

“Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma”
Winston Churchill, BBC, 1939

Introduction: When the Heartland¹ turned its back on the sea

The Kremlin framed its 2022 invasion of Ukraine as a historical correction and a security imperative: pushing NATO back and restoring “strategic depth” along its western flank. The UN General Assembly condemned the aggression in its Eleventh Emergency Special Session (A/RES/ES-11/1, 2 March 2022), and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered provisional measures directing Russia to suspend its operations (ICJ, 2022), thereby conferring substantial international legitimacy on the allied response (UNGA, 2022). The geostrategic effect, however, was a boomerang. The accession of Finland (4 April 2023) and Sweden (7 March 2024) to NATO has transformed the Baltic Sea into a body of water almost surrounded by allied states—de facto an “inner sea” of the Alliance. Its key access points are now under reinforced surveillance and covered by a dense network of sensors, platforms, and interoperable procedures, significantly raising the difficulty and cost of any Russian attempt to operate in the area without being detected, tracked, or deterred (NATO, 2023, 2024). In oceanopolitical terms, a continental power without a robust maritime strategy has discovered that its much-valued landward depth can turn into the depth of its own confinement.

Why Russia (Putin) went to war: Security, history, and miscalculation

Taking both security considerations and the historical narrative into account, Putin’s 2021 presidential discourse posited a historical unity between Russians and Ukrainians, serving as an ideological platform to delegitimize Ukraine’s statehood and frame a “corrective” operation toward the West. To this construct he added a security logic: preventing Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic gravitation and, consequently, pushing NATO away from Russia’s borders. The empirical outcome, however, was the opposite: allied cohesion was reinforced and NATO’s perimeter in the Baltic expanded—precisely the

¹ A geopolitical concept formulated by Halford J. Mackinder to designate the continental “core” of Eurasia—the vast landmass inaccessible or only with great difficulty accessible to maritime power—whose control, he argued, would confer a decisive strategic advantage over the “World-Island” (Eurasia plus Africa) (Mackinder, 1904).

maritime consequence that the Kremlin, by all indications, underestimated (NATO, 2023, 2024).

In juridical and political terms, while international law does not stop tanks, it does structure and discipline the behavior of coalitions. UN General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1 - UNGA² and the provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in Allegations of Genocide (Ukraine v. Russian Federation) were not merely symbolic gestures: they helped forge a broad consensus and provided a shared foundation of legitimacy for the sanctions architecture, for military assistance to Ukraine, and for multilevel coordination among states and international organizations (UNGA, 2022; ICJ, 2022). In a context of great-power competition, that legitimacy becomes a genuine operational variable: it conditions access to bases and logistical corridors, facilitates or restricts air and maritime transit, shapes the drafting of rules of engagement (ROE), and lowers the political costs of technical-military cooperation. Put simply: units advance not only on fuel and ammunition, but also on transit rights, overflight clearances, open ports, and willing partners; without legal and political legitimacy, that support becomes more expensive—or simply evaporates.

The wea Moscow underestimated

One vector Moscow clearly misjudged was the legal regime of the Turkish Straits, codified in the Montreux Convention³ (Switzerland, 1936). On 28 February 2022, Ankara announced the application of Article 19: the passage of warships belonging to belligerent states through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles would be restricted, with only their return to home ports being authorized. The measure, communicated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and endorsed by the Presidency, amounted to an act of active neutrality⁴: Turkey did not side with either belligerent, but it did enforce—firmly and explicitly—an international legal instrument that produced a significant operational shift in Russia's

² Eleventh Emergency Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).

³ Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits: Its purpose is to guarantee freedom of passage and navigation through the Turkish Straits, while upholding Turkey's sovereignty and establishing different regimes depending on whether the state is at peace or at war (Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits, 1936, League of Nations Treaty Series).

⁴ A strategic posture that is neither passive nor indifferent, but proactive and value-driven, rooted in non-alignment, non-intervention, and demilitarization... This new paradigm of neutrality is designed to underpin a model of governance that is explicitly oriented toward peace and human rights. (Papisca, A. (2017). Active Neutrality with the New International Law: Reflections from a Politics of Law Perspective (Vol. 1). Peace Human Rights Governance).

maritime war. “Turkey will implement, with full transparency, all the provisions of the Montreux Convention,” declared Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in a television interview. “The Montreux Convention regulates the passage of warships, and Turkey has applied it meticulously since its signature... Article 19 is very clear,” he emphasized.

