

Strategy Research Project International Fellow

Challenges for the Baltic Sea Regional Stability

by

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United States Army War College
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Abstract

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U.S. military presence in Europe after World War II played a significant role in maintaining deterrence against Soviet expansion and influence in Western Europe during the Cold War. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, most European countries reduced their military capabilities and put more attention on wellness and social security issues. The Balkan conflict showed that only U.S. forces in Europe had sufficient capability to intervene and stabilize the situation. Even after fighting two wars in South East Asia, the U.S. may be the only country capable of checking Russia's rising military power and nationalism. Cyber attacks, information operations and politically motivated statements show that Russia still has ambitions to expand her influence and control over the Baltic Sea region. Reduction of U.S. military presence in Europe might put the Baltic States in particular at risk of physical threat. This Paper describes what might be strategic implications for Baltic Sea regional security after a downsized U.S. military presence in Europe. It also proposes probable actions that should be taken by the Baltic States and NATO to continue successful deterrence against Russia.

Challenges for the Baltic Sea Regional Stability

U.S. military forces played a significant role during World War II in the liberation of Europe. The creation of NATO after the war ended required significant U.S. military presence in Europe and served as the main guarantor from a Soviet attempt to overrun West Europe through military assault. After the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991, the three Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia successfully transformed their political systems and become peaceful and stable countries. The U.S. supported the Baltic States' sovereignty and efforts to become members of NATO and the European Union (EU).¹ However, Russian influence remained significant because of economic ties and dependency on Russian exports and energy. With the Baltic States joining NATO and the EU in 2004, Russian influence in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia significantly decreased, however a potential threat to their economies, energy sectors and societies still persist.

The three Baltic States' cautious attitudes towards Russian policy are natural and historically based. During 50 years of Soviet occupation they experienced what Soviet/Russian type of "democracy" meant in reality. Current Russian leadership under President V. Putin demonstrates nostalgia for the old order; his statements illustrate that for many Russians the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century was the collapse of the Soviet Union.² The Baltic States' best interests lie in the United States maintaining a strong leadership role in Europe. Working with Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia on a bilateral basis as well as within the larger NATO context, the U.S. remains the most important strategic partner for the Alliance.³ Hence U.S. military presence in Europe is not only an expensive relic of the Cold War, but a very important security guarantor to counter Russia, particularly for the Baltic States. Downsizing U.S. military

force in Europe might have serious strategic implications on the overall security environment and Baltic Sea region stability. On the other hand, shifting U.S. policy priorities towards the Middle East and Asia-Pacific regions will encourage NATO to rethink its role in the Global arena and look for other options to maintain peace and security at home. For the Baltic States it might be a window of opportunity to fill security gaps by finding new forms of cooperation to maintain successful deterrence and the balance of power in the Baltic Sea region after a downsized U.S. military presence in Europe.

This paper assesses current Russian ambitions and policy towards the Baltic Sea region and potential strategic implications for regional security after the reconfigured European U.S. military presence. It examines what actions must be taken by NATO to close security gaps following U.S. troop withdrawal and reviews existing regional cooperation projects which are already in force. Finally it recommends what could be future steps by the Baltic States to maintain security and strengthen their defense capabilities, which then allows successful deterrence against potential aggression.

The Russian Ambitions and Policy

Most European countries do not see any particular conventional threats in the near future and indeed, security analysts do not see any direct threat against Europe. However, in the Baltic Sea region and in the Baltic States, a neighboring country's large military force is still concentrated very closely. Every country understands threats and means to counter them differently; the probability of direct military confrontation still exists. The Baltic States, along with Poland and other former Warsaw Pact states are

fearful of the current Russian aggressive international policy, because they still remember Soviet terror and atrocities. Involuntary annexation of the Baltic States by the Soviet Union led to murder, imprisonment and deportation of thousands of innocent people by Stalin's NKVD between 1940-50, thus creating long lasting fear and grievances.⁴ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia is "still searching for its place in a complex and multipolar world order" and acts as "a hegemonic power in its immediate neighborhood."⁵ For Russia the Baltic States "are historically seen as former provinces of the Russian, and later the Soviet empires."⁶ Russia's opportunistic behavior shows that it will try to use every opportunity to reestablish its influence as a regional or even global superpower. Russia does not foster democratic values but sees its role in the world from the military power perspective. When Russia figured out that it could dictate terms to the West, the closest neighbors have been the first to feel the "heat". Nevertheless, Russia's antagonism to the West has been inspired by fear of the "color" revolutions, which made Moscow very nervous in expectation of a domino effect.⁷ Russia's current support of the Syrian regime shows its real intentions and attitude towards the peaceful solution of world problems. Russia has significant influence on its friend Bashar al-Assad, but does not use that advantage to encourage the Syrian regime to stop its killing of innocent people.

