

# The Baltic Sea islands and their impact on the regional security

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## **Abstract**

The main islands of the Baltic Sea have been crucial for naval power and dominance of the entire Baltic Sea region, both historically all the way back to the age of the Vikings and today in the context of Russian growing confrontation with the regional member states of the EU and NATO. During the Cold War, the Warsaw Pact dominated the Baltic Sea. Today, the situation is the opposite, with Russia squeezed into the dead-end of the Gulf of Finland, with the military exclave of Kaliningrad acting as an 'island' between Poland and Lithuania and aimed to project Russian military power to Baltic Sea and neighboring countries. After Sweden and Finland announced their ambition to join the Alliance, NATO has become the dominant power in the Baltic Sea. It will be able, in the case of war, to maintain Sea Control in the area, and potentially conduct a wide range of operations from the sea, including amphibious landings. Still, it would be vitally important to control the larger islands. Current study aims to analyze and clarify the geographical and military importance of the Baltic Sea main islands – Bornholm, Gotland and Saaremaa.

**Key words:** Baltic Sea islands, Bornholm, Gotland, Saaremaa, Baltic Sea region security.

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## 1. Introduction and context

Over the last decades, the islands of the Baltic Sea have proved to be an important factor in regional security due to their geostrategic location. This is reinforced by the respective Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), access to natural resources and control of the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) – all critical aspects of the coastal states' economy. A similar situation has occurred also elsewhere. In Asia, in the South China Sea, multilateral and bilateral disputes are topics of concern for politicians and military leadership both regionally and globally. The same type of dispute exists with regard to the Senkaku/Dioyudao Islands and the Kurile Islands. Lately, Svalbard, the Norwegian archipelago in the Barents Sea (Stormark 2017) and other islands in the Arctic have triggered growing interest connected with the construction of military infrastructure to control naval and commercial traffic and rich natural resources. During the Russian large-scale exercise 'Zapad 2017', assumptions were made that one of the scenarios represented an amphibious invasion of Svalbard. This island group has been described as NATO's Arctic "Achilles' Heel" (Berg 2020, 312). Lately, during the Russian war against Ukraine, the tiny Snake Island was seen as a symbol and at the same time strategically important for both Russia and Ukraine became an arena of intensive fighting.

Similarly, the Baltic Sea islands have now come back into the limelight. Dominance in the Baltic Sea region has been inextricably linked to naval power all the way back to the age of the Vikings. Denmark, Sweden, the Hanseatic League, Germany, Russia and later the USSR, all considered the Baltic Sea an area for their exclusive interest in transportation, economic development and military operations. In no other seas has this been demonstrated more clearly, not only in a historical sense but also very much in current security context. During the Cold War, the Warsaw Pact dominated the Baltic Sea. It controlled the coastline from Travemünde to Leningrad, and Sweden and Finland remained staunchly neutral. Still, German and Danish submarines and missile boats, extensive mine warfare and maritime aircraft were present to deny the Warsaw Pact access to the North Sea through the Danish Straits, which constituted – and remains today – a strong card firmly in NATO's hands. After the end of the Cold War and, in particular in 2022, when Sweden and Finland announced their intention to join NATO, the situation is completely the opposite. Russia is now squeezed into the dead-end of the Gulf of Finland, with the exclave of Kaliningrad acting as an 'island' between Poland and Lithuania and aimed to project Russian military power to Baltic Sea and neighboring countries (Veebel 2019). In conflict or war, NATO would control the area and be in a position to bring forward reinforcements and supplies, and conduct a wide range of operations from the sea, including amphibious landings or demonstrations and Ballistic Missile Defence (Ploom, Sliwa and Veebel 2020). With any of the three islands of Bornholm, Gotland or Saaremaa in the hands of Russia, this task would be immensely more complicated.

Russia is dependent upon the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) through the Baltic Sea. Much of their trade and half of their imported food transit this enclosed sea. Interdiction of legitimate business is of course not an option in peacetime, but very much so in conflict. After an initial fight to eliminate the military capacities in Kaliningrad, the most Russia can hope for is to reduce NATO's naval effectiveness through missile attacks, either shore-based or air-launched. Again, Russian control of an island in the middle of the Baltic Sea would make the task all the more difficult for NATO.

