2019.

¹¹ See 'Kilkist zatrymanikh RF suden dlya oglyadu vzhe 148 odynyts,—Yuri Lavreniuk', Ministry of Infrastructure of Ukraine, 16 July 2018, available at: <https://mtu.gov.ua/news/29974.html>, accessed 18 July 2018.

several scenarios may be considered. The first, which gravitates toward the left side of the spectrum outlined in Figure 2, can be called ‘divided domination’. This scenario envisions coordinated Russian–Turkish endeavours in the region, or at least some sort of common understanding, based on the ‘special geostrategic position’ of the two countries. At the expense of the smaller and ‘less special’ Black Sea states, Russia and Turkey may seek to dominate the region through the use of political, economic, military and other means of influence. Joint Russian–Turkish naval exercise activity may expand in scope and scale. Trade relations between the two countries may also continue to pick up, particularly in the energy sector. The ‘Blue Stream’ pipeline, which was commissioned in 2005, will soon be supplemented by a new gas export pipeline (‘TurkStream’), from Anapa on the Krasnodar coast to Lüleburgaz on the Turkish Thrace coast. The latter pipeline is more or less complete, and the gas flow is expected to start in December 2019 (Vozdvizhenskaya 2019). Despite Turkey’s NATO membership, the two countries seem to have a common interest in keeping the Western military presence at a modest level, much to the regret of countries such as Ukraine, Georgia and Romania (Toucas 2018). On the other hand, Turkey’s interests in the region do not always coincide with those of Russia. Turkey has traditionally maintained close ties with Muslim communities in Russia, such as the Circassians, and Russia’s treatment of the Crimean Tatar population is likely to remain a sensitive issue in the bilateral relationship. Such factors may reduce the likelihood of a ‘divided domination’ scenario.

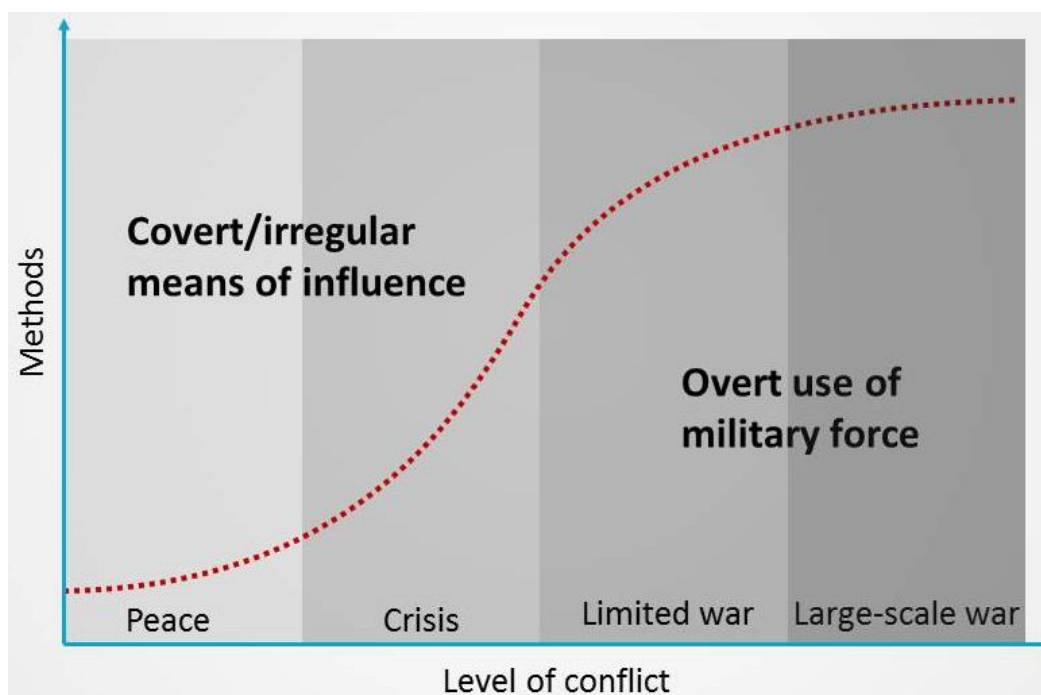


Figure 2: Russia’s means of influence in different parts of the conflict spectrum.

The second scenario, covering the central parts of the conflict spectrum illustrated in Figure 2, may be called ‘creeping expansion of the Russian world’. In this scenario, Russian-controlled bridgeheads on the territory

of other Black Sea states, such as Ukraine (Crimea and Donbas) and Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), are used to enable the expansion of Russian regional dominance. This dominance may be achieved through the use of hybrid warfare tactics. In the case of Ukraine, Russian efforts may target vulnerable parts of the country's political, social and economic system through a combination of hidden and overt actions of low to medium intensity (e.g. subversive actions in the informational or cyber domains, the use of economic means of influence, or the use of criminal elements, proxy warriors or special operations forces). In line with such a gradual approach, new territorial advances may be made when favourable conditions have been created for a further expansion of the 'Russian world' (*Russkii mir*). This may happen on land as well as at sea and on the continental shelf. In the Balkans, Bulgaria and Serbia may serve as access points for Russian influence operations. The purpose of such operations could be to challenge the cohesion of NATO and the EU, ensure the survival of Russia-friendly regimes or advance Russia's political and economic interests in the region. In the Caucasus, Armenia, which has a sizeable Russian military base on its territory, may come under pressure. Such or similar moves are likely to be accompanied by extensive public diplomacy efforts, aimed at creating a favourable view of Russia's actions and intentions.

The third scenario, closer to the right side of the 'irregular-regular' spectrum, envisions the establishment and retention of Russian 'Black Sea domination'. In this scenario, Russia aggressively pursues its long-time strategic ambitions in the region, including the northern part of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, by combining military and non-military means of influence in a medium-intensity effort to restore a position similar to that of the USSR in the Cold War period. In order to dominate this maritime space, Russia may, for instance, turn the Sea of Azov into a Russian 'inland sea', take control of the mouths of the Dnieper, the Southern Bug and the Dniester rivers and other parts of the Black Sea's northern or eastern coastline, perhaps also the territories of Southern Bessarabia. This scenario presupposes the (overt) Russian use of military force, possibly combined with the asymmetric methods described in scenarios one and two.

