

How Russia Defends Its Baltic Lifeline

by Ekaterina Zolotova - December 13, 2024

European authorities are pretty sure someone is deliberately cutting their undersea cables and scrambling ships' navigation systems in the Baltic Sea, and they are pretty sure Russia is involved. They are probably right. With its war against Ukraine occupying most of Russia's military resources, and Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO threatening to turn the Baltic Sea into a "NATO lake," Moscow is apparently turning to hybrid attacks to protect its position in the Baltic region.

In November, two undersea fiber optic cables (one between Lithuania and Gotland Island, the other between Germany and Finland) suddenly went offline less than 24 hours apart. Finding that the cables had been severed, investigators quickly zeroed in on a Chinese bulk carrier that had left Russia's port of Ust-Luga a couple of days earlier and that was in the vicinity of the cables when they shut down. They believe Russian officials induced the ship's crew to drag its anchor along the seabed for more than 160 kilometers (100 miles) to sabotage the cables. Lending credibility to their suspicions, a nearly identical incident occurred in October 2023 involving a Chinese container ship dragging its anchor and damaging telecoms cables linking Estonia to Finland and Sweden as well as a Finland-Estonia gas pipeline. Meanwhile, European ships operating in the Baltic Sea are increasingly reporting issues with their navigation systems. European officials have accused Russia of jamming navigation satellite signals and falsifying (or "spoofing") automatic identification system data, which shows ships' locations to reduce the likelihood of collisions.

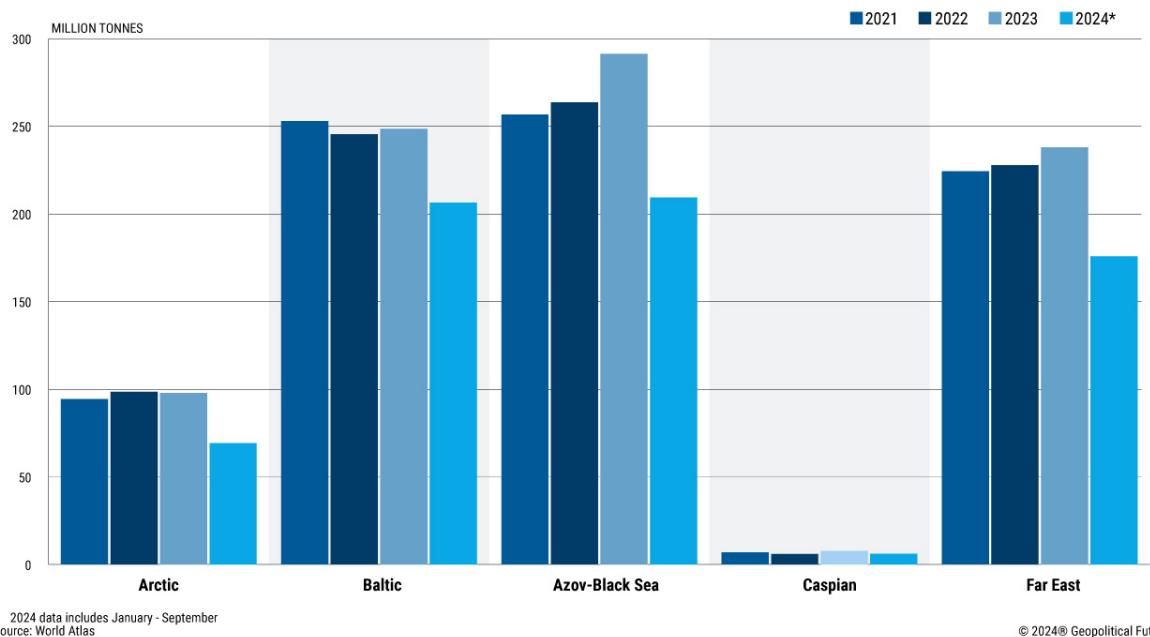


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Since Peter the Great, Russian leaders have placed huge importance on controlling the Baltic region to further Russia's economic security, well-being and defense. The Baltic Sea offers Russia's shortest route to the Atlantic Ocean, and in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, the route is only growing in importance. Less Russian oil and gas are reaching Europe via pipeline, increasing Moscow's reliance on its Baltic ports and tankers to move its energy exports to more distant markets. The remaining ports in western Russia are either along the Arctic, where ships must contend with extreme weather and sea ice, or the Black Sea, where they risk Ukrainian attacks.

Russia's navy faces two additional challenges. First, within days of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Turkey closed the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to Russian (and Ukrainian) warships, as is its right under the 1936 Montreux Convention. Second, the fall of the Assad regime has cast doubt on the future of Russia's naval base at Tartus, Syria. Both factors undermine the ability of the Russian navy to operate in the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, Moscow has grown more concerned about the security of its presence in Kaliningrad, a Russian exclave sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania and accessible by land only via the Baltic countries. The main port in Kaliningrad hosts Russia's Baltic Fleet and is the country's only Baltic port that is free from ice year-round.

Cargo Turnover of Russian Sea Ports by Basin



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Most worrisome to Moscow is that NATO's dominance in the Baltic region is increasing alongside Russia's dependence on the sea. With Finland and Sweden having joined NATO in response to the Russia-Ukraine war, members of the trans-Atlantic alliance now control 95 percent of the Baltic coastline. Additionally, NATO and its members have conducted several significant military exercises in the Baltic Sea this year. Last month, 15 NATO countries sent more than 4,000 personnel and 30 ships to participate in Finland's annual Freezing Winds exercise, which practiced cooperation and defense of the Finnish coast and maritime areas. In October, NATO held its annual Neptune Strike exercise, some of which took place in the Baltic and North seas and involved 22 alliance members, approximately 15,000 personnel, and around 20 surface vessels and submarines. And in the summer, Baltops, NATO's annual drill in the Baltic Sea region, featured 20 countries, more than 50 ships, 80 aircraft and helicopters, and 9,000 personnel. Separately, the U.S. in November inaugurated a new air defense base in northern Poland near the Baltic coast – a project some two decades in the making.

Moscow vowed a "symmetrical response" to meet these developments, but because of NATO's dramatic military advantage over Russia in the Baltic region, its response has instead been highly asymmetrical. It is important for Russia not to provoke a military conflict in the Baltic region,

considering its budget-draining war against Ukraine, which draws its forces to the south, as well as restrictions on its access to foreign capital and components necessary to support a rapid military build-up in the area. Thus, the mysterious sabotage of European undersea cables, as well as Russian electronic warfare in the Kaliningrad and Leningrad regions. Colloquially known as the “Baltic jammer,” the latter Russian response creates confusion for vessels trying to navigate the area. It also helps Russia’s “shadow fleet” of tankers evade Western sanctions by concealing their location and movements. Moscow also commonly conducts electronic warfare exercises in border areas, especially during NATO exercises.

Access to the Baltic Sea is critically important for Russia, both for national defense and for its economic security. Sanctions and the emergence of new challenges in other regions have only made the preservation of its Baltic access more urgent for Moscow. NATO’s dominance of the Baltic Sea deters the Kremlin from risking direct confrontation, but Russia has other tools to frustrate, preoccupy or warn off its Western adversaries.

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