The activation of Article 19 turned the straits into a strategic gate valve: once closed to the warships of belligerent states—except for their return to home ports—the Russian Black Sea Fleet lost its inter-theater flexibility. Continuity with the Mediterranean was severed, mobility between fleets was curtailed, and the routine rotation of units between Sevastopol and Tartus was effectively halted; at the same time, the option of reinforcing the eastern Mediterranean was removed (Konrad, 2025)⁵. In terms of operational art, this broke the line of sustainment Moscow had been exploiting since its 2015 intervention in Syria, built on the continuous flow of ships through the Turkish Straits to supply Tartus and maintain a standing naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean, and forced a reorganization of Russia’s naval posture along interior lines, degrading its capacity for power projection and its freedom of maneuver. The political–strategic bottom line was unambiguous: under the shield of Montreux, Turkey emerged as the de facto arbiter of the naval balance between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

At the geostrategic level, the measure laid bare Russia’s structural maritime vulnerability—its dependence on chokepoints controlled by third parties. The functional closure enabled by Montreux turned the Black Sea into a semi-enclosed theater in which sea lines of communication (SLOCs) became contingent on the decisions of a state formally outside the conflict, which, in classic sea-power terms, is tantamount to yielding the initiative. From an oceanopolitical perspective, the effect was twofold: beyond control of physical space, the system of flows was affected—trade, energy, and data carried through subsea cables, gas pipelines, and offshore power interconnectors, as well as via liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals and port nodes. Allied governance and monitoring (MDA/ISR)⁶ of that critical subsea infrastructure increased NATO’s resilience and raised

⁵ Konrad, J. (2025). Resilient Sea Lines: A Chokepoint Risk Ledger, 2013–2023. Center for Naval Warfare Studies, U.S. Naval War College.

⁶ Within allied doctrine, maritime domain awareness (MDA) is understood as the effective comprehension of all phenomena associated with the maritime domain that may affect security, defense, the economy, or the marine environment, achieved by integrating information from sensors, civilian agencies, and private-sector actors. In turn, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) denotes the integrated set of capabilities, sensors, platforms, and processes used to collect, monitor, and analyze information on forces, activities, and infrastructure in the theater of operations, transforming it into intelligence that supports operational and strategic decision-making (NATO, AAP-06

Russia's operational costs, pushing Moscow back onto interior lines. Under the cover of the treaty, Turkey thus consolidated its role as regulator of the naval balance and custodian of the geostrategic valve that connects the Eurasian Heartland with the Mediterranean (Pedrozo, 2022; USNI, 2022).



The Russian warship *Korolev*, a Ropucha-class landing ship, transits the Bosphorus en route to the Black Sea in this April 2024 image. Photo: Murad Sezer / REUTERS

Germany breaks out of strategic inertia

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine marked a historical watershed for Germany. For decades, Berlin had maintained a restrained defense posture, privileging economic power and diplomatic multilateralism over hard military capabilities. The shift in the strategic environment —war returning to Europe and sustained U.S. pressure for a more equitable sharing of responsibilities within NATO— forced the German government to overhaul its security priorities.

In 2024, for the first time since the 1990s, Germany reached the benchmark of 2 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) in defense spending, thereby fulfilling its commitment within the Alliance. This translated into a defense budget of roughly 88.5 billion U.S. dollars, making Germany the largest defense investor in Europe and the fourth largest in the world. Within NATO, it became the second-biggest defense spender in absolute

NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions; Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 2-0, Joint Intelligence).

terms, behind only the United States.

Beyond the numbers, as Chancellor Olaf Scholz has stressed, this shift symbolizes the end of Germany's long "era of restraint" and the beginning of a phase of structural rearmament and modernization of the Bundeswehr⁷, underpinned by a special 100-billion-euro fund (the Sondervermögen der Bundeswehr).

With the *Zeitenwende* —the proclaimed "turning point"— Berlin acknowledged that European security requires strategic autonomy, structural rearmament, and an active German role within both NATO and the European Union (EU). The term has thus moved from being a political slogan to a transformation doctrine encompassing: (a) a sustained increase in defense spending (at or above 2 percent of GDP); (b) the creation of the extraordinary Sondervermögen for the Bundeswehr (100 billion euros); (c) technological modernization and military digitalization; and (d) the reinforcement of deterrence along NATO's eastern flank (Reuters, 2025; SIPRI, 2025; NATO, 2024).

