



Baltic military cooperation: past, present and future

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When five years ago Estonia as well as its two Baltic neighbours, Latvia and Lithuania, joined NATO, it marked the fulfilment of one of the greatest strategic ambitions of our small countries. And it opened a new era, in which our security is firmly embedded in Western collective security and defence framework. Today, when we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the North Atlantic Treaty and 5th anniversary of our membership in the Alliance, it is a good time to pay a proper tribute to the so-called BALT-projects, which greatly assisted us in our integration effort. It is also a good opportunity to consider where we stand with those projects now, when membership in NATO is a demanding reality rather than a distant dream.

As a former civil servant in the Lithuanian defence organisation and then an academic at the Baltic Defence College, who has spent a great deal of career time trying to sort out inter-Baltic collaboration issues, I often had to make sense of various twists and turns in this defence policy area. Having witnessed its ups and downs, frustrations and celebrations, one cannot help but have a feeling that Baltic military cooperation is at a certain crossroads and has lost much of its appeal and idealist zeal. The big question constantly hanging in the air is whether Baltic military cooperation is bound to stagnate within the confines of the present activities and projects, or whether it will expand and deepen in the future. Or, as any sceptic might ask, have we been too ambitious all along, so shrinkage of commitment to as well as scope of Baltic military cooperation is inevitable?

This article is an attempt to reflect upon the reasons as well

as results and consequences of various periods of Baltic military cooperation. It also seeks to offer a conceptualisation of its achievements and, drawing upon some examples of successful defence cooperation outside the region, demonstrate various possibilities and opportunities that are either overlooked or ignored by defence policymakers in the Baltic states. Thus, the purpose of this article is to examine the shifting rationale of Baltic military cooperation in order to better understand its dynamics and appreciate its future potential. The main issue that this article seeks to address, building upon this understanding, is the following: what are the alternative models of Baltic military cooperation which could be pursued in the future and what may eventually determine its “winning design”?

I will not provide a detailed chronology of BALT-projects in this article: sources to verify them are indeed abundant, so there is no need to waste space on reiterating them at length. I will not be able to offer much on the technical details of those projects either: some of them are not easily accessible, while others are too mundane to those concerned with the big strategic picture – the level at which this article aspires to stay. I am primarily interested in presenting and dissecting strategic arguments, the logic and rationale of Baltic military cooperation and registering how they have changed, and why, since joining NATO.

Finally, although the ambition to assess future prospects may appear to some as putting the argument into the league of speculative discussion little to do with academic rigour, this would be groundless scepticism: strategic decision-making involves making informed choices, where robust historical perspective is interwoven with good understanding of present realities as well as sensible management of the uncertainties of the future, combined with a compelling vision. Not looking into the future and not trying to anticipate challenges and opportunities ahead that may require different ways of cooperating would result in us just limping on with the BALT-projects without any grand vision for Baltic military cooperation in general – currently a persistent and most detrimental feature of handling it by all the involved parties.

In the first chapter, I will put forward some general considerations with regard to possible forms of military cooperation, with mutual integration representing its most advanced and deepest form. In the second chapter, past rationale and results of the Bal-

tic military cooperation projects, or BALT-projects, will be discussed in order to establish the original intentions behind them. In the third chapter, this rationale will be contrasted with the shifts in thinking and approach that have been manifest over the last few years. The last chapter will look into several alternative models, with their distinct rationales, requirements, strengths and weaknesses, which are available to the decision-makers pondering the future of Baltic military cooperation.

Intra-alliance military cooperation: between mere familiarity and total inter-dependence

Any discussion of where, how and why to pursue closer military cooperation should start from a general understanding of this phenomenon. Alas, literature on theoretical models of military cooperation is somewhat lacking, so I have to resort to constructing my own framework as a basis for further analysis. In this chapter, I will suggest several models of cooperation, although it is necessary to make a caveat that these are going to be pure, theoretical models. In real life, they often overlap and display characteristics of each other. However, as a theoretical exercise, it is worth separating them, for it facilitates judgement of their merits and disadvantages as well as choice of appropriate strategies and policies. Another caveat is that I will look at intra-alliance cooperation models, taking NATO as a basis for the discussion, for all three Baltic states are very much driven in their policies by their membership factor.

