



# High Profile, Low Availability: The Emerging US Maritime- Strategic Approach to NATO's Northern Flank

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## ABSTRACT

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the United States held the Northern Flank a low priority in maritime-strategic considerations. Increasing Russian naval power, however, and a deterioration of the relationship between NATO and Russia following the 2014 invasion of Crimea, and the conflict in eastern Ukraine that followed, saw the Northern Flank return to maritime-strategic thinking around 2016. Given that the principal focus of US naval forces remains the Pacific, however, what are the central tenets of the emergent maritime-strategic approach of the United States to the Northern Flank? Describing these tenets, this article introduces the concept of *High-Profile, Low-Availability* (HIPLA). The core of the concept is twofold. First, the United States signals its enduring maritime interests through isolated operations and exercises sending a strong diplomatic message to all parties involved. This is the 'high-profile' aspect. Second, while the decisiveness of the initial phase of operations highlights the importance of swift and substantial reinforcement of the Northern Flank, US naval forces are not available for such a response. This is the 'low-availability' aspect. Further, as US naval forces become increasingly occupied in the Pacific, the availability of these forces is likely to continue to dwindle. Ultimately, HIPLA relates to the credibility of extended deterrence on behalf of the United States. This article describes the main characteristics of the HIPLA concept using NATO's Northern Flank as a case study. Many issues outlined in this article are universal to the US Navy and may therefore be relevant to other regions.

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In the 1990s and early 2000s, the United States held the Northern Flank as a low priority in maritime-strategic considerations.<sup>1</sup> A strengthened Russian naval power, however, and a deterioration of the relationship between NATO and Russia following both the 2014 invasion of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine that followed, saw the Northern Flank return to maritime-strategic thinking around 2016. The principal focus of US naval forces, however, remains the Pacific.<sup>2</sup> Thus this article asks: 'What are the central tenets of the maritime-strategic approach of the United States to the Northern Flank?' Defining these tenets, the article introduces a novel concept – *High-Profile, Low-Availability* (HIPLA). The concept is composed of two core elements. First, the United States signals its enduring maritime interests and the support of its allies through isolated operations and exercises, sending a strong diplomatic message to all parties involved. This is the 'high-profile' aspect. Second, while short-term presence of this kind lacks substance, Russia's doctrinal emphasis on the decisiveness of the initial phase of operations underlines the importance of swift and substantial reinforcement of the Northern Flank. This is the 'low-availability' aspect. Further, the more US naval forces are engaged in the Pacific, the less available they will become elsewhere. HIPLA ultimately relates to the credibility of the United States as an alliance partner. As an extension of this, the concept raises questions regarding the United States capacity for extended deterrence.

This article describes the main characteristics of the HIPLA concept using NATO's Northern Flank as a case study. The Northern Flank cannot be viewed in isolation from the greater North Atlantic region, however, so the article's elements and conclusions are relevant to the North Atlantic, Europe, and other regions, too. The article also relates HIPLA's characteristics to the more urgent strategic and operational concerns of the United States, such as the rise of China and Russia as revisionist powers, and to a substantial set of geographically diverse challenges around the world. Furthermore, many of the issues outlined in this article are universal to the US naval services and may therefore, also, be relevant to other regions.

The article argues that the application of high-profile and low-availability principles is not based on the United States having any significantly reduced interest in Europe. Rather, it is the result of a holistic appraisal of the threats and risks to the security of the United States and its allies in an era when Asia, and most notably China, has become the primary challenge in American security policy. In addition to China, and as a reaction to a revisionist, if not wholly belligerent, Russia, the United States is devoting more resources and attention to the Northern Flank than hitherto in the post-Cold War era. The challenge from Moscow, however, has outpaced measures taken on the Northern Flank, which may have significant strategic and operational implications for European countries who depend on assistance from the United States for their defence.

A combination of four specific characteristics sets the era of HIPLA apart from the eras preceding it. First, Asia, rather than Europe, has become the primary strategic concern for the United States. Second, Russia poses a significant naval challenge to NATO on the Northern Flank. Third, in an effort to balance strategic challenges with available resources, the United States prioritises mostly short-term, high-profile presence missions to signal enduring interest in the Northern Flank. Fourth, the ability of US forces to assist in the event of a crisis or conflict on the Northern Flank is limited. Although the United States has enduring interests in Europe and is likely to remain engaged there, HIPLA has substantial political, strategic, and operational implications for the continent, particularly for the maritime nations of Northwest Europe.

This article will limit itself to describing HIPLA as it specifically relates to the Northern Flank; any potential implications and consequences that it may have for European NATO allies and for the maritime and Arctic nations of Northwest Europe will be outlined but not addressed in detail. The first part of this article looks very briefly at US maritime-strategic priorities. The article then delves into the details of the Low-Availability and High-Profile approach, and how its two elements are seen to emerge in the US maritime-strategic approach to the Northern Flank. Finally, the article addresses the implications HIPLA may have for the Northern Flank and Europe before concluding and addressing the potential for future research.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the Northern Flank is understood as the largely maritime area stretching between the Bear Gap (a line going from Northern Norway, via Bear Island, and to the Svalbard archipelago) in the North-East, Greenland in the West, and the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap in the south.

<sup>2</sup> In this article, 'US naval forces' refer to the US Navy and US Marine Corp.

