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Conventional Arms Control in the Baltic Sea: A Montreux for the North

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Abstract

A conventional arms control (CAC) agreement for the Baltic Sea could help stabilize the security relationship, reduce arms racing, and improve diplomatic relations between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Similar to the Montreux Convention, which governs the passage of naval forces through the Turkish Straits, a CAC agreement focused on the Danish Straits could set limits on the size, type, number, and total tonnage of naval ships that pass through the straits. Additionally, or alternatively, an agreement could set limits on naval vessels based in the Baltic Sea, based on a combination of ratios, ship types, and capabilities. Any agreement could be implemented and managed by the state parties themselves or delegated to an agreement executor, such as an international organization.

Keywords:

Conventional arms control; Baltic Sea; Montreux Convention; Danish Straits.

Though the Russo-Ukraine War rages without any certain end in sight, attempts to prevent another conventional conflict in Europe should still be considered. Future agreements and policies should be based on the notion that the Russo-Ukraine War was caused in large part by the Russia-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) rivalry, which itself was amplified by the deterioration of conventional arms control (CAC) and failure to establish a new CAC regime adapted to the significantly altered European security landscape than that which existed in 1992 when the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty entered into force (Kühn 2020; Lippert 2024b; Nelson and Twardowski 2022).

A broad, Europe-wide CAC agreement from the Atlantic to the Urals (ATTU) might be called for – essentially an updated CFE Treaty that includes all NATO and European Union (EU) members[1], Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, and potentially other states in eastern Europe but not necessarily those in central Asia. Such an agreement may be necessary to offer a comprehensive, stable arms control regime that both prevents a surprise attack and offers all parties a sense of "indivisible security" (Kvartalnov 2021; Perrin de Brichambaut 2010). Alternatively, or in combination with a broad agreement, a narrow, geographic demilitarization agreement can contribute to crisis stability, stabilize an aspect of the EU/NATO-Russia relationship, and improve diplomatic relations to pave the way or build upon other CAC agreements[2]. With the complete suspension of the CFE Treaty, only minimal application of the Open Skies Treaty (OST) (NATO 2021), and Russia's non-compliance with the Vienna Document (Rosa-Hernández 2023), there are currently no Europe-wide arms control measures or significant CSBMs that temper the EU/NATO - Russia security rivalry.

This article discusses options and issues concerning a "Montreux Convention for the Baltic Sea," which could include naval limits on Baltic Sea states for forces based in the Baltic Sea, controls and rules on access to the Baltic Sea through the Danish Straits for all naval vessels, and limits placed on naval forces permitted in the Baltic Sea for non-Baltic Sea states. Such an agreement could help stabilize the great-power rivalry between NATO and Russia (Mazarr et al. 2021) that contributed to the Russo-Ukraine War through the development and implementation of a specific CAC agreement[3]. This agreement can offer all parties benefits at minimal costs. For the EU/NATO, it could improve relations with Russia and prevent or halt arms racing in the Baltic Sea. For Russia, it could offer increased security compared to an unchecked increase in NATO naval capability in the Baltic Sea. Addressing Russia's security concerns and geopolitical ambitions is more necessary now than in the past, given that Moscow is unilaterally looking to alter existing borders (AP News 2024). What confronts Baltic Sea states and EU/NATO members more broadly today is whether they

[1] The EU has not been extensively involved in major arms controls agreements, but there is a need for their future involvement. See Portela (2021) and Lippert (2023b).
[2] Burns and Urquidi (1968) offer a detailed discussion of the differences between geographic demilitarization and broader, arms limitations.

[3] See, for example, Charap et al. (2020) for concrete, CAC recommendations made prior to the Russo-Ukraine War.

want to retain a confrontational approach with Russia or seek (eventually) a more cooperative relationship (Claeys and Williams 2022).

Previous discussions about arms control in the Baltic region have focused on land forces and/or only offered vague recommendations for CAC in the Baltic Sea (Engvall et al. 2018; Kacprzyk and Kulesa 2020; Richter 2016; Zellner, Oliker, and Pifer 2020). Buzhinskiy and Shakirov (2019) briefly discuss naval CAC in the Baltic region but dismiss it as infeasible. This article offers an original set of detailed proposals and discussion focused on the Baltic Sea.

One of the EU/NATO's main goals would be to offer Russia assurances and a diplomatic and security gain both to improve diplomatic relations overall, and potentially as part of a broader diplomatic or CAC agreement. For Russia, any offer to establish limits on NATO naval forces in the Baltic Sea should be welcomed, given the substantial imbalance of naval forces it faces with Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO (Dahlstrand 2024; Dyer 2023; Kayali 2023; Newsweek 2023).

The Montreux Convention

The 1936 Montreux Convention for the Turkish Straits, officially entitled the *Convention Regarding the Regime of The Straits*, was an evolution of an earlier agreement, the 1923 *Convention Relating to the Regime of the Straits and Turkey* (Lausanne Treaty). At the end of the First World War, the newly independent state of Turkey (now Türkiye) was established from the break-up of the Ottoman Empire and the new state's borders contained in their entirety the Bosporus, Dardanelles, and the Sea of Marmara – collectively referred to as the Turkish Straits *(see map 1)*. Negotiations between interested states about control of the straits resulted in the Lausanne Treaty, which gave Türkiye control of the straits but prohibited Türkiye from placing weapons and fortifications along the strait's coastlines. Additional rules applied to naval forces passing through the Straits, in part based on a compromise between Soviet Russia in particular which sought to restrict all naval ships from passing through the straits and global seapowers such as the United Kingdom which sought to retain freedom of navigation to and within the Black Sea (Seydi 2010). The basis of maintaining the Turkish Straits as an international waterway was based on historical custom and existing international law (Ünlü 2002).

