Continuity and change – lessons from 1000 years of geopolitics in the Baltic Sea area

Gunnar Åselius

Department of Operations, Swedish Defence University, Stockholm, Sweden

ABSTRACT

The geopolitical location of the Baltic Sea region between the Russian heartland and the Atlantic Ocean has shaped developments in this part of Europe for at least a millennium. The traditional narrative in the Baltic Sea tells of hegemonic powers succeeding each other in a continuous struggle to control trade routes and exclude non-littoral powers, from the Vikings to Tsarist Russia. Since industrialization, war and military tension in the Baltic Sea have reflected European and global great power rivalries more than regional tensions. While the hegemonic powers in the Baltic Sea have changed repeatedly through the centuries, infrastructure and terrain in the region have always been unfavourable to the large-scale projection of military power, giving a defender the upper hand. Now, the increased range and accuracy of modern weapon systems seem to have changed that. Moreover, climatic changes expected in the coming century may transform the geopolitical environment even further.

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Introduction

This article will review the history of the Baltic Sea region from a geopolitical perspective. It will sketch out the main challenges and changes across 1000 years of developments in the Baltic Sea region. When examining the history of this region – a geographical area – it is necessary to discuss the many important ways in which geography has shaped the development of societies around the Baltic Sea. In particular, the structure of agriculture and social stratification in the countryside, the patterns of industrialization and of trade across the Baltic Sea region, can only be understood with reference to concrete geographical factors that shape each part of the region. Indeed, beginning with the Vikings and ending with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU), a surprising level of continuity, rather than change, can be found. This continuity is, as this contribution will argue, due to the fact that the physical realities of warfare have hardly changed through the centuries. It is less certain, however, that those geographical characteristics will carry similar weight in the future.

In its analysis this article departs from what is traditionally understood with the term “geopolitics”: the relationship between geography, state power and inter-state relations.
The first part will shortly recapitulate the traditional narrative on geography, trade and power in the Baltic Sea area – a tale of hegemonic powers succeeding each other through the centuries. The second part will then point out some other lessons which geography can offer from the perspective of military history. The third part will discuss the relevance of geopolitical perspectives in analyzing the contemporary developments around the Baltic Sea.

**Geography, trade and power in the Baltic Sea region**

The traditional narrative emphasizes the geographic position of the Baltic Sea between the Atlantic Ocean in the West and the Eurasian continent in the East. The Baltic Sea region holds a dual status: it is both a prolongation of the oceans and a secluded inland sea. Since ancient times, the flow of trade between the maritime civilizations of Western Europe and the continental civilizations of Eastern Europe and beyond has been passing through the Baltic Sea. The dividends of that trade have created wealth and resources, and been the cause of rivalry and wars between the local powers in the region (see Åselius, 2003, for an overview).

The traditional narrative about power in the Baltic Sea region starts with the Vikings. In the early Middle Ages, when Arab conquests and piracy had diverted Mediterranean trade northwards to the Black Sea and the rivers of Russia, the Baltic Sea came to play a crucial role in East–West trade. The profits from this trade yielded enormous resources to various Scandinavian chieftains and enabled the Vikings to expand territorially over Western Europe. This accumulation of resources also contributed to state formation in both Scandinavia and Kievskaya Rus during the tenth and eleventh centuries.

The next phase usually has to do with the Germans. The crusades in the twelfth century opened the Mediterranean trade again and the importance of the “Baltic round-about” decreased. Although Scandinavian influence in present day Estonia and Latvia continued during the thirteenth century, it was the crusading Teutonic Knights who came to dominate the area of the present Baltic states during the Middle Ages. In their wake came German merchants and during the Middle Ages, the Hanseatic League came to control trade between the Baltic Sea region and Western Europe. The German merchants made their imprint on city planning and architecture around the Baltic Sea. The impressive brick buildings they erected in cities like Stockholm and Lübeck, Gdansk, Visby and Tallinn still form an important part in the regional identity and sense of belonging.