## US MARITIME-STRATEGIC PRIORITIES ON THE NORTHERN FLANK

The emergence of the HIPLA approach has been prompted by several concerns, notably the US pivot to the Pacific and the re-emergence of Russia as a significant challenge. China's ascent has deeply affected US strategic thinking and defence priorities, as Washington considers China to be a systemic challenger (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2018; Ross, Dong, & Tunsjø, 2021; The White House, 2021; US Department of Defense, 2018, 2022). From a maritime perspective, China is clearly the pacing threat. Although Sino-American competition has spread to the Arctic and consequently to the Northern Flank, the competition is 'not primarily military in nature' (Pincus, 2021, pp. 100–101). While US-China competition has yet to require significant US military attention in the region, an increased Chinese military presence in the future is a distinct possibility. Asia is likely to remain the main theatre for military competition between China and the United States; the Arctic's military role in the competition between the two great powers is thus uncertain.

Despite China's dominant position in US military strategy, Russia features more prominently in current US strategic publications than at any other time in the post-Cold War era, both in US national security documents and maritime-strategic documents (The White House, 2017, 2021; US Navy & US Marine Corps, 2021; US Navy, US Marine Corps, & US Coast Guard, 2020). Putting the strategies into practice, the US Navy has re-established its Second Fleet to address Russian maritime challenges. US maritime efforts are spread across four main maritime operating areas in the North Atlantic region: the Northern Flank, the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) across the North Atlantic (Foggo, 2016; Nordenman, 2019; Olsen, 2017). The war in Ukraine has drawn the attention of the United States to Europe, even if priority continues to be given to China, as was explicitly stated after the invasion (US Department of Defense, 2022).

In addition to great power competition, the maritime-strategic environment presents the US naval services with a range of other challenges, including regional conflicts, terrorism, piracy, maritime security operations (MSO), and humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HA/DR). While these are presented as minor challenges, and given what appears to be an ancillary status rather than central strategic priority, these tasks require the attention of the US Navy, adding to its overall workload (The White House, 2021, p. 8; US Navy et al., 2020, p. 1).

## CONCLUSIONS ON MARITIME-STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

The US naval services face a diverse set of challenges throughout the world. There are inherent tensions between these challenges, particularly with Russia and China. This tension was articulated by Elbridge Colby, former US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development, when he stated that 'you face a two-front war where we don't have a two-front military' (Detsch & Mackinnon, 2021). Although Colby's statement addresses two simultaneous wars, the United States will have to take the potential of a two-front war into account even during regular great-power competition. The above shows that the United States considers the Chinese challenge to be the more severe, with Washington prioritising accordingly. The priority awarded to China is likely to have significant implications for the Northern Flank and it is the primary driver of the High-Profile, Low-Availability approach.

## LOW AVAILABILITY

Between 2016 and 2021, the US presence on the Northern Flank was at its highest level since the end of the Cold War. Notwithstanding this increased presence, the availability of US naval forces to respond to a major crisis or conflict remains low. Due to the number of challenges that the US Navy faces, this availability is likely to decrease further. Indeed, some argue that US naval forces are stretched nearly to the point of breaking (Dougherty, 2021; Filipoff, 2018, 2019; Hendrix, 2021; Work, 2021). Concerns for the availability and readiness of US reinforcements in the event of crisis or war were also expressed during the Cold War (Tamnes, 1991, pp. 154, 205, 252). For the first time since the founding of NATO, however, a significant maritime challenge on the Northern Flank coincides with the United States giving primary attention toward its great-power competition with a non-European power. The primary difference in the HIPLA

context is the combination of three conditions: Europe being given a subordinate priority, long US readiness time, and short warning time.

It is thus imperative to discuss warning time and Russian capabilities on NATO's Northern Flank. Russia would have a clear disadvantage in a drawn-out conflict with NATO. [Table 1](#) shows Russian vessels in the Northern and Baltic fleets, most relevant when discussing the Northern Flank. As the table clearly shows, Russian naval forces are heavily outnumbered by a selection of (mostly) European naval forces based in the same region, which can be surged during a drawn-out conflict. On top of this, the alliance has significant air assets that add to its advantage. In this regard, NATO's advantage increases in relation to distance from Russia, and Russian target detection and identification capabilities are particular vulnerabilities ([Kofman et al., 2021, p. 53](#)).

SHIP TYPE	RUSSIA	NATO	UK	NED	US	NOR	FRA	GER	POL
Carrier	1	3	2				1		
Strategic subs	8	8	4				4		
Attack subs	19	29	7	4		5	4	6	3
Major surface combatants	17	67	19	6	4	4	22	10	2
Corvette	18	18				6	6	5	1
Total	63	125	32	10	4	15	37	21	6

**Table 1** Naval Vessels of the Russian Northern and Baltic Fleets, and vessels of select NATO navies ([Naval Vessel Register, 2021](#); [The Military Balance, 2021, pp. 101–109, 127–134, 156–160, 190–205](#)).