The aim of current study is to analyze the geographical and military importance of the Baltic Sea main islands – Bornholm, Gotland and Saaremaa from the security perspective of Western countries and Russia. The topic is highly important even as of today, Russia has limited resources to conduct a landing, occupy, and fortify any of these islands in the region. Still, a well-planned and executed attack coinciding with or launched just before an actual larger attack could be successful. Sweden has realized this and brought some of its armed forces back to Gotland. Bornholm and Saaremaa, on the other hand, remain more or less open and are not adequately defended today (Zaleski, Sliwa and Veebel 2020).

Current study is based on publicly available information, governmental documents, analytical studies of think tanks and academic research works. The scope of consideration is limited to sources not covered by any confidentiality clause. It is covering the last two decades with some annotation of historical events relevant to the current context. Qualitative research applies analysis, critical synthesis, desk research and comparative studies methods. Quantitative data are used only where they concern the respective cases related to any surveys.

## 2. Bornholm – the gatekeeper of the Baltic Sea

In 2018, Denmark released the document 'Foreign and Security Policy Strategy 2019 – 2020', highlighting the unpredictability of a changing global order and deteriorating security environment, including increasingly aggressive conduct and rhetoric by Russia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark 2018). Reacting to the threat, Denmark decided to support the NATO enhanced Forward Presence and to create the multinational Division Headquarters in Latvia. It was a function of relying on NATO, the UN, the EU, and Nordic cooperation termed "active internationalism". (Larsen 2020, 9). The '2018-2023 Danish Defence Agreement' contributed to the decision to increase the military budget to 1.5 percent of the GDP in 2023, allowing for the procurement of modern weapon systems for all the services responsible for homeland security (including the Danish Home Guard already present on Bornholm), facilitation of host nation support functions, and coordination of civil preparedness (NATO 2020). Nevertheless, although contributing to NATO's collective defense, it has limited expeditionary capability. Moreover, Denmark "does not describe its defence policy in total defence terms" (Wither 2020, 63) and it refers mainly to peacetime and crisis. As NATO and transatlantic relations are a cornerstone of Danish security and defense policy, it underpins the US engagement in Europe based on a "relatively high level of consensus" (Larsen 2020, 9) in Denmark, allowing long-term planning in all security-related aspects.

Bornholm has a specific place in Danish security as it was subjected to some pressure from Russia at the end of World War II. The importance of the island lies in its location close to the Danish Straits, which connect the Baltic Sea to the North Sea through Kattegat and Skagerrak. These narrow sea corridors may easily be controlled by land-based weapon systems employed by either Sweden, Denmark, Norway, or Germany denying any movement at sea to an adversary – in this case, Russia. These straits are used by all maritime traffic to the Baltic Sea region and represent an important chokepoint for Europe's crude oil and petroleum supplies. They are an important route for Russian seaborne oil exports to Europe that increased significantly after opening the port of Primorsk in the Gulf of Finland in 2005. In 2016 an estimated 3.2 million barrels per day (b/d) of crude oil and petroleum products were transferred via this waterway (Villar and Hamilton 2017). In addition, a smaller amount (some 50,000 b/d) was transferred from Norway and the United Kingdom to Scandinavian markets. The movement of LNG carriers is important to countries like Lithuania, and this will increase dramatically in step with Europe weaning itself off Russian gas. Another factor is the transit of naval warships between the Baltic Fleet and other fleets, as happened ahead of the war in Ukraine.

Russia claimed its rights to Bornholm already at the end of World War II and had the ambition to activate a naval base there to control the entrance to the Baltic Sea and the SLOCs to its ports in the area. The island could become "the Malta of the Baltic Sea" (Holtmark 1994, 10). After bombing the island, Russian troops seized it on 9th of May 1945 and left only after 11 months, on 4th of April 1946. The occupation was linked with acts of violence against the civilian population by the Soviet infantry division located there and this is still remembered by Danes. Although Danish, British and US politicians all doubted that the Russians would withdraw from the island without considerable diplomatic and perhaps military pressure, however, Bornholm was quietly evacuated leaving no Soviet presence in Scandinavia (Kennedy-Pipe and Bellamy 2020). As Russia was engaged in pacifying Eastern Europe and in the war with Japan, Bornholm was left "under the assumption that Danish forces would reoccupy the island 'without any participation from foreign troops or foreign administrators'" (Holtmark 2021, 272) An interesting point in this context was the consideration to establish Soviet military bases on the German Rügen Island, which was doable as part of the occupation of East Germany; however, only an institute for aerodynamic research was later located there to test long-range missiles. According to Sven Holtmark, the Bornholm case revealed "the limits of Soviet power and influence in Denmark", which was based on political and not military considerations. This followed the Soviet decision-makers agreement on the "need to revise the regime of the Baltic Straits, to close the Baltic Sea to warships of non-littoral countries and transform the Baltic Sea into a mare clausum" (Holtmark 1994, 8).