The Germans were followed by the Swedes in their role as representatives of the dominant power in the Baltic Sea region. The dissolution of the Realm of the Teutonic Knights in Livonia in the mid-sixteenth century triggered a fierce, century-long competition between Sweden and Denmark, to fill the ensuing power-vacuum. To some extent this struggle also involved Poland and Lithuania. The outlook of the Polish-Lithuanian state was constantly diverted eastwards, into Ukraine. Though because the Polish kings failed to fully subjugate their aristocracy or established a modern administrative system, they never acquired the revenues necessary to build a Navy which could have enabled them to engage in power projection around the Baltic Sea (Anderson, 2013, pp. 279–298).
In the early eighteenth century, Russia then replaced Sweden as the leading power in the Baltic Sea region, as Peter the Great’s modernization of the Russian Empire required direct access to the trade routes with Western Europe.

Exports from the region had changed character in the sixteenth century. Having consisted mostly of fur, wax and dried fish during the Middle Ages, the rise of trans-Atlantic shipping after Columbus’ discovery of America created new demands. In order to construct ocean-going sailing ships, timber, tar, hemp and flax from the Gulf of Bothnia and the Baltic provinces became vital commodities. In addition, there was a demand for grain from Poland and Prussia to feed the growing urban population in the Netherlands and the British Isles. As a consequence of growing commodity exports, Baltic trade not only became profitable but strategic in nature. Danish historian Knud Jespersen has even compared the Baltic Sea in the seventeenth century to the Persian Gulf in the late-twentieth century. In both cases, we have a region exporting raw materials vital to the economy and security of the leading global powers, and therefore regularly prompting intervention by the navies of these powers to avoid local actors from acquiring hegemony. The Dutch supported the Swedes against the Danes in 1643, then the Danes against the Swedes in 1658 and then again the Swedes against the Danes in 1700 (Jespersen, 1994).

For similar purposes, the British Royal Navy intervened in the Baltic no less than twenty times before 1814, mainly to prevent Russian domination (Grainger, 2014). During the Great Northern War (1700–1721), the foundation of Saint Petersburg in 1703 marked Russia’s return to the Baltic Sea (from which the country had been isolated since the Swedish capture of Narva in 1581). A Russian naval base was established in the Gulf of Finland, and from 1714 Swedish naval supremacy was successfully challenged. The British, who had been moderately supportive of the Russians for a few years in the middle of the Great Northern War, by 1717 shifted towards supporting the Swedes (Aldridge, 2009).

During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815), when the gap in resources between different actors in the international system increased dramatically, both Sweden and Denmark were reduced to small power status. They could no longer play an active role in the European system. Moreover, when steam by the mid-1800s had replaced wind as the main source of propulsion at sea, and steel had replaced wood as the principal building material in warships, exports from the Baltic region lost the strategic and economic significance they had held for at least three centuries. In 1800, as much as seventy percent of Russia’s total exports passed through Baltic ports. In 1890, this portion had sunk to less than a third, reflecting a restructuring of trade as well as the rise of railway transportation (Attman, 1973).

Ever since the Napoleonic Wars, the Baltic Sea for the most part stands out as a region of low tension in Europe. Since then wars and periods of military confrontation in the region as a rule have been a reflection of great power rivalry rooted in a competition that is essentially taking place outside the region: the British–Russian rivalry until 1890, the Russo-German rivalry until 1945 and the US-Soviet rivalry during the Cold War. This was also true of the wars between Denmark and the German states in the mid-nineteenth century, which must be analyzed in the wider context of German unification and Prussian-Austrian rivalry in Central Europe at the time. Likewise, the rise of military tension around the Baltic Sea in later years does not have regional causes primarily, but should be seen against the backdrop of deteriorating relations between Russia and the US-EU over Ukraine (see Andrei Tyushka’s contribution, in this Forum).
Geography and warfare in the Baltic Sea region

Another geographic dimension, which is crucial for the understanding of when and how governments can assert their power, is that of military geography: how has the landscape and terrain around the Baltic Sea influenced the great powers’ different options of using military force in the region? While the dominating powers in the Baltic Sea have changed repeatedly during the past millennium, the physical realities of warfare demonstrate a remarkable continuity.

The Baltic Sea region has never been a particularly densely populated part of Europe. Pine forests and swamps, minor plateaus and some mountains dominate the terrain. Roads are few, and the few built-up areas are located along coasts and rivers. Winters are long. Before the industrialization started, these sparsely populated lands offered limited possibilities to supply armies. Military operations on land normally consisted of sieges or small-scale raiding across borders. Only in Denmark and the southern parts of Sweden, large plains can be found that are similar to those in Ukraine, Germany, Flanders, northern France and northern Italy, where the classical European theatres of war are located (see Glete, 1999, for an assessment of the Baltic Sea as a theatre of military operations).