In a 2019 speech, General Valery Gerasimov, Russia's Chief of the General Staff, presented what he termed a 'strategy of active defence' ([Gerasimov, 2019](#)). This strategy can be interpreted as being strategically defensive while being operationally offensive ([Bredesen & Friis, 2020](#); [Gerasimov, 2019](#); [Kofman, 2020, p. 4](#); [Kvam, 2020, pp. 27–28, 39–43](#)). While Russian forces seem to have had little success with this approach in the invasion of Ukraine, the predominantly maritime nature of the Northern Flank makes it a very different theatre compared to the plains of Ukraine. It is thus an open question whether the apparent shortcomings of the Russian military in Ukraine are applicable to the Northern Flank. Moscow nevertheless emphasises the initial phase of war to attain a *fait accompli* before successful resistance can be mounted. This emphasis is the primary challenge for the availability of US reinforcements in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Most of NATO's naval forces (shown in [Table 1](#)) are likely to be unavailable for immediate operations on the Northern Flank during the initial phase of a conflict. Moscow expects to be able to establish localised and temporary sea control, or at least strongly contest NATO control, within the near seas zone that stretches 600 to 1000 km from the Russian coast ([Kofman et al., 2021, p. 53](#)). Russian naval forces, within a layered defence and supported by air forces, are likely to have numerical superiority and greater firepower than local NATO forces on the Northern Flank during the initial stages of a conflict.

The Northern Fleet's missile inventory presents a particular challenge in this regard. Modern Russian missiles potentially reduce the warning time to nearly zero, and recent snap exercises are intended to test the Northern Fleet's reaction time, gaining the advantage in the initial stages of an actual conflict ([Zysk, 2020, pp. 21–24](#)). Furthermore, Russia has developed a layered defence that aims to protect its military infrastructure and its nuclear second-strike capability. This defence has a combination of capabilities that can raise the costs of a NATO intervention, with Russia having already deployed such capabilities in the Baltics, the Black Sea, and the Barents Sea.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the Northern Fleet is transitioning from large, oceangoing vessels designed for blue-water sea control and sea denial operations, to a fleet that emphasises littoral power projection ([Kvam, 2020, pp. 29–39](#)).

<sup>3</sup> The Russian challenge on the Northern Flank, including the short warning time, have been comprehensively addressed in several publications. A selection of literature on this topic includes: ([Bredesen & Friis, 2020](#); [Dalsjö, Berglund, & Jonsson, 2019](#); [Foggo, 2016](#); [Heier, 2021](#); [Kofman, 2019](#); [Kvam, 2020](#); [Nordenman, 2019](#); [Parnemo, 2019](#); [Zysk, 2020](#)).

<sup>4</sup> The nominal range and capabilities of Russian layered defence systems are impressive, however, a number of factors, such as over-the-horizon targeting, limit their effectiveness. For more on Russian layered defence, their purpose, ranges, strengths and limitations, see for example ([CSIS, Year not given](#); [Dalsjö et al., 2019, pp. 25–44](#); [Zysk, 2020](#)).

Russia's strategy of active defence, the capabilities of Russian layered defences, the state-of-the-art Russian submarines and the Northern Fleet's surface, air, and ground assets would have at least three significant consequences in a major conflict. First, in a major conflict between Russia and NATO, the US and NATO maritime forces would be required to divide their attention between the North Atlantic, the Black Sea, the Baltics, and the Northern Flank, dispersing their resources between the four. Second, Russian layered defences can impose significant costs on US and NATO operations that would likely become progressively higher the closer they approach Russia. In a war with Russia, the US would likely conduct maritime operations in four different locations simultaneously, forming the backbone of alliance maritime operations. Third, Russia's emphasis on the initial phase of a conflict aims at achieving its objectives before NATO can effectively respond. The improvement of long-range precision strike weapons have also reduced the warning time for such operations, making time critical for a NATO response (Boston & Massicot, 2017, pp. 4–5; Cimbala & McDermott, 2016, pp. 550–551; Kvam, 2020, pp. 27–28).<sup>5</sup> The combination of these three trends would require the United States to react quickly, deploying significant forces, in four different regions. Rolling back significant Russian gains would be more costly in terms of lives and materiel than simply reinforcing an ongoing operation; and, since US naval forces are central to the defence of Europe and NATO's Northern Flank, the availability of US forces is paramount to this effort.<sup>6</sup>

The US strategic priority of Asia, the wide range of security challenges world-wide and limited budgets, have significant implications for the availability of US forces in general, and thus to the Northern Flank. Perhaps the most visible proof of the US maritime-strategic priority of Asia is the shift in home-basing. Basing is a strong indication of strategic priority as it has a significant impact on where naval vessels are likely to deploy, and it affects the transit time of vessels.<sup>7</sup> For example, at 20 knots, vessels sailing from San Diego on the US West Coast will take about 18 days to transit through the Panama Canal to the Norwegian Sea, while from Norfolk on the US East Coast the transit time is about seven days.<sup>8</sup>

During the Cold War, 60% of US Navy vessels were based on the Atlantic coast while 40% were in the Pacific. This priority began to be reversed during the early 2000s (Swartz & Duggan, 2011a, p. 33; 2011b, p. 64). At the time of writing, the US Navy has 293 battle force vessels.<sup>9</sup> 25 of the US vessels are without an assigned homeport, 116 (43%) are based in the Atlantic, and 152 (57%) are based in the Pacific.<sup>10</sup> Only five of the Atlantic-based vessels are homeported in the 6th Fleet area of responsibility (the 'Mediterranean Fleet' with headquarters in Naples, Italy), while 28 are homeported in the 7th Fleet area of responsibility (the Pacific Fleet, headquartered in Yokosuka, Japan) (Naval Vessel Register, 2021). The home-basing of the fleet thus signals a strong emphasis on the Pacific, where the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has approximately 350 vessels in comparison to the 152 of the United States.<sup>11</sup> Combined with the limited size of the US fleet, home-basing restricts the number of readily available vessels based on the US Eastern Seaboard.

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5 The 1980s series of Maritime Strategy documents, for comparison, assumed two weeks warning time and then a transition to global war. (US Navy, 2008b, p. 97; 2008c, p. 195; 2008d, p. 303).

