

FUTURE MARITIME DEFENCE SCENARIOS IN ESTONIA

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ABSTRACT. The issues of organising Estonian maritime defence have been subject to publications since Estonia regained independence but have not yet been acknowledged either on a governmental or a societal level and no fundamental rearrangements have been made so far. The objective of this article¹ is to propose two extreme hypothetical scenarios in the perspective of the next thirty years, both positive and negative, based on the current state of Estonian maritime defence. The first, black scenario is based on the assumption that the next decades will bring about negative developments and Estonian maritime defence will significantly deteriorate. The second, white scenario is based on the opposite assumption of positive developments and a major improvement in Estonian maritime defence. The distinct difference between the two scenarios should, again, draw attention to the facts that ignoring the issues of Estonian maritime defence may have fatal consequences and that it will be entirely possible to establish a well-functioning maritime defence over the following decades.

Keywords: Estonian maritime defence, maritime mindset, national maritime defence, sea blindness, state fleets, future scenarios

1. Introduction

In the context of this article, Estonian maritime defence is defined as a collection of national maritime objectives and tasks based on the concepts of comprehensive national defence and fully supporting its establishment. For this, we need clearly established national maritime interests as well as purposeful and systematic actions for protecting these interests. The issues of organising Estonian maritime defence have been subject to publications since Estonia regained independence but have not yet been acknowledged either on

¹ This article is based on an essay by the author that won second prize in the essay contest “The Future of Naval Warfare” organised by the Estonian Military Academy in 2019. This article was originally written in Estonian and first published in the Estonian Journal of Military Studies (Sõjateadlane), No. 16 (2021), pp. 34–45.

a governmental or a societal level, and no fundamental rearrangements have been made so far.

Almost thirty years have passed since Estonia regained independence, which is a common lifespan of a ship. Therefore, the focus of this article is on the following three decades: Estonian maritime defence until 2050. The objective of this article is to propose two extreme hypothetical scenarios, positive and negative, based on the current state of Estonian maritime defence. The first, black scenario is based on the assumption that the next decades will bring about negative developments and Estonian maritime defence will significantly deteriorate. The second, white scenario is based on the opposite assumption of positive developments and a major improvement in Estonian maritime defence.

These proposed scenarios are based on publicly available sources as well as current societal and political processes. Since the development of maritime defence requires significant time and investment, an important factor has been the age of current vessels and equipment as well as capability gaps. Both scenarios are described from the perspective of a maritime mindset, maritime situational awareness, and the subtopics of vessels, fleets, and capabilities, comprising the basis for exemplifying a hypothetical case description and analysis.

2. Maritime mindset

In the case of the black scenario, Estonian maritime geography will continue to be ignored on a governmental and political level, including by the management of national defence. The maritime interests of Estonia will remain undefined and unprotected as a result of inadequate legislation² and the lack of a systematic approach. Maritime management will remain visionless and segregated³ between ministries and authorities. Single project-based attempts to change the situation will not provide the desired result or integrate into the larger picture. The maritime domain will gradually disappear, maritime competency will decrease, and sea blindness will increasingly spread

² **Kaunis, I.; Lindpere, H.; Lott, A.** 2015. Mereõiguste kodifitseerimise lähteülesanne. Conso-lato del Mare OÜ, p. 265. https://www.just.ee/sites/www.just.ee/files/mereõiguse_kodifitseerimise_lahteülesanne.pdf (12.05.2020). [Kaunis, Lindpere, Lott 2015]

³ **Eesti merenduspoliitika 2012–2020.** 2012. Majandus- ja kommunikatsiooniministeerium, p. 57. <https://dhs.riigikantselei.ee/avalikteave.nsf/documents/NT001A58E6?open> (20.22.2022).

in society. Expert opinions will succumb to political will. The number and authority of people able to understand maritime issues is small, even more marginal in the subject of maritime defence. This, in turn, will be reflected in national defence where the dominating focus will remain on land forces, and the navy as a niche domain will continue to fight for its existence without any significant independent contributions to the state's initial self-defence capability. This is happening in spite of the attempt of the maritime officials to bring a merchant fleet under the Estonian flag⁴: an attempt based on a bottom-up initiative that will not bring the state any expected benefits after the initial state aid period. The resistance of financial officers will result in the loss of any political interest to make developing the maritime domain a priority and reform the field. An increasing amount of political attention will be paid to secondary questions without any interest in extensive reorganisation that would not result in any subsequent political benefits. This is supported by the establishment of several joint authorities with a questionable return and an increasingly entrenching structure of the administrative areas of ministries. The state will have neither a complete overview nor control over processes on the Estonian sea area.