Russia's National Security Strategy to 2020, issued on 12 May 2009, indicates that Russia wants to be a leader among the world economies and will consolidate its influence in the world arena as a leading political and economic power. Russia is also implementing more effective defense of the rights and lawful interests of Russian citizens abroad.⁸ This statement and the Russian military invasion into Georgia in 2008,

in support of Russian minorities in South Ossetia, greatly worry the Baltic States, where numerous Russian speaking minorities still live. Thus implementing measures to become less dependent on the Russian economy and resources as well as Latvian and Estonian refusal to grant automatic citizenship to their sizable Russophone minorities annoys Russia. It believes that the Baltic States are essentially anti-Russian in their foreign policy and form a vocal anti-Russian lobby in both NATO and the EU.⁹ However, “Russian minorities in Latvia and Estonia have been an important factor enabling Russia to successfully establish networks based on common language, values and interests.”¹⁰ Through these communities Russia continuously tries to influence domestic policies. Russia’s policy goals regarding the Baltic States are seen as preventing them from developing supporting military infrastructure and an active NATO presence in the region, forcing Estonian and Latvian Governments to implement lower requirements for acquiring citizenship to Russian minorities, and finally, “defending the Soviet Union’s role in liberating Europe from Nazism.”¹¹ As an example, on 21 November 2011, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev while addressing soldiers in Vladikavkaz near the Georgian border, stated that the 2008 invasion had prevented any further NATO enlargement into the former Soviet sphere.¹² Reelected new-old Russian President V. Putin returned to power in May 2012 and political, social and economic atmosphere has again become tense and unpredictable, reinforcing the belief in Russia’s intentions.

Russian economic growth is very dependent on keeping sufficient oil and natural gas markets. Russia understands that today, for most European countries, she is the only energy provider. Dependence on Russian natural gas and the previous arrangement between V. Putin and former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroder,

allowed Russia to establish the North Stream gas pipeline project under the Baltic Sea, bypassing the Baltic States and Poland, and leaving them isolated. Because of the lack of domestic energy resources, the Baltic States heavily depend on Russian energy. Pipelines, electricity and gas grids are mostly linked with Russia as a legacy of Soviet-era infrastructure. The gas sector remains especially vulnerable because the gas market is monopolized by local gas companies which belong to the Russian national gas company "Gazprom".¹³ This opens room for probable manipulation and influences the Baltic States. "Russia does not depend on the Baltics for gas transit to foreign markets, leaving the three states effectively as 'gas islands'. As a result, Russia could cut off gas supplies to them without interrupting supplies to other European countries."¹⁴

Dependency on foreign energy resources pushes some EU politicians into the corner; narrow state interests sometimes trumps overall good. Russia, clearly understanding its importance and role as a main gas supplier to Europe, uses it as a tool to promote Russia interests. Gas delivery and price become instruments to implement Russian foreign policy and spread its influence. Russia is able to reward those who agree to cooperate with her and punish those who are against:

...[companies are] controlled by the state and play a key role in its geo-economic and geopolitical policy. Their actions seem designed to maintain the isolation of the Baltic gas sector, and they have been instrumental in strengthening vested interest groups in the Baltic States that promote these ends and in other respects display loyalty to Moscow.¹⁵

As members of the EU, the Baltic States expect more support from other European countries, jointly defending EU interests. However the EU fears to use its political and economic means to encourage Russia to act as a transparent and democratic state. A soft indulgent position of the EU towards Russia allows Russia to aggressively stretch its muscles.

Since 2007 Russia has intensively implemented military reform, which focuses mainly on strengthening its Western Military District. Its recently formed Western Command is equipped with the most advanced weapon systems and has high readiness units which are directed mostly towards Europe to protect Russia's borders: "Russia has reportedly placed "Iskander" [short range] missiles in the Leningrad region, next to NATO's borders, from which the range of these missiles covers the three Baltic capitals as well as Finland."¹⁶ Deploying S-400 anti-aircraft weapon systems and modern submarines in Kaliningrad district, increasing her air force activity, including heavy bombers, over Baltic Sea and purchasing Mistral amphibious assault ships from France all represent clear demonstration of force. Such activities do not help to build mutual trust and stability in the region.