6 See for example (Foggo, 2016; Gramer, 2016; Grove & Marson, 2020; Nordenman, 2019; Olsen, 2017, 2018; Pincus, 2020).

7 Basing is highly strategic, but it is also tied to a range of other questions that are often highly politicised. The US Navy's Strategic homeporting in the 1980s is an example that mixed the strategic questions of basing with local economic interest and the Navy's goal of a 600-ship force structure. The Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process is a Defense Department-wide example of this.

8 The transit times are generalisations and may vary depending on departure and arrival point. (US Navy, 2008a, p. 216).

9 A battle force ship is defined as either "(A) A commissioned United States Ship warship [sic] capable of contributing to combat operations." Or "(B) A United States Naval Ship that contributes directly to Navy warfighting or support missions." (United States Congress, 2021).

10 The percentage is calculated from the 268 vessels that are assigned a homeport. Most of the unassigned vessels are logistics ships, while a few are warships that have been commissioned but have not yet been assigned to a homeport. (Naval Vessel Register, 2021).

11 There is a wide range of literature and sources on the modernisation and build-up of China's People's Liberation Army Navy. See for example (Cronin, Rapp-Hooper, Krejsa, Sullivan, & Doshi, 2017; CSIS, 2018; Elleman, 2019; Gompert et al., 2007; Heginbotham et al., 2015; O'Rourke, 2021b; Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020).



A general rule of thumb in naval vessel availability is that two in three vessels are in various stages of maintenance and training, and one in three vessels are available for operations. Going by this 'rule of thirds' approximately 39 of the Atlantic-based vessels should be available for operations at any given time, with about 50 vessels in the Pacific. The 'rule of thirds' is a generalisation, however, which may vary according to factors such as high operational tempo and maintenance delays. With a steadily declining force structure from 333 vessels in 1998 to 271 vessels in 2014, the US Navy was able to deploy about 100 vessels at any given time, exceeding the expectations of the 'rule of thirds' toward the end of the period. The high operational tempo has not been sustainable, however, and has come with severe consequences; these include maintenance issues (discussed below) and the accumulation of retention and training challenges (B. Clark & Sloman, 2015; Government Accountability Office, 2021b).

It is also relevant to note that the US Navy's most advanced surface vessels are generally homeported in the Pacific – another sign of its strategic priority. For example, out of the 20 most modern Arleigh Burke-class destroyers, 14 are assigned to the Pacific while six are homeported in the Atlantic (Naval Vessel Register, 2021; Polmar, 2013). Considering the significant submarine challenges from Russia and China, the geographical priority for US submarines is not as clear as it is for surface vessels. Although the balance is roughly 54% to 46% in favour of the Pacific, there are significantly more modern submarines in the Atlantic (Naval Vessel Register, 2021). Placing the most modern submarines in the Atlantic likely reflects the sophistication of the Russian submarine threat. The vastness of the Pacific and the size of the PLAN are reflected in the numerical priority of the Pacific.

Maintenance delays significantly affect the readiness and availability of the fleet. Between 2014 and 2020, delays amounted to the loss of 15 vessels on average per year; these maintenance issues could take years of significant effort to address (Government Accountability Office, 2020a, p. See headline 'What GAO Found' (section is unpaginated) and p. 13; 2020b, p. 17).<sup>12</sup> Unless the US Navy manages to improve its maintenance performance, the US Navy's readiness and availability for crisis and conflict will be affected more generally beyond the Northern Flank. An excessive operational tempo severely affects availability and feeds into the maintenance issues addressed above. The wear-and-tear of long and frequent deployments has not only reduced time for maintenance; it has taken a severe toll on US Navy crew and equipment. Measures to alleviate this issue have fallen short, underlining the issues related to a high operational tempo and a limited force structure (Government Accountability Office, 2021a, pp. 12–14; 2021b; Larter, 2021; US Navy Board of Inspection and Survey, 2021).

The US Navy's availability for significant surge deployments in the event of crisis or war has also suffered under the excessive operational tempo (Bayer & Roughead, 2017; B. Clark & Sloman, 2015; Filipoff, 2018, 2019; United States Fleet Forces Command, 2017; Work, 2021). Normally, carrier strike groups (CSG) and amphibious ready groups (ARG) that have recently returned from deployment are maintained and ready for surge deployment, while 'groups preparing for deployment are ready several weeks before they depart' (B. Clark & Sloman, 2015, p. 8). The high operational tempo has, however, caused vessels to go directly into maintenance after a deployment, and straight out on deployment again when maintenance is completed. A high operational tempo also affects personnel morale and retention, though the effect is more indirect than the material consequences (B. Clark & Sloman, 2015, pp. 8–9). The availability of vessels is thus severely affected by maintenance issues and operational tempo. Unless the US Navy addresses these issues, the operational availability of its vessels is likely to suffer. Even if the US Navy can maintain this tempo, it affects availability to surge for a crisis or conflict on the Northern Flank.