The fourth scenario is 'large-scale military aggression against Ukraine'. The purpose of such a scenario could be to establish a Russian land corridor to the occupied Crimean peninsula and seize other parts of the northern Black Sea coast, including Snake Island, located east of the mouth of the Danube River. Such a scenario would primarily have to rely on hard power and the overt use of military force (that is, the right side of the spectrum described in Figure 2). If successful, such an operation might give Russia access to the shipbuilding hub of Nikolayev (Mykolaiv) and other strategic objects on the Black Sea coast. On the other hand, such a scenario may only be possible if it is preceded by a substantive degradation of the Ukrainian military and/or economy. Under normal conditions, Ukraine should be able to provide significant resistance to a military offensive of this type.

The likelihood of scenarios such as those discussed above may vary, but all of them are, in theory, plausible. It is, of course, possible to imagine other combinations of regular and irregular means of warfare and other types of conflict, at sea as well as on land. However, the most likely conflict scenarios are expected to form around issues such as the access to, and dominance of, the Black Sea's maritime areas, continental shelf and coastal regions, and the maritime transport corridors on Russia's southwestern—and NATO's southeastern—flank.

The Baltic Sea region

Like the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea is a semi-enclosed inland sea and a marginal sea of the Atlantic Ocean. Its surface area is only slightly smaller than that of the Black Sea—377,000km² compared to 436,400 km²—but the most notable difference between the two basins is their water depth. With its shallow waters and numerous islands, not to mention the fact that parts of it are ice-covered during the winter months, the Baltic Sea is more difficult to navigate than the Black Sea, particularly for larger vessels. Despite this, the Baltic Sea has historically served as an important arena for East–West interaction, cooperation and confrontation.

History and geopolitics

As pointed out by Olaf Fagelund Knudsen, the Baltic Sea region has 'never been marked by a distinct regional culture, or been under a uniform system of law or authority, even if the memory of the Hanseatic system provides some indication to the contrary' (Knudsen 1999, p. ix). Up to the end of the Cold War, many of the Baltic Sea states had become used to 'regarding themselves as parts of other regions—Poland of Central Europe; Germany of Central and later Western Europe; Denmark, Finland and Sweden of the Nordic region'.

The Soviet Union's interaction with its Baltic Sea neighbours had also been fairly limited up to 1991. Following the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, efforts were made to address this shortcoming by developing cooperative political, cultural and trade relations across the Baltic Sea. The establishment of the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) in 1992 was an important first step towards this aim. This and other regional frameworks of interstate cooperation continue to exist, but there is no denying that the cooperation climate in the Baltic Sea region has been affected negatively by the general deterioration of Russia's relationship with the West since 2014 (Kropatcheva 2017, pp. 81–100).

One of the lessons learned from Russia's interventions in Crimea and Donbas is that Russia considers it legitimate to intervene militarily on behalf of 'compatriots' who live outside Russia's borders. Since 2014, Russia has stepped up its propaganda against the Baltic states, claiming that Russian speakers are being discriminated

against (Lucas 2015, p. 11). The Baltic states, for their part, are concerned that Crimea-type scenarios may play out on their territory. Close to a quarter of Estonia's and Latvia's population is Russian, and significant parts of it live in cities located relatively close to the Russian border, such as Narva in northeastern Estonia and Daugavpils in southeastern Latvia. This creates potential vulnerabilities for the minorities' host nations and increases the playing field for Russian hybrid warfare tactics (Murphy *et al.* 2016, p. 2).

As for the maritime environment, it should be noted that Russia's current coastline on the Baltic Sea is significantly shorter than that of the Soviet Union or tsarist Russia. The maritime areas currently under Russian jurisdiction are limited to the inner part of the Gulf of Finland and a small maritime area off the coast of the Kaliningrad exclave, squeezed between the territorial waters and EEZs of Lithuania and Poland. There are few unresolved maritime delimitation disputes in the Baltic Sea, with the possible exception of an area south and southeast of Bornholm, where Denmark and Poland have partially overlapping claims.

Denmark and Sweden control the main entry and exit routes between the Baltic Sea and the North Sea, traditionally referred to as 'the Danish Straits'. In addition to these natural access points, the Baltic Sea can be accessed through two man-made canals. The White Sea Canal, built in the early 1930s, connects the Baltic Sea port of St Petersburg with the White Sea through a network of canals and canalised rivers running *via* the Russian lakes of Ladoga and Onega. The Kiel Canal, built in the late nineteenth century, is one of the world's busiest artificial waterways and links the Baltic Sea with the North Sea *via* the German state of Schleswig-Holstein.

In line with the perceived strategic significance of the Danish straits during the Cold War, NATO and the Warsaw Pact shared the ambition of seizing control of the Baltic approaches in the event of a military contingency (Gaudio 1983, p. 28). This added to the strategic significance of the Danish island of Bornholm, located between the southern tip of Sweden and the northern coast of Poland. The Swedish island of Gotland, located in the central part of the Baltic Sea, and the demilitarised and largely self-governed Finnish archipelago of Åland, located at the mouth of the Gulf of Bothnia, were also seen as potentially exposed parts of the Nordic area. Previous Danish, Swedish and Finnish security concerns related to these islands seem to have been invigorated in recent years (Orange 2015; Gotkowska & Szymanski 2016a).