Russian armed forces annual large anti-NATO strategic army exercise together with Belarusian armed forces "ZAPAD" (West) near the border with Lithuania and Poland shows that Russia sees NATO as potential adversary and threat. "Increased NATO activity near the Union State [of Russia and Belarus] border, and the US plans for a missile shield in Europe, are pushing Moscow to increase military cooperation with its allies, and particularly with Minsk."¹⁷

Russia barely lives with the reality that the Baltic States escaped from its sphere of influence. Russia seeks using direct and indirect measures to discredit the three Baltic States fundamentals of statehood. By increasing intelligence activity, periodically raising questions about Russophone discrimination and their rights in Latvia and Estonia, and endeavoring to rewrite or distort historical facts, Russia seeks to show to Western countries that the Baltic States are the weakest link in their political and

economic organizations. Russia also uses its influence through state controlled media. Most Russian print and broadcast media are used as a tool to influence the Baltic population. “Television channels such as First Baltic, RTR Planeta, NTV Mir, and both Russian and locally produced Russian-language newspapers, internet news portals and radio stations are important tools for disseminating information that often has a Kremlin bias.”¹⁸

Russia had offered automatic citizenship for all of Russian descent no matter where they live and what other citizenship they have.¹⁹ After the current case of the famous French actor Gerard Depardieu receiving Russian citizenship, the Russian Parliament recently issued an amendment to simplify requirements for Russian citizenship, allowing all former Soviet Union citizens and their children to apply for Russian citizenship. These Russian policies raise concerns for the Baltic States because it gives Russia the right to use all means to defend its citizens’ rights even if they never lived in Russia.

Today, for the Baltic States, Russia remains the only potential external threat to the territorial integrity and political independence. Russian effort to modernize conventional military forces makes Russia a dangerous neighbor. Of course, its military capabilities and strength is no match for NATO forces, however Russia is capable of handling a fight with its smaller neighboring countries as shown in the Georgia case.

Reduced U.S Presence in Europe Implications

U.S. military presence as a strong and capable member of NATO in Europe was a major element in countering Soviet expansion. U.S. President Reagan’s smart strategy brought down the Soviet Union economically, and its total collapse followed.

After the end of the Soviet Union, the direct threat to Europe declined. Now, many Americans think that keeping huge military bases in Europe is just an historical relic. However, even in the Cold War era, “the U.S. military presence in Europe did much more than the traditional Cold War mission of defending Western Europe.”²⁰ United States potential to use its forward deployment bases in Europe allowed U.S. instantly to project its military power when needed and send troops where needed. “Since 1952, U.S. troops based in Europe have participated in or supported more than 200 named operations varying from humanitarian and natural disaster relief efforts to peacekeeping, anti-terrorism, and force protection operations - many of them outside continental Europe.”²¹

Currently about 80,000 U.S. military personnel are stationing in 28 main operating bases in Europe, primarily in Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom (UK), and Spain. Four Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) are a core of U.S. ground combat capability in Europe.²² Trough the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review Report (QDR) the President Obama declared, that U.S. will maintain existing force level in Europe for upcoming years. It included four BTC and an Army Corps headquarters. This change “from original plan of returning two brigades” to U.S. by previous President Bush administration, mainly was based on fallowing arguments: “deterring political intimidation of U.S. allies and partners in Europe; displaying U.S. commitment to NATO allies; promoting stability in the Balkans, the Baltic region, and the Black Sea region; and training and exercising with key NATO allies.”²³

Global crises and a shrinking military budget force the U.S. to rethink how to do more with less. To maintain global leadership with the same resources, the U.S. must,

by necessity, reconsider its military presence in relatively stable regions and shift to the regions where U.S. national interests have high priority and there is less stability. In April, 2011 President Obama announced, that U.S. will withdraw one BCT and leave three BCTs in continental Europe. This decision was based mainly “on budgetary considerations and the belief that these troops were no longer needed for Europe’s defense.”²⁴ According to the plan, the U.S. Army will consist approximately of 37,000 troops in Europe by 2015, “when one of the brigade combat team will return from Germany.”²⁵ However, Americans now believe in a long lasting European stability and fear the continuing rise of China,²⁶ U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) officials decided to significantly reduce its military presence in Europe. According to the Pentagon announcement on January 26, 2012, US military forces in Europe will be reduced according to the plan which calls for inactivation of main combat or combat support units during 2013-2015, such as A-10 squadron at Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany, the 603rd Air Control Squadron at Aviano Air Base in Italy, the 170th BCT and the 172nd BCT, and inactivation of V Corps headquarters.²⁷