One obvious way to address the availability issue is by increasing the size of the fleet and changing its composition. The US Navy is planning a significant shipbuilding programme that will see its fleet grow from just under 300 today to between 398 and 512 manned and unmanned vessels sometime in the future (Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 2021, p. 9). Such a shipbuilding programme would exceed the average shipbuilding budgets between 2016 and 2021 by 15% to 50%. Furthermore, building a 400-vessel force by 2051 would increase

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<sup>12</sup> Other reports that address the maintenance issues facing the US Navy: (Congressional Budget Office, 2021c; Government Accountability Office, 2019, 2020c).

operations and support budgets from \$74 billion to \$113 billion per year, and the US Navy's entire budget from \$200 billion to \$279 billion per year (Congressional Budget Office, 2021b, p. 6).<sup>13</sup> Reaching 512 vessels would naturally raise those costs substantially. Significantly higher defence budgets are unlikely, so to finance the US Navy's force structure ambitions, Washington could instead transfer a significant piece of the Army's budget to the Navy. This could provoke fierce inter-service rivalries, however, and would also have to be approved by Congress (McLeary, 2020a).

Funding for the US Navy's force structure plans is therefore far from secured (Dougherty, 2021; Herzinger, 2021; McLeary, 2020a; Rubel, 2021; Shelbourne, 2021). Even if budgets were able to keep pace with the US Navy's force structure plans, constructing and maintaining a larger fleet could be hamstrung by a range of issues in the US shipbuilding industry, hampering the US Navy's shipbuilding plans for decades.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, China's shipbuilding is outpacing the US by a wide margin. PLAN's force structure has gone from 220 vessels in 2005 to 360 vessels in 2021, and is projected to reach 425 vessels by 2030 (O'Rourke, 2021a, p. 9). The primacy of the PLAN in US Navy strategy would likely mean that the Pacific would receive most of the growth in the absolute number of vessels. A larger force structure would thus have a limited impact on the US Navy's availability for crisis and conflict on the Northern Flank and in Europe.

There are other ways of reducing the operational tempo. One suggestion has been to significantly reduce the number of ongoing operations by adopting 'a readiness-centric culture' in which the ability to surge forces is emphasized 'as much as forward presence' (Work, 2021, pp. Unpaginated online version, see headline 'Forward Presence As The New Strategic Concept'). This would reduce the forward presence of US naval forces while making more vessels available for assisting allies in the event of crisis or conflict. The primacy of the Pacific would nevertheless limit the availability of US vessels for the Northern Flank and Europe, and the time aspect of such reinforcements would still be a significant issue. Furthermore, if US adversaries such as China and Russia interpret such a move as a withdrawal, and in turn a sign of weakness, they may attempt to fill what they consider to be a strategic vacuum.

The Marine Corps is the primary US contribution to the land dimension of the Northern Flank, and the Corps is rapidly changing. It is creating Littoral Regiments by investing in capabilities and operational concepts designed to contribute to maritime operations, and divesting in heavy, land-centric equipment (US Marine Corps, 2020a, 2021a, 2021c). The Littoral Regiments, however, have so far been intended for the Pacific; they seem unlikely to be available for operations on the Northern Flank anytime soon. Heavy equipment has already been retired across the board (US Marine Corps, 2021b). Indeed, it is explicitly stated that the Marine Corps prioritises the I and III Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) in the Pacific. II MEF, which is destined for Europe, has the lowest priority and 'will undergo substantial changes to better align with the needs of Commanders of 2nd and 6th Fleets' (US Marine Corps, 2019, p. 3). What those changes entail is not fully described. This development raises questions regarding how the US Marine Corps will be equipped and trained for operations on the Northern Flank, and how this will affect the availability of the Corps in this region. Indeed, the current Marine Corps initiatives such as Force Design 2030 and the Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE) operational concept, improve readiness for the Pacific but arguably reduce the availability of the Marine Corps for combat operations in Northern Europe.

Furthermore, there is the time aspect of Marine assistance to Norway. Rapid Marine Corps reinforcements rely on transporting a Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) of roughly 4500 troops by air to pair up with their pre-positioned equipment in Trøndelag, Norway (US Marine Corps, 2016, pp. 2-2). These forces would then make their way to their intended operational area, either by travelling along the E6 highway for over 900 kilometres, or by being transported by sea. Preparing, transporting, and deploying this force could take several days, even weeks. Preparing, transporting, and deploying the entire II MEF across the Atlantic would likely take months. Substantial Marine Corps assistance in the initial phase of a crisis or conflict therefore

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<sup>13</sup> CBO also has an online force structure tool that allows the user to calculate the maintenance and operations costs when adding or subtracting military units and platforms. (Congressional Budget Office, 2021a, pp. Not paginated, see 'At a Glance' section).

<sup>14</sup> See for example (B. Clark, Walton, & Lemon, 2020; M. Clark, 2021; Congressional Budget Office, 2021c; Dougherty, 2021; Government Accountability Office, 2020c; O'Rourke, 2021c, p. 25).

rests largely on significant warning time, which is improbable. US Navy ground-based air assets, probably maritime patrol aircraft, would most likely have the fastest reaction time in the event of crisis or conflict, although they will be vulnerable in contested airspace. Consequently, MPAs will probably avoid the Barents Sea as it is within the Russian near seas zone, operating further south during a conflict, outside the range of Russian air defence and aircraft.