An area of special concern for NATO is the so-called 'Suwałki gap' (Grigas 2016). This term denotes the 100-kilometre stretch of land between Kaliningrad in the northwest and Belarus in the southeast, which is controlled by Lithuania in the north and by Poland in the south. Should Russia, with or without the help of union partner Belarus, use military force to establish a land corridor between western Belarus and Kaliningrad, this would significantly complicate NATO's ability to transfer reinforcements to the Baltic states, particularly if combined

with Russian ‘sea denial’ operations in the Baltic Sea. This concern was raised on several occasions by Lieutenant General Ben Hodges during his tenure as US Army Europe commander.¹²

Russia’s security concerns in the region are related not only to the fear of a NATO attack on Kaliningrad, western Belarus or Russia’s western mainland, as played out during the 2017 edition of the *Zapad* exercise (Higgins 2017), but also to Russia’s ‘soft’ security and economic interests in the region. The economic interests include, among other things, the ability to use the Baltic Sea for purposes of maritime transportation and energy export. The sea lanes of the Baltic Sea are navigated daily by some 2,000 vessels, and almost 70% of Russia’s container traffic, including the part that transits through Finland and the Baltic states, goes *via* the Baltic Sea (Lorentzon 2014, p 14).

On the sea bottom, between the Russian port of Viborg and Greifswald in northeastern Germany, lies the world’s longest subsea gas pipeline, called ‘Nord Stream’. A second pipeline, ‘Nord Stream 2’, is currently being planned and, like the first one, it will pass through the EEZs of Finland, Sweden and Denmark.¹³ Unlike the ‘South Stream’ project in the Black Sea, which was cancelled in December 2014 after Bulgarian and EU objections (Siddi 2018, pp. 1565–1566), the ‘Nord Stream 2’ project in the Baltic Sea is still in progress. Russia plans to double its gas deliveries to Europe *via* the Baltic Sea, thereby reducing its dependence on Ukrainian and Polish transit pipelines (Siddi 2018, p. 1563). At the same time, Russian–German pipeline projects in the Baltic Sea raise a number of jurisdictional and environmental security concerns for the coastal states whose waters the pipelines pass through (Gotkowska & Szymanski 2016b).

Recent military developments

Since 2014, Russia’s military presence and activity in the Baltic Sea region has grown, as has that of NATO. Both sides tend to portray their forward deployments and exercise activity in the region as a defensive, necessary and natural response to ‘aggressive and expansionist’ measures taken by the other side (Wilhelmsen & Godzimirski 2017, p. 63). NATO–Russia relations in the Baltic are increasingly marked by disengagement and mutual distrust. Military posturing, rather than direct communication, has become the main way of conveying political and military resolve and deterring unwanted behaviour.

¹² See for instance ‘US Army Commander Warns of Russian Blocking of Baltic Defence’, *The Baltic Times*, 9 November 2015.

¹³ ‘Denmark to permit Nord Stream 2 construction under guarantee of gas transit through Ukraine’, *UAWire*, 13 April 2018, available at <https://uawire.org/denmark-to-permit-nord-stream-2-construction-under-guarantee-of-gas-transit-through-ukraine>, accessed 11 October 2019.

Russia's naval assets in the Baltic Sea are mainly concentrated in the Kaliningrad exclave (Baltiysk), which is one of the most heavily militarised parts of the world, and in the naval town of Kronstadt, located some 30 kilometres west of St Petersburg. The Russian Baltic Fleet deteriorated badly in 1990s and early 2000s. Little was invested in new vessels and upgrades, corruption flourished, and the level of training was poor (Oldberg 2009, 354–355). In an unprecedented 'purge' during the summer of 2016, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu fired the Fleet Commander, Vice Admiral Victor Kravchuk, his chief of staff and several dozen other high-ranking Baltic Fleet officers, owing to their alleged failure to organise adequate training and day-to-day activities for the Fleet's units (Elfving 2016).

Shortly after the Baltic Fleet dismissals, the Chairman of the Duma's Defence Committee, Admiral (ret.) Vladimir Komoyedov, announced that *Iskander M* short-range ballistic missiles would soon be deployed to Kaliningrad as a response to NATO's activities in the region (Sukhanin 2016). These are dual-capable and road-mobile missiles with an operational range of up to 500 kilometres. Their deployment to Kaliningrad will place not only the Baltic capitals but also Copenhagen, Stockholm, Warsaw and Berlin within striking range. Hence, it would add to the land- and sea-based strike systems already in place in the region.

Despite the Russian shipbuilding industry's many shortcomings, and despite the Baltic Fleet's traditionally low priority compared to the other Russian fleets, some progress has been made since the turn of the century. The Baltic Fleet's current inventory includes, among other vessels, four new *Steregushchy*-class corvettes (Lavrov 2016, p. 7), and two *Buyan*-class corvettes recently transferred from the Black Sea Fleet (Osborn & Johnson 2016). The latter vessels are capable of launching *Kalibr*-type cruise missiles over considerable distances, as are the Baltic Fleet's diesel submarines. The Baltic Fleet also possesses significant amphibious capabilities, including a naval infantry brigade and various landing ships, based in Baltiysk (Lavrov 2016, p. 7).

As in the Black Sea, Russia has in recent years created a formidable A2/AD 'bubble' in the Baltic Sea, which could make it difficult for NATO to enter the theatre of operations in the event of a major crisis or conflict. The increasingly sophisticated Russian air defence systems, such as the S-400 surface-to-air (SAM) batteries, which were deployed to the region in 2014 (Lavrov 2016, p. 8), and Russia's new precision-strike missile systems, seem particularly challenging for Russia's Baltic neighbours (Lanoszka & Hunzeker 2016, p. 12). Russia's ground- and sea-based air defence systems in the Baltic are, as elsewhere, backed up by considerable offensive air power, in the form of regionally based fighter air regiments as well as naval and army aviation units.¹⁴ The electronic warfare and signal intelligence units in the region have also been upgraded (McDermott 2017, 17–18).

¹⁴ For details, see Lavrov (2016, pp. 7–8).

As for Russian ground forces in the St Petersburg region, the core of the current assets are made up of the 6th Combined Services Army, the size of which is roughly comparable to a British or US Army division (Sutyagin & Bronk 2017, p. 90), that is, upwards of 10,000 soldiers. At the regional level, the overall correlation of forces between Russia and NATO is clearly in Russia's favour, particularly when it comes to the available manoeuvre battalions. RAND Corporation researchers counted 22 for Russia and 12 for NATO in a recent study (Shlapak & Johnson, 2016, p. 5). In order to compensate for this weakness in NATO's conventional force posture and to strengthen deterrence on the eastern flank, NATO's 2016 Summit in Warsaw adopted several measures. Key among them was the decision to deploy, on a rotational basis, four battalion-sized battle groups to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland (Nikers 2017). NATO has also strengthened its air and naval activity in the region since 2014 (Prokopenko & Goncharenko 2019).