In geopolitical terms, *Zeitenwende* signals Germany's return to hard power as a central pillar of European defense. It reflects the recognition that security can no longer be outsourced to the United States and that the continental balance depends on Europe's own critical mass—on the understanding that defense is an essential component of political sovereignty.

Germany's new defense posture is not limited to higher spending; it also entails the forward deployment of heavy forces on a permanent basis outside its national territory, assuming a front-line deterrence role on NATO's eastern flank. In June 2023, Defense Minister Boris Pistorius announced the deployment of a German armored brigade—approximately 4,800 troops—to Lithuania under NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP). This formation includes Leopard 2 main battle tanks, mechanized infantry, artillery, and logistic support units, with infrastructure and families being relocated permanently to Baltic territory. Its purpose is unambiguous: to establish a tangible line of deterrence vis-à-vis Russia, such that any attack on a Baltic state would, in practice, mean attacking German soldiers and, by extension, NATO as a whole.

Analytically, this evolution represents Germany's transition from an "economic Germany"

⁷ The Bundeswehr is the official name of the armed forces of the Federal Republic of Germany, established in 1955 following the country's accession to NATO.

to a “strategic Germany,” conscious that its prosperity and internal stability depend on a secure environment and on its willingness to act as a first-tier power.

Oceanopolitics in the twenty-first century and its implications for Russia

In its original formulation, oceanopolitics conceives the sea as a strategic continuum where trade, energy, cables, ports, and sea lines of communication (SLOCs) intersect. A state that sees the sea only as a physical boundary constrains its own capacity for projection. By contrast, a state that understands the sea as an interconnected system—through which resources, energy, commerce, and information flow—acquires the ability to shape the very flows that sustain global power (Martínez Busch, 1993)⁸. For Russia, however, the maritime map has increasingly turned into a trap of ice and sensors. The Arctic remains semi-closed due to seasonal ice; the Baltic has become an allied inner sea following Finland’s and Sweden’s accession to NATO; the Black Sea is constricted by the restrictions of the Montreux Convention; and the eastern Mediterranean has become a highly politicized chessboard where access ultimately depends on third parties. In this environment, only the shores of the Russian Far East—with Vladivostok as an outlet to the Pacific—provide Moscow with a limited margin of maritime and strategic freedom of action.

This situation is compounded—and operationally intertwined—with the incident involving the submarine B-261 Novorossiysk (Project 636.3, Improved Kilo)⁹, detected between 7 and 15 October 2025 while transiting on the surface off the coast of Brittany, France. Escorted by a Russian tug and monitored by allied units during its passage through the English Channel, the North Sea, and into the Baltic, the episode exposed the operational vulnerability of Russia’s submarine force during extended transits and confirmed the superiority of the allied ISR architecture in monitoring the strategic maritime corridors of the Atlantic and the Baltic.

⁸ Admiral Jorge Martínez Busch (1936–2011) served as Commander-in-Chief (CNO) of the Chilean Navy from 1990 to 1997 and is widely regarded as the principal architect of contemporary Chilean oceanopolitical thought.

⁹ Project 636.3 submarines are diesel-electric platforms developed by Russia for operations in littoral waters and semi-enclosed seas, noted for their low acoustic signature and their ability to employ Kalibr cruise missiles. However, they lack air-independent propulsion (AIP), which limits their endurance to roughly 45 days on patrol and makes them dependent on frequent logistical support. These constraints, combined with the high density of sensors and surveillance in theaters such as the Baltic, reduce their effective time on station and increase their tactical exposure (NTI, 2024; The National Interest, 2024; USNI, 2023).

The Royal Navy reported a three-day operation by the frigate HMS Iron Duke and its embarked AW159 Wildcat helicopter, conducted under NATO coordination (Royal Navy, 2025). The Dutch Ministry of Defence noted that the hydrographic vessel HNLMS Luymes (A803) took over tracking duties within the Netherlands Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Netherlands MoD, 2025). Authorities and the media distilled the allied logic into a powerful phrase: “We. Are. Watching.”, while the then NATO Secretary General publicly joked about a “gammy” submarine, making the stunned loss of stealth impossible to ignore (Reuters, 2025).

