

The Role of Regional Sea Conventions in Maritime Security,

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Excellencies, colleagues, friends of the ocean,

It's a great pleasure to address you here today.

To kick start the discussion, let me start with a TV mini-series airing on Netflix since last year, the show *Heweliusz*. It's a Polish production with quite some stellar actors. The story recasts one of the major disasters in the Baltic Sea.

On January 14, 1993, the roll-on/roll-off ferry MS Jan Heweliusz capsized and sank in the Baltic Sea near the German island of Rügen during a ferocious hurricane-force storm. The toll: out of 64 people on board (crew and passengers), 55 lost their lives, making it one of the deadliest peacetime maritime disasters in Polish history.

As in any disaster, there were multiple causes. Yet one cause why so many people died on that day is powerfully revealed in the TV show: the lack of coordination between agencies and countries.

While it's a counterfactual, today fewer people would have died, because of the growing sophistication of maritime cooperation and surveillance in the Baltic. A vital part of that regional cooperation today is the Helsinki Commission.

HELCOM was originally founded in 1974, at a time when the Cold War was a bit warmer and nations sought avenues to cooperate beyond the Iron

Curtain. Cooperation between scientists and over environmental protection became that avenue. Measuring the state of the marine environment and fighting pollution from land and from shipping became the tools of collaboration, followed by increasingly integrated search and rescue and coast guard collaboration.

While formally independent, HELCOM is counted as one of the 18 Regional Seas Conventions under the framework of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), initiated after the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. Regional Seas Conventions, hence, precede the consensus expressed in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982, yet were made an integral part of UNCLOS's emphasis on regional cooperation.

At the end of the Cold War, with UNCLOS entering into force, ocean advocates argued that there was a historical opportunity to advance regional seas conventions — to not only address marine protection, but to form broader regional cooperation mechanisms that would include peace and security. This was most vividly argued by Elisabeth Mann Borgese, often hailed as "the mother of the oceans," given her influential role in the UNCLOS negotiations and in advancing the principle of the ocean as a heritage of humankind. Borgese argued that security tensions could undermine any conservation efforts, and that regional seas conventions should not only focus explicitly on trust and confidence building, but also develop dispute resolution mechanisms — in line with UNCLOS — and tackle maritime crimes.

Such calls found little fruitful ground. The main reason was the optimism that the end of the Cold War meant the end of military tensions, and that UNCLOS and its commitment to peace would solve all remaining problems once and for all. Today, thirty years later, we know that this optimism was unfounded. A historical opportunity was missed.

Much of the contemporary discussion of violence and threats at sea is not structured by notions of peace, but by the concept of maritime security. Many in the room might know my work on maritime security, most recently in the book *Understanding Maritime Security*, published with Oxford University Press together with my colleague Tim Edmunds.

Maritime security is an agenda that assumed political priority starting from the 2000s, where the focus was initially on terrorism, then piracy off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Guinea. Problems such as maritime smuggling and environmental crimes, such as illicit fishing, were increasingly noted too. Up to the late 2010s, maritime security was an agenda that reflected a strong impetus of international cooperation. The broad multi-national campaign against Somali piracy is a good example. This in many ways reflected the fact that all nations depend on maritime trade, and on the digital communication provided through subsea data cables.

Maritime security led to largely informal means of regional security cooperation, focused on information sharing and military cooperation. Problematically, it developed outside other work on ocean governance and marine protection.

The role that Regional Seas Conventions could play in maritime security was barely noted. The argument made by Mann Borgese and others had been forgotten, and the fact that regional seas conventions actually have some maritime security components — for instance, by fighting environmental crimes such as deliberate pollution — went unrecognized.

In the contemporary era, maritime security has profoundly shifted its character. Increasingly, security at sea is no longer a story of cooperation, but of competition. In our recent research, we call this the age of grey zone competition at sea.

Nations increasingly engage in measures which are neither fully outside the law, nor legitimate or acceptable. They sponsor or directly engage in activities that often cannot be fully traced back to a state, and it's often unclear whether an act was accidental or deliberate. Maritime cyberattacks, seizure of ships on questionable legal grounds, accidents

that could be acts of sabotage such as cable cuts, spoofing and jamming, or the strategic use of civilian vessels have become widespread. Kinetic attacks on civilian vessels by non-state actors, such as the Houthi forces, but also by states, as currently witnessed in the Strait of Hormuz and the Caribbean, have become tools of contemporary maritime strategy.

The phenomenon described as the shadow fleet fits that picture too. While primarily a tool of sanctions evasion, the employment of aged, substandard tankers deliberately plays with an environmental threat toward coastal states, and raises fears that these vessels could be used as weapons in a more straightforwardly militarized conflict.

What does the age of grey zone mean for regional seas conventions, and more precisely for the Baltic?

To answer that, it's worth stepping back and looking at how the Baltic sea got so crowded in the first place.

The 2000s and 2010s were, for the Baltic, a story of "blue and green." In 2009 the European Union launched its Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region — the first ever EU strategy for a regional sea, aimed at fighting pollution and making the Baltic a model of clean shipping and maritime safety. It landed on top of two organizations already doing overlapping work: HELCOM, which we've discussed, and the Council of the Baltic Sea States, founded in 1992 to knit Nordic and Russian relations together through everything from culture to crisis response.

