Maritime NATO After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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In 2022, the world witnessed full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine, the return of mine threats and other attacks on shipping in the Black Sea, and an acute awareness of the vulnerability of subsea infrastructure. The blockade of Ukrainian grain threatened food supply on a global scale. All of these threats had a maritime dimension, some of them a dominant one. The Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM) in Northwood UK was called on to lead maritime NATO's response to the war that began in February, support maritime security, assure Allies and deter Russia from expanding its war to NATO. The period since February 2022 has proved transformational for MARCOM and for the Alliance's deterrence and defense posture on the seas.

The maritime dimension of NATO constitutes a strategic unity that links the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) across the Atlantic, the North Atlantic and GIUK Gap, the Norwegian Sea, the Arctic passages to the Pole, the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. But this strategic unity also exists beyond the NATO Area of Responsibility (AOR) to the seas and oceans that feed our trade and commerce around the world. In the context of the current crises, the seas matter tactically due to the potential threat of sea-based missile attack on Allied ships or indeed land targets. They matter operationally in the ability of an adversary to disrupt SLOCs between North America and Europe and within the NATO Area of Responsibility. And they matter politically as the symbol of our essential connectedness as an Alliance.

Deterrence, always NATO's primary task, was given new urgency after the Russian illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in the Donbas. NATO Summits in Wales 2014 and Warsaw 2016 expanded and reoriented the NATO Response Force away from the out-of-area crisis management assumptions of the Post-Cold War Era, and back towards collective defense.[1] The command structure reforms of 2018 saw the establishment of Joint Force Command Norfolk to secure the Atlantic SLOCs.[2] And within NATO, new thinking saw the release of the NATO Military Strategy and then the Concept for Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) which set NATO up well when Russia launched its attack on Ukraine.[3] The specifics of DDA are classified, but the essential point is the appreciation that credible deterrent posture and defense planning must deal with all of NATO's geography. There is no crisis or conflict with a peer power in one region only, to be addressed by one small NRF task force, all deployed to one place at one time. Rather, the Alliance needs to present dilemmas for potential aggression along several vectors, tailored to the effects needed in each area but reinforcing all of them. A further key element is the need to effectively coordinate NATO and national activity to leverage the totality of Allied military power in planning and employing the Alliance's overall deterrent posture. Because adversaries can tell the difference between mere activity and a credible posture. Sea Power excels at delivering these kinds of effects.