When Charles XII prepared to invade Russia in 1707–1708, the Baltic provinces and Finland were too poor to serve as his logistical base area. During the Russo-Swedish War over Finland in 1808–1809 there were at most some 60,000 soldiers engaged, counting all soldiers on both sides. An operational theatre covering all of Finland and northern Sweden – well comparable in size with all of Germany or all of Italy – could hardly feed a force equivalent to two army corps in Napoleon’s Grande Armée (see Hårdstedt, 2002, for logistical aspects of the war of 1808–1809). Not until the twentieth century, after railways and motorized vehicles had revolutionized land transport, could major military operations become at all possible in this corner of Europe.

The difficult terrain with forests and swamps favours the defender, rather than the attacker. This was demonstrated repeatedly during the Second World War. In 1939–1940 and in 1944 in Karelia, in Estonia and Latvia in 1944–1945, Soviet forces attacked with great superiority in numbers, mobility and firepower. Still, the Finnish and German defenders managed surprisingly well in slowing down and eventually stopping the Soviet forces’ advance by exploiting the terrain. The Red Army’s superiority was of little use in a battlefield covered by forest, where there were few good roads allowing encircling movements. The Germans in the Kurland Pocket in Latvia remained until May 1945. Also, the German troops along the Arctic coast could probably have delayed the Red Army’s Petsamo-Kirkenes Operation in October 1944 for a considerable time, had they not been retreating already at the time of this Soviet offensive. The attacking Soviet forces had but one supply route. Provisions had to be transported by reindeer, dropped from the air in parachute or carried on the backs of the Soviet soldiers who struggled under burdens of fifty-sixty kilos (cf. Appel, 2001; Frieser, 2007; Gebhardt, 1990).

One notable change in naval warfare was the introduction of mines, torpedoes and aircraft during the twentieth century, which turned the narrow Baltic Sea into a dangerous environment for large surface warships. Nonetheless, in this theatre of operations, ground forces have always relied on artillery and logistical support from warships. In countries where there were no roads, sea transport and close interaction between naval and ground forces became crucial to military success. Since only small vessels have the
mobility and operational diversity required along the island-clad coasts and archipelagos of the Northern and South-Eastern Baltic Sea, this military development has required a highly specialized amphibious capacity with small mobile vessels and well-trained naval infantry.

In ancient times, oared galley fleets secured these functions, closely following the movements of the armies along coasts and rivers. It is noteworthy that only in the early eighteenth century, after Czar Peter the Great had created a galley-fleet in the Baltic Sea, Russia could conquer Sweden’s provinces in present day Estonia, Latvia and Finland. The fall of the fortress of Sveaborg outside Helsinki in the spring of 1808 secured Finland to the Russians – not because the fortress itself was so important, but because the Russians captured the Swedish archipelago fleet – some 110 vessels – at the same time. Without these small ships, the Swedish army in could no longer operate in road-less Finland (Glete, 1994).

During the wars of the twentieth century, amphibious forces were also important. Among the First World War amphibious operations, the German landing in Riga Bay in the autumn of 1917 was second only to the allied landing in Gallipoli, and a great deal more successful. The swift capture of the Estonian Saarema and Hiiumaa islands outflanked the defences of Petrograd and forced the Russian Baltic Fleet to retreat into the Gulf of Finland (military setbacks which in turn undermined the authority of the Russian Provisional Government and facilitated the Bolshevik seizure of power a couple of weeks later) (Barrett, 2008). Likewise, during the Soviet offensives in Finnish Karelia and the Petsamo-Kirkenes area in 1944, the lack of suitable roads on which to conduct encircling movements forced the Soviets to make several landing operations in the flank and rear of their opponents. During the Cold War, the threat of surprise landing operations ensured that Russia, Finland, Sweden and Norway would preserve their fixed coastal artillery batteries until the end of the twentieth century. By then, such military installations were long since deemed outdated in other countries due to the threat from guided-missiles and jet aircraft (the US disbanded its Coast Artillery Corps already in 1950) (Faringdon, 1989, pp. 282–317).