Türkiye, however, was dissatisfied with the limits imposed on its military, which prohibited fortifications and other military capabilities along the straits, and in 1936, it successfully negotiated a revision that was signed by state parties in Montreux, Switzerland.

The Montreux Convention removed any restrictions on Türkiye concerning its own military and also removed the limited roles of the League of Nations and the Straits

Commission in monitoring compliance. The Montreux Convention's CAC elements include limits on the ship tonnage of non-Black Sea states that can transit the straits; the number of naval ships that may pass through the straits at any one time; the total tonnage that any non-Black Sea state may have in the sea at any one time; and the duration that a non-Black Sea naval vessel may stay in the sea. While in times of peace, the straits are open to all navies; in times of war, belligerent Black Sea states may only transit the straits if the ship is returning to its home port (either entering or exiting the Black Sea). A non-Black Sea state at war (in principle *anywhere* in the world) cannot transit the straits[4].

The treaty's application was soon tested during World War Two, when both sides sought to use the straits to move military supplies and naval ships back and forth between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. While there were instances of deceit and some inconsistent application of the rules, by and large, Türkiye upheld the Montreux Convention while remaining neutral and applied it equally to all belligerents (Seydi and Morewood 2005). The belligerents themselves did not seek to openly violate the rules openly, as doing so might have offered Türkiye a justification to lift rules applied to the other side. Arguably, the establishment of naval passage through the straits and their fair application decreased the incentive of belligerents to attempt a (possibly expensive) seizure of the straits. This phenomenon finds similarities in other geographic demilitarization efforts, such as Norway's Spitsbergen and Finland's Åland Islands, which prohibit the presence of *any* military forces in times of peace. This phenomenon of an arms control agreement in which the absence of possession by all parties resolves a security dilemma reminiscent of Schelling's (1975) notion of an "IFF" preference. In his framework, he was referring to a weapon system, with an IFF framework referring to the notion that a state would only want to possess a weapon system *if and only if* its adversaries possessed it. The correspondence between Schelling's IFF and agreements such as the Montreux Convention is that both sides may accept that, first, they do not need to control the straits as long as an adversary does not; and second, that they do not need substantial foreign naval reinforcements if the other side does not have them.

The Convention is still in force and was applied by Ankara soon after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. The impact on Russia is likely significant – it cannot easily reinforce its Black Sea fleet or quickly replace losses (Axe 2023) (most of its navy's larger surface vessels and submarines are homeported outside of the Black Sea (Office of Naval Intelligence 2015; "Chapter Five: Russia and Eurasia" 2022). The impact on Ukraine is less certain. On the one hand, Ukraine's surface combat fleet prior to Russia's full-scale invasion was relatively small ("Chapter Five: Russia and Eurasia" 2022).

[4] While applying Montreux Convention limitations to states involved in a conflict involving Black Sea states is relatively straightforward – such as the Russo-Ukraine War, determining that states are at war elsewhere in the world with no immediate impact on the Black Sea and its littoral states may be more complicated. This issue arose, for example, when the US sought to send a warship into the Black Sea during the Vietnam conflict. The Soviet Union objected, claiming that the US was a belligerent state, but Turkey determined that the conflict was not a war (Ünlü 2002, 90).

But on the other, Türkiye's policy of prohibiting *any* naval ships' passage through the straits reduces Ukraine's ability to obtain naval vessels for Black Sea operations (Reuters 2024), or for NATO to provide any assistance, for example, escorting grain shipments (Isachenko 2023; Overfield 2022). The absence of naval reinforcements reduces Ukraine's ability to defend its coastline, including its air defense, and clear waterways of mines, which is important for Ukraine's maritime trade[5].

[5] It remains to be seen to what extent other Black Sea states can reduce this threat (see, for example, (Kucukgocmen and Hayatsever 2024) – and if this will be sufficient if they do not remove mines from Ukrainian waters.

The Montreux Convention serves as a useful template for any CAC agreement for the Baltic Sea due to similarities such as rival states sharing a large sea with limited access, although a substantial difference is that the Black Sea is composed of non-NATO states, NATO members, and Russia so that Turkey remain – as is currently the case – neutral while two non-NATO Black Sea states are at war. This means that Ankara can impartially implement the Montreux Convention as a non-belligerent state. However, excepting the near-term improbability of two Baltic Sea NATO states engaging in conflict with one another, any conflict between Russia and another Baltic Sea state would minimize Sweden and Denmark's neutrality due to all Baltic Sea states other than Russia belonging to NATO.

Map 1 - Black Sea
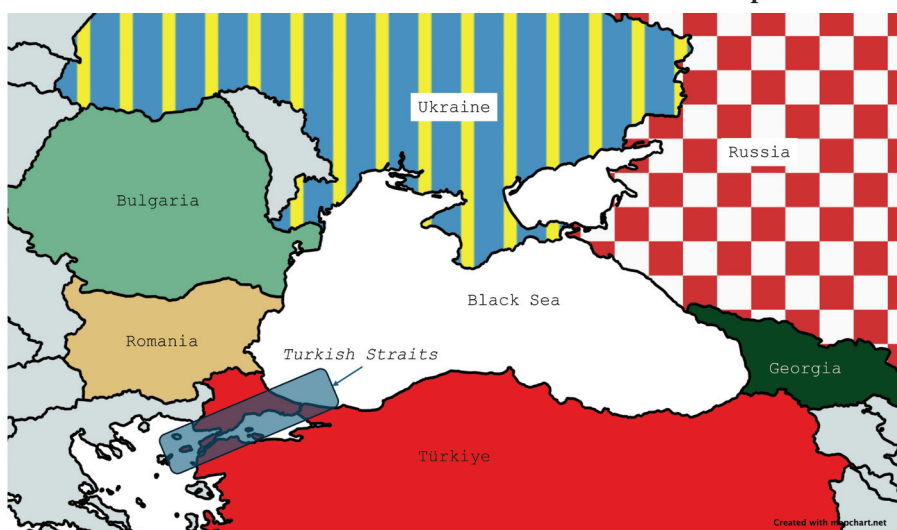
The Baltic Sea

The Baltic Sea's primary access route that can accommodate ships of all sizes runs from the Kattegat Strait between Sweden and Denmark, and then through the relatively narrow Oresund, Little Belt and Great Belt into the Baltic Sea. While the Kattegat flows through Swedish and Danish territorial waters, the Belts are wholly within Danish territory. The Oresund separates Denmark and Sweden and is wider and deeper than the Little and Great Belts and handles more traffic (Helsinki Commission, n.d.). Collectively, these are