In case of the white scenario, Estonian maritime issues and challenges will be increasingly more acknowledged on a political level. This will be the result of restoring the merchant fleet under the Estonian flag which will draw the necessary attention to the maritime domain. In order to solve maritime issues, the government will assemble a commission where experts play an important role. They will strenuously but persistently start solving the issues that have arisen since the nineties. For the first time ever, the maritime interests of Estonia will be defined, maritime management will be reorganised, legislation arranged, and the necessary reforms implemented to guarantee the sovereignty of Estonian sea areas. Managing the maritime domain will become systematic. Dangers coming from the sea will be increasingly acknowledged while firmly rooted dogmas (e.g., potential dangers can only come from the East, meaning Kronstadt, and not from the West, meaning Kaliningrad; maritime defence should be the responsibility of our allies; one can be present at sea without a ship) will, over time, disappear. Despite the general principle of reducing legislation and authoritative structures, the required reorganisations will be established as a part of a national reform. Issues related to Estonian sea

⁴ **Eesti laevanduse areng – põhjused ja ajajoon** 2018. Transpordiamet, 11. oktoober. <https://www.transpordiamet.ee/uudised/eesti-laevanduse-areng-pohjused-ja-ajajoon> (21.11.2022).

areas and maritime zones will arise due to the establishment of wind farms and increasingly intensive hybrid operations with research vessels, fishing vessels, etc., of the Russian Federation.

3. Maritime situational awareness

In the case of the black scenario, sea surveillance, which is the basis for maritime situational awareness and all naval operations, will stay divided among different authorities and the responsibility of sea surveillance would remain unregulated by legislation. Despite several attempts to establish a unified sea surveillance system compatible with wartime requirements, this will be stuck in the maze of working groups and the indecisiveness of ministries and authorities. There will not be a recognised maritime picture. All resources of the Police and Border Guard Board will be spent on maintaining existing capabilities and renewing current radar systems and positions. Even though the Defence Forces will purchase mobile radars that will increase the survivability of the sea surveillance system, these will not be sufficient to cover all Estonian sea areas. Due to unsuitable vessels and the lack of resources, the Navy will not be able to identify all contacts, especially in the open area of the Baltic Sea. This issue has been present for decades but there have not been any political initiatives for solving it alongside mundane issues.

In the case of the white scenario, in an initiative of leading officials of the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of the Interior, and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, a work group will be assembled, including specialised experts, to reorganise Estonian sea surveillance⁵. Legally, the task of sea surveillance will be given to the Defence Forces; they will build a recognised maritime picture with stationary and mobile coastal radars and vessels that permanently fly the state flag on the Estonian sea area and identifying contacts. The Estonian sea surveillance system will be integrated with those of NATO and other friendly countries of the Baltic Sea. The Police and Border Guard Board, the Estonian Maritime Administration (since 2021 the Transport Administration) and other institutions will use the maritime picture to a necessary extent in their everyday operations.

⁵ **Sargma, S.** 2019. Mereolukorrataedlikkus ja selle täiustamisvõimalused Eestis. – Sõjateadlane, No. 11. Tartu: Eesti Ülikoolide Kirjastus, pp. 140–141.