HOW 2022 CHANGED MARITIME NATO
As NATO's Theatre Maritime Component Commander and Principal Maritime Advisor to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), a great part of the command and coordination responsibility at sea fell on MARCOM's shoulders. MARCOM commands NATO's four Standing Maritime Groups – the Standing Naval Forces (SNF) of two Frigate/Destroyer
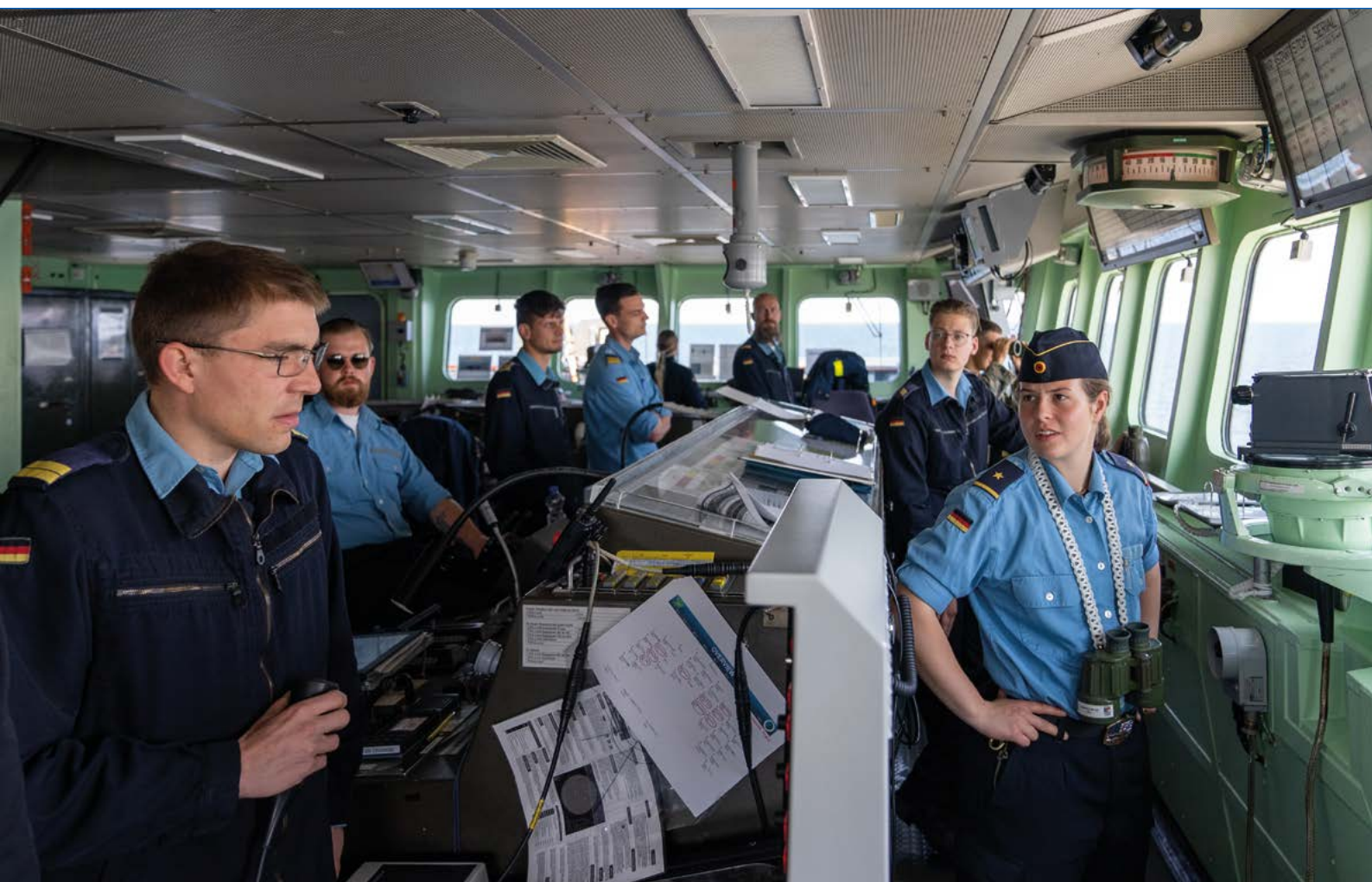
German Navy sailors discuss tactics on the German GS Bayern during BALTOPS 23. The exercise is controlled by Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO (STRIKFORNATO) (foto: NATO)

task groups and two mine countermeasures task groups, as well as Operation Sea Guardian focused on maritime security in the Mediterranean. Force generation had been a major challenge for more than a decade. But since March 2022 the SNF has been at or near full strength, with 26-29 ships under MARCOM's Operational Control. On a typical ratio of 3:1 between the ships required in national inventory to have a fully trained, certified, ready warship deployed at sea, if NATO were a Navy, it would be a navy with fifty DDG/FFGs and thirty MCMs in its order of battle. That is larger than any individual navy in NATO other than the US. Being fully resourced in 2022 provided SACEUR and MARCOM with greatly enhanced flexibility and deterrence management options. MARCOM was able to respond quickly to Allied calls for deterrent presence and assurance throughout the year.

The second critical task as Theatre Maritime Commander is coordination with national navies to deliver the deterrent posture that the North Atlantic Council has directed amidst changing tactical balances and the cascade of events of a Europe in wartime. The response of Allied navies to the crisis was to increase our deterrence and defense presence at sea, strengthen interoperability and become as agile and flexible as possible. On a typical day, the balance between deployed Allied and Russian maritime forces ranges from 2:1 on a bad day, to more than 5:1 on an ever more common good day as Allies deployed more of their naval assets. But with such scale advantages comes a potential vulnerability: NATO's inability to combine that fleet, to join up those 'blue dots' in an integrated, effective way. That is why a critical component of MARCOM's command, coordination and exercise strategies is to ensure that Alliance maritime forces are capable of rapid force integration, and that this is understood by any adversary.