In 1952, the USSR claimed that the presence of Allied forces in the vicinity of Bornholm was "a violation of the conditions upon which the island was evacuated" (NATO 1952, 1). Russia has since been following the situation at this gate to the Baltic Sea closely, so when a B-52 flew close to Bornholm in August 2020, Russian Su-27s followed even if this violated Danish airspace. Again, in February 2022, when Denmark and the US revealed their considerations of a new defense agreement, which could lead to the presence of US units in Denmark, Moscow condemned it. It referred to the correspondence from February 1946 regarding Russian withdrawal from Bornholm and leaving the responsibility of the island to the Danish



armed forces. The claim was not valid, as the document did not mention anything about foreign troops in Bornholm or even the fact that NATO did not exist at the time (Kongelige Danske Gesandtskab 1946). Russia's ambassador to Denmark, Vladimir Barbin, warned about such a move, but the Danish Foreign Minister, Jeppe Kofod, countered, "that it is Denmark that decides what happens in Denmark, not Russia" (Christian 2022, 1). Therefore, the strategic location of Bornholm is still valid for the current security and economic domains as it could be used as another barrier against Russia and deny its warships and civilian vessels access to the Danish Straits. The impact could be significant, especially for reinforcement of the Baltic Fleet if required in the case of a conflict and utilization of Russian Baltic Sea ports for economic exports and imports. Vice versa, if Bornholm were controlled by Russia, the same limitations would apply to NATO's unhampered use of the Baltic Sea.

### **3. Gotland – Complicated choices in complicated times for Sweden**

The situation in Gotland appeared complicated for Swedish government already before Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014. The Swedish Commander in Chief stated in 2012 that his country could defend itself for one week only (Nünlist 2013). Subsequently, the May 2013 report 'Choices in a globalised world' acknowledged the need to enhance Sweden's capability to carry out operations in and beyond its neighbourhood (Sanders 2015). Following the Russian annexation of Crimea, some warning signals, such as Russian aircraft operating close to Swedish airspace, a presumed Russian submarine presence (however not proven) in national waters, and warnings of preparations to seize Gotland Island during large-scale exercises, proved to be a wake-up call. Peter Hultqvist confirmed such a perception stating, "it is a general fact that Russia is carrying out bigger, more complex, and in some cases provocative exercises" (Sanders 2015, 1).

To improve the security situation, 'Sweden's Defence Policy 2016 – 2020' recognized the increasing threat by adopting the total defense concept merging military defence and civil defence (Sanders 2015). A symbol of the military build-up was Gotland Island's remilitarization with its strategic location in the Baltic Sea. The reinforcements of Gotland's defenses were given special priority along with enhanced anti-submarine capabilities. Further, the 'Total Defence 2021 – 2025' concept stated that "an armed attack against Sweden cannot be ruled out" (Government Office of Sweden 2020a, 1) pointing out a need for "joint operational planning with Finland and coordination of operational planning with Denmark, Norway, the United Kingdom, the United States, and NATO" (ibid.). It was linked with a planned 40% increase in military spending for 2021 – 2025 (some USD 3 billion) (Nikel 2020) and an increase in military personnel from 60,000 to 90,000. Next, procuring new submarines, an extension of the corvette fleet, and modern combat platforms for the army and air force to significantly reinforce national defense capabilities, took place (Ministry of Defence of Sweden, 2020). Moreover, the Riksdag (Parliament) decided to close ranks with Finland in joining NATO, which of course has a huge impact when we consider control of the Baltic Sea (Government Office of Sweden, 2020b).