What all three were managing was a sea going through what researchers have called a "blue acceleration" — a rapid industrialization of ocean space. Between 1990 and 2010, container shipping grew sixfold, oil shipping quadrupled, cruise traffic tripled. After 2010 it only sped up: 85,000 vessel transits a year, offshore wind capacity multiplying sevenfold, subsea cable length doubling. The Baltic stopped being an open, empty sea and became something closer to an industrial seascape — one

requiring careful management of a genuine paradox: the infrastructure that drives the green transition — wind farms, interconnectors, cables — is also the infrastructure that fragments habitats and multiplies risk. Managing that paradox was the job HELCOM, CBSS, and the EU strategy were built for.

Then the sea turned grey.

On the night of September 26, 2022, Swedish seismologists picked up unusual tremors under the Baltic. Hours later, satellite images showed what looked like boiling circles of water on the surface. Below them, the Nord Stream pipelines had been torn apart. It was the opening act of what's now a pattern: the Balticconnector pipeline damaged a year later, apparently by a ship's anchor; two data cables cut in November 2024 by a Chinese vessel; on Christmas Day 2024, a power cable and four data cables between Finland and Estonia severed by the tanker Eagle S. In each case, responsibility sits in a fog — accident or sabotage, and if sabotage, whose. That fog is precisely what makes this a grey zone: infrastructure has become a target, but the actors behind it are deniable almost by design.

Running alongside the cable-cutting is Russia's shadow fleet — aging, badly insured tankers, flagged in jurisdictions that ask few questions, built to move sanctioned oil while evading the price cap the G7 imposed in December 2022. These ships turn off their transponders, skip proper classification, and have racked up a string of near-disasters: engine failures adrift in the Kadetrenden channel, off Bornholm, off the Hanko Peninsula. They are a sanctions-evasion tool first, but they carry an unmistakable secondary message — that this fleet could be turned into something more directly militarized.

The institutional response has been fast and largely securitized. Russia was suspended from the CBSS in 2022 and then withdrew. NATO stood up new infrastructure-protection bodies, welcomed Sweden and Finland, and after the Christmas 2024 incidents launched Baltic Sentry, a dedicated naval patrol. Commentators now talk about the Baltic as a "NATO lake." The EU, for its part, folded infrastructure protection into its 2023 maritime security strategy and a cable-protection strategy this past February. And a looser

coalition — the Baltic Nordic Eight plus Germany and the UK — built a shadow fleet task force outside any single organization.

What's notable is what's been left out of that response: HELCOM. It continues its environmental mandate — and, notably, is still the one forum where Russia sits at the table — but this comes at a price: the action plans haven't been updated and much of the work needs to proceed informally.

Which brings me to where I want to end. HELCOM today sits at a genuine fork. One path pulls it toward becoming another maritime security instrument, folded into the logic of deterrence against Russia.

The other keeps faith with what it's always been — a mechanism for collective security in the older sense: science diplomacy, mediation, confidence-building, the kind of low-politics cooperation that Mann Borgese hoped regional seas conventions could become.

I'd argue avoiding the trap of militarization is exactly the task ahead — and that the way to do it is to lean harder into what HELCOM already does well: scientific cooperation as a genuinely cross-border activity, and coast guards, which are often the only actors with both the legal standing and the practical reach to operate in that grey space between environmental protection and security. That, more than a naval headquarters, may be what actually keeps the Baltic from tipping fully into grey.

Let me end by pressing on that fork a little harder, because I don't think it's a comfortable choice, and I don't think HELCOM can duck it much longer.

The pull toward securitization is real, and it's not irrational. When your pipelines get blown up and your cables get dragged by anchors, the instinct to reach for naval patrols and alliance structures is understandable. NATO's Baltic Sentry exists for a reason.

But if HELCOM tries to become a security actor in that sense — if it tries to compete with NATO or the EU on deterrence — it will lose, and it will lose

the one thing that actually makes it valuable: the fact that Russia is still in the room. CBSS lost that when Russia walked out. HELCOM hasn't, and that's not a technicality — it's the last standing channel of Baltic-wide communication that survived 2022.

So the alternative isn't passivity. It's recognizing that HELCOM already has tools that are quietly suited to a grey zone problem, if it's willing to use them as security tools rather than only environmental ones. Take scientific cooperation. Monitoring pollution, tracking the marine environment, running joint assessments — this is unglamorous, technical, and precisely the kind of activity that lets adversarial states keep talking to each other without either side losing face. Mann Borgese saw this thirty years ago: trust gets built in the low-politics register, not the high one.

Second, take coast guards. They sit in an unusually useful legal position — civilian in character, but operationally capable, present in these waters every day in a way naval task forces aren't. They're often the first responder to a cable break or a drifting tanker, and because they're not framed as a military asset, they can act and investigate in the grey zone without every incident escalating into a NATO-Russia confrontation.

That's the wager: that the instruments best suited to this new grey era of maritime security are not the newest ones — not the naval headquarters in Rostock or the alliance patrols — but the oldest ones, the ones built in 1974 by people trying to keep a channel open across the Iron Curtain. The lesson of the Heweliusz was that people died because agencies couldn't coordinate.

The lesson for the Baltic today might be the opposite risk: that in the rush to militarize, we let the one institution that still coordinates across the divide quietly become irrelevant. HELCOM's task now isn't to arm itself. It's to prove that science diplomacy and coast guard cooperation are still, even now, a form of security.

Thank you.