4. Vessels and fleets

In the case of the black scenario, authorities will continue to maintain separate fleets that are unable to fully perform the tasks assigned to them, especially in the event of a crisis or engagement⁶. Some fleets may be unified under the governance of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications by handing over the vessels of the Maritime Administration, the Port of Tallinn, Saarte Liinid, and Estonian Pilot to a state company. Renewing or replacing smaller vessels (buoy tenders, research vessels, or pilot boats) would not be overly problematic. The more critical issue concerns icebreaking capabilities. By then, the Tarmo icebreaker of the Maritime Administration will be either sold or scrapped, the Botanica icebreaker of the Port of Tallinn will have been in use for over forty years. If the predominantly warm winters continue, no resources will be invested into building a new icebreaker, and in the rare harsher winters, the area around the Gulf of Finland will be serviced solely by the Botanica. This will create queues for access to the port; in the future, all ports must consider it an economic risk. The Sektori buoy tender of the Maritime Administration and the multipurpose icebreaker EVA-316 will be replaced with a new multipurpose vessel that will operate on the Gulf of Riga as an icebreaker.

The fleet of the Police and Border Guard Board will, for the most part, remain in its current state; only the Pikker patrol vessel will be replaced with another Raju-class vessel over the next decade with European funding. In the critical budgeting conditions⁷, the Ministry of the Interior will not have found a way to allocate additional investment. The fleet will still be composed of four vessels, which is not sufficient for performing the assigned tasks. Pollution control abilities will remain at the same level as in 2020. Because of the increasingly police-centred background of the management of the Police and Border Guard Board, they will leave the fleet neglected. Because of the age and diverseness of the fleet, a proactive presence at sea will be replaced with reacting to events from the harbour. This will be complemented by staff issues arising from constant competition with the merchant navy. The unfortunate

⁶ **Murumets, J.** 2016. Eesti merejulgeolek. Uuringu raport. – ENDC Occasional Papers, Vol. 5. Tartu: Eesti Ülikoolide Kirjastus, pp. 44–47. [Murumets 2016]

⁷ **Politsei- ja Piirivalveameti moodustamise kulg ja tulemuslikkus** 2016. Riigikontrolli aruanne Riigikogule. Tallinn, 19. aprill, p. 4. <https://www.riigikontroll.ee/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=1DZyqcLQ8Iw%3D&language=et-EE&forcedownload=true> (12.05.2020).

decisions adopted in the 1990s to maintain separate fleets⁸ will continue into the middle of the century and it seems impossible to reverse them.

The naval fleet is in the most difficult situation of all national fleets since the length of service of minehunters will amount to forty years in around 2030. Warships are expensive and must be replaced all at once. Due to the current capability gaps of the Defence Forces, various investments will create competition. It will be difficult to find the money for larger investments: this will be subject to great criticism that will result in the navy fighting for its existence. In a worst-case scenario, minehunters will be replaced with other used vessels that will not resolve the capability gaps.

In the case of the white scenario, a national fleet strategy will be established. Its purpose will be to create balanced fleets that are able to operate during wartime as well as peacetime. Standard projects will be developed for modular ships⁹ that will constitute the basis for constructing new ships. Under this new conception, vessels will be built for the Navy in the 2030s. Combining the fleets and reorganising them pursuant to the need to use force will be opposed to some extent but the unsustainable future perspective of separate fleets will not leave any other options. Since the state needs ships to be present (cannot be replaced with aircraft or small watercrafts) and operate at sea, it is reasonable to use the potential of these vessels to their full extent, considering the spectrum of required tasks at all escalation levels. The vessels of the Police and Border Guard Board will be divided between the Navy and civil organisations until the lifespan of these vessels ends. Although the number of vessels will decrease, their number of days at sea will increase, whereas the number of capability gaps will decrease and tasks will be better performed. Modular solutions will enable the addition of more expensive abilities to the vessels later.

5. Capabilities

Since a number of capability gaps are related with currently used vessels and their quantity, the situation with capability gaps would not improve in the case of the black scenario. It is extremely difficult or even impossible to

⁸ **Laanetu, L.** 2017. Mereline riigikaitse ehk tardumine 1990-ndatesse. – Sõdur, No. 1, pp. 20–25.