However, as U.S. foreign and security policies shift to the Asia-Pacific region, Europeans, especially the Baltic States, are left anxious about the future. Downsizing U.S. military forces in Europe might have a strategic effect for the easternmost NATO countries, because it might encourage Russia to increase its pressure on “near abroad” countries, as well NATO and EU. Hence, reducing its military presence in Europe, United States will weaken its capability to project military power and prolong reaction time in any unexpected.²⁸ Even with the former U.S. Secretary of Defense Panetta’s assurances to compensate U.S. troops cut by helping NATO allies improve their military

capabilities through training, exercises and other initiatives, the security conscious Baltic States feel vulnerable.

Actions That Must Be Taken by NATO

The main reason for the Baltic States' application for membership to NATO and the EU straight after regaining their independence was the understanding and feeling that the Baltic States historically, culturally and traditionally belonged to Western civilization; they were pulled forcibly by the Soviet Union into Moscow's sphere of influence. After their bad experience under Soviet rule, the logical step for the Baltic States was to look for security in Western organizations.²⁹ After joining NATO, the Baltic States assumed, they would get security warranties in case of aggression. The new NATO members have very different perceptions of threats to their security than the old members and those differences may be difficult to understand. Most European countries feel relatively safe and have forgotten the feeling of a strong hostile armed force observing their backyard from rifle shot distance. Strong Russian rhetoric towards the Baltic States forces them to look for more reliable warranties from NATO. The breaking point was the Russia - Georgia conflict, which made "near abroad" countries alert to Russia's bold approach to deal with its area of interest, and the West's reaction. It staggered confidence in security assurance that the Baltic States had hoped to get by being members of NATO. The Baltic States are on the Northeastern edge of NATO, and they will be the first who will face a first strike in the event of conflict. Therefore the Baltic States have a right to ask for more valuable support and warranties from NATO. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia asked for a contingency plan to defend the Baltic States' in the event of conflict in the region. Older NATO members, especially Germany, do not

see any threat on NATO northern flank, and they were very fearful, that any contingency plans against a Russian attack could provoke it. Only after U.S. insistence was the Baltic States' defense plan developed. However the process caused contradictory debates among the rest of NATO members.³⁰

Recovery from 2008 Global financial crisis is still painful for most European countries. Deep defense budget cutting for most Governments was the only way to stabilize their budgets. Not all NATO members met the recommended spending of two percent of GDP before the crisis; now fulfilling this requirement is even more difficult. The United States is going to cut its defense budget by \$450 billion in the next ten years. Economically most powerful European countries, such as UK will cut its defense spending by 7.5 percent by 2015, and Germany by 25 percent. This downturn in military expenditures is alarming to the entire NATO community, because it will have significant impact on further NATO capabilities development and raises questions about NATO future credibility.³¹ Recent Operation UNIFIED PROTECTOR in Libya and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan show that participating NATO members, despite financial problems, are capable of conducting supporting and counterinsurgency operations. However, shortage of critical military capabilities, such as air refueling and intelligent, surveillance and reconnaissance worried the United States and indicated that NATO countries have to put more effort in diminishing any capabilities shortfalls.³²

At the Lisbon NATO Summit in 2010, NATO leaders outlined an ambitious Strategic Concept which “paves the way for the Alliance to modernize its ability to carry out its core mission of collective defense, while continuing to promote international

stability.”³³ NATO leaders recognized that main threat for security today is fiscal restrictions, therefore “...the [new] strategy calls on allies to “develop and operate capabilities jointly, for reasons of cost-effectiveness and as a manifestation of solidarity,” known as the concept of “Smart Defense”, commitments which were reconfirmed at the Chicago NATO Summit in May 2012.”³⁴

A similar concept was agreed between EU Defense Ministries in 2011, where EU member states called “for greater defense collaboration” and “to counter the impact of fiscal austerity on defense through ‘pooling and sharing’ of resources, particularly in the areas of procurement and assets sharing.”³⁵ A good example is the NATO-led C-17 consortium that leases three Boeing C-17s strategic transport aircraft, which provides Strategic Airlift Capability to NATO, EU or UN missions. Eleven European allies and two partners on a time-share basis manage, support and operate them from Papa Air Base in Hungary.³⁶ Another project is the Allied Ground Surveillance system, which is based on the acquisition by thirteen Allies of five unmanned aerial vehicles and the associated command and control base stations. It gives commanders a comprehensive picture of the situation on the ground.³⁷ Most of the Baltic Sea states take part in these projects.