From an operational intelligence perspective, every mile steamed represented an opportunity for multi-source collection. The submarine’s noise profile enabled refinement of its acoustic signatures; thermal variations and electronic emissions revealed patterns of activity and propulsion; while visual and video observations from aircraft, ships, and satellites provided continuous tracking of its position and tactical environment. The fusion of these sources reinforced allied situational awareness, enabling the consolidation of a high-resolution Common Operational Picture (COP) in that theater. In a sensor-saturated Baltic, a Kilo-class submarine forced to remain on the surface loses any plausible deniability: its masts, wake, and engine regime become observables that feed the COP in near real time

Kaliningrad: An enclave managed by its environment

Kaliningrad is a Russian enclave wedged between Poland and Lithuania. For decades, it has functioned as an A2/AD¹⁰ node, equipped with S-300/S-400 air defense systems, Iskander-M short-range ballistic missiles, and Bastion-P coastal defense batteries, and it also hosts the main base of the Baltic Fleet¹¹.

Yet the same geography that makes it valuable also confines it. The Suwałki¹² Gap

¹⁰ A2/AD = Anti-Access/Area Denial.

¹¹ Kaliningrad’s A2/AD Systems. The region fields a layered defense network composed of S-300 and S-400 “Triumph” surface-to-air missile systems, medium- and long-range weapons capable of engaging aircraft, cruise missiles, and certain ballistic targets at distances of up to roughly 400 km; Iskander-M (SS-26 “Stone”) short-range ballistic missiles, with ranges on the order of 500 km; and K-300P Bastion-P coastal defense systems, designed to launch P-800 Oniks anti-ship missiles from mobile land-based platforms. Taken together, these vectors create an A2/AD “bubble” that covers much of the Baltic Sea, the Suwałki Corridor, and portions of Polish airspace, providing Russia with substantial regional deterrence and theater-denial capability.

¹² A border corridor of approximately 65 km between Poland and Lithuania that connects the Baltic States with the rest of NATO. Flanked by Kaliningrad (Russia) and Belarus, its control is decisive for allied freedom of movement in

concentrates attention on land as the critical corridor linking the Baltic states to the rest of NATO, while the allied maritime–air ring—reinforced after the accession of Sweden and Finland, has turned the Baltic Sea into an increasingly monitored space, narrowing Kaliningrad’s maritime access and eroding the logistical resilience of the enclave.

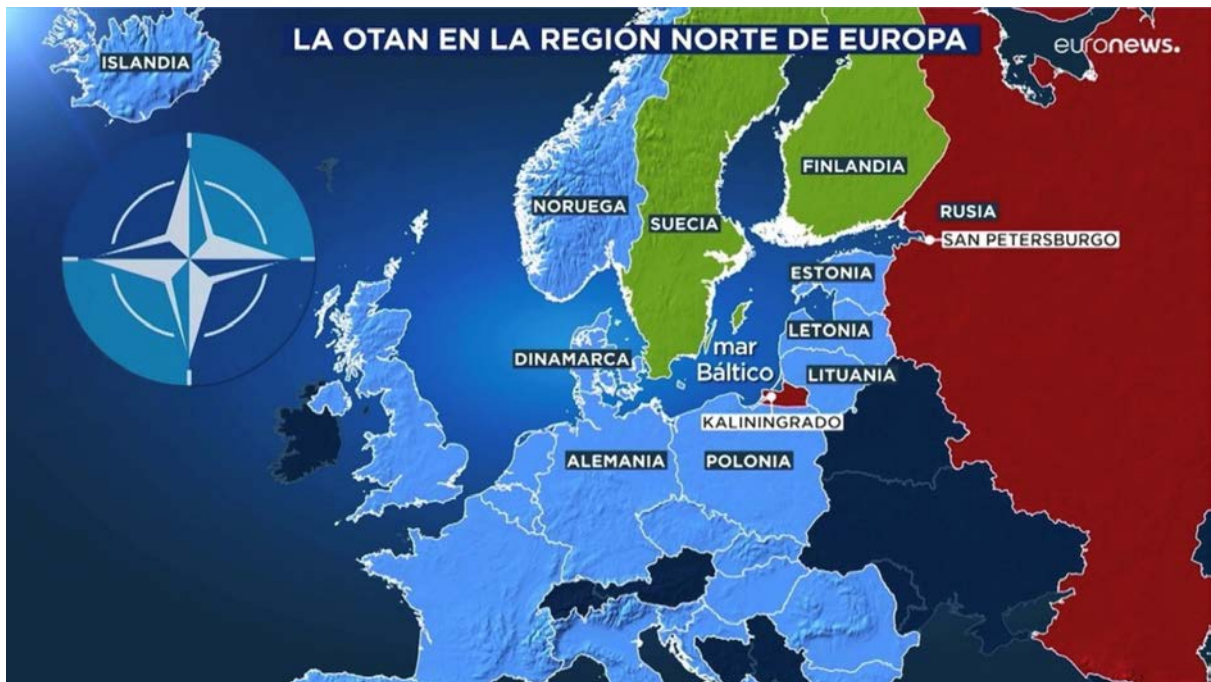
On the energy and logistics front, the decoupling of the Baltic states from the BRELL¹³ ring and their synchronization with the continental European power grid have deepened Kaliningrad’s “island” status, forcing Russia to guarantee its electricity supply in quasi-isolated mode and reducing Moscow’s visibility and leverage over Baltic grids.

