Strategic arena: Naval presence focuses international spotlight on Baltic Sea

Recent months have seen NATO and Chinese naval task groups exercising in the Baltic Sea, while the Russian navy is also operating some of its newest ships there. Dr Lee Willett considers the strategic importance of the Baltic Sea’s naval developments.

In July, three ships from China’s People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) visited the Baltic Sea. The flotilla consisted of the Type 052D Luyang III-class guided-missile destroyer Hefei, the Type 054A Jiangkai II guided-missile frigate Yuncheng, and the Type 903A Fuchi-class auxiliary vessel Luoma Hu. The ships joined Russian Federation Navy forces for the latest iteration of the Sino-Russian ‘Joint Seas’ exercise series.

Russian assets included the Project 20380/20381 Steregushchiy-class guided-missile frigates Steregushchiy and Boiky (embarking Ka-27 Helix anti-submarine warfare [ASW] helicopters), auxiliary platforms, and shore-based aircraft. According to various reports, the exercise aimed to improve co-operation on ASW, anti-air and anti-surface warfare (AAW and ASuW), counterpiracy, and securing sea lines of communication (SLOCs).

Assembled ships and submarines conduct a sail past exercise during ‘BALTOPS 2017’. Exercises such as ‘BALTOPS’ underline NATO’s growing focus on the Baltic region. (NATO Maritime Command)

This was the first time the ‘Joint Seas’ bilateral exercise had been conducted in the Baltic, with previous serials having taken place in the Black and Mediterranean seas and the Pacific Ocean. Drills took place off St Petersburg and the Kaliningrad enclave – Russia’s access points into the

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Baltic, and in the case of Kaliningrad, a focus of current international tension with Russian military build-ups ashore close to NATO’s Baltic member states.

According to reports NATO viewed the exercise as a demonstration of China’s growing military capabilities and global role. En route to the Baltic, the PLAN flotilla conducted exercises in the Mediterranean before being escorted through the English Channel and North Sea by NATO ships from Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom. After ‘Joint Seas’ had concluded, the flotilla visited Helsinki, Finland.

Three Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) ships – the Type 052D Luyang III-class guided-missile destroyer Hefei, the Type 054A Jiangkai II guided-missile frigate Yuncheng, and the Type 903A Fuchi-class auxiliary vessel Luoma Hu – are pictured alongside in Helsinki, Finland. The ships visited the Finnish capital following the first ‘Joint Seas’ exercise in the Baltic Sea. (US Navy)

Despite the international coverage the PLAN’s presence attracted, a NATO spokesperson told Jane’s that all countries have a right to exercise and sail in international waters, provided they operate within the framework of international law.

“This is not the first time that Chinese warships have sailed into European waters, and NATO has worked with the Chinese navy previously in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden,” the spokesperson noted. “It is important for us to engage with China and NATO is committed to friendly relations.”

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Strategic significance

While China’s growing military strength and its increasingly close ties with Russia have been noted in NATO, the organisation’s re-focusing on higher-end operations has been driven by Russia’s military resurgence, including its renewed levels of naval activity across the European theatre.
The Baltic region is of considerable significance for Russia. The strategic future of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – former Soviet states that are now NATO members – remains a source of East-West tension. The Kaliningrad enclave – sandwiched between Lithuania and Poland – has also seen concerted Russian military build-up. Russia may see Kaliningrad as hemmed in by NATO, and Russian aircraft ‘buzzing’ NATO ships in the Baltic suggests Moscow may perceive a need to deter NATO forces from operating too regularly in the region and too closely to Kaliningrad.

The Baltic Sea provides Russia’s maritime access along its Western flank. What it sees as growing NATO naval pressure in the North Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean may be prompting Moscow to boost naval activity in the Baltic to ease this strategic squeeze.

While the Baltic may be strategically important to Russia, Moscow is seeking to expand military activity on all flanks – in the Barents Sea, North Atlantic, and Arctic region to the north, in the Black and Mediterranean seas to the south, and in the Pacific Ocean to the east. With economic challenges continuing to restrict spending on defence acquisition and industrial modernisation (although budgets remain larger than for some time), it is difficult for Russia to maintain planned modernisation levels across all fleets. The Northern Fleet retains strategic pre-eminence, and Russia’s apparent desire to generate its own Asia-Pacific ‘re-balance’ and its focus on building up the Black Sea Fleet to reinforce an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) buffer in the Eastern Mediterranean suggest that the Baltic Fleet places fourth on Moscow’s priority list.