referred to as the Danish Straits and are considered international waterways and thus as a matter of maritime law naval vessels by default have a right to transit them with some rules applied for reasons of safety (such as the requirement for submarines to surface while transiting) and security, such as limits on the number of warships that may pass the Danish Straits together (Denmark 1999; Sweden 1966) *(see map 2)*.

The Kiel Canal connects the North and Baltic Seas within German territory, cutting across northern Germany south of Denmark. Due to a combination of international customs and German laws, the waterway is subject to German government approval for the passage of naval vessels[6]. On the eastern end of the Baltic Sea, the White Sea- Baltic Canal and the Volga- Baltic Waterway are minor, artificial sets of canals that lead to the North, Black, and Caspian Seas (Deaton 1975; Swistek and Paul 2023). While the Russian canals offer Moscow some flexibility regarding the way to access the Baltic Sea, due to their shallow depth and narrow width, the canals are neither an efficient route nor can they support larger vessels (Savitz and Winston 2024).

Perhaps the most significant difference between the Baltic and Black Seas is that the former is entirely NATO dominated, with Russia only retaining a narrow coastline along the Baltic Sea, and its navy is much smaller than NATO's collective naval forces in the Baltic Sea. Among the strategically important Russian areas that border the Black Sea are the exclave of Kaliningrad and Saint Petersburg.

[6] The Kiel canal management has indicated that permission from the German government is likely required for passage of Russian naval vessels (UCA Kiel 2023). Another document indicates that Russian-flagged vessels are unable to use the canal due to EU sanctions ("Notification Requirements," n.d.). These indicators suggest that the Kiel canal is subject to more restrictions and sovereign control than the Danish or Turkish Straits.

Map 2 - Baltic Sea
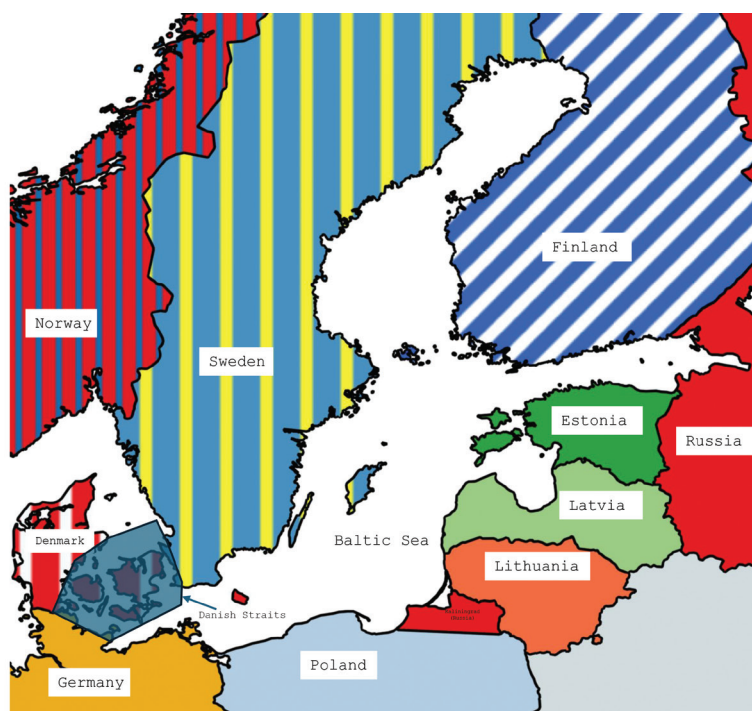
Potential CAC in the Baltic Sea

Russia would have an interest in seeing any Baltic Sea naval restrictions. Although it can freely move its own naval forces in and out of the Baltic Sea in times of peace, Moscow faces comparative disadvantages. First, the overall size of NATO's navies – especially due to the US's naval fleet – dwarfs that of Russia's. Thus, without limits, NATO naval forces can threaten Russia far more than Russia can threaten NATO. Second, NATO's industrial and defense capacity outstrips Russia's so that, if unchecked, the Baltic Sea NATO states will produce far more ships than Russia. Access and/or national limits could at least stabilize Russia's disadvantage. Third, it might be possible for Sweden and Denmark to prevent the passage of Russian warships in times of crisis, leading to escalation and potential conflict. A legally binding agreement would establish the precise conditions in which the Danish straits could be closed to Russian naval vessels. Table 1 contrasts and compares the Turkish Straits agreements with potential Danish Straits and Baltic Sea CAC agreements.

Russia should be especially concerned about NATO's overall growing coastal and naval activities in the Baltic Sea area, such as NATO naval exercises (Reuters 2023; Brooks 2022). NATO established Baltic Sentry in early 2025 in response to underwater communications cable damage and to generally deter Russian naval activities and presence (Shape.Nato.Int 2025). Baltic Sea NATO members plan continued upgrades and expansions of their naval capabilities (Livermore 2024).