⁹ **Laanemets, O.** 2015. Eesti merejõudude ülesanded ja laevatüübid. – ENDC Occasional Papers, Vol. 3. Uurimusi Eesti merelisest riigikaitsest. Tartu: Eesti Ülikoolide Kirjastus, pp. 157–165. [Laanemets 2015]

add complementary capabilities and modify their operational and construction parameters (speed, helicopter deck, etc.). The vessels of the Maritime Administration and the Police and Border Guard Board are not ready for military use (communication systems, armament, etc.). Estonia would have to have 7.5 vessels with relevant capabilities instead of the current four¹⁰ just to comply with the minimum pollution control capabilities¹¹ as recommended by the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (the Helsinki Commission, or HELCOM). Over the next decade, the military capability the most likely to be developed will be mine laying (along with obtaining the mines). As far as military capabilities go, this will remain a single (or one of the few) qualitative advancement. Replacing monofunctional minehunters with used monofunctional vessels will leave the naval fleet in the inevitable trap of capability developments for the next few decades.

In the case of the white scenario, the capabilities of fleets will improve as a result of the number of vessel classes being reduced, the implementation of modular vessel classes, and an increase in the cross-usage of vessels. Any addition or modification of a capability will no longer require the construction of a new vessel. Expensive capabilities could be added to a vessel later in its lifespan and modified according to a particular crisis or emergency. In addition to fully developing naval mine warfare capabilities (launching, hunting, sweeping), we will also be able to increase the self-defence abilities of warships and create the conditions for them to operate in other areas of naval warfare besides mine warfare (surface, submarine, or air warfare). Besides the niche capability of mine hunting, the Navy will also have an actual opportunity to make a military contribution into the state's initial self-defence capability¹².

¹⁰ **Riigi ülesannete rahastamine Euroopa Liidu toetustest** 2017. Riigikontrolli aruanne Riigikogule. Tallinn, 30. november, p. 65. https://www.riigikontroll.ee/Portals/0/Upload/ELi%20raha%20audtit_30.11.2017_LOPP.pdf (12.05.2020).

¹¹ **HELCOM Manual on Co-operation in Response to Marine Pollution within the framework of the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area (Helsinki Convention)** 2019. Volume 1, Chapter 13. Helsinki Commission, p. 37. <https://helcom.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/HELCOM-Manual-on-Co-operation-in-Response-to-Marine-Pollution-Volume-1.pdf> (12.05.2020).

¹² **Murumets** 2016, p. 49.

6. Case description and analysis

The following section includes a description and analysis of the operations of the state in a hypothetical situation according to the two previously described development scenarios and relevant capabilities.

In the case of the black scenario, a research vessel from the Russian Federation will operate in the central area of the Baltic Sea, in the Estonian exclusive economic zone; officially, it will be conducting biological research but its actual assignment will be hybrid operations, including an exploration of the cables in the seabed. The Police and Border Guard Board will not be engaged in visually detecting or monitoring the activities of the vessel. During a deployment exercise, a NATO national sealift ship will berth in Saaremaa Harbour. With the purpose of replenishing supplies, the research vessel will approach a roadstead in the Estonian territorial sea. In the darkness of night and by violating the border regime, a boat from the research vessel will land on the Saaremaa shore. Before any signal to stop can be given, the research vessel will leave Estonian territorial waters. Since Estonia is one of the minority coastal states that has not established a contiguous zone¹³ of 12 nautical miles of width in addition to the territorial sea of 12 nautical miles of width, the authorities do not have the right of control or hot pursuit after the research vessel has left territorial waters¹⁴. The research vessel is not held responsible.

Later, disturbances in GPS signals will be detected near a transit fairway in the central area of the Baltic Sea, the actual source of which is the aforementioned research vessel. Russia will accuse the organisers of the deployment exercise of restricting the freedom and safety of navigation and will send a frigate to the area. The frigate will navigate near the border of the Estonian territorial sea where a patrol boat of the Police and Border Guard Board was sent. The next manoeuvre of the frigate of the hostile country will be to enter Estonian territorial waters. They will violate the conditions of innocent passage by drifting in the Saaremaa Harbour roadstead. The vessel of the Police and Border Guard Board will fix the entrance of the frigate into the territorial sea with technical means and demand its immediate departure from territorial waters¹⁵, however, it will not have any legal premises or

¹³ Kaunis, Lindpere, Lott 2015, p. 190.