On top of this, restrictions and quotas on the rail transit of sanctioned goods, including fuel and refined petroleum products, across Lithuania, along with additional controls imposed by Poland, have introduced structural friction into the enclave’s overland line of communication with the Russian heartland.

The option of shoring up supplies via LNG shipments and maritime traffic in the Baltic is not cost-free either: it remains exposed to harsh winter ice conditions, the need for icebreakers, and potential limitations related to port windows and insurance in a sea where up to 40–45 percent of the surface can be ice-covered at the height of the season. Taken together, Kaliningrad still retains significant regional deterrent value, but that deterrence is increasingly conditioned by logistical, energy, and access vulnerabilities that NATO can modulate without ever having to engage the enclave’s A2/AD systems directly.

northeastern Europe and it constitutes the point of greatest land vulnerability for the Alliance.

¹³ A power interconnection system formed by Belarus, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, in operation since 2001. For two decades, it kept the Baltic states synchronized with the Russian power grid, creating a structural dependence. Their decoupling from the BRELL ring and subsequent synchronization with the European grid (ENTSO-E) constitutes a milestone in regional energy security



NATO countries bordering the Baltic Sea

Operational effects on Russian maritime maneuver

From an operational standpoint, the war in Ukraine and its maritime spillover have reshaped the very structure of Russian naval power. Three factors—the restrictions on the Turkish Straits, the situation of the Kaliningrad enclave, and the exposure of the Novorossiysk submarine—reveal a loss of strategic elasticity, understood here as the ability to project and sustain forces across interconnected maritime theaters.

First, Turkey's application of Article 19 of the Montreux Convention (1936) since February 2022 closed the functional connection between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, interrupting the Russian Navy's inter-fleet mobility. This move, legally legitimate and strategically calculated, fragmented the Russian naval posture into isolated regional fleets: the Black Sea Fleet, the Baltic Fleet, the Northern Fleet, and the Pacific Fleet. Deprived of the ability to reinforce and rotate units between theaters, Moscow saw its maritime strategic depth reduced, with its naval forces effectively confined to semi-enclosed seas and increasingly dependent on interior lines.

Second, the enclave of Kaliningrad shifted from being an A2/AD bastion to an operational enclave under pressure. Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO closed the northern

arc of the Baltic, densifying the ISR network and limiting Russia's room for maneuver. The enclave's logistical lifelines—maritime, rail, and energy—became more vulnerable: the synchronization of the Baltic states' power grids with the European network (decoupling from the BRELL ring), combined with Polish and Lithuanian controls and the loss of secure maritime resupply routes, reduced its strategic autonomy.

Today, Kaliningrad still retains a significant deterrent capacity thanks to its A2/AD architecture, built around S-300/S-400 systems, Iskander-M tactical ballistic missiles, and Bastion-P coastal batteries, which enable it to threaten Baltic airspace, the Suwałki Corridor, and critical nodes on NATO territory. However, that deterrent effect rests on increasingly fragile logistical and energy foundations: the enclave depends on tightly managed "windows" of maritime access (traffic through the Baltic, vulnerable to allied ISR and interdiction) and on rail and road corridors crossing Lithuania, subject to restrictions and political pressure in the context of sanctions and ongoing tensions with the European Union. Added to this, the Baltic states' disconnection from the BRELL ring and their full synchronization with the European grid have forced Russia to ensure Kaliningrad's energy self-sufficiency outside the regional system it once controlled, heightening the enclave's exposure to supply disruptions, potential sabotage of subsea infrastructure, and a larger strategic vulnerability footprint in the energy domain.

