

Regional Security Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region

By Wojciech Lorenz and Tomasz Prądyński

In Brief: The Baltic Sea region has undergone a remarkable transformation over the last twenty-five years, from an area of potential competition and instability in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union to a place of robust stability, deep Euro-Atlantic integration, and economic dynamism. The aggression of Russia against its neighbors and attempts to intimidate NATO and EU border states has led to a new situation in the Baltic Sea region. Because Russia demonstrates capability and potential intention to undermine the security architecture, which removed Cold War divisions in Europe, transatlantic policymakers decided to reassess collective defense arrangements across NATO's Eastern flank. The Warsaw Summit highlighted the strategic importance of the region, moving from a policy of assurance to one of concrete actions with the objective to deter Russia. NATO allies will start implementing Warsaw commitments by deploying soldiers at the beginning of 2017. However, in addition to concrete military actions there is also a need to look for a regional strategy to deal with Russia using already established institutional frameworks.

Introduction

In a strategic contest between the West and Russia over the post-Cold War architecture, the security of the Baltic Sea region depends on its allies within NATO and the European Union. Since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, it has been clear that the Kremlin is not interested in maintaining the status quo or that it interprets it in a different way than the majority of democracies. Although EU and NATO enlargement in the region has not threatened Russia militarily, it has expanded the rule-based international order, championed by the West, into former Warsaw Pact countries as well as some former USSR republics. From the Kremlin's perspective, the spread of these fundamental Western institutions along its borders constitutes a threat — one that even carries with it an existential dimension.

In response to this perceived threat, Putin has used military aggression to create a new security order and draw concessions from the West. The Baltic Sea region is one of the theaters of confrontation where political will is challenged by the threat of military conflict. NATO has responded by setting up multinational combat battalions in the Baltic States and Poland, which should serve as a trip wire, but more needs to be done. NATO and EU partners need to stand firm against Moscow, both in defense and in ideological terms. They cannot let themselves be divided, or be fatigued into compromising their principles. Both history and international relations theory indicate that any form of appeasement would only increase the risk of the confrontation instead of decreasing it. Thus, their response must include long-term investments in capabilities and forms of cooperation, which will improve the credibility of NATO's deterrence and defense. At the same time the West should try to enhance the role of the OSCE as the major regional security organization, which could improve Russia's satisfaction with the European security architecture.

Russian Actions Toward the Baltic Region

Russia revealed its leadership intentions first in Georgia in 2008 and later in Ukraine in 2014. President Vladimir Putin has embarked on a strategy of imposing major changes on the European security architecture in order to enhance his sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space. The Baltic Sea region consequently became a key area of strategic importance because the territory of NATO and EU border states was previously regarded as a military buffer zone by Russia.

By escalating tensions with NATO and the EU, Putin has demonstrated that Russia strives for military superiority in the Baltic Sea region and has both the capability and the political will to confront the West. This should be perceived as coercive bargaining. Moscow believes that by raising the risk of a potential military conflict, the West can be divided and its determination to defend its values and border states sovereignty is weakened. This would ultimately lead to concessions, in the form of legal assurances from both NATO and the EU, stating that neither institution would further enlarge itself, nor enhance its ability to defend its Eastern border states. However, Russia may also attempt to test the determination of Western structures to defend the status quo, or better assess what methods of influence could be applied in the future. Once the Kremlin estimates that the West's resolve is weak, it could decide to employ a more aggressive scenario, which could lead to a confrontation over NATO or EU territory. Should such a confrontation spill over into a NATO (or even EU) member state's borders, Russia could create a *fait accompli* and enforce political negotiations over the new security architecture. From the Kremlin's perspective such architecture should give Russia the right to potentially block sovereign decisions of countries that had once been under Moscow's direct control.