The very first thing we have to bear in mind is that NATO itself represents one of the forms of military cooperation at all levels – political, strategic, operational and tactical. Since no supranational defence organisation to which members cede their sovereign authority over the use of force exists, it is possible to argue that NATO is the most advanced form of military cooperation ever conceived. It has a common threat assessment and mechanisms for pooling intelligence; common strategy (Strategic Concept), well-honed consensual mechanisms of political decision-making; integrated command structure; standard operational planning process (OPP); combined joint and service doctrines; elaborate standards in all fields of military activities; collaborative research and de-

velopment and, increasingly, capabilities developed together and shared by member states. So one does not need to look far to discover how military integration works in practice.

The nagging question is whether individual NATO allies need to develop any “special relationships” within the Alliance to supplement their integration into the overall framework of the organisation. Indeed, one of the arguments against expanding Baltic military cooperation might be that the emphasis must now shift to building ties with all the allies and increasing integration into the Alliance’s structures, instead of pushing for ever closer cooperation between the Baltic trio. For relative newcomers such as the Baltic states, becoming more visible, known and active within NATO is a matter of establishing themselves as serious members of the organisation.

However, the reality is that Estonia, for instance, cannot be an equally interesting and engaging partner of military cooperation to all members of the Alliance. There are such issues as resource constraints, cultural differences and what we may call “mental distance” – absence of shared interests and common issues around which to build a meaningful partnership, combined with a simple lack of desire to go beyond those activities and commitments that already exist within the framework of NATO. To be quite honest, Estonia has limited interest in engaging, for instance, Greece or Portugal; those countries are not burning with desire to turn Estonia into their “special partner” either, even though occasionally they are brought together in various ventures of the Alliance.

Therefore, in practice, it is not uncommon to observe geography-based regional groupings as well as issue-centred, or sectoral, partnerships operating within that framework. As a result, the Alliance should not be seen as a tightly-knit political and military community, but also as a web of different cooperation processes and interactions of varying degree between its members. The examples of regional groupings and issue-based partnerships within NATO’s framework are abundant, from military cooperation of the Benelux countries or Franco-German military relationship to the aforementioned ABCA grouping (which includes a non-member – Australia – a prominent partner in NATO’s global partnerships policy and New Zealand as observer). Various NATO Centres of Excellence (COEs), such as the COE of Cooperative Cyber Defence in Tallinn, are incarnations of issue-centred part-

nerships between countries interested in a specific area and seeking to build cooperation for the benefit of the entire Alliance.

Trying to generalize and conceptualize different approaches to intra-alliance military cooperation, I would suggest envisaging it as a continuum where members only familiarize with each others at one end and where they integrate their military closely at the other end, with different levels of cooperation lying in between. For the sake of theoretical neatness, we could establish several ladders on this continuum as pure theoretical forms of military cooperation that I earlier promised to articulate (see the table below). As it can be seen, members of an alliance may engage each other in different ways for different purposes and with different means, thus creating a rather fluid and complex web. Many observers of NATO, looking at the suggested model would be able to recognize where individual members stand in relation to each other or what their aspirations are, which is exactly the purpose of this theoretical exercise. The suggested model could also work outside the alliance framework, although it should be supplemented with such ladders not relevant within a collective defence organisation such as confidence building.

In practice, of course, the picture is much more complicated. For example, many participants in ad hoc bilateral or multilateral arrangements between contributors to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan may end up locked in them for years, prompting an appropriate question whether this should not be regarded as a long-term issue partnership. Issue partnership might also create interdependence in some area to such a degree that one would rather naturally ascribe it to mutual integration form, with NATO capability projects being a good example. The recent decision of Poland to withdraw from the Alliance Ground Surveillance (ASG) programme and its possible ramifications to Poland's interoperability with NATO's C4ISR¹ systems underline how much reliant on each other the participating countries become as those projects progress.² It might be equally difficult to strictly separate issue partnership and broad cooperation: how many of the former do we need to be able to describe the relationship as broad cooperation?

¹ Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance.