Judging by the number and severity of recent Russian–Western 'close military encounters' in the Baltic, there is due cause for concern about this region. A recent study by researchers affiliated with the European Leadership Network (Frear 2015) listed 66 Russian–Western military encounters in various regions since the Crimea intervention. More than 60% of the listed incidents (40 of 66), and all of the incidents classified as 'high risk', had taken place in the Baltic Sea region. By comparison, only four of the 66 incidents listed in the report, none of them 'serious' or 'high risk', took place in or above the Barents Sea (Frear 2015, pp. 7–24). A similar pattern of Russian–Western military encounters was observed in 2016 and 2017. Of 16 'high risk' incidents observed in 2016–2017 (Raynova & Kulesa 2018, p. 6), ten took place in the Baltic Sea region, five in the Black Sea region, and only one in the Barents Sea region.

The list of incidents in, over and around the Baltic Sea region since 2014 includes Russian violations of the air territories of Estonia, Finland and Sweden, a suspected Russian submarine incursion into Swedish territorial waters, a near-collision between a Russian reconnaissance aircraft and a Danish commercial airliner, the kidnapping and illegal Russian detention of Estonian security service operative Eston Kohver and several instances of low-altitude 'buzzing' of US naval vessels by Russian fighter jets (Frear 2015; Stavridis 2016).

If the current and recent pattern of military activity in this region is any indication, it will not be easy to escape the NATO–Russia 'spiral of distrust' and restore lasting regional stability (Wilhelmsen & Godzimirski 2017). The question is rather if incidents and episodes such as those mentioned above could spiral out of control and result in an even larger confrontation between NATO and Russia.

Escalation potential

Unlike the Black Sea region, where Russia has recently used—and continues to use—military force and other means of influence in a concerted effort to redraw previously recognised international borders, the Baltic Sea region has not become the arena of a similar Russian ‘land grab’. We must assume that Russia’s threshold for the use of military force against NATO territory, including the Baltic states, is higher than its threshold for the use of military force against non-NATO countries such as Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova. This does not mean, however, that a Russian incursion into one or more of the Baltic states, or into the land or island territories of non-aligned Sweden and Finland, is unthinkable. The presence of significant Russian diasporas, particularly in Estonia and Latvia, and the strategic location of Baltic Sea islands such as Åland, Gotland and Bornholm, are relevant factors to consider in this regard. Various hypothetical scenarios for how this may play out are routinely discussed in Western military circles.

One scenario, which was described in some detail in a 2015 article in the Finnish magazine *Suomen Kuvalehti* (Moberg *et al.* 2015, pp. 1–6), features a Russian takeover of the islands of Åland and Gotland. The demilitarised Finnish archipelago of Åland, consisting of some 6,500 skerries and islands, is located at the entrance to the Gulf of Bothnia. In the scenario, Russia uses the element of surprise to its advantage and establishes a presence on the islands before the Finnish Defence Forces are able to react, in other words, a *fait accompli* tactic. Russia then uses its foothold on Åland to put pressure on the governments of Finland and Sweden, claiming forward basing rights for Russian naval vessels. This could potentially prevent Western forces from blockading or bottling up Russian naval vessels in the inner part Gulf of Finland (a tactic successfully applied by the Germans against the Soviet Baltic Fleet in World War II). The scenario also presupposes the establishment of a 10-kilometre no-fly zone around the Åland archipelago, enforced by Russia from the sea and air. With its new foothold in the central part of the Baltic Sea, Russia could conduct, or threaten, amphibious or airborne assaults ‘anywhere within the Baltic Sea region’ (Moberg *et al.* 2015, p. 3).

A second scenario, discussed in the same source, takes place around the Swedish island of Gotland. The scenario plays out in an environment of increased Russian–Western tension in connection with a large-scale Russian exercise and involves the shooting-down of a Swedish JAS *Gripen* aircraft in the airspace around the island. In order to enhance its perimeter defence in the region, Russia establishes an A2/AD ‘bubble’ on Gotland by positioning S-400 anti-aircraft batteries there, and threatens to strike the Swedish mainland with *Iskander* missiles from Luga, 140 kilometres south of St Petersburg.¹⁵

¹⁵ For further details, see Moberg *et al.* (2015, p. 3).

A third scenario, perhaps more likely than the first two, is a Russian ‘hybrid incursion’ into a part of the Baltic states, such as the mostly ethnic Russian city of Narva in the northeastern part of Estonia (Lanoszka & Hunzeker 2016, p. 15; Moberg *et al.* 2015, pp. 6–8; Stubbs 2017). In this scenario, Russia leverages a sympathetic ‘compatriot’ community abroad to agitate for the secession of a city or territory, much as it did in Crimea. Seen from the perspective of NATO, a ‘grey zone’ scenario of this type would be problematic, for at least three reasons. First, the operation could be difficult to identify and detect, particularly in the early stages. This could cause a protracted debate within the Alliance about whether and how to respond. Second, any counter-measures taken against the local population by Estonian government or NATO forces would likely be perceived or portrayed as illegitimate, provocative or disproportionate. Third, Russian use of dispersed local militias or fighters in unmarked uniforms could make it inherently difficult for NATO to use long-range, stand-off weapons without risking significant collateral damage or risk to civilians (Lanoszka & Hunzeker 2016, p. 15).

