



# Fellow submarines

by Jan Joel Andersson

Ever since the occupation of Crimea in 2014, Russian military activity has increased in and around Europe. Russian air and land exercises have also become more assertive and frequent compared to previous years. Fighter jets of the Swedish and Finnish air forces, as well as NATO fighters protecting the air space of the three Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are scrambled on a regular basis to intercept approaching Russian aircraft. Similarly, the Russian navy has stepped up its operations and engages in naval exercises and deployments of increasing scope and scale.

Perhaps most worryingly to Western observers is the increase in underwater activity in the Baltic Sea and North Atlantic: senior NATO naval commanders have confirmed that “Russian submarine activity is reaching levels unseen since the end of the Cold War”. In October 2014, Sweden engaged in a seven-day submarine hunt in the Stockholm archipelago in what was the biggest mobilisation of the country’s armed forces since the Cold War, and in April 2015 the Finnish Navy dropped depth charges to warn-off an intruding submarine in the waters off Helsinki. Several submarine hunts have also been conducted by the British Royal Navy in the waters off Scotland and in the so-called Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap through which Russian submarines must pass before heading into the North Atlantic.

Europe is heavily dependent upon free and safe sea lines of communications to support civilian,

commercial, and military transport. Moreover, the growing importance of secure maritime borders and the protection of vital undersea global communication cables make it both prudent and necessary for Europe to collectively manage, deter, and counter any undersea provocations. Countering enemy submarines is, however, very difficult, time consuming and costly as the best underwater defences are submarines themselves.

## Complex and competitive

Containing more parts than jet airliners and being more complicated than surface vessels, submarines can be compared to space ships in their complexity. There are only a handful of companies in the world capable of designing advanced submarines and the majority of them are European. Currently, companies in France, Germany, Spain, Sweden and the UK are all capable of designing submarines. With diminishing European defence budgets since the end of the Cold War, these firms have had to largely rely on exports, primarily to the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America. Most recently, Australia awarded French shipbuilder DCNS a major order for 12 new submarines after having considered earlier offers from German, Japanese and Swedish producers.

However, increasing Russian undersea activities in the Baltic Sea and North Atlantic, as well as the recent reintroduction of submarines in the Russian Black Sea Fleet patrolling in the Mediterranean

have drawn new attention to submarines in Europe. Italy and Turkey are in the process of introducing new submarines to their fleets while France, Germany, Spain, Sweden and the UK are all currently building new submarines for their respective navies. Currently, Norway, Poland and the Netherlands are all looking to procure new submarines. Today, Norway has six submarines, Poland five and the Netherlands four but none of them has the money to replace their ageing boats one for one. In fact, Norway is planning a future fleet of probably four, Poland is said to plan an order of three and the Netherlands will perhaps only order two, at least to begin with. Given the cost of building submarines and the complexity of anti-submarine warfare (ASW), there should be plenty of opportunities for European collaboration in these areas.

### Cooperation under the surface...

Potentially, large savings could be made if two or more partner countries could commit to the same submarine design and even more could be saved if joint training, logistics and maintenance could be agreed upon. The three countries in question have all also expressed an interest in finding a partner. In fact, the Netherlands, Norway and Poland are already cooperating in the procurement of multirole tanker-transport (MRTT) aircraft to be jointly owned and operated by the three partner countries.

However, a major challenge in all international procurement cooperation is to agree on common specifications. While both Norway and Poland operate rather small submarines for coastal operations and have reportedly similar types of requirements, there is no imminent talk of joint procurement between the two despite a pressing timeline to get new boats before the current ones need to be replaced. Meanwhile, the Netherlands is said to require much larger boats than the others (the Dutch want submarines capable of crossing oceans), making it unclear if there is possibility for cooperation among the three after all.

Another form of cooperation is to partner with existing producers of submarines. For example, the German and Polish navies announced on 29 June 2016 that they have set up a joint 'Submarine Operating Authority' that will bring the submarines of the two navies under joint control (although command over the submarines will be retained by the respective countries). If Poland were to order its next submarines from Germany, cooperation could clearly also be extended to training, logistics and more. Meanwhile, the

Swedish submarine producer SAAB-Kockums has teamed up with the Dutch group Damen Schelde Naval Shipbuilding to bid on the submarine replacement programme for the Dutch navy. If they won, long-term cooperation between the Netherlands and Sweden in the underwater domain would follow.

### ...and in the air

The return of significant Russian undersea activity in northern Europe has also revived the issue of how to counter threats by other means than submarines. Unfortunately, the current state of European ASW assets is dismal, but this does, however, provide ample opportunities for European cooperation. Years of neglect after the end of the Cold War have left many European navies without assets and knowledge of how to reliably detect, track and counter enemy submarines.

While many European countries still operate submarines, there are few that have maintained the long-range maritime patrol aircraft (MPAs) necessary for extended submarine hunts over the oceans. The Netherlands sold its P3 Orion MPA aircraft to Germany in 2005 and the UK retired all of its Nimrod MPAs in 2011. Indeed, when a suspected Russian submarine was detected in the waters close to the main UK submarine base in Scotland in November 2014 and again in January 2015, the Royal Navy had to rely on NATO allies sending their MPAs to join the hunt.

Many countries in Europe are in great need of rebuilding their capabilities related to maritime domain awareness. These capabilities can then be used for ASW in the North Atlantic and also for monitoring the seas in the Baltic and the Mediterranean or to safeguard sea lanes of communications off the coasts of Africa and beyond. Airborne systems like MPAs are particularly well suited for all these purposes but high costs prevent many countries from individually acquiring or maintaining this capability. There is therefore a good opportunity for a cooperative European solution to emerge. There are different models that could be used of which the NATO Airborne Warning and Control System (AWAC) consortium and the multinational C-17 Strategic Airlift Cooperation are just two good existing examples of pooling and sharing that works.

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