The “Smart Defense” initiative is a response to today’s challenges. It is difficult to predict how long economic chaos will last. In a time of defense austerity NATO has to pay attention to balancing priorities between national and collective capabilities. It is also very important to look forward to the kind of special capabilities needed for the Alliance and to plan to develop them in accordance with existing capabilities. Economical efficiency must be the main driver.

Existing Regional Cooperation Projects

Effective and efficient defense remains a high priority for NATO. A real opportunity exists for the Baltic States to show their eagerness to contribute more in security and not only simply benefit from the NATO security system. New reality shows that a shrinking U.S. military presence in Europe leaves no other option but to handle threats to NATO Europe by the Europeans themselves together with the small highly mobile U.S. forces left in Europe. Europeans have to be ready and capable to deal with their own security challenges and at the same time to help U.S. to do its best in maintaining stability and security in Asia-Pacific and Middle East. This gives to the Baltic States and other Central European countries an opportunity to look for other options to strengthen the security environment and maintain a more valuable commitment to NATO and regional security.

Baltic Defense Cooperation

Defense cooperation between the three Baltic States has an invaluable importance. Started in 1990s, almost after regaining independence, the Baltic States demonstrated their joint effort to join NATO. To show that Baltic States sought not only security guarantees, but also were ready to contribute to the common Europeans effort to ensure peace and stability, started to actively participate in the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, which presented the opportunity to make armed forces interoperable with NATO. Several projects were developed with advice from supporting/donor countries to develop the Baltic States Armed forces, its defense capabilities and at the same time to increase regional defense cooperation.³⁸ The Baltic Defense College (BALTDEFCOL), the Baltic Naval Squadron (BALTRON), and the Baltic Air Surveillance

Network (BALTNET) demonstrate will and ability to cooperate in the field of security and defense. These projects are the first joint military venture in the Baltic States.

BALTDEFCOL is a multinational joint military education institution for training senior staff officers and civil servants. Established in 1999, BALTDEFCOL is a very important link in overall military education and training system in the Baltic States. It gives the opportunity to continuously educate NATO-interoperable staff level officers and helps to create a common background. Currently BALTDEFCOL has Joint Command and General Staff Course (JCGSC), High Command Studies Course (HCSC) and Civil Servant Course (CDC).³⁹

BALTRON is the three Baltic countries' Naval force with mine countermeasures capabilities. Started in 1997, this international project was created to minimize mine hazards in the Baltic Sea, improve the safety of peacetime navigation and help to remediate environmental damage in the territorial waters and economic zones of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Western European aid, especially German, accompanied the project, helping to develop the Baltic Navies and enhancing the defense capabilities of each state. BALTRON staff is formed of representatives of the Baltic States Navies. The staff positions are rotating between the officers of the three states. This helps to ensure an equal participation of the navies involved in the project; the participants also gain an equal share of experience to be able to act in accordance with the internationally established terms of cooperation.⁴⁰ BALTRON serves as NATO Mines Countermeasures (MCM) unit and is a part of the Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 1 (SNMCMG1).

BALTNET, Baltic Air Surveillance Network and Control System, established in 1998, was inspired by specific military and security needs. The Baltic States' lack of suitable jets to perform air policing tasks and inability to maintain air surveillance, led to signing agreement for the establishment of the Regional Airspace Surveillance Coordination Centre (RASCC) and the acquisition of new equipment by sharing costs between the three Baltic States. It allowed receiving, processing and displaying primary and secondary radar data in the three Baltic States, initiated tracking and identification of all aircraft in radar coverage and coordinated the exchange of regional information with third parties. After joining in NATO, BALTNET was linked with NATO Integrated Air Defense System and now provides data to NATO Regional Air Operation Centre.⁴¹

Cooperation between national Special Operations Forces (SOF) is another good example of the Baltic States' cooperation. From autumn 2011 a Latvian SOF contingent joined the Lithuanian counterpart in the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in the south of Afghanistan as part of a Joint task force. The decision to deploy the Lithuanian-Latvian SOF unit was made under a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Lithuania and Latvian Chiefs of Defense.⁴² Lithuanians SOF units are gaining invaluable experience in participating together with U.S. SOF units since 2004 in U.S. led Operation Enduring Freedom and since 2007 in ISAF mission.

Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia defense forces, as contributors to collective defense, coordinate their effort for joint participation in the NATO Response Force (NRF)⁴³ and European Union Battle groups (EU BG)⁴⁴. The Baltic States joint efforts in creating trilateral Baltic Battalion (BALTBAT) allowed them to successfully prepare and

enter the NRF-14 land component led by Danish Infantry Brigade for 6 month duty in 2010. This success encourages continuing trilateral cooperation and is already agreed upon at the political level to re-establish BALTBAT in 2016 as a part of the land component of the NRF. Also, Baltic States look for possibilities to participate together in the EU's Nordic Battle Group (NBG). The NBG is going to be on duty in 2015, and preparations for which have already begun.⁴⁵

Baltic–Nordic Defense Cooperation

Baltic-Nordic cooperation in security and defense is very important for Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, because this indirectly provides them with additional security guarantees. It allows achieving greater interoperability and builds stronger links between the armed forces of the Baltic Sea region, including non-NATO countries in the region Sweden and Finland.⁴⁶

The bilateral project between Denmark and Lithuania, LITBRIG (Lithuanian Brigade) project, and the Mechanize Infantry Brigade (MIB) "Iron Wolf" affiliation to Danish Division was initiated by Denmark in 2004. The main purpose of this project is, until the end of 2014, to prepare MIB "Iron Wolf" staff, Staff Company and the entire brigade to fully participate in NATO military activities and operations, and to ensure systematic and purposeful activity and responsibility of all units that participate in this project. Later the similar ESTBRIG (Estonian Brigade) and LATBRIG (Latvian Brigade) projects were launched. Affiliation of its combat units with higher units allowed Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian brigades to organize training in line with NATO standards, and issue guidelines for the development of the brigade's staff and units. Close interaction with the Danish Division enhances improvement of NATO procedures,

staff officers gain valuable experience.⁴⁷ Denmark has chosen to cooperate with NATO Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC). It gives Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian brigade's commanders and their staff officers the opportunity to participate in higher than before Divisional and Corps level exercises.

As part of LITBRIG, LATBRIG and ESTBRIG projects, with support of Danish Advisory and Training Staff (DATS), the Baltic States share their combat brigade's personnel branch training. Lithuania is responsible for annual Intelligence and Civil-Military cooperation (CIMIC) specialists, Latvia for Communication and Information System (CIS) specialists and Estonia for Artillery specialist courses. This allows achieving mutual understanding and interoperability between three Baltic States' Land forces militaries.

The Nordic Defense Cooperation (NORDEFECO) proved itself as a successful tool for Nordic countries cooperation. In January 2011, the Swedish chair of NORDEFECO invited the Baltic States to cooperate with NORDEFECO in three specific areas: Advanced Distributed Learning (ADL), Nordic Centre for Gender in Operations and Veteran Issues.⁴⁸

Other Forms of Cooperation

Besides joint defense cooperation activities, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, depending on historical ties and geographical location, maintain bilateral cooperation with other neighboring countries. Lithuanian Armed forces actively cooperate with Poland, which joined NATO in 1999 and was a great supporter for Lithuania and remains one of the strategic partners in military cooperation. Lithuanian land forces units participated in Polish led Lithuanian Polish Ukrainian Battalion (LIPOLUKRBAT) in

the multinational mission in Kosovo and Polish Division in Iraq. To strengthen EU and East partners' cooperation, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine have launched the joint Brigade project (LITPOLUKRBRIG) in 2009. All three countries are going to contribute an equal number of troops and once the LITPOLUKRBRIG project is implemented, it will be an important regional defense cooperation tool which enhances and facilitates participation of the three states in the EU Security and Defense Policy.⁴⁹ Estonia has similar defense cooperation project with Finland. Estonian armed forces already are contributing to the EU NBG.

It is very important to mention, that all three Baltic States have strong ties with U.S. through State Partnership Programs (SPP). U.S. states partner with European countries in support U.S. European Command (EUCOM) commander's security cooperation objectives and build partnership capacity."Originally created to minimize instability and encourage democracy in the former Soviet bloc nations after the collapse of the Soviet Union; today, SPP continues to be one of the National Guard's most effective security cooperation programs."⁵⁰ The Baltic States are no exception. Lithuanian armed forces partner with the Pennsylvania National Guard, Latvian Armed forces with the Michigan National Guard and Estonian armed forces with the Maryland National Guard.