Maritime NATO's ability to act coherently – for deterrent effect – was strikingly demonstrated in the spring of 2022 when MARCOM played a key coordinating role between four Allied Carrier Strike Groups: the TRUMAN strike group commanded by Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO (STRIKFORNATO) in the Adriatic under NATO Command;[4] the CHARLES DE GAULLE strike group in the Eastern Mediterranean; the CAVOUR strike group in the Central Med; and the PRINCE OF WALES strike group in the North Atlantic. All but the TRUMAN are under national command, but effectively aligned and correctly positioned to demonstrate forward defense and contest any move against, or coercion of, the Alliance in those uncertain early months of the war. The initiative led to a regular Maritime Strike Forum, co-hosted by MARCOM and STRIKFOR-

Croatian crew members on board Croatian Navy vessel HRMV Vukovar prepare for boarding exercise during Operation Sea Guardian. (Foto: NATO)

NATO, to share ideas and coordinate carrier strike presence across the NATO AOR. In 2023, STRIKFORNATO became the central hub for command and coordination of carrier strike assets in support of NATO, demonstrated in a series of NEPTUNE STRIKE evolutions.[5]

PARADIGM SHIFT

But we were also reminded in 2022 that Sea Power is more than battleships, or their modern equivalents. The Nord Stream pipeline explosions catapulted the challenge of undersea critical infrastructure protection to global prominence. Drifting mines in the Black Sea presented a threat to shipping. The Russian blockade of Ukrainian grain exports and attacks on civilian ships and ports, not justified by the laws of war, threatened to make grain unaffordable for large parts of the developing world. As a result, NATO actively explored how it can support Allies in the area of critical seabed infrastructure and is closely focused on the food supply challenge out of the Black Sea and the impact on commercial shipping.

The war begun in 2022 also completed a paradigm shift in the understanding of maritime security. The Alliance Maritime Strategy of 2011, on whose drafting team the author served, considered maritime security solely in the frame of threats from private actors.[6] The classic case was Horn of Africa piracy. But in the noughties, we increasingly saw insurgents and proxies impact maritime security, such as the Houthis in Yemen and the warring sides in Libya. Then there were direct but denied state attacks on shipping by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps in the Gulf. But in 2022 this paradigm of maritime security as a non-state actor affair imploded with Russian attacks and losses of merchant vessels, the grain crisis, floating mines in the Black Sea, and the pipeline explosions. The Strategic Concept adopted in Madrid recognized this shift when it committed to strengthening posture and awareness to deter and defend against all threats, uphold freedom of navigation, secure maritime trade routes and protect main lines of communication, threats more state than non-state in origin.[7]

In sum, we learned some important lessons in 2022, many with heavy maritime relevance. Once the dice of war are rolled, it is extremely hard to put the clock back. Deterrence really matters and is worth shoring up at sea. The Ukraine conflict also pushed aside the notion that any 21st-century great-power war would necessarily be short. Once Russia had lost its initial gambit on collapsing the government in Kyiv, the conflict became a protracted, attritional ground campaign. This puts a premium on the transatlantic SLOCs and the materiel rein-

forcement that only the US can provide in a protracted conflict involving NATO. The ending of European energy dependence on Russia means that strategic quantities of energy, especially LNG, are and will be transported by sea: an asset and a potential vulnerability. Finally, critical undersea infrastructure is fertile terrain for grey-zone attacks.

THE ROAD TO VILNIUS

The June 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius was the moment for the Alliance to take stock of the events of 2022 and plan its next steps. Vilnius was not intended to be a pivotal Summit. It followed Warsaw where the ambitious NATO Force Model and Strategic Concept were agreed, and precedes Washington in 2024 to mark the 75th anniversary of the Alliance. But the impact of the conflict in Ukraine thrust key challenges onto the agenda for the Heads of State and Government, issues that could not wait.

Not all NATO Summits have substantial and direct implications for the maritime area, but this one arguably did. The issues included Ukraine, Regional Plans, Sweden, critical undersea infrastructure, China and nuclear planning. As with most important Summits, several of the key deliverables were decided at, or just prior to, the event itself.

To begin with Ukraine: Offering Ukraine a solid path to NATO membership had been a hot debate topic in the run-up to Vilnius, and the outcome will likely be remembered as the main 'deliverables' of the Summit. Of course, admitting Ukraine as a member in current circumstances would immediately have put NATO at war with Russia. The trending alternative was a hard commitment by Allies to support Ukraine's ability to prevail in the war, and to modernize its armed forces, akin to the US guarantee of materiel support to Israel.[8] To date, NATO as an organization has provided non-lethal assistance while Allies provided weaponry, but a multi-year funding program was agreed at the Summit. A new NATO-Ukraine Council was established that could take executive decisions. And most importantly, it was decided that Ukraine no longer needed a Membership Action Plan, making NATO membership essentially a political decision not a bureaucratic process.[9] As Carl Bildt noted, there can now be no doubt that Ukraine will become a NATO member one day.