Access Control

One aspect of a Baltic Sea CAC regime could be the establishment and implementation of naval vessel access controls. These already exist to a limited extent according to Danish and Swedish laws, limiting the number of naval vessels that may transit the Danish Straits simultaneously and the requirement for submarines to transit surfaced. The former likely reflects, even if not explicitly, fears of attack by sea. For example, the German invasion of Norway by sea included the passage of a German fleet through the Danish Straits. Nothing in international or national laws, however, prohibit Denmark or Sweden from permitting larger fleets from transiting their waters through the Danish Straits in peacetime – a notable difference from the Montreux Convention which limits the aggregate number (to include non-Black Sea naval vessels already in the Black Sea) and size of non-Black Sea state naval vessels[7].

Aside from fears of enemy action, Sweden and Denmark impose reasonable maritime safety measures due to the Danish Straits' narrowness and high

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[7] The Montreux Convention Article 21 permits Turkey to impose unilateral control over the straits when it might "consider herself to be threatened with imminent danger of war".

TABLE NO. 1

	Lausanne	Montreux	Current Danish Straits Restrictions	Danish Straits Potential Limitations	Potential Baltic CSBM	Potential Baltic Medium Limits	Potential Baltic Deep Limits
Area of Application	The Turkish Straits, its shorelines, and entry/exit areas.	Turkish Straits.	Danish Straits (Sweden and Denmark territorial waters).	Danish Straits (Sweden and Denmark territorial waters).	Baltic Sea.	Baltic Sea.	Baltic Sea.
Tonnage restrictions	No individual ship shall exceed 10,000 tons.	The maximum aggregate tonnage of all foreign naval forces which may be in course of transit through the Straits shall not exceed 15,000 tons; the aggregate tonnage which non-Black Sea Powers may have in that sea in time of peace shall not exceed 30,000 tons.	None.	Other than Sweden and Denmark, a limitation of 15,000 tons for one ship, maximum of three ships.	Reporting of naval ships over 1500 tons entering or departing the Baltic Sea, to include production within.	Limit of a certain number of ships total for each side (not necessarily even number), above a certain tonnage, in part based on class. For example, for "destroyers" a ratio of 5:3; for cruisers 1:1; etc.	Only a small number of ships permitted between certain tonnages (real numbers at a ratio), for example 10,000-20,000. Above a certain number, 20,000, no military vessels permitted. Prohibition of amphibious assault ships.
Rule differentiation based on geography	None.	Black Sea Powers may send through the Straits capital ships greater than 15,000 tons, on condition that these vessels pass through the Straits singly, escorted by not more than two destroyers. Other definitions of ships based on gun calibre.	None (excluding Danish/Swedish sovereignty).	No single tonnage limitation for Baltic states, but no more than three ships totaling 45,000 tons at any one time.	Reporting would not apply to ships *not* in, entering, or departing the Baltic even if the state is a Baltic sea state (ie the ships are outside of the Baltic Sea).	Non-Baltic Sea states are permitted up to five naval vessels totally 50,000 tons per state.	Non-Baltic Sea NATO states are only permitted up to three naval vessels combined totalling 30,000 tons in the Baltic Sea at any one time. Amphibious assault ships and submarines from non-Baltic Sea states are prohibited.
Firepower restrictions	None.	For auxilliary vessels, 105 mm anti-surface guns, and 75 mm anti-air guns.	None.	None.	Above a certain firepower, perhaps defined by number of missiles or missile tubes (excluding small missiles) could be reported. This might account for small boats armed with anti-ship missiles.	Limitation on the number and a fixed ratio of VLS/missile tubes.	Limitation on the number and a fixed ratio of VLS/missile tubes (lower ceiling compared to medium limits).
Aircraft restrictions	Freedom to fly over a strip of territory of five kilometres on each side of the narrow parts of the Straits;	Vessels of war in transit through the Straits shall in no circumstances make use of any aircraft which they may be carrying. No other mention of military aircraft.	Denmark: restrictions on activities; Sweden: no restrictions in a narrow corridor. A bit unclear however, although some sources say it is sovereign airspace subject to permissions (and specifically in contrast to sea vessels).	No change.	Reporting of planned military aircraft activities above a certain threshold and/or in a certain international area.	A specified area might be prohibited to armed military aircraft.	A specified area might be prohibited from armed military aircraft (lower ceiling and/or larger area, compared to medium limits).
Fortifications	Demilitarization (military forces and fortifications) along the Straits shorelines.	None.	None.	None.	None.	None.	None.
Quantitative restrictions	Based on the total Black Sea fleet size of the most powerful fleet; and not more than three ships of which none shall exceed 10,000 tons. Limit of 12,000 soldiers in Constantinople.	The maximum aggregate tonnage of all foreign naval forces which may be in course of transit through the Straits shall not exceed 15,000 tons, except in certain cases and not more than nine vessels. In the Black Sea itself, the aggregate tonnage which non-Black Sea Powers may have in that sea in time of peace shall not exceed 30,000-45,000 tons depending on the tonnage of the largest Black Sea fleet.	Sweden: Not more than three naval vessels of the same belligerent Power, or of allied belligerent Powers, may be within Swedish territory at the same time. A naval vessel of a belligerent Power shall be admitted to pass through the territorial sea for a maximum period of 24 consecutive hours. A naval vessel of a belligerent Power shall not stop or anchor or otherwise interrupt its voyage within Swedish territory unless this is necessary for the safety of the vessel. Unclear what new rules will apply to NATO members. No clear limits imposed by Denmark.	Maximum of three naval vessels (except for Denmark/Sweden) for any one nation or alliance.	Not applicable.	Limit of a certain number of ships total for each side (not necessarily equal ratio), above a certain tonnage, in part based on class. For example, for "destroyers" a ratio of 5:3; for cruisers 1:1; etc.	Only a small number of ships permitted between certain tonnages (real numbers at a ratio), for example 10,000-20,000. Above a certain number, 20,000, no military vessels permitted. Prohibition of amphibious assault ships.
Monitoring and verification	Straits Commission on-site inspections	Unilateral and national means.	None (unilateral).	Joint NATO-Russia Commission.	OSCE.	Joint NATO-Russia Commission or OSCE.	New Baltic Sea-Specific International Organization.
International Organization role	Straits Commission, composed of state representatives.	None.	None (unilateral).	Joint NATO-Russia Commission.	OSCE.	Joint NATO-Russia Commission or OSCE.	New Baltic Sea-Specific International Organization.
Exemptions	Right of Turkey to move forces through the Straits; Turkey and Greece could move forces through the demilitarized areas.	None; Tükiye is not subject to limitations.	Denmark/Sweden are not subject to limitations.	Denmark/Sweden are not subject to limitations.	Ships not in the Baltic Sea, even if belonging to a Baltic Sea state.	Emergency humanitarian operations, as informed and monitored.	Emergency humanitarian operations, as informed and monitored.
Dispute adjudication	Council of the League of Nations.	Bilateral/diplomatic.	Bilateral.	Joint NATO-Russia Commission, OSCE, and United Nations.	Joint NATO-Russia Commission, OSCE, and United Nations.	Joint NATO-Russia Comission, OSCE.	Joint NATO-Russia Comission, OSCE. Possibily New Baltic Sea-Specific International Organization.
Other	No violations of Turkish neutrality (attacking enemy forces within the Straits). No passage for states at war, unless Turkey is at war then the Convention does not apply.	Vessels of war belonging to non-Black Sea Powers shall not remain in the Black Sea more than twenty-one days, whatever be the object of their presence there.	Submarines must transit surfaced. Prohibitions on various activities such as espionage and taking scientific measurements.	Denmark and Sweden may close the Straits to belligerent states at war with another state in the Baltic Sea, if Denmark/Sweden are non-belligerent parties. That is, a non-Baltic Sea state at war with a Baltic Sea state would not be permitted to transit the Straits; and a Baltic Sea state vs. another Baltic Sea state in which case no Baltic Sea state at war may transit.	Additional protocols involving long-range weapon firing, and exercises in the Baltic Sea over a certain quantity, such as a 10 vessels and 30 aircraft.	Vessels flagged by Baltic Sea states that are not present and/or based in the Baltic Sea will not count towards any totals and limitations.	Vessels flagged by Baltic Sea states that are not present and/or based in the Baltic Sea will not count towards any totals and limitations.