¹⁴ Ühinenud Rahvaste Organisatsiooni mereõiguse konventsioon. – RT II, 2005, 16, 48. <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/911675> (12.05.2020). [UNCLOS]

¹⁵ Riigipiiri seadus. – RT I, 08.07.2020, 7. <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/RiPS> (26.04.2020).

armament (besides the handguns of the crew) to fire warning shots. Due to insufficient national legislation at different escalation levels, it is unclear if and when the Navy should intervene and what impact a naval anti-aircraft cannon located in Tallinn would have in an already escalated situation. After a number of provocative manoeuvres with risk of engagement in the Saaremaa Harbour roadstead, the frigate will proceed to the open sea and leave the area. Only diplomatic notes will remain (references to technical issues) but the actual message will be clear: Estonia does not have the ability to defend its sea area and guarantee its sovereignty.

In the case of the white scenario, a research vessel of the Russian Federation will operate in the central area of the Baltic Sea, in the Estonian exclusive economic zone; officially, it is conducting biological research but its actual assignment is hybrid operations, including an exploration of the cables in the seabed. The research vessel is visually detected during a build of the maritime picture and its activities regularly monitored. During a deployment exercise, a NATO national sealift ship will berth in Saaremaa Harbour. With the purpose of replenishing supplies, the research vessel will approach a roadstead in the Estonian territorial sea. In the darkness of night and by violating the border regime, a boat from the research vessel will land on the Saaremaa shore. Before any signal to stop can be given, the research vessel will leave Estonian territorial waters but, thanks to the establishment of a contiguous zone with a maritime zone act, the stop signal is given in the contiguous zone. The right of hot pursuit ceases as soon as the ship pursued enters the territorial sea of its own state or of a third state, unless the pursuit has not been interrupted¹⁶. Warning shots will be fired to stop the research vessel. The naval boarding crew and officials will board the vessel and their inspection will reveal the true assignment of the vessel which was to explore the cables at the bottom of the sea and conduct other hybrid activities. Russia will accuse Estonian officials of restricting the freedom and safety of navigation and will send a frigate to the area. The frigate entering into the exclusive economic zone of Estonia will be escorted by a naval vessel. After an abrupt change in course to the Saaremaa Harbour, the frigate will receive an order to follow the requirements of innocent passage. Under the legally clear conditions of guarding and protecting the sea border, the naval vessel is forced to fire warning shots from a compact cannon. Despite the escalating situation, the frigate will leave

¹⁶ UNCLOS.

Estonian territorial waters, thus guaranteeing the sovereignty of the territory of Estonia.

In the first scenario, the situation may quickly become fatal, while in the second scenario, we would guarantee actual deterrence and sovereignty. A small country like Estonia is not capable of engaging in a conventional naval warfare with our neighbours from the East. Conventional warfare may follow a long period of peace and different escalation levels that we must first manage. Hybrid warfare is a common way for Russia to achieve its strategic objectives without engaging in conventional warfare and it involves the use of a marine environment. Examples of this include the drowning of the Metallist freighter in the Narva Bay¹⁷ in 1939 or the Kerch Strait incident¹⁸ in 2018. In order to prevent situations like these, we need maritime situational awareness (recognised maritime picture) and the ability to demonstrate the sovereignty of our nation. Currently, Estonia has shortcomings in both areas. The problem is not just the lack of solutions, it is lack of awareness, will, decisiveness, and engagement on a governmental level. It is not a technical issue; it is political. It is made more complicated by the comprehensiveness of the issue: it must be handled in cooperation with different ministries, not just within a single authority. The Estonian Navy as a postmodern navy is not required to operate alone. In cooperation with other countries of the Baltic Sea, we can confront the Baltic Fleet of the Russian Federation, prevent the adversary from achieving sea control¹⁹, and implement the conception of small war²⁰ by contributing to the joint operation of Estonian military defence and protecting sea lanes of communication and other communications.

