

# Poland to Bolster Western Presence in the Baltic Sea with Three Additional Mine Countermeasures Vessels

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## Introduction

In the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the wave of rearmament announced in several European nations, Poland declared through its Defence Minister its objective to acquire three additional mine countermeasures vessels (MCMVs) to boost its naval presence in the Baltic Sea. This decision has its roots in the strategic and military importance of the Baltic Sea, and its political significance for Poland and Europe. Above all, it reflects a need for Polish armed forces to modernise and reinforce their position in what remains a place of friction between Western and Russian forces.

## The Baltic Sea: An Area of High Stakes

Throughout history, the Baltic Sea has constituted a region of both periods of cooperation and long-lasting wars for hegemony. Today surrounded by nine independent and sovereign states – Russia, Germany, Poland, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – the area is at the crossroad of numerous interests and issues in the economic, energetic, and security realms. This makes the Baltic Sea a region where the stakes are exceptionally high and where the military commitment of the concerned countries is significant.

Economically, the Baltic Sea accounts for 2% of the global gross domestic product, with more than 2,000 vessels through its corridors every day, representing some 15% of the world's container shipping (Lundqvist and Widen, 2015). At a regional scale, the weight and importance of the sea are substantial for several states and essential for some. While it constitutes one of many geographical directions of economic ties for large states such as Russia or Germany, the Baltic Sea has a “decisive impact on smaller Baltic (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) and Nordic (Sweden, Denmark, Finland) states” (Mezhevich et al., 2016: p. 12). As for Poland, the country's economic condition is also greatly tied to the sea, given how it composes the only sea route connecting the nation with the world's ocean<sup>[1]</sup> (Makowski, 2020: p. 115). Losing or risking this link to the world is not an option for Poland. Preserving and protecting it, including through military means, is not an option either: it is an imperative.

Energy-wise, the Baltic Sea is equally crucial for many European states, especially since “Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland [...] have become the target of geopolitical pressure and a source of economic rent that Russia could and has derived from its dominant or monopolist position on the Baltic Sea region's gas market” (Mikulska, 2022: p. 309).

[1] The situation is the same for Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, and Latvia.

To cite two prominent cases, Finland and Latvia rely on Russia for respectively 94% and 93% of their gas supply (Buchholz, 2022). Poland is also highly dependent on Russia for its energy supplies, with 55% of the country's gas imports coming from Russia and 75% of its imported coal (Wanat, 2022). Finally, one must bear in mind that the sea hosts Nord Stream, the world's longest sub-sea pipeline, that delivers natural gas from Russia to Germany and is constantly mentioned in the current debate surrounding Nord Stream 2.

To remedy and soften these vulnerabilities, these countries, and Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, have decided to cooperate to reduce Russian prevalence on their energy security through the build-up of new gas infrastructure and the development of the market's interconnectivity to ensure the region's integration. The Baltic Sea is fundamental in this endeavour, given how its seabed is increasingly exploited for oil extraction, submarine cables, wind power farms, and pipelines (Lundqvist and Widen, 2015: p. 43). Poland is at the forefront of this effort, with the Baltic Sea being at the centre of its new strategy. Indeed, the country intends to decrease its reliance on Russian gas in 2023 when its contracts with Gazprom expire and turn toward Norwegian gas thanks to the new Baltic Pipe. The country also aspires to sign new agreements with more suppliers from countries like the U.S. and Qatar (Wanat, 2022). Because of these issues, maintaining the Baltic Sea as an open and accessible sea to create the conditions for diversification of energy supply sources to be delivered by sea to all concerned states remains a substantial challenge for the West today (Makowski, 2020).

Finally, on the security front, the Baltic Sea region constitutes the only point of direct intersection, and potentially confrontation, between continental Russia and NATO member states, namely Estonia and Latvia.[1] This makes the sea an area of security concern, especially given how Russia currently has "absolute supremacy in terms of offensive equipment" (Lucas et al., 2021: p. 6). The Russian Federation also rapidly increased its military potential in the years following the annexation of Crimea to build an effective A2/AD (anti-access/area denial) structure in the Kaliningrad region. This strategy aims at preventing an adversary from occupying or traversing an area of land, sea or air and is thus immensely damaging (Makowski, 2020: p. 115). That Kaliningrad is a mere fifty kilometres away from Polish borders makes Poland notably exposed to any such strategy. Additionally, the fact that "Russian planes and ships have also been conducting unsafe manoeuvres and intrusions in the region for years [...] highlight Russia's continued and growing readiness to win short wars and break Western political will" (Lucas et al., 2021: p. 6).