A fourth scenario, at the more extreme end of the spectrum, is a large-scale, conventional invasion of one or more of the Baltic states. This is a scenario in which Russia uses its local ‘correlation of forces’ dominance,¹⁶ plus the short distances and mostly flat terrain of the Baltic states, to move against one or more of the Baltic capitals. The RAND Corporation war-gamed this scenario in 2016, concluding that Russian forces would be likely to reach Tallinn and/or Riga in less than 60 hours. In some of the RAND simulations, the Baltic capitals were reached by Russian forces in as little as 36 hours after the start of the operation (Shlapak & Johnson 2016, p. 4). Such a scenario could potentially be combined with, or preceded by, a Russian incursion into northeastern Poland, for instance, as part of a Russian effort to take control over the previously mentioned ‘Suwałki gap’ between Kaliningrad and Belarus. The latter move could effectively cut the Baltic states off from the rest of the Alliance.

Some would probably say that scenarios such as those mentioned above can be dismissed as far-fetched or ill-conceived. Still, they are being studied and discussed in the West, including among high-level and presumably well-informed military commanders. For one, the Commander of NATO’s Allied Land Command, US Army General John Nicholson, recently wrote an interesting article discussing the latter scenario (Nicholson 2016). He concluded that the strength and mobility of NATO’s forces in the region do matter, and that NATO needs to adapt to the new security environment in order to deter Russian aggression in the Baltic. At the same time, he acknowledged the need for ‘increased transparency and communication with the Russian Federation’s political and military establishments’ (p. 43).

¹⁶ For details, see Nicholson (2016, p. 31), Lanoszka and Hunzeker (2016, p. 15).

The Barents Sea region

The Barents Sea, located between the Arctic Ocean in the north and northern coasts of Norway and Russia in the south, and between the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard in the west and Russian archipelagos of Franz Josef Land and Novaya Zemlya in the east, is a treasure chest of oil, gas and living marine resources. Being the western gateway to the Northern Sea Route, which connects Northern Europe to Northeast Asia *via* the Arctic, the Barents Sea is also seen as an important arena for commercial ship traffic. However, the Barents Sea's strategic significance is, more than anything, linked to the region's role as Russia's primary basing area for naval forces.

History and geopolitics

The relationship between Barents Sea neighbours Norway and Russia has historically been a peaceful one. From the mid-eighteenth century and up to the Russian revolution in 1917, 'Pomor' traders travelled the coasts of Northern Norway and the Kola Peninsula, bringing timber and grain products on the westward journeys and dried fish of various sorts on the eastward journeys. The two countries have never been at war with each other, and their 196-kilometre land border has essentially remained unchanged since the signing of a bilateral border treaty in 1826.¹⁷ The fact that the eastern part of Norway's northernmost county, Finnmark, was liberated from Nazi occupation by Soviet forces in October 1944, and the fact that these forces withdrew from Norwegian territory after the liberation, created a foundation for peaceful and mostly friendly cross-border relations after World War II.

The Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard, located in the northwestern part of the Barents Sea, and the interpretation of the Svalbard Treaty, signed in 1920, has been the source of numerous diplomatic exchanges between the two countries. Russia has at times been harsh in its criticism of certain aspects of Norway's Svalbard policy. The conflict potential became particularly evident during World War II, when Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov in a meeting with his Norwegian colleague Trygve Lie in 1944 suggested a *de facto* annulment of the Svalbard Treaty, a suggestion that was later rejected by the Norwegian Government (Lie 1958, p.158).

Given the Svalbard islands' strategic location, it was perhaps no wonder that the Soviet Union attached so much importance to the need to maintain a permanent presence in the mining town of Barentsburg, presumably to ensure that Norway's exercise of sovereignty was in compliance with the Treaty and that Norway and its allies did not use the archipelago for military purposes. Throughout the Cold War, considerations of military security

¹⁷ The only major exception was that Norway did not have a direct land border with the Soviet Union in the period between 1920 and 1944, when the Petsamo corridor was controlled by Finland.

were clearly at the forefront of Soviet government thinking with regard to this remote piece of Norwegian (and NATO) territory in the Arctic.¹⁸ Even today, security-related issues constitute an integral part of Russia's Svalbard policies.

The fishing grounds around Svalbard are also of great economic significance to the Russian trawler fleet, which regularly operates in these waters. Over the years, the Norwegian Coast Guard's enforcement of coastal state jurisdiction in the Svalbard Fisheries Protection Zone, established in 1977, has been the source of numerous Norwegian–Russian disputes (Åtland & Bruusgaard 2009). Similarly, Russia does not share Norway's view of the legal status of the continental shelf around the archipelago, which is believed to harbour significant petroleum reserves (Pedersen 2006). That said, it should be noted that the single most difficult issue in the Norwegian–Russian relationship—the delimitation of the two countries' maritime jurisdiction areas in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean—has been resolved. The Norwegian–Russian maritime delimitation treaty,¹⁹ which entered into force in 2011, established a continuous 1,700-kilometre boundary line between the two countries' EEZs and continental shelves in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean. This was not only a milestone in the bilateral relationship, but also an important contribution to regional stability.

Security dynamics on the Euro-Arctic mainland have undergone significant changes in the post-Cold War period, and even more so since 2014. In the 1990s, efforts were made to replace the logic of Cold War antagonism with a new logic, based on common values and shared interests. Some of these efforts were quite successful; others less so. However, cross-border interaction on the level of institutions, organisations and individuals in the northern part of Norway and the northwestern part of Russia grew rapidly throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Cooperative relations were also established between the two countries' armed forces.

After Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the Norwegian government decided to put bilateral military cooperation with Russia on hold. All planned joint exercises, visits and exchanges with Russia were suspended.²⁰ The trilateral Norwegian–Russian–US 'Northern Eagle' exercise, planned for the spring of 2014, was also called off (Nilsen 2014). In April of the same year, NATO's foreign ministers agreed to suspend all of NATO's

¹⁸ Svalbard's inclusion in NATO's command area was confirmed in 1951.

¹⁹ 'Treaty between the Kingdom of Norway and the Russian Federation concerning Maritime Delimitation and Cooperation in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean', signed in Murmansk 15 September 2010, available at: https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/smk/vedlegg/2010/avtale_engelsk.pdf, accessed 18 July 2018.