² Grzegorz Holdanowicz, "Poland quits NATO ground surveillance programme", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Vol. 46, Issue 19 (13 May 2009), p. 14.

Forms	<i>Symbolic relationship</i>	<i>Ad hoc cooperation</i>	<i>Issue partnership</i>	<i>Broad cooperation</i>	<i>Mutual integration</i>
Motives	Building familiarity with other allies, registering interest in their policies and concerns, scouting for possible opportunities	Achievement of some specific objective of limited scope in a short term	Cooperative solution of a pressing problem	Mutual assistance in peacetime military tasks and during crisis management; ability to combine and enrich learning experiences	Capability for seamless combined military action in all levels and dimensions of warfare
Measures and activities	Staff talks, visits, occasional participation in exercises, exchange of information etc.	Ad hoc bilateral working groups, task forces or agreements temporary staff exchanges, some coordination etc.	Joint capabilities projects, project-based common structures, regular coordination on a specific issue etc.	Routine combined peacetime activities (e.g. common exercises), coordination of policies and doctrines, semi-permanent staff exchanges; effective framework for assigning units to common operations; technology barter etc.	Intensive common training and education, common doctrines, free flow of intelligence, joint decision-making and staffing in many areas, integrated command structures, many shared or common assets and units, continuous staff exchanges, additional common standards, technology sharing, joint acquisition and maintenance etc.
Outcomes and effects	Knowledge of the allies and symbolic solidarity	Medium or long term development of capability or competence in some particular field	A better ability to deal with a specific security threat or risk, new knowledge creation in a specific field, enhanced national contribution to the alliance's activities	Better response and management of diverse security threats, better knowledge sharing and cooperative learning, economy of effort and resources, substantiation of allied solidarity, trust	Greater interoperability, enhanced military effectiveness of multinational forces, better deterrence, high degree of trust and interdependence, commonalities in national military cultures
<i>C o o p e r a t i o n c o n t i n u u m</i>					

Table: Forms of intra-alliance military cooperation

Regardless of the difficulties in analyzing real-life cases that may arise, the model proposed above facilitates understanding and interpretation of the military cooperation between members of the alliance. Take ABCA: it is a perfect example of ambitious mutual integration which started even before NATO was set up and which continues expanding in scope well beyond tactical level. Based on a premise that “creating multinational interoperable armies is the cutting edge of force projection in the 21st century” and that “lack of interoperability is a dangerous drag on nations’ battle-winning capabilities” this programme is now crucial to the ability of the participating nations to conduct coalition operations together.³ Despite a very comprehensive standardisation framework of NATO, ABCA arrangements are still seen as pivotal and indeed often precede the corresponding NATO standards.⁴

It certainly helps that all ABCA participants have an extensive historical record of fighting wars shoulder to shoulder. Notably, these are English speaking nations with rich military traditions and more or less similar strategic and military cultures, oriented towards force projection and expeditionary warfare.⁵ This historical, cultural and mental affinity in strategic and military affairs is coupled with the contemporary imperatives for mutual integration, made evident by operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, which revealed further interoperability gaps crippling military effectiveness of the allies. Finally, ABCA is very much facilitated by the fact that it has a military heavyweight, the United States, as its main driving force. By virtue of being a source of most technological advances in defence, it often prompts the need for new standards which ABCA duly addresses, followed by the wider NATO community.

³ Robert L. Maginnis, ‘ABCA: A Petri Dish for Multinational Interoperability’, *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 37, 2005, pp. 53 & 56.

⁴ See Richard A. Cody, Robert L. Maginnis, “Coalition Interoperability: ABCA’s New Focus”, *Military Review*, November-December 2006, pp. 65-68.

⁵ Not all of the ABCA nations had an historical orientation towards expeditionary warfare to the same degree. Canada, for instance, is a relative newcomer to such strategic culture and continues wrestling with the challenges of transforming its national military culture accordingly. See Peter Foot, “Military Education and the Transformation of the Canadian Forces”, *Canadian Military Journal*, Spring 2006, pp. 13-20.