All in all, these economic, energetic and security issues make the Baltic Sea region a politically charged one. The challenges and risks characterising the area create a perpetual need for the West to demonstrate NATO's unity and Europe's dedication and willingness to defend its borders and interests.

[1] With the exception of a small Norwegian-Russian border at the extreme north of Europe.

## Overview of Poland's Decision: Equipment and Practical Use of MCMVs

To face these challenges, and in the context of a Europe that is rearming itself, Poland expressed the objective to modernise its navy to reach a total of six modern MCMVs in its fleet, all of which will be stationed in the naval base of Gdynia. Currently, the Polish military possesses one MCMV, the ORP Kormoran, and will receive two more in the near future, ORP Mewa and ORP Albatros. These two ships need to undergo final tests before they are delivered to Poland's naval forces by the consortium formed by the Remontowa Shipbuilding shipyard and the country's defence giant PGZ (Adamowski, 2022). Indeed, as expressed by Polish National Defence Minister Mariusz Błaszczak on 15 March, three MCMVs of the type "Kormoran II" are to be ordered soon. The idea is to have the new contract signed in June at the latest.

In terms of features and equipment, the main weapons of the prototype Kormoran are unmanned, remotely operated mine warfare devices. The ship is also armed with a 23 mm cannon, three large-calibre machine guns and three Grom anti-aircraft missile launchers. The ships will additionally be equipped with Double Eagle SAROV unmanned systems, a mine countermeasure system that can operate both remotely or autonomously and offers efficiency in mine countermeasure operations, from mine reconnaissance to mine disposal (Wyrzykowski, 2022; Navy Naval Maritime Defense Industry, 2020).

As for their practical use, MCMVs typically take charge "for the whole range of anti-mine operations – search, detection, classification, identification and neutralization of all types of naval mines, dangerous objects, improvised explosives" (Biernat et al., 2017: p. 57). They can also undertake reconnaissance of waterways and guide ships and vessels through mine-hazard areas, search for and fight against forces and means of diversion in the areas of ports and anchorages, and participate in rescue operations (Wyrzykowski, 2022).

## What is the Resonance of this Decision?

If the Ukrainian crisis undoubtedly added a sense of urgency to the need to rearm, it remains that this procurement is just the continuation of a trend that started in 2013, when the first MCMVs were ordered. Furthermore, the decision to expand the fleet from three to six of these ships is in line with "Poland's Strategic Concept for Maritime Security." Indeed, intending to improve the national maritime security system, this document stipulated in 2017 that the development of the Polish Navy should include the modernisation or acquisition of anti-mine warfare, among other types of units (Biernat et al., 2017: p. 56-57).

Concretely, because of their characteristics mentioned previously, these MCMVs are intended to protect ports and sea lines of communication and “shall bring a new quality to the protection of Poland’s maritime areas and shipping lanes against mine warfare, including hybrid-warfare scenarios” (Piekarski, 2019: p. 59). All in all, these mine countermeasures vessels are intended to help guarantee local naval superiority. This element marks a change to the extent that Poland is much more of a land force than a naval one. Indeed, because most of the manpower and budget are allocated to Land Forces, Polish armed forces find themselves capable of countering a conventional, large-scale land invasion but more vulnerable to operations mobilising maritime units, such as hybrid threats.

Poland’s decision simultaneously carries a certain political capital. Indeed, it demonstrates the country’s will to face the security challenges in the region and commitment to collective security in cooperation with NATO. This is especially true given that the ordered vessels are intended for operations in the Baltic Sea, the North Sea and other areas within the framework of joint naval operations, as a part of Standing NATO Maritime Groups and NATO Response Forces in prospective areas of operation (Biernat et al., 2017).

## **Conclusion**

All this considered, while the purchases of MCMVs have been assessed as useful and effective, “Poland’s Strategic Concept for Maritime Security” highlighted the need for the Polish Navy to modernise beyond mine countermeasure vessels and, above all, improve cooperation with allied forces. Still, mine countermeasures vessels appear necessary and helpful in securing the Baltic Sea and constitute a good step towards a Europe more prepared to deal with Russian unpredictability in the east. In addition, the Polish decision helps to display the political commitment of Poland to NATO and European defence, and for this reason, it carries a value that goes beyond the military framework alone.

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