



EMERGING CHALLENGES July 2018

Future underwater scenarios: is the Cold War back?

As the NATO's Brussels Summit Declaration confirmed, the security of the transatlantic lines of communication is still a significant issue for the members of the Alliance. Based on Alfred Mahan's seapower theories (1890), maritime security and freedom of navigation have persisted as main points in the transatlantic's agenda since the end of the Second World War.

Throughout the Cold War sea warfare followed the evolution of technology represented by nuclear submarines and submarine – launched missiles (SLBM), going beyond the US Navy/Royal Navy struggle versus the Kriegsmarine for the supremacy of the sea lines of communication (SLOC). In that period submarines were deployed in a silent war under the sea, consisting of reconnaissance, surveillance, intelligence and special operations support. Of course the Super Power's submarine fleet, with their nuclear mass destruction capability, were the most insidious tool of the nuclear deterrence doctrine. Since the conventional "end" of the Cold War (1989), Russia has not been a serious threat in the sea warfare scenario for a long time, compared with the URSS. However, this trend is changing, in parallel with Russia's new assertiveness stand in the international scenario. In fact, in addition to the hybrid war, cyber attacks, the crises in the Ukraine and Syria, it could seem that Russia is going back to the glorious past of the cold war with its submarine activities.

Last December NATO's Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg warned that there was increased activity by Russian submarines in the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. According to Jens Stoltenberg, Russian submarine activity has been considered to have reached its highest level since the Cold War and presents a threat to the trans – Atlantic military alliance by possibly undermining links between European and North American allies [Kalina Oroschakoff, Russian submarine activity 'highest since Cold War' warns NATO chief, Politico.eu 23/12/2017 <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-submarine-activity-highest-since-cold-war-warns-nato-chief/>].

In the Brussels NATO's Summit Declaration the allies have agreed to establish a Joint Force Command Norfolk headquarters in the US to focus on protecting the transatlantic lines of

communication [Brussels Summit Declaration, NATO, 11-12 July 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm]. The creation of a new NATO Maritime headquarters in Norfolk and the re-establishment of the US Navy's East Coast-based Second Fleet, have again fuelled obvious interest.

Actually the Russian Navy's submarine force is less than a fifth of the size of its Soviet forebearer and many of these units will soon be ready for retirement, but politically the return of an assertive Russia has focussed minds on old US maritime reinforcement routes.

Russian units like Typhoon – class sub Dmitry Donskoy, or the latest Yasen sub K-329 Severodvinsk as well as the units equipped with the 3M-54 Kaliber cruise missile, have significantly enhanced Russian combat capacity. In fact, today's Russian Navy can remain within its Barents bastion and still launch accurate attacks against ships in the Norwegian Sea and NATO land targets without leaving these protected waters [Steve Wills, A new gap in the High North and forward defense against Russian naval power, Center for International Maritime Security, 17/7/2018, <http://cimsec.org/a-new-gap-in-the-high-north-and-forward-defense-against-russian-naval-power/37129>]. This is a serious problem for a transatlantic alliance whose credibility hinged and hinges around credible reinforcement capabilities.

Moreover Russia seems to have stepped up activity around undersea data cables in the North Atlantic, which provide Internet and other communication connections to North America and Europe. Data cable security seems to be the new challenge for NATO and its allies, involving two different kinds of threat from Russia: to prevent Russia from cutting or disrupting those cables or tapping into vital data [Michael Birnbaum, Russian submarines are prowling around vital undersea cables. It's making NATO nervous, The Washington Post, 22/12/2017 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russian-submarines-are-prowling-around-vital-undersea-cables-its-making-nato-nervous/2017/12/22/d4c1f3da-e5d0-11e7-927a-e72eac1e73b6_story.html?utm_term=.85f79e57f29f].

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