MARITIME DELIVERABLES

These moves have maritime implications, given Ukraine's need to secure access to the Black Sea. A closer NATO-Ukraine partnership is likely to foster enhanced maritime cooperation. Future NATO involvement in mine clearance and maritime security is foreseeable, particularly if some pause or ceasefire is achieved. A major question for the Alliance's deterrent posture is the return of non-regional NATO warships to the Black Sea, where they have been absent since December 2021.[10] The issue – a classic example of striking the balance between deterrence and escalation - is under regular review, but was not directly raised at Vilnius. The Summit's stress on defending all Allies and the approval of new Regional Plans does, however, strengthen the case. In any event, the routine presence of Allied Carrier Strike Groups in the Adriatic and Eastern Mediterranean, well capable of responding to contingencies in the Black Sea, provides a powerful deterrent signal to Russia.

The Baltic Sea was also in play at Vilnius. Finland acceded to NATO prior to the Summit, and at Vilnius the Turkish government agreed to forward Sweden's accession to the Assembly. An Alliance that includes Sweden and Finland as members will confirm the dramatic changes to the deterrent dynamics of the Baltic Sea since 2021, a fundamentally maritime area of operations. New planning on multi-layered defense in depth drawing lessons from Ukraine, including the use of loitering drones, low-signature units, shore-based anti-ship missiles, HIMARS, improved MSA and mining capabilities, is already in play and will likely be accelerated.

The second main deliverable at Vilnius was approval of the new defense plans. These specify Allied actions for deterrence and defense in much greater detail than anything since the Cold War. Moreover, they are intended to directly link into NATO's Defence Planning Process. There is a strong maritime dimension, including application of carrier strike and amphibious power projection, as well as multi-domain ASW capabilities. The result will be much needed clarity on what NATO expects from Allied maritime forces, qualitatively and quantitatively. This should feed back into national force development. Command and control was clarified with an emphasis on unified and coherent command across the NATO Command and Force Structures.

The third maritime deliverable of Vilnius was confirmation of a maritime security initiative focused on critical undersea infrastructure (CUI).[11] Following the Nord Stream pipeline explosions, NATO has considered how it could support nations in securing CUI. A Coordination Cell has been established at NATO Headquarters that will be the strategic-level hub of the enterprise. A Maritime Centre for the Security of Critical Undersea Infrastructure at MARCOM as the operational hub was announced at Vilnius and is in the process of standing up. The challenge is considerable. Russian activities at sea have made clear their interest in this infrastructure. Maritime and air assets cannot guard every inch of maritime CUI space, nor should they, as the other deterrence and defense requirements are still with us. But rapid response, new surveillance technology to map the threat, and sharing best practices in close networks with nations and industry can allow NATO to enhance its support to Allies in securing CUI. The challenge is not limited to the Baltic, but includes all the strategic seas of the Alliance and elements as diverse as gas pipelines, IT cables, oil rigs and wind farms.

Finally, the Summit addressed concerns over China with the

Nord Stream 1 pipeline in Lubmin, Germany. shutterstock.com / nitpicker

'P4' Asia-Pacific Partners Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea, represented by their heads of government for the second time at a NATO Summit. The Pacific is another predominantly maritime theatre of operations. But the concern over China extends back into Europe with Chinese control of important ports and infrastructure, as well as IT networks. The closeness of Russia and China was a concern at the Summit. From a maritime perspective, the risk of a weakened and embattled Russia sharing advanced submarine technology with China, or opening up the Arctic to Chinese naval presence, may quietly press on the mind.

LOOKING FORWARD TO 2024
As 2023 winds down, a number of efforts remain pressing for NATO and its maritime dimension. The ending of the war against Ukraine, grain exports and maritime security in the Black Sea remain critical concerns. Swedish accession, when completed, will begin a process of new planning to take full advantage of Swedish and Finnish membership in the Alliance. The New Force Model, agreed in Warsaw, and the new defense plans from Vilnius are being implemented together. The conflict between Israel and Hamas, being fought currently, will have a substantial impact on regional security dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean. The NATO leaders will have much to grapple with at the 75th Anniversary Summit in Washington next summer.

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