First, however, we must break the mentality of denying the existence of sea. After that, we can start implementing sea surveillance and the necessary reforms regarding fleets in order to start developing capabilities. It is a long process but we must begin now. The existence of a purposeless and incapable organisation is easy to confront. Unfortunately, there is no better way to change a mental pattern than to talk and talk and talk. The process of

¹⁷ **Petrov, P.** 2006. Punalipuline Balti Laevastik ja Eesti 1939. aasta septembris ning vahejuhtum aurikuga „Metallist“. – Akadeemia, nr 6, pp. 1213–1236.

¹⁸ **Lewis, S.** 2006. Russia's Continued Aggression Against Ukraine: Illegal Actions in the Kerch Strait and Sea of Azov. – The RUSI Journal, Vol. 164, No. 1. Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), pp. 18–26.

¹⁹ **Laanemets** 2015, p. 76.

²⁰ **Laanetu, L.** 2014. Väikesõja kontseptsioon – kas Eesti esimene meresõjaline doktriin? – Sõdur, No. 4, pp. 42–47.

restoring a merchant fleet under our own flag is a great example of the fact that activities based on a bottom-up initiative lasting for decades may, in the end, bear some fruit. A wake-up call like we saw before the land border construction was initiated would be an incomparably worse alternative.

7. Conclusion

The organisation of Estonian maritime defence is at a crossroads. Continuing on the current course is not sustainable even for maintaining current capabilities because, over time, new issues will arise. The realisation of either scenario mostly depends on the blossoming of a maritime mindset. In the case of the black scenario, Estonian maritime geography will continue to be ignored at a governmental and political level, including in managing national defence. As a positive alternative, the maritime interests of the nation would be defined, maritime management reorganised, legislation arranged, and the necessary reforms implemented to guarantee sovereignty on Estonian sea areas.

The second aspect is the national organisation of sea surveillance and the building of a recognised maritime picture that are the basis of maritime situational awareness and all naval operations. In the case of the black scenario, these would remain segregated among different authorities and responsibility for sea surveillance would remain unregulated by law. In the case of the white scenario, the task of sea surveillance would be legally given to the Defence Forces: they would build a recognised maritime picture in accordance with wartime requirements with stationary and mobile coastal radars and vessels that permanently fly the state flag and identify contacts.

The national quality of the performance of naval tasks is directly dependant on the organisation of national fleets and the vessels being used. In the case of the negative scenario, authorities would still maintain separate fleets that are unable to fully perform the tasks assigned to them, especially in the event of a crisis or engagement. In the case of the white scenario, however, they would develop a strategy for national fleets with the purpose of creating well-balanced fleets capable of operating in peacetime as well as wartime. Since a number of capability gaps relate to currently used vessels and their quantity, the situation with capability gaps would not improve in the case of the black scenario. In the case of the white scenario, however, the capabilities of fleets would improve as a result of the number of vessel classes being reduced, the implementation of modular vessel classes, and an increase in the cross-usage of vessels.

Maritime defence is needed not only for conventional warfare but also under peacetime conditions as well as at different escalation levels. In order to prevent losses in hybrid warfare and the escalation of crises, we need maritime situational awareness (recognised maritime picture) and the ability to demonstrate the sovereignty of the country. In the case of the black scenario, the situation might escalate relatively quickly in a crisis; the other scenario, however, would allow us to guarantee actual deterrence of the country and sovereignty. The differences between the two proposed scenarios should, once again, bring attention to the fact that ignoring the issues of Estonian maritime defence may have fatal consequences and establishing a functional maritime defence is entirely possible over the course of a few decades. First, we must break the mentality of denying the existence of the sea, after that we can start implementing the necessary reforms regarding sea surveillance and fleets, which are the basis for enabling a capability development. In order to change this mindset we must constantly raise awareness in the whole of society. The validity of the possible scenarios is only revealed over time. Actual developments may lie somewhere between the two scenarios, or in a combination of the two.

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