The Dynamic Force Employment (DFE), the Pentagon's deployment concept of 2018, was designed to alleviate some of the availability issues outlined above, if only partially. DFE stresses the need for being 'strategically predictable, but operationally unpredictable' (US Department of Defense, 2018, pp. 5, 7). The essence of the concept is based on three interconnected principles: unpredictability, flexibility, and efficient exploitation of resources. First, the previous deployment concept was based on a pre-set and very predictable system. A more unpredictable system is expected to foster uncertainty as to the nature, location, and timing of upcoming deployments, thus keeping an adversary guessing about the next move. Second, DFE introduces increased flexibility to US military deployments, allowing forces to be sent wherever they are needed the most at the most suitable time. Third, DFE is expected to exploit resources more efficiently as shorter, and most likely fewer, deployments should be less taxing on finite resources, both material and human (Rodihan, Crouch, & Fairbanks, 2021, pp. 4–9; *Statement of General Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., USMC, 19th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: Department of Defense Budget Hearing, 2018, pp. 10–11; US Department of Defense, 2018, pp. 5, 7*). Even if DFE was able to solve the operational tempo issue (which is unlikely due to the increasing need for US presence in Europe and Asia), it is not an adequate solution for short warning times in Europe and on the Northern Flank.

## CONCLUSIONS ON LOW AVAILABILITY

Three main factors affect the low availability of US naval forces: Europe's status as the subordinate strategic priority, long US readiness time, and short warning time. The Russian emphasis on the early phase of a conflict, and the accompanying short warning time, makes a swift US response imperative. Yet a swift response is not likely since the US naval services prioritise the Pacific in their strategy, their operational concepts, and their force posture. General maintenance and shipbuilding issues and an excessive operational tempo contribute also to low availability. The US Navy is taking various measures to alleviate the availability issue. Expanding the US fleet is the foremost example, although there is limited realism behind the plans for a significant naval build-up. The DFE concept has also had a slender effect on the availability of US Navy vessels. Solutions to Marine Corps availability issues for the Northern Flank do not seem to be on the table at all, raising questions about the force's suitability as the land component for US assistance to the region. Rapid and significant reinforcement in the event of a conflict on the Northern Flank is therefore unlikely and would largely need to depend on those forces that already happen to be in the region. This leaves the initial phase of a conflict in the hands of the regional European navies.

## HIGH PROFILE PRESENCE

Current US Navy strategic documents address naval presence in the context of 'countering malign behaviours short of armed conflict', 'operating forward', and deterring 'coercive behavior and conventional aggression' (US Navy & US Marine Corps, 2021, pp. 10–13; US Navy et al., 2020, p. 6). For these operations to have any effect against major naval powers like Russia and China, significant naval forces would be required. It is therefore natural to assume that presence operations will maintain a relatively high profile to signal a clear US intent and to counter and deter adversaries.

High-profile presence is facilitated by the unpredictability and flexibility inherent in the DFE. When reducing the steady and enduring commitment of pre-set deployments, and instead highlighting the element of surprise, the change may be perceived as representing less of a commitment. To counteract such a perception, each individual operation arguably must keep a more aggressive stance, use a more powerful force, or in other ways keep a higher profile than was the norm under the pre-set deployment regime. The flexibility will likely allow the US Navy to compose naval forces better tailored to the perceived requirements of different situations,



facilitating the more ambitious scope of such operations. It is also possible to argue that a single high-profile operation sends a clearer signal than several smaller ones, thus contributing to a more efficient use of resources. The predilection for high-profile operations on the Northern Flank has historical roots in the Cold War, especially the 1980s, when numerous high-profile exercises and operations culminated in the Teamwork series of exercises, when US carriers operated out of Norwegian fjords. Although there are significant differences between the Cold War and today, the US naval services continue to emphasise a high-profile presence.

The DFE, in combination with Advantage at Sea, and the history of US operations on the Northern Flank, facilitate and encourage a high-profile naval presence. Recent US maritime presence operations support this conclusion. True to the increased strategic emphasis on Russia and the North Atlantic, the US has increased its short-term and longer-term maritime presence on the Northern Flank. The short-term presence is generally sporadic and is often publicised with a seemingly deliberate high operational profile. There are many instances to choose from. As part of exercise Trident Juncture in the autumn of 2018, for example, a US Navy aircraft carrier entered the Norwegian Sea for the first time since 1991, with the event covered extensively by both the US and Norwegian press. US Navy destroyers, together with allies, entered the Barents Sea on three occasions during 2020, the entry on 4 May 2020 being the first US Navy combat vessel to do so since the mid-1980s. These operations, all prominent in the media, were designed to signal the enduring nature of US interests in the region to its allies and to Russia alike.

Not every US maritime presence on the Northern Flank has been short-term and unpredictable, however. The US P-8 Poseidon aircraft, operating out of Andøya air base in Norway over extended periods since 2016, have largely been used in low-key operations related to surges in Russian submarine activity. The United States has also established a more permanent presence in the eastern parts of the North Atlantic theatre of operations. The US Navy has both invested in infrastructure for maritime patrol aircraft at Keflavik in Iceland and in Lossiemouth in Scotland, and uses a port outside the Arctic city of Tromsø as a logistics hub for its submarines patrolling the Arctic (McKenzie, 2018; Montgomery, 2019). The topic of US submarines operating in the Arctic is important, if difficult, to address. Submarine operations are usually highly classified. When the USS Seawolf, a submarine specialising in covert intelligence operations, made a very public appearance while docking in the northern Norwegian port city of Tromsø, it sent a very strong signal to allies and adversaries about the US submarine presence on the Northern Flank (McLeary, 2020b; Nilsen, 2020a, 2020b).