In equipment terms this is demonstrated by the fact that, of more than 40 platforms of different types operating in the Baltic Fleet, only six are relatively new. These are the fleet’s four Project 20380/20381 Steregushchiy frigates (which entered service between 2007 and 2014) and two Project 21631 Buyan-M-class patrol vessels (which both entered service in December 2015). Russia’s Buyan-M platforms have featured prominently in operations in Syria, firing 3M14 Kalibr land-attack cruise missiles; such capability could boost Russian A2/AD aims in the Baltic region.
Also prominent in Russia’s Baltic Fleet are 12 mine warfare vessels. The Baltic region, with shallow waters and narrow access points, creates unique challenges for defensive and offensive mine countermeasures (MCM) operations alike.

NATO faces its own operational challenges, with a strategic requirement to commit air, land, and sea forces across the European theatre, covering the Arctic, the Baltic and Black seas, the Mediterranean, and the North Atlantic. The alliance must also generate presence ‘out of area’ if necessary, as it has in supporting counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan and counter-piracy operations off Somalia. However, since Russia’s return to the world stage, NATO’s strategic spotlight has swung sharply back to Europe.

In the Baltic, NATO’s primary focus is to reassure member and partner states: the Baltic states and Poland (in the former instance), and Finland and Sweden (in the latter instance). NATO’s Baltic naval presence is also designed to secure SLOCs on behalf of member and partner states in what is a busy maritime region.

Much of NATO’s assurance effort is based on supporting operations ashore, including from the sea. This was demonstrated in ‘BALTOPS 2017’, during which amphibious operations were conducted with land-based and organic maritime air operations integrated together to support the landings ashore. The support for activities ashore included NATO’s land-based exercise, ‘Saber Strike’, which took place in the Baltic states and Poland concurrent to ‘BALTOPS’.

Rear Admiral Paddy McAlpine – a UK Royal Navy officer and deputy commander of Striking and Support Forces NATO (SFN), the ‘BALTOPS’ host organisation – told Jane’s that “there are those that like to watch the exercise”. ‘BALTOPS 2017’ attracted Russian attention, with frigates, intelligence-gathering ships, and aircraft dispatched to observe proceedings. In a media briefing during ‘BALTOPS’ onboard the Royal Danish Navy’s (RDN’s) combat support ship HDMS Absalon, SFN’s political advisor James Smith noted that Russian presence around ‘BALTOPS’ was greater in 2017 than it had been in 2016. This year, just as last, “they came, they watched, they observed, they took notes no doubt, they recorded”, said Rear Adm McAlpine, “but it was very professional, safe; no real incidents”.

Lieutenant Commander Robert Lehman, executive officer of the German Navy’s lead Type 404 auxiliary ship FGS Elbe, said German and Russian naval ships continue to interact as they always have done. However, he noted greater levels of naval activity in the Baltic and a shift towards the eastern Baltic region, with more support being given to the Baltic states. “We have a good picture of what is going on in the Baltic Sea,” Lt Cdr Lehman added.

The PLAN has also paid attention to ‘BALTOPS’. In June 2016, its newly commissioned Type 054A Jiangkai II-class frigate Xiangtan deployed to the Baltic. While there were no PLAN ships observing ‘BALTOPS 2017’, the flotilla present for ‘Joint Seas’ highlighted Beijing’s growing ability to deploy its navy at distance, building political and economic links as well as demonstrating military capacity.

In terms of building trade links, Baltic deployments enable Beijing to stretch its ‘One Belt, One Road’ posture up towards the High North. In terms of military capacity, 2015 saw another three-ship PLAN flotilla demonstrate the navy’s ability to conduct around-the-world deployments: following Indian Ocean counter-piracy operations, the ships conducted port visits in the Baltic before sailing home via trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific crossings. The ‘Joint Seas 2017’
deployment included a Type 052D destroyer, regarded by some analysts as the PLAN's most capable warship. Hefei only entered service in 2015 and the deployment demonstrates the PLAN's confidence to operate its newest ships at distance.

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**Baltic activity**

The increasing level of military activity in the Baltic region is generating renewed political focus there, something that is noted by the navies themselves. In a briefing at Korsor Naval Base earlier in 2017, RDN deputy chief of staff for planning Captain Mikael Bill told Jane's that, in terms of political interest, the navy sees “a stronger focus … on the Baltic. Our co-operation with the Germans, for instance, will become much stronger”. In strategic terms, the Baltic Sea is ringed by six NATO members (Denmark, Germany, Poland, and the Baltic states), NATO partners Finland and Sweden, and Russia.

![The Royal Danish Navy's combat support ship HDMS Absalon conducts a replenishment-at-sea operation with the German Navy's Type 702 Berlin-class auxiliary vessel FGS Bonn during 'BALTOPS 2017'. Increasing focus on the Baltic region is seeing Denmark and Germany work more closely together. (NATO Maritime Command)](image)

In operational terms, Baltic waters present particular challenges, including confined, noisy, and shallow seas with complex underwater topography; varying levels of salinity (which creates difficulties and advantages for the ASW hunter and hunted, respectively); air and sea spaces cluttered with commercial and military traffic; critical infrastructure including large numbers of offshore resource platforms; and access via the narrow choke points of the Kattegat Sea and Skagerrak Strait.