Until the Russian aggression against Ukraine (2014) Gotland was without any sizeable garrison and the overall high security in the region had led to Gotland Regiment together with the Gotland Anti-Aircraft Corps being relocated or disbanded. However, in 2015 growing Russian ambitions and aggressive behavior led to the deployment of a mechanized battalion and air-defense capabilities (RBS 70 system). In 2017, the Riksdag confirmed the decision to reactivate Gotland Regiment to achieve the full operational capabilities in 2020. In 2019, it was reinforced with the upgraded RBS 23 BAMSE (Bofors Advanced Missile System Evaluation) medium-range air defense system, which could engage small and fast targets (cruise missiles, anti-radiation missiles and UAVs) but also high-altitude aerial targets (MilitaryLeak 2021). The range of this system is up to 15 km and it could engage targets at altitudes from some tens to 12,000 meters. Deploying the land-based RBS 15 MK3, a long-range anti-ship missile, and arming the JAS 39 Gripen and corvettes with the same system, is further extending both range and capabilities to engage naval targets by the Swedish armed forces. Gotland's location is allowing Sweden and NATO to control the central part of the Baltic Sea. The importance of this relates to SLOCs from the Danish Straits and the Gulf of Finland to seaports in the Baltic States, Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg. This is, as we have seen, very important for the economy and security of Russia. The weapon systems mentioned have the capacity and range to deny naval traffic access and could be used to engage targets in Kaliningrad, which is critical for the Russian Baltic Fleet. However, after Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022

and explosions of Nord Stream gas pipeline these measures seem to need improvements once again.

The geostrategic location of Gotland is playing a further role as it acts as a hub for up-to-date intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance by using a variety of available tools. It is also linked with an option to share data not only with Finland but within NATO, to maximize the effectiveness of, among other systems, a Recognized Maritime Picture (RMP). In the maritime arena, the exchange of information within the framework of 'Sea Surveillance Cooperation Finland and Sweden (SUCFIS)' came about in 2006 after some years of negotiation, technical studies and implementation of secure communications. At the same time, the Finnish and Swedish navies and amphibious units increased their cooperation. At the beginning of the Millennium, bilateral air force exercises were carried out within the framework of NORDEFECO, but they were formalized in bilateral agreements (Nielsen 2021). The increased cooperation was administratively cumbersome, as all international exercises had to be approved by the government in several steps, with political decisions required at each step. It can now be expected that all the legacy bilateral agreements with Finland and individual NATO nations will be replaced and subsumed into NATO's standing procedures (Sliwa and Paasikivi 2021).

#### **4. Saaremaa – Which role in Estonian defense posture?**

The Estonian islands have historically been recognized as an important strategic location. This prompted the German Empire to launch the successful amphibious operation codenamed 'Albion' in 1917. The landing was undertaken to threaten St. Petersburg, disrupt naval traffic and gain access to Riga by eliminating the 12-inch guns covering the inlet to the bay. In 1946, after reoccupying Saaremaa and transforming Estonia into a Soviet republic, the USSR turned it into a military base. The island was isolated during the entire Cold War and access was denied to any foreigners and even for most Soviet Estonian citizens. Estonia was a specific case as the Soviet 14th Air Defence Army was located there; being the only one to be located solely on the territory of what was then a Soviet republic (Loemaa 2017). It was equipped with modern fire-control systems and weaponry like S-200 complexes capable to engage targets at 300 kilometers range. A combination of a militarized Saaremaa, naval bases in Riga, Kaliningrad, Liepaja, plus Paldiski, Baltiysk, Hel Peninsula and coastal batteries, allowed for full control of naval movement in most of the Baltic Sea and the entrance to the Gulf of Finland. The operations could easily have been supported by land-based aviation and selected land base artillery or missile systems. This layered set of military installations ensured a robust control over the eastern parts of the Baltic Sea.

Russia has been recognized as an essential security threat to Estonia since its creation as an independent state. The 2017 National Security Concept portrayed Russian activities as unpredictable, aggressive, provocative, a source of instability, and an imminent threat to Estonia's security (Riigikogu 2017). It noted the use of military power by Russia as a tool for the achievement of its objectives followed by concerns of increased military presence on the borders of the Baltic Sea Region and in Estonia (Ministry of Defense of Estonia 2017). Therefore, Estonia adopted a comprehensive national defense concept including a focus on military defence, the civilian support for military defence, international action, domestic and internal security, maintenance of the continuous operation of the state and society, and psychological defence (Veebel et al. 2020). Deterrence was seen as key, followed by active defence in close cooperation with the nations of the Alliance. To meet such requirements defense spending are planned to exceed one-billion-euro limit (2.9 per cent of GDP) in 2023 (Riigikogu Press Service 2022), including procurement of weapon system, like a coastal defense system as the Saaremaa Island is seen as a possible target for amphibious attack. On Saaremaa, the Estonian Defence League (EDL) is an important force – its Commander is directly subordinated to the Estonian Chief of Defence, who has the authority to command and control the troops/units of the Defence League (Veebel 2021). The EDL Saaremaa Region, as a part of the Western Territorial Defence District, is vital in the security of the rural municipalities of Saaremaa and Muhu Islands, as components of a comprehensive approach to national defense.