traffic. Even in the best of circumstances, ships can collide in busy seaways and naval ships may be more vulnerable to accidents due to combinations of radar and visibility reductions (modern naval vessels often incorporate radar signature reduction designs and due to their often matte gray paint, they are less visible compared to commercial and civilian vessels), potentially higher speeds, and possibility of turning off identifying, navigation radio signals (Labrenz 2023). The requirement for submarines to travel surfaced is an obvious question of safety, as submerged submarines are difficult to detect and, should they surface in constricted waterways, may easily collide with other ships[8].

The Montreux Convention imposes a variety of access controls which might be transferrable to the Danish Straits. First, there may be limits on the size (tonnage) of naval vessels. Ship tonnage is a fairly straightforward measure of a ship's capability, with larger vessels being more capable because more systems and weapons fit in it[9]. This comparison is restricted to ships of the same technological generation; an 8000-ton modern destroyer arguably has much more anti-ship capability than a World War Two-era 65,000-ton battleship because the former is equipped with accurate, long-range anti-ship missiles.

The Montreux Convention also specifically prohibits the transit of non-Black Sea states' capital ships, as defined by tonnage and/or firepower, and submarines. Additionally, though not specified in the Convention, the Turkish government prohibits the passage of all aircraft carriers ("Implementation of the Montreux Convention", n.d.).

Ship tonnage and quantity are two approaches to limit access to the Baltic Sea through the Danish Straits. First, there may be a universal limit on ship types based on tonnage and firepower. Before the age of missiles, firepower was easily determined by barrel caliber and the number of large guns. Today, however, guns are irrelevant to naval surface warfare, having been replaced by missiles. Assessing ship firepower in the missile age is much more difficult than in the gun age because missile capabilities vary significantly due to technology, design, and tactics. Moreover, ships carry missiles for a variety of missions such as anti-ship, anti-submarine, surface strike, and air defense. Despite the challenges of measuring naval firepower, as most naval ships today are equipped with vertical launch systems (VLS), the quantity of these can be used as a measure of a ship's firepower.

Tonnage-based limitations could hedge against states attempting to circumvent firepower limits and might otherwise offer a means to anticipate changes in naval ship design and warfare. Moreover, a tonnage limit can help prevent ships from circumventing any restrictions based on ship class designations. While broad ship classes may exist for naval vessels, many

[8] See, for example, the collision of a surfacing Japanese submarine with a commercial ship (Ogura 2021).
[9] See, for example, Peck's (2019) discussion about battlecruisers being less capable than battleships due to less armor (less mass).

ships can fall between or within several categories. For example, any restrictions on aircraft carriers will be frustrated by a lack of a universal definition of such ships. Some fixed-wing aircraft-carrying ships also conduct other missions, such as amphibious assault. Two examples of these gray areas are the Soviet *Kiev* and *Kuznetsov* aircraft-carrying cruisers and the US amphibious assault ships that double as fixed-wing aircraft carriers. Both these types of ships displace significantly more mass than a modern cruiser or destroyer.

A universal tonnage and firepower restriction would offer Russia an increased sense of security as it would decrease its fear of a sea-based attack in the Baltic Sea. This would reduce arms racing and contribute to confidence building. While some states might object to what would amount to *de facto* national limits if their entire coastline falls within the Baltic Sea, it is unclear that they require the restricted vessels or, if they do, that these cannot be based in the ports of other NATO members. Foreign-basing of naval vessels is widely practiced by the United States, with other countries operating primarily foreign naval support facilities without permanently assigned ships. This approach may in part suggest a more alliance-wide approach to defense planning, basing, and deployments for NATO – one that treats NATO's entire geographic space as a single, continuous zone or at least substantial areas and blocs of states as a single zone for CAC purposes, much as Russia seeks be considered as a single zone (west of the Urals) instead of it being partitioned into CAC zones which restrict internal movement – but this is beyond this article's scope.