For some of NATO’s Baltic navies, these operational challenges are shaping platform procurement. Commander (senior grade) Christian Moritz, responsible for plans, policy, and
international co-operation in Germany's naval staff, told the 2017 Underwater Defence Technology (UDT) conference in Bremen, Germany that the Baltic Sea environment "makes navigation and underwater operations particularly difficult". Moreover, with the German Navy focusing again on collective and homeland defence, alongside international crisis management (as stated in its 2016 defence white paper), the navy "will still have to be suited to operate at the northern flank" with its future platforms, Cdr Moritz added. For example, as it considers improving capability and endurance for its next-generation Type 212 Common Design (CD) diesel-electric submarine (SSK), the navy nonetheless will aim to ensure that the boat can operate effectively in such waters.

A number of NATO Baltic navies also are recognising the benefits of combined training, development, command and control (C2), and operational burden-sharing, in bilateral relations that provide spokes to reinforce the NATO 'hub'.

Sweden and Finland have established the Swedish-Finnish Naval Task Group (SFNTG), which will form the centrepiece of the Baltic-based ‘Northern Coasts‘ exercise taking place from 8-21 September 2017.

‘Northern Coasts 2016’ was run by the RDN's Danish Task Group (DATG). Talking to Jane’s in Korsor, Rear Admiral Torben Mikkelsen – now the RDN's chief of naval staff, but then the DATG’s commanding officer (CO) – said that ‘Northern Coasts’ “actually supplements the overall position within NATO to be more present in the Baltic region”. He added that the RDN was re-introducing its own national exercise, ‘DANEX’ – also taking place in September 2017 in the Baltic, and focusing on high-end littoral warfare – to help the navy train its own forces in task group operations.

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‘BALTOPS 2017’

‘BALTOPS 2017’ brings together NATO member and partner navies with different experiences of Baltic operations but with the common aim of achieving high-quality training to improve operational output. Working with Baltic navies provides other forces, such as the USN, with the opportunity to improve regional understanding. Such co-operation, said Vice Adm Grady, "brings a capability and a capacity that others don't have, plus [the Baltic navies] know the se waters. So, when you couple that local knowledge ... with the capability and capacity they bring, it fills in the spectrum of warfare that we bring as a joint and combined coalition fight".

For NATO, the aim of 'BALTOPS' is two-fold, Rear Adm McAlpine told Jane’s . First is “the assurance piece to the Baltic nations", he said. “Then, there’s the deterrence piece .... Anyone that would threaten the security of the Baltic nations would know that NATO has the ability to bring high-end warfighting presence absolutely into that theatre.”

According to Vice Adm Grady, ‘BALTOPS’ develops “the credibility of the deterrent value, of the presence that you bring”. Working together each year, he continued, “[makes] the capability and capacity better and better – and that builds credibility”.

At sea, ‘BALTOPS 2017’ was commanded from two ships, Absalon and the USN's San Antonio/LPD 17-class amphibious assault ship USS Arlington , with Standing NATO Maritime Group 1 (SNMG1) and Standing NATO Mine Counter Measures Group 1 (SNMCMG1) providing the exercise framework for the bulk of the surface ships present.
Commodore Ole Morten Sandquist, Commander SNMG1 embarked in the Royal Norwegian Navy (RNoN) Fridtjof Nansen-class frigate HNoMS *Roald Amundsen*, said ‘BALTOPS’ offers benefit because it includes all the different warfare elements and presents “a great opportunity in a complex scenario to actually train and exercise all the skills in a rather short period of time”.

For the first time in the ‘BALTOPS’ series, a primary output was the establishment of an integrated air-sea situational awareness picture. Through the use of a link-based tactical datalink, the picture could be shared across all exercise platforms and with shore-based command headquarters.

“We can build a recognised air picture, we can build a recognised maritime picture,” said Vice Adm Grady, “but what we really want to build is a current operating picture, which is both.” Delivering this picture to more than 50 ships and 55 aircraft, two submarines, and 14 different nations was “a very significant achievement”, he added. The ability to export the combined picture to shore-based headquarters meant that, for example, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) “could see what was happening in this very important part of the world”.

