



THE BALTIC SEA: A CONCENTRATION OF NAVAL ISSUES

Sometimes called Northern Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea is a strategic area for NATO which just announced a reinforcement of its regional presence. Bordered by nine countries, this maritime area where Russia intersects with the European Union (both in Saint Petersburg and Kaliningrad) is at the heart of economic, environmental, and military challenges.

AN AREA OF HIGH MARITIME TRAFFIC

The Baltic Sea is an almost closed space, only connected to the Atlantic Ocean by a Danish-Swedish Strait, the Øresund, and two Danish straits, the Great Belt and the Small Belt. This particular geography did not prevent the development of trade: goods traffic doubled in the last fifteen years. Today, 15% of global marine cargo - more than 800 million tons of goods - and 150 million passengers pass through this area every year.

This strong maritime growth is explained by the profound geopolitical changes experienced by some countries in the area since 1990. Driven primarily by the transport of oil and containers, this activity also grew with the development of Russian oil ports - created in 2001, the port of Primorsk had a record growth of 325% in 15 years - and the proliferation of underwater connections projects - Nord Stream pipeline that connects Vyborg in Russia to Greifswald in Germany, or fibre optic cables between Estonia and Finland. This constant intensification of maritime activity drives in parallel a major ecological challenge.

AN ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGE

As rivers from the former Eastern bloc overflow it, the Baltic Sea is extremely polluted by human activities. The dumping of large quantities of waste is largely responsible for this situation: explosives and chemical weapons after the two world wars as well as paralyzing gases and radioactive waste from Russian secret operations before 1992. It's an inland sea, shallow (56m average depth) and with low salinity. Its water renewal rate is thus particularly slow, at about 30 years for the total water volume. Air pollution is equally important: commercial vessels contribute to such an extent that the Baltic has become a SECA (*Sulphur Emission Control Area*) in 2006. This status was established by the International Convention for the Prevention of Marine Pollution from ships (MARPOL), and developed by the international maritime organization. Bordering countries now wish to give it the status of NECA (*Nitrogen Oxide Emission Control Area*) since marine traffic contributes to as many emissions of nitrogen oxides as Sweden and Finland combined.

The Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea, known as the Helsinki Convention or HELCOM (signed by the nine residents and the EU and enforced in 1980), is no longer ruling out the hypothesis of a soon-to-be dead sea.

STILL STRATEGIC AN AREA

Out of all the riparian countries, six are NATO members and eight belong to the European Union. All of them, however, meet as members of the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS), a regional cooperation forum established in 1992 together with the EU, Iceland and Norway. But if agreements are found on economic and environmental issues, the Baltic Sea, after a brief lull due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, became again a genuine area of diplomatic and strategic tensions.

The ambitions of a militarily resurgent Russia are sources of concern for all its neighbours. This air and sea space houses the Russian Baltic Fleet at Baltiysk and Kronstadt and is entirely within range of Russian fighter-bombers. While the suspected submarine incursions resumed in Swedish and Latvian waters, interceptions of Russian military aircraft by Danish fighter jets have doubled in 2014, to as many as 58, or an average of nearly five per month. As a consequence, defence and equipment policies of Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Poland are changing. The renewal of the Swedish submarine fleet, the commissioning of Danish (and Norwegian) frigates able to operate anti-ballistic missile systems, the deployment by Poland of similar ground capabilities, the acquisition of anti-submarine helicopters (NH90 in Sweden and Norway) and the replacement of the Danish and Norwegian F-16 by F-35 Joint Strike Fighters are all political decisions that irritate Moscow.

The Baltic however is not the Black Sea, and Estonia is not Crimea...



Source : Marine nationale / Service prépresse