Another approach, which the Montreux Convention also incorporates, is the placement of certain limits on non-Baltic Sea states and different restrictions (or no restrictions) on Baltic Sea states. The Montreux Convention sets limits on aggregate tonnage of all non-Black Sea state naval vessels combined, the aggregate tonnage for any one non-Black Sea state, and the duration in which they may remain in the Black Sea. The latter varies from most of the other Convention's stipulations as the limit goes beyond transiting; that is, once a vessel has passed through the Turkish Straits, it is unclear how Türkiye could compel a state to withdraw the vessel other than through diplomatic means and by refusing entry of the violator's other naval vessels.

Baltic Sea limitations that apply only to non-Baltic Sea states could still reduce arms racing and build confidence and security, but without Russia seeing limits imposed on its navy. On the other hand, the limits would not (in this approach) apply to the Baltic Sea NATO states, thus it might not go far in increasing Russia's sense of security although restrictions placed on NATO's top three naval powers – the US, UK, and France –in the Baltic Sea (as non-Baltic Sea states) should improve Russia's perception of security.

National and Bloc Limits

The national naval limits of Baltic Sea states represent another approach that could be adopted to CAC in the Baltic Sea. This would be a substantial variation

of the Montreux Convention, which did not impose limits on the size or composition of Black Sea naval fleet sizes – limits rather applied primarily to transiting the Turkish Straits and *de facto* limits. Rather, national naval limits would build on an established history of national, military capability CAC agreements. Among these are the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty which set limits on capital ships amongst five major naval powers and the 1990 Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty which set limits on five categories of land-based weapon systems from the North Atlantic to the Ural Mountains (often referred to as the Atlantic to the Urals (ATTU)).

While the CFE Treaty set equal limits for NATO and the Warsaw Pact, the Washington Naval Treaty established a ratio of naval forces between five states. Measured in tonnage, the ratio was 5:5:3:1.67:1.67 ratio of tonnage for the United Kingdom, the US, Japan, France and Italy, respectively. This ratio was established based on a combination of existing naval power and perceived naval force requirements with the US and UK, for example, having by agreement a greater need for a larger navy compared to other state parties. Importantly and relevant to today, the CFE and Washington Naval Treaties were signed during times of peace between the signatories, albeit the proxy war that NATO and Russia find themselves in Ukraine creates a much more challenging atmosphere for agreement as well as casting into question bases for any ratios. Another agreement of interest is the 1817-1818 Rush-Bagot Treaty between the US and Canada, which sets (it is still in force despite the two states' close alliance) limitations on fortifications and naval vessels in and around the Great Lakes (Bagot and Rush 1817; O'Neill 1991).

The issue of whether an agreement is signed during peace or war (or soon after) is important because peace agreements often require extensive bargaining and discussions, as each side has the capacity to refuse the agreement with minimal consequences. In contrast, a conflict or post-conflict agreement, such as the post-World War treaties, permits the victor to impose CAC limits and measures on the defeated state(s) without accepting any limits on their own military forces[10]. It is unclear if post-Russo-Ukraine War agreements between Russia and NATO are likely to lean towards peacetime or discriminatory post-conflict agreements, but currently, a Baltic Sea agreement is more likely to reflect a peacetime agreement due to neither side having the capacity to impose a discriminatory agreement on the other (Lippert 2024a).

Currently, available information from the 2025 IISS Military Balance and other sources suggest that Baltic Sea NATO tonnage far surpasses Russia's by a ratio of 85:15, or 217,000 metric tons to 40,000[11]. Thus, realistically, Russia is unable to compete with NATO's current Baltic Sea fleet, even

[10] One exception to this was the peacetime, 1920 Russia-Finnish agreement signed in Tartu/Dorpat which imposed substantial limits, particularly naval, on Finland. Finland was newly independent from imperial Russia, but newly-established.
[11] For this calculation, all of Germany's fleet is counted for simplicity, although its ships can be based in the North Atlantic rather than the Baltic Sea. The calculations are based on various open sources, such as The Military Balance ("Chapter Three: Europe" 2025; "Chapter Four: Russia and Eurasia" 2025), and count combat ships of 20 tons and higher, excluding, for example, inflatable boats. Russia's calculations are an estimate based on multiple sources of what it may have in the Baltic Sea at any given time, and likely overestimates actual holdings.

excluding NATO reinforcements from outside of the Baltic Sea. For example, a ten percent increase in tonnage offers Russia a modest 4000 tons, which is approximately one frigate. NATO, on the other hand, would gain 22,000 tons with a ten percent increase – or the equivalent of five frigates.

Though the CFE Treaty and its additional protocols specify national limits in five TLE categories, the treaty established equal limits for NATO and the Warsaw Pact collectively. A similar approach could be done with a Baltic Sea limitation treaty. NATO and Russia could agree on a broad ratio and limitations, and then work backwards to define national limits. Alternatively, the two sides might agree on an overall NATO ceiling, reflecting Russia as a single-entity, then NATO could manage the ceiling internally[12].

The ratio approach still leaves open several questions and choices. First, should there be reductions in TLE or should Baltic Sea fleets be subject to a ceiling that is either at or higher than current inventories? The CFE Treaty mandated the destruction of a significant amount of TLE by both blocs, although the Warsaw Pact had a heavier destruction burden as they had more TLE than NATO at the time of CFE signature and entry into force. TLE limits or reductions reduce the capability of conducting a surprise attack – which was one of the CFE Treaty's main goals.