Recent Russian provocations and military exercises close to NATO's borders clearly indicate that in a scenario of military confrontation with NATO, Moscow perceives the Baltic Sea region as one strategic theater for operations. The Baltic States, which are most vulnerable, are left asking what Russians are really up to and whether they are truly prepared to risk the possibility of war over their territory. In addition to the Baltic States, potential conflict scenarios should include the escalation of a conflict on Finnish or Swedish territory, as well "preemptive" offensive operations against the Swedish Gotland or Finland's Aland Islands.

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NATO's Response to Russian Provocative Behavior

In reaction to Russia's provocative actions, NATO first responded by assuring Eastern flank states that in the event of any military action taking place, deployable units would reach the region within days. This moderate response served to demonstrate that while the Alliance is ready to improve the ability to defend its territory, the decisions do not change the regional balance of power. Although Russia has not discontinued the escalation, it has, at the same time, intensified the move of its military capabilities closer to NATO's borders on an unprecedented scale. Russia's military exercises and provocations also diminished transparency and confidence building measures that have served as the bedrock of post-Cold War stability in Europe.

The Warsaw NATO summit in July 2016 demonstrated the Alliance's determination to defend its easternmost members. This decidedly historic shift toward the East will bring rotational battalion combat groups to the territories of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Starting in 2017, the United States will lead the battalion in Poland, while Germany will take the lead in Lithuania; Canada in Latvia; and the U.K. in Estonia. Altogether, around 4,000 troops will be deployed across the region. On top of that, the United States will establish headquarters for a new heavy brigade in Poland that will be a hub for U.S. military rotating across Europe. If fully implemented, these plans will undoubtedly send a strong signal of NATO's unity and firm stance on defending its Eastern flank to the Kremlin. By moving from assurance to deterrence, the Alliance with its Enhanced Forward Presence will effectively end the military divergence between "old" and "new" members.

The decisions made in Warsaw should impact Putin's potential calculations and discourage him from conventional aggression against NATO. The more indivisible the Alliance proves to be, the stronger the prevention is for scenarios such as the *fait accompli*.

Sweden and Finland, while not members of NATO, have also been taking increased steps toward countering a Russian threat. Both countries play key roles in supporting existing security infrastructure in the Baltic Sea region, and their cooperation is crucial to the Alliance's ability to send reinforcements to the Baltic States. Unsurprisingly, both Nordic states have strengthened their cooperation with NATO's military structures in recent months. Despite longstanding calls for Sweden and Finland to join the Alliance, this remains unlikely to happen in the near future. Cultural and historical factors in each country, translate into a lack of political consensus on NATO membership and low public support for such a move.

Hence, even if directly threatened by Russia, both countries could not rely on security guarantees from the NATO. To compensate for this limitation, they have strengthened their bilateral defense cooperation —

in particular with the United States and the U.K. Sweden and Finland's close cooperation with the U.S. European Command could prove to be one of the most important elements of regional deterrence, as this could increase the likelihood of U.S. troops deploying to their territory in a crisis situation.

As the Baltic Sea region becomes more militarized in order to meet the challenges posed by Russia, the Alliance should avoid any moves that could give Moscow a pretext for employing a military scenario. Having this in mind, NATO must be cautious not to play a weak hand in the strategic bargaining process that was imposed on the West by Russia. Making concessions would only prove to Russia that the Western Alliance is divided, uncoordinated, and unable to defend its members. This would only encourage Russia to set a more aggressive security agenda toward Europe, with potentially devastating consequences for Eastern members of the EU and NATO, and the West as a whole.

Recommendations

The only viable option for the West is to defend the post-Cold War, rules-based order, which can be done on multiple levels.

First, the role of the OSCE needs to be reinforced. The OSCE should be used as a pillar of the transatlantic collective security architecture because it has the unique advantage of a membership that includes not only European states and the United States, but also Russia. Consequently, it has the potential to serve as a major international forum that could allow Russia to have an equal say on security matters, while at the same time requiring Moscow to respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of other member states. Although Moscow may not be interested in being engaged in OSCE meaningfully at the moment, other members of the organization should give it a new political push to raise its profile. Despite current efforts of the OSCE to reinvigorate itself, there is still a long way to go. But there is no better option than boosting the standing of the organization, and allowing it to function as a platform for meaningful and equal dialogue on security issues in the Euro-Atlantic area.

