

Germany and Nordic-Baltic Security

The CTF Baltic and the Trinity House Agreement

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Resumé

Etableringen av CTF Baltic i Rostock och det tysk-brittiska Trinity House-avtalet ger viktiga indikationer på hur det europeiska försvarssamarbetet utvecklas. De understryker också Tysklands alltmer aktiva roll i säkerheten av den nordisk-baltiska regionen. Invigningen av CTF Baltic är ett exempel på ”*Zeitenwende* till sjöss” och speglar den tyska marinens förnyade fokus på maritim säkerhet i Östersjöregionen. Det väcker dock en rad frågor om de relativa rollerna och ansvarsområdena för CTF Baltic och det brittiskleda JEF. I detta avseende är förstärkningen av det tysk-brittiska försvarssamarbetet genom Trinity House-avtalet särskilt viktig. Det inkluderar ett åtagande att stärka Natos östra flank genom ett nytt ”Land Strategic Partnership” för att förbättra de potentiella synergierna hos de framgrupperade markstyrkorna i de baltiska staterna. Det är av stor betydelse att Försvarsmakten noggrant följer dessa förändringar i Europas säkerhetsarkitektur i sin egen process av militär transformation.

TWO EVENTS IN the autumn of 2024 provide important indicators of significant changes taking place in Europe’s security architecture. Both events involve Germany—Europe’s *Zentralmacht*—and the country which is critical for the future of conventional deterrence and defence in Europe. Both events also have particular significance for the Nordic-Baltic region and will shape the geostrategic context within which Swedish defence transformation is taking place. The first is the establishment of *CTF (Combined Task Force) Baltic* in Rostock on 1 October; the second is the *Trinity House agreement* of 23 October between UK and Germany. Together they are indicative of a growing leadership role for Germany in European security and defence, both in terms of maritime security in the Nordic-Baltic region and in terms of

the coordination and integration of NATO’s Forward Land Forces in the three Baltic states.

For Sweden, these changes in Europe’s security architecture are of considerable importance. The Swedish Armed Forces are currently engaged in a process of far-reaching military transformation. As the Chief of the Swedish Army, Major General Jonny Lindfors, has noted, this is driven by three factors: Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, Sweden’s accession to NATO and the ongoing ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’.¹ The Swedish Army is having to address the complex challenges of land warfare and multi-domain operations in a multilateral context, which places a premium on interoperability and joint planning with allies. Similarly, the Swedish navy is shifting from a largely defensive strategy to a more offensive one in an alliance context, “requiring a change

of mind-set from being an underdog to being part of a top dog pack”.² Strategically and operationally, Swedish defence policy now needs to be formulated in the context of NABO (the *nordiskt-arktiskt-baltiska området*).³

The complicating factor, however, is that all the key institutions of the Euro-Atlantic community are in a process of change and adaptation, as are the security and defence policies of the key actors in this security architecture. As EU High Representative Josep Borrell has noted, the “post-Cold War has ended with the Ukrainian war, with the Russian aggression against Ukraine”, and we are now living in “a ‘moment of creation’ of a new world”. The war in Ukraine, he noted, “is changing a lot of things, and certainly it is changing the European Union”.⁴ More importantly for European security, it

“*Three days after Russia invaded Ukraine, Chancellor Olof Scholz announced a Zeitenwende*

is also changing NATO; Sweden’s accession to the alliance has thus come at a time when NATO is undergoing a far-reaching transformation of its organisation, capabilities, doctrine and strategy.

Not only is the institutional topology of European security changing, so are the security and defence policies of its key actors, not least Germany. Three days after Russia invaded Ukraine, Chancellor Olof Scholz announced a *Zeitenwende* (a ‘watershed era’) for Germany and Europe: “And that means that the world afterwards will no longer be the same as the world before.”⁵ Sweden’s defence transformation is thus taking place in a rapidly changing geostrategic and institutional context, not least because

of the growing leadership role of Germany in European security.