Another question would be whether to only count tonnage or to also include counts for specific ship types. For example, a strong case can be made that 20 ships of just 1000 tons each (a large patrol vessel) are not as capable as 5 ships of 4000 tons each (approximately a frigate). This is because small ships lack capabilities that larger ships have, such as advanced radar and sonar systems as well as helicopter-carrying capacity. Thus, limits could be both on total tonnage and per ship class and type. This would be in line with previous naval agreements, including the Washington Naval Treaty and the Montreux Convention, which established ship class definitions and limits specific to each class. Prohibitions on specific ship classes or ships above a certain size could also be considered, such as cruisers, large amphibious assault ships, and aircraft carriers.

Another, and perhaps the most important and difficult question to resolve, is the allocation of limit ratios. Russia might seek (and certainly prefer) an even ratio of 1:1 or even a ratio in its favor. However, there is no historical justification for this, as CAC agreements often reflect the military balance at the time of agreement[13]; that is, NATO is unlikely to give up a substantial advantage *unless* the agreement is closely tied to a broader ATTU agreement and/or to ending the Russo-Ukraine War. If a substantial reduction in the gap between NATO and Russian Baltic Sea capabilities is not likely, this still leaves open the possibility that the gap can be narrowed – or even

[12] When the Soviet Union was dissolved, the newly independent states divided CFE Treaty TLE limits amongst themselves.

[13] Reference CSP article.

broadened – but to an extent that reduces the potential, long-term gap. Concerning the latter option, if Russia faces a potential tonnage ratio of 95:5 in fifteen years, it might be willing to accept a limitation which locks in a ratio at 90:10 – worse than the current ratio of 85:15 – but better than 95:5.

NATO, in the interests of stability, confidence building, and improved diplomatic relations might be willing to sacrifice some of its advantages in the Baltic Sea, especially as it is unclear if such overwhelming naval capabilities are essential to offense or defense given advantages in airpower, strategic depth, and difficulties Russia might face in conducting amphibious operations (Baev 2023; Gapiński, Kulesza, and Muzyka 2023). Thus, NATO might reasonably tolerate a 66:33 ratio, for example.

Implementation and Delegation

Two important aspects of implementation are verification and implementation management. Verification measures include a combination of national intelligence collection, on-site inspections, state reporting, and remote monitoring. There are three broad approaches to monitoring and verification: state-based "good faith", state-based multilateral intrusive inspections, and delegated implementation. In the first, which was the approach adopted for the interwar naval agreements, states did not establish a formal system of inspection. Rather, they relied on espionage, open sources, and good faith. After the Second World War, intrusive measures became more commonplace, with state parties sending inspectors to one another's military facilities. The management of the arms control treaties, however, was by the state parties themselves. In the case of several agreements, a coordinative body was created (such as the CFE Treaty's Joint Consultative Group (JCG)). This body was legally established as part of the agreement, but it was composed of national representatives who met to discuss administrative, technical and coordinative issues. Disputes could be raised in the JCG, but the JCG itself did not conduct monitoring or verification activities and did not assess compliance.

Other agreements, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) role in implementing the 2015 Minsk Agreements for the reduction in hostilities in Ukraine, involved a neutral, third-party implementer. The OSCE was charged with a full range of monitoring and verification functions, which included over 1000 staff members, many of whom were based in Ukraine on both sides of the line of contract (OSCE 2021). The OSCE issued compliance reports but did not have an enforcement mandate.

The Lausanne Treaty for the Straits established the Straits Commission which was charged with collecting information about naval vessels in the Black Sea, sharing this information with all states concerned, and "to see that the provisions relating to the passage of warships and military aircraft are carried out," ("The Convention

Relating To The Regime Of The Straits And Turkey" 1923, art. 15). The agreement also established a commission to verify defortification along the Turkish Straits. In practice, the commissions were only minimally active, perhaps due to a lack of violations and because of Türkiye's desire to be in control of the straits. With the Montreux Convention's entry into force, the commissions were dissolved, and Türkiye assumed full responsibilities for monitoring, verification, and enforcement.

A notable difference between the Montreux Convention and other CAC agreements is that Türkiye has substantial capabilities to enforce the agreement due to the straits running through its territory. In contrast, most CAC agreement violations occur in opposing states' national territory, outside of the control of the state(s) making any accusations of violations. For example, the US had no means to enforce Russian compliance with the INF Treaty when Washington accused Russia of testing a prohibited conventional land-based cruise missile. The US's only means of compelling enforcement was through diplomacy.

An important caveat on CAC agreement enforcement, however, is necessary. States or their supranational agreement implementors may be able to enforce discriminatory, post-conflict agreements when the victorious states occupy the defeated states or are otherwise willing to use force to enforce the agreements. One of the clearest examples of this are the post-World War Two Allied Control Councils and Commissions (ACCs) set up in the defeated Axis states. These had the backings of the occupation armies to ensure compliance with agreements. In the case of the much narrower agreement that ended the 1999 Kosovo conflict, the agreement authorized NATO to enforce the demilitarized zone by force.

The geography of the Turkish Straits permits, and the Montreux Convention implicitly authorizes Türkiye to enforce rules concerning the passage of the Straits. As recently demonstrated due to the Russo-Ukraine War, Türkiye unilaterally decides which naval vessels are and are not permitted to pass through the straits. Aside from diplomatic costs, violators risk military action in an extremely tactically disadvantageous position. Of course, for Türkiye to attack a state with whom they are otherwise not at war would be extreme. But other measures could be undertaken, including the non-provision of a pilot and non-cooperation from traffic control authorities. The Straits, which may have difficult navigational natural, marine, and man-made obstacles, might be risky to pass through if authorities erect non-destructive barriers such as obstacles or do not offer navigational assistance ("Note on the Turkish Straits," n.d.).