Norway receives 30 to 40 port calls by US, British, and French nuclear submarines a year, indicating a presence of at least two, and most likely three, submarines at any time (Norwegian Radiation and Nuclear Safety Authority (DSA), 2021). Due to the Russian submarine threat, it is natural to assume that one or two of these submarines belong to the United States. Russia's submarine and missile capabilities have been touted as 'the primary military threat to the [US] homeland today', and keeping a significant submarine presence in the region is likely to be a priority in Washington (VanHerck, 2021, p. Unpaged). The development of a Norwegian port to provide support services to US attack submarines supports such a priority, as does the basing of the majority of the US Navy's newest submarines, the Virginia-class, on the US Eastern Seaboard (Naval Vessel Register, 2021). Submarines therefore represent the only permanent, or near-permanent, US maritime presence on the Northern Flank, and are a significant contribution to the maritime defence of NATO's Arctic regions. Submarine presence is thus a partial exception to the US maritime high-profile presence, although the publicised dockings in Norway certainly support the high-profile hypothesis.

Anti-submarine warfare thus offers an exception to the HIPLA approach. There are nevertheless lingering questions related to future US ASW priorities. China's capabilities in the underwater domain are improving and the force structure is projected to increase significantly. The US submarine force structure, on the other hand, is planned to remain at the same level or to increase slightly (O'Rourke, 2021a, pp. 10, 12–16; 2021c, p. 7). As outlined above, the US Navy's shipbuilding plans will not be easy to fulfil. This raises the question of what the US Navy will prioritise as the Chinese submarine threat increases while its own force structure is unlikely to match this growth. Considering the severity of the Chinese challenge and European capabilities in the underwater domain, it is natural for the US Navy to direct its forces towards China.

In a significant development, in 2021 Norway and the US signed the Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement, granting Washington access to three Norwegian military airfields and one port (US Department of State, 2021). As for Europe in general, the basing of four US Navy destroyers in Spain and the presence of vessels in the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and in the Mediterranean testify to a high profile.

The Marine Corps' rotational presence in Norway from 2017 to 2020, with up to 700 marines deployed at any one time, similarly served to generate a relatively high profile. Although British and Dutch marines also train and conduct exercises in Norway, the two European contributions do not keep the high profile of the US Marines. Likewise, the transition from permanent rotational deployment to participation in specific training and exercises in 2020 has received substantial amounts of attention, and the nature of future deployments, with trainings and exercises numbering over 1000 marines at a time, are likely to be given a high profile (US Marine Corps, 2020b).

## CONCLUSIONS ON HIGH PROFILE

The US maritime presence in the North Atlantic in general, and on the Northern Flank in particular, has increased to a level not seen since the Cold War, with presence generally maintaining a high profile. The basis for the visibility and scope is anchored at the national-strategic level and in both the naval services' current strategic publications and the Pentagon's DFE-concept. These presence operations are nevertheless intermittent and, when the availability of US naval forces is low and is likely to decline even further, their profile acts as a substitute for a presence of genuine substance in signalling an enduring interest in the region and theatre. The high profile thus indicates weakness rather than strength. Considering the escalating challenges in the Pacific, and the individual issues of both the US Marine Corps and US Navy, a high-profile, low-availability approach most likely extends beyond NATO's Northern Flank to maritime Europe and beyond.

## HIPLA AND EUROPE: ALL BARK AND NO BITE?

Given the rather bleak picture of the development of the US naval services described in this article, one may be forgiven for concluding that US military presence in Europe, specifically on the Northern Flank, is largely symbolic, with a high-profile presence not translatable to substantial military assistance in the event of conflict – 'all bark and no bite,' to put it colloquially. But this would be to rest on certain assertions that, at best, lack nuance; to come to this conclusion we must be persuaded, for example, that having the US as an ally does not offer a significant deterrent effect. But notwithstanding several challenges and issues, the United States is still the world's strongest maritime power. There are also significant US air and ground forces available for operations in Europe, and the mobility of the former makes them particularly relevant in a first response to any crisis or conflict on the Northern Flank. Since Washington arguably still has an enduring interest in a 'Europe whole and free' (Bush, 1989), the US security guarantee will remain central to European security policy. The 'all bark and no bite' conclusion rests almost entirely on the decisiveness of the initial phase of a war. Although it might take time, US maritime power can be mobilised and, in concert with other US services and NATO allies, would most likely be able to re-take any NATO territory occupied by Russia. The enduring importance of US assistance to Europe does not detract from the fact that the HIPLA approach will potentially have significant implications for Europe; and, although there is limited research on the topic, it is important to outline some of these.

One obvious consequence is that Europe must take more responsibility for its own maritime security. But what would this entail? First, European nations must prepare to spend more on defence and naval capabilities, while continuing to develop intra-continental cooperation on both strategic, operational, and tactical levels, as well as on logistics and acquisition. The Nordic Defence Cooperation and the Joint Expeditionary Force are examples of existing regional security arrangements (Saxi, 2018, 2019, 2022). The former spans a range of issues such as capabilities, acquisition, education, and operational cooperation, while the latter primarily emphasises operational integration and cooperation. Joint acquisition programmes such as the German-Norwegian submarine programme, limited to the acquisition of the 212-class submarine, is yet

another example of possible European cooperative programmes and security arrangements. Operational plans must also take into account that substantial US naval assistance in a crisis or conflict will take time. Plans must therefore rely primarily on European naval power for the crucial initial stages of a crisis or conflict.