## 5. Meeting growing security challenges – Military cooperation as the key factor

In the light of Russian full-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022, the Baltic Sea islands have growing strategic importance both for regional security and in context of NATO-Russia growing escalation. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the subsequent wars in Ukraine have changed all previous concepts and understanding about defense and deterrence needs completely (Veebel 2022).

However, simultaneously, Russia's aggressive actions have changed the military situation in Baltic Sea completely to their disadvantage, an effect that probably was dismissed or went unseen for Moscow. Previously, during the Cold War period, Russia was in a vastly better position by occupying Saaremaa and indeed the whole Southern Baltic coastline and controlling East Germany and Poland. All three islands could have had a crucial role to play if the Cold War had developed into a world war. Deployment of anti-ship missiles and air defense assets on Rügen, land-based systems on the Polish coastline, and Saaremaa as an A2/AD hub would significantly have had an impact on the whole Baltic Sea Region. The Warsaw Pact forces could neutralize Bornholm, Gotland, and infrastructure in NATO, but also Swedish and Finnish air and naval bases, along with civilian seaports. This would support the overall Soviet objectives, and together with the occupation of Bornholm, secure not only military but also parallel economic interests. The latter included deeper water seaports connected with inland railway systems and their role in export and import as part of Russian and satellite nations' economies during this period.

After Sweden (and Finland) announced their ambition to join the Alliance in 2022, Bornholm will be surrounded by the NATO coastlines. The Territorial Region of the Danish Home Guard, along with regular units and an ability to deploy air force and naval capabilities to the area at short notice, decreases the probability of a surprise attack. Gotland is no longer 'unarmed' after the re-establishment of the Gotland Regiment with its inherent air defense and anti-ship capabilities, and the Swedish Navy and Air Force's ability to react in the case of any aggression. Estonia has territorial defense troops on Saaremaa and the ability to deploy regular military units there at short notice (however no air defense or anti-ship capabilities currently deployed). Alliance troops can act in support as was demonstrated when a Polish Naval Missile Unit deployed there. The geopolitical developments have fundamentally caused a reversal of demilitarization and directed attention towards rebuilding military capabilities on Bornholm, Gotland and Saaremaa which may have a significant impact not only on the situation at sea but also to engage an enemy on land by using any long-range capacities deployed there.

A key factor, which many see as a game-changer for security, is international cooperation. The most important institutional actor is NATO as its members are enjoying a significant advantage over Russia allowing the Alliance to conduct combined joint operations employing a full range of capabilities. That Sweden and Finland are now able and ready to contribute to joint combat and readiness is a direct consequence of the war in Ukraine and indeed a paradigm shift for the Baltic Sea Region. For Russia it is a negative development, which has brought Russia into a weak geopolitical situation and a hopeless military position should they contemplate war with NATO. Russia has a lot to lose, as it would see all SLOCs closed to them, in a situation where they are dependent upon trade and imports by sea. This gives NATO a powerful tool which must be wielded with restraint and tact, and some sort of reassurance may be required in regards to Russia – especially if the expressed impression that NATO is about to attack, prevails.

Second important factor is the added value, what Sweden and Finland are bringing to the Baltic Sea Region, not only do they provide strategically important infrastructure such as airfields, seaports and land bases, but they also have significant military capabilities in place (Finland) and intentions to rapidly increase their military strength (Sweden). Another advantage is their capable military industry and ability to produce technologically cutting-edge combat systems.