²⁰ 'Norway suspends all planned military activities with Russia', Press Release, Ministry of Defence of Norway, 25 March 2014, available at: <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/Norway-suspends-all-planned-military-activities-with-Russia-/id753887/>, accessed 18 July 2018.

practical cooperation with Russia, military and as well as civilian.²¹ Thus, Russia's military adventures in Ukraine have also had a negative impact on the regional security dynamics in the European Arctic. There is more uncertainty about Russia's intentions now than before 2014.²² East–West trade relations in the region suffer as a result of the restrictive measures imposed by both sides. At the Norwegian–Russian and Finnish–Russian border crossings, the traffic of people and goods has decreased, after several years of continuous growth. On the Norwegian–Russian border, the introduction of visa-free travel for those living in the 30-kilometre border zone does not seem to have compensated for this decline (Nilsen 2015).

At the same time, long-standing regional cooperation arrangements, such as the Barents Euro-Arctic Region cooperation, which was established in 1993, have been preserved. The same goes for Norway's practical bilateral cooperation with Russia in other non-military fields. These activities include, among other things, the Norwegian and Russian coast guards' generally successful joint efforts to combat illegal fishing in the Barents Sea, and cooperation between the two countries' maritime search and rescue services and their local police authorities and border commissioners.

Recent military developments

Unlike the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea, the Barents Sea is a basing area for strategic nuclear weapons. More than 55% of Russia's sea-based strategic nuclear warheads—currently 416 of 752—are carried by ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) operating from Gadzhiyev on the Kola Peninsula. The rest of the Russian SSBN force is based in Vilyuchinsk at Kamchatka.²³ Safeguarding and protecting the ballistic missile submarines, at sea as well as in port, is a matter of immense strategic importance for Russia. In the event of a major conflict with NATO, Russia can be counted on to initiate extensive 'sea control' operations in the Barents Sea as well as 'sea denial' operations in adjacent maritime areas, such as the Norwegian Sea (Tamnes *et al.* 2015, p. 21).

Russia is currently in the process of modernising its military assets on the Kola Peninsula. In 2014, an Arctic Joint Strategic Command was established, with headquarters in Severomorsk. The command coordinates the training and operational use of Russia's military forces and their support infrastructure in the region, and its area of responsibility stretches all the way from the Barents Sea in the west to the East Siberian Sea in the east.

²¹ 'Statement by NATO Foreign Ministers', Press Release, NATO, 1 April 2014, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_108501.htm, accessed 18 July 2018.

²² See, for instance, Bø (2017).

²³ For details, see 'Russian strategic nuclear forces', updated 20 June 2017, available at: <http://russianforces.org/>, accessed 18 July 2018.

The frequency, size and geographic reach of Russia's naval and air exercises in the north have grown in recent years. Unannounced 'snap drills', often involving significant amounts of military hardware and personnel, have been held on a more or less regular basis since 2013–2014. The most recent one took place in the Barents Sea in June 2018 and involved some 36 naval vessels and 20 military aircraft (Vorob'eva 2018).

As in the Black Sea (Crimea) and the Baltic Sea (Kaliningrad), Russia has in recent years placed modern, long-range air defence systems on the Kola Peninsula in order to ensure the security and operational effectiveness of its naval, air and ground forces in the High North. In addition to the regions of Murmansk and Arkhangelsk (see Staalesen 2014), S-400 missile batteries have since 2014 been deployed to remote Arctic locations such as Rogachevo on the archipelago of Novaya Zemlya and Tiksi in Yakutia.²⁴

In 2007, Russia resumed its Cold War practice of conducting strategic bomber patrols in the international airspace over the Barents, Norwegian and Greenland seas. This is now a routine occurrence (Posey 2016). Russia's tactical fighters and fighter-bombers have also increased their activity in the region, particularly since 2014. According to the Director of the Norwegian Intelligence Service, Lieutenant General Morten Haga Lunde, the pattern of Russian air activity in the region has also become more provocative. For instance, Russian 'tactical profiles'²⁵ flown in 2017 included simulated attacks targeting the Globus II radar in Vardø as well as Bodø Main Air Station and a group of NATO vessels conducting training in the Norwegian Sea (Nilsen 2018).

In 2013, the first of Russia's new *Borei*-class submarines, the *Yurii Dolgorukii*, entered service in the Northern Fleet. The class is planned to consist of at least eight submarines, each carrying between 16 and 20 ballistic missiles. The *Severodvinsk*, which is Russia's first nuclear-powered attack submarine of the *Yasen* class, was commissioned in December the same year. More submarines and surface vessels, with increasingly sophisticated weapon systems, will enter service with the Russian Northern Fleet in the coming years. Efforts are underway to supplement the Northern Fleet's ageing inventory of surface combatants with smaller and more modern vessels, such as the new *Admiral Gorshkov*-class frigates. Like the new attack submarines, these will be equipped with *Kalibr*-type cruise missiles. There are also plans to build a new generation of destroyers for the Northern and Pacific fleets, known as the *Lider* class. The design for this class was approved by the Defence

²⁴ 'Russia deployed two S-400 air defense missile regiments in Arctic in 2015 — General Staff', *TASS*, 8 December 2015, available at <http://tass.com/defense/842201>, accessed 11 October 2019.

²⁵ This is a military term which is used to describe the behaviour of an aircraft, or a tactical formation of two or more aircraft, based on characteristics such as altitude, speed and trajectory.

Ministry in 2017 (Nilsen 2017). According to industry sources, these vessels will be nuclear-powered, armed with more than 60 cruise missiles each, and they are planned to enter service around 2025.²⁶

Despite the growing scope, scale and frequency of Russia's military exercises, hazardous military-to-military encounters are relatively rare in and above the Barents Sea, at least compared to the other maritime border regions discussed in this article. A Norwegian–Russian Incident at Sea Agreement (INCSEA) has been in force since 1990. This agreement contains important rules of conduct for naval vessels and military aircraft. Central in this regard is the need to maintain a safe distance and refrain from provocative or dangerous manoeuvres. The Norwegian Joint Headquarters, located at Reitan outside Bodø, also has a direct communication channel to the Russian Northern Fleet's staff in Severomorsk on the Kola Peninsula.²⁷ This working-level hotline can be used to communicate concerns, questions and answers, which may contribute to the prevention of mishaps, misunderstandings and the unintended escalation of incidents and episodes at sea. The situation at the Norwegian–Russian mainland border in Finnmark can also be described as calm and predictable.