Germany and European Security

Germany possesses Europe’s strongest economy and is an influential member of the European Union. It is also an important member of NATO and makes a critical contribution to conventional defence and deterrence in Europe. Historically Germany has been a strong proponent of NATO and an advocate of a robust transatlantic relationship, encapsulated in its foreign policy role conception as *Bündnistreue* (‘loyal to the alliance’). It has taken a lead in both the Framework Nation Concept (FNC) and the Allied Reaction Forces (ARF). It leads the multilateral Forward Land Forces (FLF) battlegroup in Lithuania and contributes to Baltic Air Policing. It has taken the lead in the *European Sky Shield Initiative* (which seeks to develop a joint approach to air defence with common procurement and interoperability) and is a founding member, alongside France and Poland, of the ELSA (European Long Range Strike Approach) initiative, which Sweden has recently joined.⁶

Germany has slowly been shedding the vestiges of its former *Zivilmacht* identity and the ‘leadership avoidance complex’ it exhibited in the Cold War period.⁷ Long regarded as Europe’s ‘reluctant hegemon’,⁸ it has slowly begun to accept a greater leadership role in European security and defence. This became noticeable after the Crimea crisis in 2014⁹ and developed greater momentum after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022—which, as we have seen, led to the *Zeitenwende*. The *Zeitenwende* involves a major increase in defence spending and a greater commitment to European conventional defence and deterrence, with Chancellor

Scholz promising that the Bundeswehr would become “the cornerstone of conventional defence in Europe, the best-equipped force in Europe”. The ‘quantum leap’ in thinking about security was further fleshed out in June 2023 with the publication of Germany’s first National Security Strategy.¹⁰

Germany has also been emerging as an increasingly important actor in the Baltic Sea region. Until 2014, Germany took a back-seat role in the Baltic and was a largely passive and reactive player with fragmented and selective contributions to the security of the region.¹¹ This, however, has been changing. In June 2023 Germany announced it would increase its troops in the Forward Land Forces in Lithuania from 1 000 to 4 000. The German-led FLF has been described as “a beacon project of the watershed era in security policy” and will involve the building of the Bundeswehr’s first permanent military base abroad. This, the German state secretary for defence Nils Hilmer has declared, “brings the *Zeitenwende* into life”.¹² As one of three lead nations alongside Denmark and Poland, it also contributes to the corps staff of HQ MNCNE (Headquarters Multinational Corps Northeast) in Szczecin,¹³ as well as to Baltic Air Policing.

A ‘*Zeitenwende* at sea’ has also been taking place. Since 2014, the German Navy has been refocusing on the Baltic and the North Sea and positioning itself as a ‘framework partner’ for Poland, the Baltic states and the Nordic countries. “As a large Baltic Sea neighbour, we have a natural focus in the region”, Vice Admiral Jan Christian Kaack (the Chief of the German Navy) has argued; “Our allies expect us to play a leadership role.”¹⁴ Since 2015, fleet commanders from all the Baltic Sea navies have come together in the Baltic Commanders Conference (BCC), a forum for discussion created by the former German Naval Chief, Vice Admiral Andreas

Krause.¹⁵ The German Navy also initiated large-scale multi-national annual exercises in 2007 known as *Northern Coasts* (NoCo). In the early years, these involved crisis management and conflict prevention operations, but over recent years they have become more ambitious and more demanding, as the *Deutsche Marine* has sought to focus primarily on high-end challenges such as sea control, littoral combat, coastal defence and multi-dimensional naval warfare.¹⁶ Future German thinking about its navy, maritime strategy and naval warfare is outlined in the ‘2035+ *Vision*’ strategy document, which indicates a growing concern with sea control as well as protecting critical underwater infrastructure and developing new technologies such as unmanned systems.¹⁷