The contemporary strategic geography in the Baltic Sea

One could argue that after the Cold War, the Baltic Sea region was firmly encapsulated in the West through organizations such as the EU and NATO. Almost three hundred years of Russian dominance had been broken (see Andrei Tyushka’s contribution, in this Forum, for the significance for Russian geopolitical narratives). On the other hand, the Baltic Sea now regained an important economic role for Russia in a way in which it had not since the nineteenth century. The EU became Russia’s most important economic partner and a substantial part of Russia’s export consisted of raw materials, oil and gas, mainly pumped out through the Nord Stream gas pipelines (see Magnus Ekengren’s contribution, in this Forum, for an overview of developments in the Baltic Sea region since the end of the Cold War). In 2013, Russia exported 93% of its total oil production this way. Shipping in the Baltic Sea, on the other hand, has decreased in international importance. Since the 1950s, the shift towards container shipping has gradually reduced the significance of Baltic Sea ports, as none of them – with the exception of Copenhagen and Malmö – can receive ships with a draft exceeding nine metres. From the perspective of global trade, the ports around the Baltic Sea are nowadays mere satellites to Rotterdam and
Antwerpen, which constitute the real connection between northern Europe and the main oceanic trade routes (Malmlöf & Tejpar, 2013).

In a world where people, goods, money and information circulate freely in global networks, a traditional European sub-region like the Baltic Sea region might no longer be a relevant framework of analysis. Although today the optimistic atmosphere of the 1990s – when the Russian military withdrew from the Baltic States, Poland and eastern Germany – feels rather distant, the remilitarization of the area in later years will not necessarily have similar consequences as during the Cold War. The range of modern weapon systems like the Russian Iskander ballistic missile and the S-400 anti-aircraft missile, as well as the increasing accuracy of military technology for detection and targeting, give rise to doubts whether the traditional characteristics of the Baltic Theater of Operations as a destitute wilderness remain valid. Today, ships and aircraft are vulnerable to conventional weapons on distances up to 300 or even 500 km. Missile installations located in Kaliningrad have the capability to prevent NATO forces from entering the Baltic Sea through the Danish Straits. At the same time, Russian ships and ground installations in Kaliningrad can be destroyed from Danish waters by US long-range missile systems like the AGM-158 JASSM and the AGM-158C. Ground forces, even when deploying after nightfall in forest terrain in the inner parts of Scandinavia, will be vulnerable to attacks with precision-guided weapons, delivered from ships and aircraft operating in the Baltic Sea or the Atlantic. Moreover, the tempting option of cyber warfare against modern societies, with their sensitive high-tech infrastructure and weak redundancy, could mean that future military conflicts will be quite short and comparatively bloodless (at least initially).

As we have seen, initiatives concerning peace and war drifted away from the region already in the early nineteenth century, when the strategic significance of Baltic trade decreased and the resources required for great power status could no longer be mobilized locally (see Magnus Ekengren’s contribution, in this Forum, for the possibilities for security community building around the Baltic Sea). Since then, military tensions in the area have reflected great power confrontation on a European or global level, rather than neighbourly quarrels (see, however, Mikhail Suslov’s and Andrei Tyushka’s contributions, in this Forum). Recent developments in military technology and the expansion of operational reach further limit the autonomy of regional actors, as well as the influence of local terrain. Moreover, the prospect of global climatic changes in the coming century may have consequences for vegetation; weather conditions and even population density in northern Europe (see Peter Haldén’s contribution, in this Forum, for this discussion). Then, the old familiar environment around the Baltic Sea is likely to transform into something new. After ten centuries, geopolitics around the Baltic Sea could well be about to enter a new phase.

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Notes on contributor

Gunnar Åselius is Professor of Military History at the Swedish Defence University. His production include The “Russian Menace to Sweden”: the Belief System of a Small Power Security Élite in the Age
of Imperialism (1994); “La géographie suédoise militaire dans une perspective historique”, Revue Strategique (2003); The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Navy in the Baltic, 1921-1941 (2005); Krigen under kalla kriget [The Wars during the Cold War] (2007); “Schwedien und der Krieg, 1500–1814”, Thomas Kolnberger & Ilja Steffelbauer (Hg), Krieg in der europäischen Neuzeit (2010); “Sweden and the Pomeranian War”, Mark H Danley & Patrick J Speelman (eds), The Seven Years’ War: Global Views (2012).

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