Escalation potential

Russia and the Scandinavian countries belong to different cultural and political spheres, and the 'values gap' between Russia and its northwestern neighbours appears to be wider today than it was five or ten years ago. Since the Ukraine intervention in 2014, Norway has had to reassess many aspects of its relationship with Russia, particularly within the field of security. The same goes for Sweden and Finland, which have strengthened their mutual defence cooperation as well as their relations with NATO. Unlike Norway and Finland, Sweden does not have a land border with Russia. However, all three countries, along with Denmark and Iceland, participate in regionally oriented defence cooperation arrangements such as NORDEFECO (Nordic Defence Cooperation).

The military conflict potential in the European Arctic should not be exaggerated. Notwithstanding their concerns about Russia's expansionist policies in the south, the governments of the Nordic countries seem to share the opinion that the security situation on NATO's northern flank is different from—and more stable than—that on the southern flank. Russia, for its part, is concerned about Norway's (and NATO's) military training activity in the region, although it is significantly smaller in scope and scale than Russia's. Exercises which take place in the

²⁶ 'Perspektivnyi esminets 'lider' budet yadernym', *RIA Novosti*, 31 August 2017, available at <https://ria.ru/20170831/1501443365.html>, accessed 11 October 2019.

²⁷ 'Norwegian Joint Headquarters: – We talk to Russia over Skype', *High North News*, 17 June 2016, available at <http://www.highnorthnews.com/norwegian-joint-headquartes-we-talk-to-russia-over-skype/>, accessed 11 October 2019.

far northeast, that is, in the county of Finnmark, are often portrayed as a threat to Russia's strategic interests in the region.²⁸ Russia expressed concern also in connection with the 'Trident Juncture' exercise in the fall of 2018. This was a 'high visibility' NATO exercise, which involved some 50,000 troops from 31 NATO member and partner countries, including Sweden and Finland. 'Trident Juncture' was held in and around mid-Norway, far from the Norwegian–Russian border.²⁹

As for military escalation scenarios, a Russian military incursion into the northern parts of Norway, Sweden or Finland does not seem to be particularly plausible, even in a deteriorated geopolitical environment. The Russian minority issue is less prominent in the eastern border regions of Norway and Finland than in, say, Estonia or Latvia. Even in the border town of Kirkenes, the Russians constitute less than 10% of the total population. The Russian citizens living in this and other parts of Norway are, for the most part, well integrated in their local communities and few, if any, claim to be discriminated against. Thus, it is difficult to envision a 'Crimean' scenario materialising on Norwegian soil, or in Finland's eastern border regions. In these regions, there seems to be little room for the use of local political, ethnic or linguistic tensions as a pretext for a Russian military intervention.

In the European Arctic, disputes and conflicts are more likely to happen at sea than on land. The vast and resource-rich Barents Sea is an arena of extensive interaction between state and non-state vessels from Norway and Russia, and frictions may arise over issues such as access to oil, gas, minerals or living marine resources. Should, for instance, a Russian trawler try to evade inspection or enforcement measures by the Norwegian Coast Guard in the Svalbard Fisheries Protection Zone, this may lead to a tense situation. And should the Russian Northern Fleet choose to intervene, for instance, to protect Russian fishing vessels from the Norwegian Coast Guard, this could potentially lead to dangerous force-on-force scenarios. In the current geopolitical environment, marked by growing mutual suspicion and mistrust between Russia and the West, such incidents may escalate more easily than in the past. In the central part of the Barents Sea, the risk of such disputes is presumably lower today than prior to the signing of the 2010 delimitation agreement, but it is still there.

Russian–Western tensions in the Barents Sea may also arise as a result of large-scale military training activity. Such a scenario, termed 'escalation of a bilateral crisis', was described in some detail in a recent report prepared by a Norwegian security and defence policy expert commission led by Professor Rolf Tamnes of the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies (IFS). In their scenario, Russian air and naval exercises off the coast of

²⁸ See for instance Khrolenko (2015).

²⁹ 'Trident Juncture 2018 Press Conference', Press Release, NATO Headquarters, 9 October 2018, available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_159119.htm, accessed 11 October 2019.

Finnmark, including provocative live-fire drills and the use of electronic warfare systems, interfere extensively with civilian activity in the same region and leads to the preparation of Norwegian and allied countermeasures, with the potential for spill-over effects onto the Norwegian mainland (Tamnes 2015, pp. 55–6).

Finally, it should be noted that the security dynamics and interstate conflict potential in the Barents Sea region cannot be studied in isolation, that is, isolated from the wider context of the NATO–Russia relationship. A Russian–Western military confrontation in the north may not necessarily come as the result of an escalating bilateral dispute of local origin. Here, as elsewhere, disputes and military tensions may spill over from one region to another, as part of a larger Russian–Western or Russia–NATO confrontation. This phenomenon, known from the Cold War period, is often referred to as ‘horizontal escalation’ (Morgan *et al.* 2008, p. 18). Thus, crises in the Baltic or the Black Sea region may have potentially far-reaching implications for the security situation in the Barents Sea region, and *vice versa*. On the other hand, the destabilisation of one of the three regions, as outlined in the scenarios discussed above, does not necessarily have to result in the destabilisation of the two other regions. Much will depend on the extent to which the conflicting parties succeed in containing or ‘insulating’ the crisis in question.

Summary and conclusions

Russia’s illegal occupation and annexation of Crimea in 2014, the subsequent military incursion into Eastern Ukraine, and Russia’s maritime expansionism in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov have led to a marked deterioration of Russia’s relations with the West. The security situation in all of the three regions analysed in this article has undergone significant and potentially long-lasting changes, and the general level of East–West tension is undoubtedly higher today than it was five years ago.