*US Marines conduct amphibious operations in Ustka, Poland, during ‘BALTOPS 2017’. Exercise serials included two live landings and one feint. (US Navy)*

Vice Adm Grady added that developing and sharing a combined picture improves the decision-making space. “It gives you more time to make appropriate tactical decisions and apportion resources to the problem set.” Highlighting the ability to build networks as an advantage the USN and allied navies bring, Vice Adm Grady noted, “We train the way we are going to fight by building networks that allow us to extend that battlespace.” NATO forces also train to fight without networks in degraded or denied environments, he added.
For example, during ‘BALTOPS’, the combined picture boosted NATO’s ability to use air assets to target the opposing forces’ air defences and support the amphibious elements.

Amphibious operations have been included in all recent ‘BALTOPS’ exercises. However, 2017 focused on amphibious outputs intended to reassure allies and partners and to send deterrent messages to potential adversaries.

Two amphibious landings (at Ventspils, Latvia and Ustka, Poland) and one feint (Putlos, Germany) were carried out. Capt Hannifin noted that conducting multinational amphibious exercises “not only [illustrates] to allies that we’re committed … but to potential adversaries that we bring a capability to boost or to reinforce a hot-spot, a crisis popping up anywhere – not just in the Baltic region, but showing that we can work with allies to make that happen anywhere, anytime, from the sea”.

A rigid-hull inflatable boat assigned to the Estonian Navy’s coastal minelayer EML Wambola departs from the German Navy’s Type 404 auxiliary ship FGS Elbe. Mine countermeasures serials – with SNMCMG1 led by Wambola – were a central part of NATO’s ‘BALTOPS 2017’ training programme. (NATO Maritime Command)

The two submarines – the Royal Swedish Navy’s A 19 Gotland-class SSK HSwMS Halland and the Polish Navy’s Kobben-class SSK ORP Bielik – were encouraged to operate aggressively to push surface ship and maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) skills. A number of MPAs were available, including USN P-8A Poseidon aircraft.

Rear Adm McAlpine said ‘BALTOPS’ “reiterates and reaffirms the importance of having MPAs as part of your order of battle. We can use them in support, but we also use the MPAs to beat down on submarines … to keep them away from the surface assets and the high-value units”.

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The use of alliance constructs can allow smaller forces within such alliances to focus on particular capability areas. For a number of NATO’s Baltic navies, one area is mine warfare. The region’s shallow waters and narrow maritime access points – along with the presence of large amounts of legacy First World War, Second World War, and Cold War ordnance – drive this focus. More than two-dozen mine countermeasures vessels (MCMVs) were present for ‘BALTOPS’. During the first phase of the MCM serials, the platforms familiarised themselves with the environment and with each other’s equipment and ways of operating, before moving on to tackle serials involving multiple contacts of different mine types.

Lieutenant Commander Menno Visser, a Dutch naval officer embarked in the Estonian Navy’s coastal minelayer EML Wambola as SNMCMG1 CoS, said the emerging focus on higher-end operations in the Baltic region has not changed the MCM operational requirement, although it has underscored the necessity to establish a good recognised maritime picture to enhance awareness of other operations going on.

However, Lt Cdr Visser did note that technology in Baltic MCM operations is changing, with an increased use of remotely operated vehicles (ROVs). “In the Baltic, where there is no current, it is a really suitable environment to use the ROV,” he said. “You can see the involvement of more and more autonomous vehicles, more ROVs in whatever disposition, taking care of charges.”

During the MCM tactical phase serials included different layers, for example with MCMVs operating while under an air threat. The MCMVs also worked to clear routes through minefields to enable the passage of follow-on forces, such as opening up routes for amphibious elements.

Rear Adm McAlpine noted that the availability of the combined picture helped the MCMVs build situational understanding. With smaller vessels like MCMVs not fitted with the same levels of C2 display as a destroyer or frigate, communications were vital to enabling the MCMVs to operate while the surface escorts dealt with air and other attacks designed to test the MCMVs’ ability to conduct their core task under pressure, Rear Adm McAlpine said.

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### Training for effect

While naval personnel and commentators alike often point to the strategic impact of exercises taking place in a particular region at a particular time, the primary reason for conducting an exercise is to achieve training effect. 'BALTOPS' has taken place for many years, but commentators and naval personnel have noted the recent focus in NATO exercises such as 'BALTOPS' on improving quality and impact, especially in higher-end operations.

SFN deputy commander Rear Adm McAlpine noted that ‘BALTOPS 2017’ saw an increase in the number, intensity, and sophistication of training serials. As well as the warfighting deterrent that NATO provides, "just as important in everything that we do [is] we have to be good value for money for all of the participating nations, and so therefore we have to provide absolutely the best training that they need and that we think they should be doing", he said.

Rear Adm McAlpine noted that a big change this year was the addition of a full programme for the opposition forces. "In previous years, they were targets; they didn't get enough training out of it. This year, they had their own exercise control," he remarked. "They had their own boss …. They had their own rules of engagement; they had their own political background; they had their own press."

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Jane’s Defence Industry and Markets Intelligence Centre

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