The war in Ukraine seems to have both galvanised and united Europe, sparking a new willingness to increase defence budgets. Although it may take time, Europe may become more capable of defending the Northern Flank in the initial phase of a war – although this may also reduce the incentive for the US to improve its availability for assistance. Indeed, one can question whether the US HIPLA approach has, at least in part, been facilitated by the European numerical advantage over Russian naval vessels shown in [Table 1](#). As a continuation of the discussion of European self-defence capabilities, European nations must make a strategic choice as they evaluate their maritime-expeditionary commitments. Specifically, they must ask themselves if it is in their strategic interest to send significant maritime forces overseas to assist the US in the Pacific and in other theatres. If such operations are in the interest of Europe's nations, the next question is whether they have the capacity to do so, either jointly or individually.

Europe must also prepare for US naval services who increasingly adapt to and structure for combat in the Pacific. This adaptation has wide-ranging implications for the Marine Corps, as the changes outlined above raise concerns regarding the future suitability of the Marine Corps for operations in Norway. Depending on future developments, it may be beneficial to both the US and to Norway to have the US Army, rather than the US Marine Corps, reinforcing Norway. The Norwegian Army and European allied forces such as the British and Dutch Royal Marines could function as an inside force, operating 'inside the adversary's A2/AD zones to provide credible, survivable capabilities that undermine area denial stratagems' ([Department of the Army, 2021, p. 6](#)). The US Army would thus be the outside force, providing 'regional and global expeditionary, surge, and homeland defence formations required to control terrain, consolidate gains and secure strategic support areas' ([Department of the Army, 2021, p. 6](#)). Since the US Air Force already has a significant presence in Europe, it would be able to respond more swiftly and thus be in a better position than the US Navy to support Europe in the initial phase of a conflict. This would depend, however, on whether the US Air Force would have access to suitable European airfields with adequate infrastructure and defences.

A further consequence of the high-profile presence, and in particular the surprise element of the Dynamic Force Employment concept, is the impact it may have on diplomatic relations with Russia. The surprise element may 'complicate the calculations of adversary decisionmakers', making NATO frontline states nervous since they emphasise 'transparency and predictability toward Moscow' ([Ellehuus, Rø, Allers, & Bjur, 2020, pp. Unpaged, see under headline 'Critical Contributors'](#)). Keeping an aggressive and high-profile stance on top of the capacity for operational surprise may complicate the issue even further. A Russia potentially weakened by a combination of sanctions and the Ukraine war itself could lead the country to present a more unstable foreign policy, highlighting the need for transparency and predictability if stable relations are to be maintained. The United States' priority of China, coupled with DFE's emphasis on flexibility, may reinforce the reality of HIPLA to Europe and the Northern Flank, as the Chinese challenge continues to strengthen an American pivot toward Asia.

## HIPLA AND EUROPE: CONCLUSIONS

Although US naval forces have become less available for operations in Europe, the deterrent value of the US security guarantee is still significant, with a concerted effort by NATO forces having the advantage over Russia in a conflict involving NATO territory. The HIPLA approach used by the United States nevertheless has significant consequences for Europe. European nations will have to increase their defence spending and strengthen their cooperation on strategic, operational, and tactical levels and in the areas of logistics and acquisition. European operational planning must also consider both the US operational priority of the Pacific theatre and the time required for significant US reinforcements to arrive.

Lastly, European nations must prepare for the possibility of a negative impact on the stability of NATO-Russia relations occasioned by the high profile of the DFE concept. The concept's emphasis on flexibility permits a more substantial presence where it is needed most, and Europe and the Northern Flank's status as a secondary priority after China is therefore cause for concern. Consequently, DFE likely facilitates both high profile and low availability. The issues outlined above may call into question the extent to which the United States can be considered 'strategically predictable,' and the extent to which its emphasis will fall on its bark or on its bite. The HIPLA approach has many potential consequences for NATO's European allies and, since the elements of this strategic approach are reasonably new and continue to be developed, there is good reason for scholars, officers, politicians, bureaucrats, and interested citizens to study its ongoing development.

## CONCLUSIONS ON HIPLA

The US naval services are confronted with a host of threats and challenges in diverse geographic locations and are arguably in the throes of one of their most significant changes since the end of the Second World War. They are now shifting towards a strategic approach, operational concepts, and force posture aimed at the great power rivalry with China. On top of the Chinese challenge, Russia is unpredictable and belligerent, while European allies vie for US attention and assistance. Amid these challenges and threats, Washington is clearly prioritising the Pacific and China. With limited resources, US naval forces are stretched nearly to the point of breaking. This article has shown that the US naval service has principally responded to these challenges with a new approach to the Northern Flank: a high-profile presence combined with low availability in the event of a crisis or conflict.

The Northern Flank should not be seen in isolation, and the issues discussed in this article may be applicable to the entire European theatre. Indeed, many of the above issues apply to the US naval services in general and may therefore be valid for other regions, too, although their impact will vary depending on local and regional circumstances. These are only minor variations, however, and China's influence on US maritime-strategic priorities continues, with a significant effect on US force posture. Readiness issues and new operational concepts are likely to exacerbate the effects of the primacy of Asia, likely enhancing the impact of HIPLA on Europe and other regions. When the availability of US naval forces is low and may decline even further, their high-profile approach acts as a substitute for a substantial presence used to signalise their enduring interest in the Northern Flank. The high-profile approach is thus a sign of weakness rather than strength.

The war in Ukraine is a watershed moment in European security policy, and at the time of writing it appears to be leading European nations towards deeper integration and cooperation, something in line with the recommendations made in this article. However, it is too early to conclude whether the war in Ukraine truly marks a turning point in Europe's willingness to invest more in defence. If it does not, then the continent's NATO allies will continue to rely on a maritime power that practises high-profile presence and low availability.

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