A third factor compounds this picture: the case of the submarine B-261 Novorossiysk, whose transit from the Atlantic to the Baltic in October 2025 was shadowed by an allied tracking operation under the tagline "We. Are. Watching." Beyond the wealth of data collected, the operational outcome was the collapse of tactical stealth, demonstrating that in a sensor-saturated environment a diesel-electric submarine loses its invisibility over extended transits. Its weakness is not its design, but its sustainability: limited logistical endurance, dependence on external support, and growing exposure when operating away from secure bases.

The combined effect of these factors is a structural fragmentation of Russian sea power. The Federation now faces a segmented naval system, with isolated fleets, constrained inter-theater mobility, and a maritime deterrent capacity degraded by persistent observation and logistical vulnerability. In doctrinal terms, this amounts to a forced interiorization of naval power: Russia is acting as a continental power whose fleets are caught between geography, the constraints of maritime law, and allied ISR superiority.

If American writer Tom Clancy—famous for his espionage and military-intelligence thrillers—had written this story in 2025, the opening scene would likely begin with the silhouette of a Kilo-class submarine breaking the surface in the cold waters of the English Channel, where the sea lanes on the chart trace some of the most heavily monitored routes in Europe. Overhead, a Wildcat helicopter would cut through the gray sky under a low cloud ceiling, while in operations centers the radar returns align like pieces of a puzzle pointing toward an inevitable conclusion. The “villain” would not be a rogue captain, but the logistical friction of a continental power trying to breathe in seas controlled by its adversaries. The lesson would not be delivered through explosions, but through persistent intelligence and unblinking surveillance. Three words capture it: “We. Are. Watching.”—three words that turned the ocean’s silence into operational intelligence.

Conclusions

1. Russia went to war to push NATO away from its borders but ended up bringing the Alliance closer to its own waterline. The 2022 invasion triggered a chain reaction that reshaped the Euro-Atlantic balance: the Baltic Sea ceased to be a frontier and became an allied inner sea; Turkey reaffirmed its role as arbiter of the Straits by applying Montreux with precision; and Germany broke out of its historical inertia, converting economic weight into critical defense mass under the banner of the *Zeitenwende*.
2. The strategic outcome for Moscow is a functional fragmentation of its maritime power. The Black Sea Fleet remains confined; the Baltic Fleet is effectively encircled; and the Northern Fleet is constrained by logistical and transit limitations on inter-fleet movement. The loss of inter-theater mobility—a cornerstone of naval operational art—has driven Russian sea power inward: from a navy built for power projection to a navy of containment, forced to operate under persistent observation and increasingly dependent on interior lines.
3. In this equation, Kaliningrad embodies the paradox of the besieged fortress. It is an enclave with a powerful defensive system whose energy and logistical autonomy nevertheless depend on infrastructure controlled by others. The decoupling from the BRELL ring, the tightening of transit corridors, and the synchronization of Baltic power grids with continental Europe show that in the twenty-first century power is measured as much in connectivity and resilience as in arsenals.

4. The B-261 Novorossiysk episode encapsulates the change of era. A submarine designed to disappear was forced to sail in plain view, tracked by a multinational chain of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR). What once counted as tactical stealth has become structural exposure. Technology, maritime law, and allied interoperability have turned the sea into a space of enforced transparency, where genuine strategic surprise is increasingly rare.
5. The lesson is clear: Mackinder's Heartland is not enough when chokepoints, routes, and sea lines of communication (SLOCs) are governed by others. In an age of sensors, cables, and energy flows, strategic depth is fluid. Effective defense is projected from the sea into the system, not merely from the continent toward the coast. The sea must be conceived as a system, not as a boundary line; oceanopolitics is the functional extension of land power into the maritime domain.
6. The twenty-first century has not removed the sea from the geostrategic board; it has made it decisive. What once seemed like continental depth can today become maritime confinement. In that transition, Russia has rediscovered—at historic cost—that any power which neglects the sea eventually finds itself suffocated by it.

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