‘*Zeitenwende* at Sea’: CTF Baltic

With the aim of creating a capability for supporting and leading multinational maritime operations and exercises, the German navy created a maritime command and operational staff headquarters in 2019 known as DEUMARFOR. This is part of the new Naval Command Centre in Rostock and was envisaged as the core of a Maritime Component Command (MCC) Headquarters once it reached full operational capacity in 2023. On 1 October 2024, the German navy’s aspiration to play a leadership role in the Baltic Sea was realised, with the establishment of CTF Baltic in Rostock.¹⁸ The official inauguration took place on 21 October at the Navy Headquarters in Rostock and its importance was underlined by German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius. He stressed Germany’s willingness to play a leadership role in the Baltic Sea region which, he noted, provided a vital corridor for trade, military mobility and energy security, and as

a possible front line of collective defence against evolving threats. Emphasising that the “security of the Baltic region is inseparable from the security of all of Europe”, he noted that its importance “has become even more evident against the background of the ongoing Russian aggression in our immediate neighbourhood”.¹⁹

The role of CTF Baltic is threefold: to provide comprehensive situational awareness for Germany and its allies; to plan maritime exercises and operations; and to lead naval forces assigned by NATO in peace, crisis and war. It is a national headquarters led by a German admiral, but with multinational participation from twelve other NATO nations. Sweden contributes the chief of staff along with eight other staff officers who will serve for two years, although this is expected to grow to twenty. “With CTF Baltic”, the Deputy Chief of the Swedish Navy Patrik Gardesten has noted, “we will be better coordinated and aligned when we operate jointly in the Baltic Sea”.²⁰ The inauguration of CTF Baltic is an example of the ‘Zeitenwende at sea’ and demonstrates Germany’s willingness and growing capability to provide leadership in defence and security policy. It also demonstrates the extent to which Sweden and Finland’s membership of NATO has strengthened European deterrence and defence in the Nordic-Baltic region. With their accession, Vice Admiral Kaack has noted, “we have considerably more options in the region” and are able to further integrate their territories into maritime defence planning, creating a “far larger area of operations”.²¹

CTF Baltic is an important contribution to maritime security in the Baltic Sea region and provides a command headquarters that can organise and coordinate naval activities from the North Sea, into the Baltic and up into the Gulf of Bothnia. Nonetheless, there

are some potential wrinkles that need ironing out. One question is the relative roles and responsibilities of CTF Baltic and the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). The UK is strongly invested in the defence of the Nordic-Baltic region and harbours aspirations for a leadership role in the Nordic-Baltic region.²² It also runs MARCOM (NATO’s Allied Maritime Command) from Northwood. The JEF is a ten-nation UK-led multinational force for “the joint development of forces and capabilities required by the Alliance, facilitated by a framework nation”. It is conceived as a rapid response force that “can act while NATO is thinking”²³ and since become operational in 2018 has both strengthening interoperability and focused on high-end capabilities, as demonstrated in the ‘JEF Warrior’ exercises in 2023.²⁴

CTF Baltic and the JEF illustrate two distinctive national approaches to European defence cooperation. The UK tends to favour more flexible and pragmatic cooperation able to deliver enhanced kinetic capabilities; Germany, on the other hand, is most comfortable building more formalised and institutionalised multilateral frameworks. There is a role for both in Europe’s security architecture. On paper, CTF Baltic and JEF have different roles and responsibilities, but without a close cooperation and consultation between Germany and the UK, there is a risk of crossed lines of communication and strategic duplication. European defence cooperation today involves an ‘archipelago of cooperation’, with multiple forms of bi- and plurilateral cooperation.

The JEF is one of the “small, military co-operative institutions that exist at the *interstices* between the national level and multilateral institutions, foremost NATO and the EU”. They “provide contingency in the guise of institutional ‘work-arounds’ to deal with both the limits of national de-

fence provision and the complexities of getting agreement within what are now a very large NATO and EU".²⁵ They therefore hit the sweet spot between ad hoc 'coalitions of the willing' and multilateral security institutions. Nonetheless, the question still remains: how to integrate these islands of cooperation into a seamless command and control structure, so that together they produce outcomes that are more than the sum of their parts. In this respect, the Trinity House agreement is potentially significant, given its promise as a means for strengthening UK-German defence cooperation and rebalancing relations between the three main military providers in Europe—the 'European three' or 'E₃' (Germany, France and the UK).