Second, the credibility gap in the potential defense of the Baltic States and other Eastern flank countries needs to be removed by NATO and the EU. It is increasingly necessary for NATO and the EU to develop a bigger pool of properly equipped high readiness forces, which are crucial for credible deterrence and effective defense in the Baltic Sea region in the event of Russian military engagement. In order to achieve robust unity on this matter, the European NATO members must increase their defense expenditures to meet the benchmark 2 percent GDP requirement. Doing so would satisfy the long-echoed groans from U.S. leaders and

other Western European governments of unequal burden sharing and accusations of "free-riding." It could also strengthen the transatlantic dimension of the Alliance wherein the United States would not be the only considerable donor of military assistance within NATO.

Third, to further enhance the credibility of deterrence in the Baltic Sea region, more regional defense efforts will be needed in both NATO and EU formats. NATO and EU border states will always be in a disadvantaged position vis-à-vis a neighbor, who has regional conventional superiority as well as nuclear weapons. But their national defense capacities, augmented by regional cooperation and institutional, economic, and political-military support from both organizations, can become a powerful deterrent. Because the region would serve as the operational area in a crisis situation, Baltic allies should base their cooperation on improving their ability to run defensive operations. New multinational units and common procurement

programs would undoubtedly contribute to the bigger pool of high readiness forces. It will be necessary also for them to develop and test internal lines of communication with which to facilitate troops' deployment. Regional exercises should focus on relearning warfare maneuvers and operations in the contested maritime and airspace of the Baltic Sea. Last but not least, defense cooperation should focus on investments in the early detection of threats (ISR), effective multinational operations to include both command and control, and should acknowledge the prospect of high intensity warfare.

Fourth, when discussing reforms to the NATO command structure, the Baltic Sea region must be regarded as a central element. The command structure should serve as a multitasked mechanism that is able to run operations simultaneously across the Eastern and Southern flanks, as well as in the North, where NATO should focus more on its ability to control the Greenland-Iceland-U.K. gap. This often-overlooked area has strategic importance for the defense of the Baltic Sea region, as Russian freedom of maneuver there could potentially cut Europe off from U.S. support. Therefore, there is a need to renew an early warning system in the northern gap and to develop an ability to run military operations in the Atlantic Ocean.

Fifth, regional cooperation in the Baltic Sea region should be used to establish a mechanism to limit any forms of hybrid warfare with a potential adversary that benefits from coercion and blackmail, and that spreads psychological panic. Any manifestations of Russian propaganda

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should be revealed to the public immediately. Moreover, collaboration between states in this region must include societal and state resilience to counter not only hybrid, but also conventional and nuclear threats. In order to achieve an integrated position, coordinated strategic communication and intelligence sharing must also be enhanced. The cyber security of the regional networks and systems should be well protected by improving early cyber warnings and investing in common IT systems.

Finally, for the credible deterrence it will be necessary to renew U.S. security guarantees within NATO. One of the first decisions of the new U.S. administration in the foreign policy area should include a signal that it is in the strategic interest of the United States to defend all NATO allies. The political-military organization of 28 members (soon to be 29) is a pillar of security in the whole Euroatlantic area. It deters Russia and offers a unique ability for the allies to project power in Europe, Africa, and even Asia. Without a strong and credible NATO, the risks of conflicts and instability will only grow with serious consequences for all members.

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About the Author

Wojciech Lorenz is a senior research fellow at the Polish Institute of International Affairs in Warsaw. Tomasz Pradzynski is a program assistant for the Security and Defense Program in GMF's Warsaw office.

Warsaw

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1744 R Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
T 1 202 683 2650 | F 1 202 265 1662 | E info@gmfus.org
www.gmfus.org