Still, it is recognised among Russia’s western neighbours that a Russian move against other parts of Ukraine, or against one or more of the other European ‘frontline states’, does not necessarily have to be based on the playbooks used in Crimea and Donbas. Other scenarios are possible, and the nature and severity of the potential for interstate conflict varies from region to region. As our study has shown, the security situation in Europe’s eastern border regions is to a significant degree shaped by factors such as geography and history, not to mention the perceived strategic significance of the various regions and the regional pattern of East–West interaction in the military field. Similarities and differences between the three regions are summarised in Table 1.

	The Black Sea	The Baltic Sea	The Barents Sea
Type of maritime area	Inland sea, accessible through straits and rivers	Inland sea, accessible through straits and canals	Largely open marginal sea of the Arctic Ocean
Economic significance (main types of activity)	Ship traffic, gas transit via pipelines, some oil and gas extraction	Ship traffic and gas transit via pipelines	Extensive fisheries, some oil and gas extraction
Size of surface area	436,400 km ²	377,000 km ²	1,400,000 km ²
Average water depth	1,253 m	55 m	230 m
Number of surrounding coastal states	6	9	2
NATO members among the coastal states	3	6	1
EU members among the coastal states	2	8	0
Size of maritime areas under Russian jurisdiction	Large (de facto)	Small	Large
Trend in Russia's military presence since 2014	Significantly increased	Increased	Somewhat increased
Basing area for Russian nuclear weapons?	Yes (non-strategic)	Yes (non-strategic)	Yes (strategic and non-strategic)
Russian anti-access/area denial 'bubble'?	Yes (Sevastopol)	Yes (Kaliningrad)	Yes (Severomorsk)
NATO's military presence since 2014	Somewhat increased (mainly sea and air)	Increased (also on land)	Relatively stable
Current level of East-West military tension	High	High	Low
Number of 'mil-to-mil encounters', 2014-2015	7	44	4
Of which 'high risk' or 'serious' encounters	4	13	0
International borders changed by force?	Yes (on land, at sea and on the continental shelf)	No	No
Most likely arena for future conflicts	The land and maritime domain	Land and islands	The maritime domain
Potential for 'hybrid warfare' scenarios	Significant	Significant	Somewhat limited
Risk of 'horizontal' escalation?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Typical scenarios for a military escalation	Russian conventional or 'hybrid' use of force against other parts of Ukraine's land territory; Russian-Turkish regional dominance of the Black Sea maritime space	Russian use of force against one or more of the Baltic Sea states; closure of the 'Suwałki gap'; amphibious landings at Åland, Gotland or Bornholm	Resource-related disputes at sea; escalation of episodes in the Svalbard Fisheries Protection Zone; incidents related to military training activity

Table 1. Security dynamics in the Black, Baltic and Barents Sea regions – similarities and differences.

The immediate consequences of Russia's aggression against Ukraine have, as noted in the introduction, been most strongly felt in the Black Sea region, particularly the northern part, where the main objective of Russia's policy appears to have been territorial expansion. By using military force and hybrid warfare tactics to change interstate

borders, Russia has set in motion events that may have far-reaching implications, not only for the Black Sea states but for the rest of Europe. Russia's military activities in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov demonstrate the intensity of Moscow's efforts to dominate this strategically important region. As described in Table 1, military escalation scenarios for the region highlight the danger of creeping Russian aggression against other parts of Ukraine (namely, beyond Crimea and Donbas), up to the level of large-scale operations. This implies the use of regular and special operations forces, irregular or hybrid means of influence (such as energy blackmail after the establishment of new gas transportation routes, information operations, psychological pressure, media manipulation, cyber-attacks and proxy actions), or a combination of regular and irregular means of influence. The recent Russian–Turkish *rapprochement* constitutes an additional source of concern for Ukrainians, who fear for their access to the Black Sea and the natural resources located there.

As for the Baltic Sea region, the NATO and EU coastal states are concerned about scenarios such as a Russian military incursion into Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania, the closure of the 'Suwałki gap' between Poland and Lithuania, and the danger of Russian amphibious landings on the islands of Åland, Gotland or Bornholm. Since 2014, the number of Russian–Western encounters in the air, at sea, and even on land, has been higher in the Baltic Sea region than in the two other regions. The Baltic Sea states are also generally seen as vulnerable to Russian influence operations. This is particularly the case with Estonia and Latvia, which have large Russian minorities within their borders. As noted in Table 1, Russia's maritime jurisdiction areas in the Baltic Sea are small compared to those of the other coastal states. The air corridors used by Russian aircraft are also narrow, particularly over the Gulf of Finland. This may explain some of the recent incidents, but certainly not all. Despite its modest scale, NATO's 'enhanced forward presence' in the Baltic states and Poland, launched in 2016, may have contributed to an aggravation of the already tense East–West relations in the region.

In the Barents Sea region, the level of tension is lower, and the conflict potential is mainly (but not only) related to the maritime domain and the risk of resource-related interstate disputes. Here, the playing field for Russian hybrid warfare tactics is seen as more limited than in the Baltic and Black Sea regions, partly owing to the limited number of Russians and Russian speakers. Possible exceptions are the north-easternmost part of Finnmark, including the border town of Kirkenes, and the Russian mining town of Barentsburg (population 450), located on the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard. The maritime spaces around Svalbard are also frequently mentioned in dispute and conflict scenarios. Unlike the Baltic and Black Sea regions (see Table 1), the Barents Sea region is a basing area for strategic nuclear weapons. This adds to the region's perceived strategic significance.

Should Russia, in a conflict with NATO, deploy an extended ‘bastion defence’ in the north, this could have potentially severe implications for the security situation of the country’s northwestern neighbours.

Russia’s western neighbours have a common fear of a negative spill-over from one border region to another. Incidents and episodes in each of the three regions discussed in this article may, if worse comes to worst, escalate not only along the ‘vertical’ axis (growing intensity), but also ‘horizontally’ (geographical expansion). Thus, a Russian–Western military confrontation in one region may not necessarily remain confined to that region, but spread to other regions, as part of a larger confrontation between Russia and NATO. The prevention of such a development should be a major priority for Russia’s western neighbours.

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