The agreement execution body options available for a Baltic Sea agreement can be any of the three approaches mentioned above. A purely state-based approach with no agreement executor would likely disadvantage Russia as Russia has no control over the Danish Straits, and they (as well as other states) would face the complicated factor that the straits run through two states instead of one. With Sweden and Denmark

being NATO members, Russia may not trust their objectivity in implementing the agreement. While Türkiye is also a NATO member, perceptions of it being a fair custodian of the straits going back to Türkiye's foundation likely alleviate concerns about Türkiye's objectivity. Russia might have less faith in Denmark and Sweden's goodwill. This approach, however, ruffles the least sovereignty feathers. States engage in traditional bilateral and multilateral diplomacy without the perceived interference of a treaty executor, however weak.

Still, a weak agreement executor is not without its advantages, which the JCG demonstrated. As a standing forum, it can efficiently coordinate information exchange, deal with disputes to some extent, and resolve technical questions in a way that can be accepted by all state parties. A standing body would develop institutional knowledge, experience, and norms especially if the same group of experts regularly assemble (Finnemore 1993).

A strong agreement executor and neutral body such as the OSCE or United Nations (UN) (which was charged with implementing weapons of destruction disarmament in Iraq, for example) has the advantage of being perceived as *relatively* fair and objective (compared to an adversaries' state organs or alliances performing inspections and assessments). Depending on its mandate and how it is structured, it may also be endowed with considerable resources, as in the case of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) in Ukraine or the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia, to execute the agreement's mission.

One advantage of an empowered, delegated treaty executor is that it is likely more adaptable – if the agreement is written to incorporate adaptability – than either of the other two approaches, which are more likely to require a whole renegotiation of the agreement. CAC agreements can only, at best, reflect military capabilities and technologies at the time of signature, but military capabilities evolve continuously. In the case of the Montreux Convention, for example, it had not anticipated armed, converted merchant vessels (Seydi and Morewood 2005). Similarly, some of the limits are based on gun caliber, which is no longer relevant to modern surface combatants. Türkiye's monopoly over the Montreux Convention's enforcement – a relatively unique situation amongst CAC agreements – likely facilitates agreement adaptability and evolution.

An agreement implementer could be charged with adapting the agreement based on changes in military technologies and geopolitical changes such as alliance memberships (Lippert 2023a). Indeed, agreement adaptation potential may be an important component of agreement survivability. Agreements that do not adapt to technological or geopolitical changes – both of which occur over the lifetime of CAC agreements – may easily become irrelevant. This irrelevance may be because they are no longer effective in addressing the problem they were designed to address, such the CFE Treaty's relevancy struggles following the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact when the

agreement had been conceived specifically to prevent a NATO-Warsaw Pact conflict; or because one or several parties no longer view the agreement as in their interests, such as the Russian perception of the INF Treaty's limitations on conventional, land-based, medium-range missiles due to perceptions of overwhelming NATO long-range precision strike capability (Kühn and Péczeli 2017).

Kühn (2015) emphasizes that adaptability is one of the three main factors of institutional success in arms control agreements (the other two being courtesy and clarity). Debre and Dijkstra (2021) note, for example, that international organizations – which conceptually include CAC agreement executors, though these are not specifically mentioned in their study – are more survivable when they are larger and more flexible. On the other hand, international organizations with very narrow mandates – which may characterize some CAC agreement executors – may be unable to adapt. This would suggest that an organization such as the OSCE is more survivable and adaptable compared to a narrow CAC body such as the CFE Treaty's JCG – which is largely borne out by the fact that the OSCE continues to function (albeit with substantial handicaps due to NATO-Russian rivalries (Hill 2023) while the JCG is *de facto* disbanded due to most state parties having suspended participation (Alberque 2023).

Conclusion

This article's underlying theme is that another war in Europe should be prevented and that preventing wars is about creating the conditions in which states view war as more costly than beneficial (Hausken 2016). CAC accomplishes this by stabilizing the military balance and reducing, if not eliminating, arms racing (Baliga and Sjöström 2004; Downs, Rocke, and Siverson 1985; Gray 1971). CAC also offers a forum for improving diplomatic relations, both through the process of negotiating agreements and in implementing the agreement. A successful CAC agreement helps to build trust and confidence between rivals and, ideally, removes some sources of dispute that can lead to conflict.

This article suggests that an effective CAC regime in the Baltic Sea can accomplish these goals. The article offers several approaches, indicating some of their advantages, disadvantages, and impacts. There is no singular approach to CAC agreements that assures success or failure. Over the past 100 years, CAC agreements have been varied and have met different levels of success. However, the relative success of the Lausanne and Montreux agreements, which have collectively surpassed 100 years of implementation, suggests that a similar approach to the Baltic Sea might be successful. The Lausanne/Montreux agreements survived several major historical periods: the interwar years, World War Two, the Cold War, and the post-Cold War decades – and still function amidst the Russo-Ukraine War. Surviving through these periods demonstrates that even if the agreement was intended for a certain

geopolitical situation, it retained its relevance despite significant changes in Europe. A Baltic Sea agreement designed for a second Cold War might similarly maintain relevance and durability.

A Baltic Sea CAC agreement, whether it imposes access controls, establishes naval inventory and capability limits, or both, is unlikely to do more harm than good for all the state parties. Russia finds itself significantly outnumbered, out-tonned, and out-missiled by NATO. Thus, they should welcome any opportunity to limit NATO naval forces, whether this is by locking in a fixed ratio of Russian and NATO navy ships and/or reducing non-Baltic Sea naval capabilities from entering the Baltic.

NATO's Baltic Sea CAC interest lies in preventing arms racing, which, even if it could prevail, would still require funds that might otherwise be better spent, and in improving diplomatic relations with Russia. The Russo-Ukraine War has shattered mutual trust. A Baltic Sea CAC agreement could be one brick in rebuilding a stable security foundation. Even if such an agreement might only slightly contribute to preventing another large-scale European conflict, the costs of the war in Ukraine suggest that all efforts should be undertaken to avoid a second 21st-century European war.

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