The close security and defense relations were highlighted by the 13th of November 2018 signing of the 'Nordic Defence Cooperation Vision 2025' to acknowledge that they are facing similar challenges and need of strengthening their national defense and capability to take joint action. In 2018, Finland, Sweden, and the United States signed the 'Trilateral Statement of Intent' to deepen defense cooperation, complement bilateral cooperation, and create synergies between them (Ministry of Defence of Finland 2018). As Sweden is not able to defend its security alone, it decided to strengthen its cooperation with Finland on mutual support during crisis and war by increasing interoperability and the capability to act jointly, both nationally and internationally (Government Office of Sweden 2019). The key areas are services capabilities, secure communication, logistics, and materiel procurement. It further includes combined units like the standing Swedish-Finnish Naval Task Group (SFNTG), interoperability between the Swedish



and Finnish Air Forces, joint base operations and joint command and control capabilities, and finally, a combined Finnish – Swedish Brigade Framework. The cooperation matters for the security of Gotland as Finland is flanking the Russian Baltic Fleet and any naval movement in the Gulf of Finland. Consequently, it could easily support the defense of the Island (and, indeed all NATO nations in the area, including Sweden) through their bases and forces in the vicinity. All the mentioned initiatives and cooperation programs have had and will have a positive effect on the further integration of both countries into NATO. Besides, the current demilitarized, neutral position of the Finnish Åland archipelago and its autonomous status could be changed to further restrict freedom of navigation including control of access to the Gulf of Bothnia and extending the reach of any weapon systems deployed there.

NATO's now enhanced, joint capabilities are important as together they are strong enough, if required, to wage a conflict and neutralize the Russian Baltic Fleet, which represents the major threat although its ship inventory is still marked by the decay that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union (Kjellen 2021). The Fleet's area of responsibility goes beyond the Danish Straits, which is beyond its power. The Baltic Fleet has only a limited capability to seize Gotland or Saaremaa –Bornholm is probably out of reach. Nevertheless, when reinforced with amphibious capabilities and supported by land-based air and missile forces, it could achieve a certain degree of success if surprise is achieved. It is also linked with favorable weather conditions. The 71st Landing Ship Division and 336th Naval Infantry brigade are the main elements of the amphibious capabilities, which, however, could be reinforced by aerial or airborne landing. According to various assessments, the total assault force could comprise about 800 – 1100 soldiers supported by a limited number of armored personnel carriers or main battle tanks. An advantage is, due to the limited distances, the ability to receive support from land-based helicopters or fixed-wing aircraft. A recent example of such surprise attacks and understanding of the importance of a fortified strongpoint can be found in the conflict in Ukraine where Russia on the first day of the conflict occupied and fortified 'Snake Island', thus dominating the access to the Ukrainian ports west of the Crimea. Such a surprise attack, however, is not easy to pull off in the Baltic Sea due to sophisticated NATO surveillance and intelligence systems with real-time Recognized Maritime Picture (RMP) and Recognized Air Picture (RAP). However, it must be taken seriously, as Russia is aware of the importance of the maritime domain. This was expressed in July 2017, when President Vladimir Putin (2017) approved a new naval doctrine strategy until 2030 presenting a revival of the Russian navy to face potential threats to national interests. Therefore, any aggressive move by Russia to attempt to seize any Baltic Sea island would, if successful, have a rather critical impact on regional dynamics – and of course, risk triggering Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

## 6. Conclusions

Peace and security in the Baltic Sea are of great importance not only for stability in general but above all for economic development in the region. Therefore, strategic locations such as the islands mentioned in this article are of great importance to maintain the security and prosperity of all nations of the region and beyond. Control of the islands is allowing the nations of NATO to contribute to the stability of Europe. The Baltic Sea can be expected to be under full control of the Alliance as any opponent could be engaged using maritime, air and land-based systems from all the NATO's coastline nations. It will allow denying any Russian attempt, practiced during exercises, to seize the respective islands. Therefore, there is a need for strong defensive systems and infrastructure on those islands as forward defense and deterrence hubs supported by surveillance and defence systems sharing real-time data. This is already ongoing on Gotland and is considered on the other two islands, but the efforts must be extended as Russia has proved to act in a reckless, unpredictable, and indeed lawless manner. It would be a direct reply to any strengthened presence of Russian capabilities in the Kaliningrad Oblast and the St. Petersburg area in response to Sweden and Finland's membership in NATO. NATO must, however, wield its power and influence responsibly and with care and respect for all legitimate interests of Russia in the area.

The significance of the geographical and military position of Bornholm, Gotland and Saaremaa is increasing as the Baltic Sea grows in importance along with new LNG terminals, the extended volume of trade and the possibility to use seaports to support Ukrainian export resulting from the closing of the Black Sea SLOCs. Therefore, the islands have a continued role to play. This is recognized not only by NATO but also by an aggressive and hostile Russian Federation, for which the Baltic Sea is an important naval realm.

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