The 'Trinity House' Agreement

The UK and Germany have been engaged in close defence cooperation for decades, based on their shared commitment to the transatlantic link and a strong NATO. However, in contrast to the Franco-German relationship, which has since its inception been draped in heavy political symbolism, the UK-German defence relationship has been much more pragmatic, ad hoc and transactional—which is why it has been referred to as *Die Stille Allianz* ('The Quiet Alliance').²⁶

As part of its broader attempt to 'reset' relations with Europe after Brexit, the new Labour government has been assiduously courting Berlin. Germany is seen from London as a key actor in the EU and a country that may be more sympathetic to British interests than either France, Spain or Italy. Germany is therefore seen as the key to unlocking a new relationship with 'EU Europe'. Building on the groundwork laid by the previous Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, Sir Keir Starmer visited Berlin in August to

begin negotiations on a new comprehensive treaty with Germany. An agreement on enhanced defence cooperation is thus seen as the first pillar of a wider UK-German treaty expected in 2025.

The Trinity House agreement was signed by the defence ministers of Germany and the UK on 23 October 2024.²⁷ Heralded as a 'milestone moment' and a 'landmark' agreement which "marks a fundamental shift in the UK's relationship with Germany and for European security", the agreement covers not only defence industrial cooperation and procurement, but also joint defence policy and operational cooperation—particularly along NATO's eastern flank in the Baltic.²⁸ It aims to "improve and enhance bilateral defence cooperation" between Europe's two largest economies and defence spenders, both of whom lead Forward Land Forces in the Baltic states and provide leadership in NATO's Framework Nation Concept (FNC) and Allied Reaction Force (ARF).²⁹

In their joint communique, the UK and Germany noted that the Trinity House agreement was complementary to the Franco-British Lancaster House agreement and argued that it laid "the foundation for increasingly close co-operation between the E₃".³⁰ The 'European Three' are the central political, economic and security actors in Europe, and close cooperation between them is critical for building a credible European deterrence. This is particularly important given the uncertainty surrounding the future of the transatlantic security relationship, which makes close and effective cooperation between Europe's three main military-political actors of vital importance for the future of NATO.

The Trinity House agreement will have important implications for the NABO region, and thus for the Swedish *Försvarsmakten*. The UK and Germany have committed themselves to working together to enhance

the protection of critical underwater infrastructure and to cooperate in developing new maritime drones and maritime uncrewed air systems. As part of the agreement, German P8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft will periodically operate from RAF Lossiemouth in Scotland. In the Baltic region, the UK and Germany will seek to strengthen the eastern flank through a new ‘Land Strategic Partnership’ involving coordination of training exercises; sharing logistics, storage and supply capabilities; and developing military doctrine—“using the front as a catalyst for developing new ways of fighting”. The 3+3 defence ministers format is envisaged an important framework within which to deepen coordination and cooperation in order to “rapidly transform the capability and effectiveness of our respective Forward Land Forces and tap the full potential of synergies of the Forward Land Forces in the Baltic States”.³¹

Conclusion

The inauguration of CTF Baltic and the signing of the Trinity House agreement are two important and potentially significant developments that indicate how Europe’s security architecture is changing and evolving. They demonstrate Germany’s growing leadership role in security and defence cooperation. Despite the country’s domestic political travails and the weakness of its ‘traffic light’ coalition, Germany is emerging as a much more important and capable

military actor in Europe. As the Swedish Armed Forces embark on their own journey of defence transformation, it is important to closely monitor the recalibration of defence partnerships in Europe and the restructuring of Europe’s security architecture.

“*It is important to closely monitor the recalibration of defence partnerships in Europe and the restructuring of Europe’s security architecture.*”

Germany will be an increasingly important partner for Sweden, and it is important for the *Försvarsmakten* to understand what the Bundeswehr is doing and adjust their expectations and policies accordingly.³²

Sweden’s participation in the Canadian-led FLF in Latvia in 2025 will provide the opportunity for close cooperation with other NATO militaries, including the Bundeswehr and the British Army. The Baltic FLF is likely to prove a catalyst and testing-ground for new doctrines, technological capabilities and command structures, which will provide vital lessons for the ongoing military transformation of the Swedish Armed Forces.

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Notes

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