The Baltic States maintain their focus on joint exercises. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, together with other regional partners are taking very active parts in the annual exercises "Baltic Host", "Saber Strike" and others, which are designed to promote regional security and stability and enhance exercise interoperability. All exercise usually rotate among the three Baltic States' territories every year. "Baltic Host" logistic exercise

is orientated in civilian and military Host Nation Support for NATO forces in case of crisis or conflict in the region. All government agencies which are responsible for crisis management in their respective countries are involved in planning process and exercise. U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) led the theater security cooperation exercise “Saber Strike”, which focuses on command and control, as well as interoperability with regional partners. This exercise rotates among Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia training areas and consists of a brigade-level command post exercise, and a field training exercise with a situational training exercise component.⁵¹ The Special operation force exercise “Jackal Stone” and BALTOPS (Baltic Operations) multinational maritime with amphibious landing exercise taking place in the Baltic Sea region countries are designed to promote regional cooperation and foster multinational interoperability to train for joint combat of regional and transnational threats.⁵²

These exercises play an important role for the Baltic Sea regional security, because this cooperation between NATO, regional Allies and U.S. enhances combined operations. Participation of U.S. troops in the regional exercise provides visibility of Allies’ presence on the Baltic soil, which works as deterrence and a strong message for potential aggressors.

NATO presence in the Baltic Sea region is very important. NATO Air Policing mission in the Baltic States, which has been conducted since 2004, is a good example of what NATO recently declared as the “Smart Defense” concept. It ensures common defense and security of the Alliance, preserving Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian airspace integrity, which do not have full range of Air defense assets.⁵³

Future Steps

Even as the U.S. is reducing its military forces in Europe, the Baltic States will continue to look to U.S. as their main partner and security guarantor. Strong NATO and bilateral agreements with United States will act as power balance in Baltic Sea region. However, to convince the U.S. that they are not only “takers” but also are “givers”, Europeans must put more emphasis on their own defense and capability development. Sufficient and effective spending on defense still remains an issue for some NATO members. From the three Baltic States only Estonia is putting effort in meeting almost 2 percent of GDP, which is a core in maintaining sufficient military capabilities. Lithuania and Latvia, whose military budgets are around 1 percent of GDP, have to find ways how to allocate sufficient resources for defense spending to align with Estonia and “ensure that they are able to contribute to the common good for NATO in other ways.”⁵⁴

To continue to strengthen security in the Baltic Sea region, greater and more sufficient defense cooperation must occur among the three Baltic States, Nordic Countries and Poland. Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian commonly viewed threats enabled tighter regional cooperation in common defense projects, exercise and training. To continue such cooperation at a high level it is very important to look for possibilities to prepare common contingency plans. After NATO issued the Baltic States defense plan in 2010, all three countries prepared their own plans to provide host nation support for incoming NATO forces in case of conflict and also organized homeland defense. For this purpose, it is very important to involve Poland in all preparation and planning process because it is an important player in the Baltic Sea region and borders the Baltic States.

Further defense cooperation has to be enlarged by focusing on trilateral national defense capabilities planning projects and joint defense procurement. Such projects should include air defense and anti-tank capabilities development, determination of common Infantry Fighting Vehicle (IFV) platform and other equipment for their combat mechanized units, and its combined procurement.

Strengthen NATO Cooperation and Defense Security

NATO needs to enlarge its footprint in the region to show its presence, implementing contingency defense plans and to train together enhancing interoperability between Allies. The NATO Response Force (NRF) has to be strengthened and well trained. NATO, with participation of the U.S. and the bigger powers from Europe, has to increase its NRF training in Poland and the Baltic States. Regular Article 5 North Atlantic Treaty exercises besides practical interaction between allies will bring better visibility of NATO in the region.

The NATO main mission is to defend member states and enhance security; however member states must allocate sufficient defense resources, expand collaboration and the “Smart Defense” concept.

Developing the Baltic Air Policing mission from temporary to long term solution was a great step forward. It gives more sufficient long term guarantees for the Baltic States and allows planning and improving host nation support infrastructure. To make it more attractive to other countries, the Baltic States have to cover bigger host nation support expenditures. It might be full coverage of fuel, communication and accommodation costs.

To make the Baltic States more important actors among other NATO members, they have to continuously develop defense capabilities and be active participants. The NATO Energy Security Centre of Excellence in Lithuania, NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence in Estonia and Latvia's recent declaration to establish a NATO Centre of Excellence for Strategic Communication⁵⁵ are good examples of the joint Baltic States' projects within NATO which have positive outcome.

Baltic-Nordic Cooperation

For stability and more sufficient security in the Baltic Sea region it is very important to expand regional cooperation between the eight Nordic and Baltic (NB8) countries. Mutual understanding of the threats and security strategy in the region is the key to success. Hence, the Baltic States engagement with the Nordic countries gives additional benefits in decision making and promotes regional influence within NATO and EU.⁵⁶ On the other hand, such continued cooperation in the period of defense austerity would be the main option for sharing and reaching cost effectiveness.

Further steps in Baltic-Nordic cooperation might be Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian armed forces permanent assignment to the EU NBG. Joint contribution allows meeting common standards in training, specific equipment and procedures. In turn non-NATO countries Sweden and Finland have to be invited as participants in NATO or U.S. led exercises in the region. "The more that the militaries and officials of the eight countries get to know each other, the more they will build trust and ultimately reap the benefits of their interaction, causing the remaining hurdles to diminish."⁵⁷

Involvement of other countries in the regional cooperation such as Poland and UK, which are out of the Baltic or Nordic region but have great interests there, would

give more “weight” in dealing with sensitive regional issues. Capabilities to project military power and strong position towards Russian ambitions would be indirect benefits.

Another very important field of cooperation is military education. The Baltic States have to keep Nordic countries military experts and instructors in BALTFOR. Hence, the Baltic States have to apply the best experience and use every possibility of closer military and technical cooperation. By applying NATO “Smart Defense” and EU “Pooling and Sharing” concepts the Baltic States can participate in common procurement, exercise and training. Enhanced Baltic-Nordic cooperation and collaboration will attract U.S., as a strategic partner, to focus on overall region and enables employ available resources more effectively. The U.S. has to continue to pay attention to the Baltic Sea region in helping to strengthen host nation support, countries planning capabilities, conduct training and regional joint land, air, maritime, SOF exercise to improve interoperability and increase the sufficiency of regional armed forces.

Cooperation with U.S. in Training and Exercise

Remaining U.S. troops in Europe have to focus on supporting NATO in training and Article 5 collective defense exercises. Also it might present a link with the U.S. forces which are assigned as part of NATO Response Force, returning to Europe in case of crisis. Such interaction has deterrent value and will provide reassurance to Allies, especially for those like the Baltic States, which are on the far edge of NATO and whose conventional military balance remains unfavorable.⁵⁸ EUCOM organized exercises help to strengthen host nation support and defense planning capabilities which are a great value for the Baltic States. State Partnership programs, exchange of experts and trainers, preparations together with U.S. troops for the new missions

abroad are helping to better understand each other armed forces, diminish stereotypes and build confidence.

Conclusion

The United States has been the traditional security guarantor for Europe and it enjoyed a preeminent place in U.S. military-strategic policy for half a century. Europe, even after the collapse of Iron Curtain, too long relied on US military power and consequently paid less attention to building its own military capability. Reconfiguration of the U.S. military presence in Europe encourages European countries to rethink its security issues. The new realities force every country to find new ways to deal with current challenges. The U.S. will continue to play important role in European affairs; however Europeans themselves have to take a lead in maintaining peace, security and stability in the Europe. In the current situation, when most European countries' defense budgets are recovering from the global crisis, the Baltic States must endorse closer regional defense cooperation. This requires wide implementation of NATO "Smart Defense" and EU "Pooling and sharing" concepts as the key to keep power balance and stability in the Baltic Sea region:

...given history, it is only prudent to anticipate defensive strategies in the event that democratic backsliding in Russia produces a more assertive Russian foreign policy. A more-integrated region is a stronger actor, mitigating the perceived or potential vulnerability of any one nation in the region.⁵⁹

The Baltic States have to continue their long standing and time tested trilateral cooperation by developing new areas of collaborations and projects such as boosting national defense capabilities and joint procurements. In maintaining the Baltic Sea regional stability, it is vital for the Baltic States to enlarge and set more solid cooperation with the Nordic countries, which share the same values and security concerns. Inviting

Poland, which is an important regional player, and the UK, which is one of the most militarily advanced and powerful NATO European countries, would strengthen NATO's position in the region. A strong NATO, different forms and agendas of regional cooperation's with the Baltic Sea region countries and continued U.S. engagement in European affairs will set suitable preconditions for successful deterrence and sustain the balance of power between NATO and Russia in the region.

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