Going back to the topic of Baltic military cooperation, the first obvious question is on (or between) which ladder the Baltic states tried to position themselves with their BALT-projects at the time of joining NATO. The following question is whether they have moved to more advanced cooperation or experienced a slide down to a more shallow form, and why. Last, we should ask what the actual potential is and whether this potential is appreciated and has reasonable prospects of being realised in the future. I will address these questions in the following sections.

Past: Go West, together

Historical legacy is an important determinant of modern day policies. It shapes, often in very subtle ways, the perception of a situation as well as the understanding of the existing choices. It can be seen as ballast to be shed through radical policy review and overhaul or, quite to the contrary, as a solid base to build future relations. Despite their relatively young age, the defence organisations of the Baltic states shared ten years of close cooperation before joining NATO. This chapter examines this historical legacy in order to position achievements of Baltic military cooperation in the suggested model at the time of accession to the Alliance. This will provide the necessary historical context for assessing the current state of affairs as well as potential for the future development.

The history of Baltic military cooperation dates back to the mid-1990s, when the Baltic Battalion (BALTBAT) was launched in 1994, with headquarters in Ādaži, Latvia, to help the Baltic states develop a capability to contribute to international peace-keeping operations. It was followed by a trilateral naval squadron BALTRON in 1998, a joint staff college BALTDEFCOL, set up in Tartu in 1999, and by the interlinked air surveillance network BALTNET, with a coordination centre in Karmėlava, Lithuania. These projects were possible only because of the strong involvement of Western nations – Nordics, Germans, British, French and Americans to whom it was all an exercise in defence diplomacy to strengthen new democracies and promote regional security. Perhaps very few realised at that time, how much these projects

assisted Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in becoming serious candidates for NATO membership, particularly when it comes to developing the ability to work together. The BALT-projects were the training ground for the young armed forces in learning how to work in a cooperative manner and what integration entails in practice.

Three major benefits were derived from the projects by the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian armed forces. The first was access to know-how – standards, procedures, concepts and daily habits – of how to build and operate Western-style military units and institutions. This mattered more than money or hardware, donated by Western sponsors. Knowledge and competence are key to success in military organisations, and the Baltics had a unique opportunity to develop them through the BALT-projects with an extensive coaching and mentoring of NATO and EU counterparts. It is also important to point out that getting involved in the transfer of know-how to new democracies was more attractive to Western nations if there was a cooperative framework for it on the ground, and BALT-projects suited this purpose perfectly.

The second benefit was using the projects as catalysts of developing tangible military capabilities. Equal contribution required from each of the three countries meant having something real to bring to the table, or be named and shamed by Western mentors. As a result, the Baltics developed the mentality that one cannot be a free rider, only consuming security benefits created by the Allies, but to be able to contribute to the best of one's abilities. Be it an infantry company, a naval vessel, radars and airspace picture to share or instructors of senior staff officers, each of the three Baltic states had to consider what, how much and when to provide and how to best prepare to do their part in the projects – from allocating finances and personnel to planning infrastructure development or equipment upgrades and purchases. The corollary to that was development of habits and skills in coordinating national plans, which is an important administrative capability when working within a military alliance.

Lastly, military personnel from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania working together as well as with their colleagues from “old” NATO and EU nations, had a chance to develop what is often termed as “interoperability of minds” or “human interoperabil-

ity” - the ability to quickly understand each other, make effective common decisions and trust each other. This is the staple of all coalition operations and was greatly advanced by the creation and development of the BALTDEFCOL in particular. Again, “software” matters more than “hardware” in military affairs, and this is perhaps the most seriously underestimated benefit of the BALT-projects. However, in this regard it is necessary to note that “human interoperability” is not tantamount to shared military culture: the armed forces of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania retained their distinct paths of developing their ethos and culture, to some extent even defining themselves through drawing contrasts between them rather than emphasizing similarities.

Baltic military cooperation did not remain confined to the BALT-projects. Inspired by their success, the Baltic militaries started seizing other opportunities of cooperation, albeit of lesser scale and ambition. Trilateral collaboration of varying degree in training specialists of logistics, engineer, communications, medical and other services took place, with many military practitioners having no doubts at all that their defence organisations must either cooperate or suffer the eventual lack of competence. This attitude kept broadening the areas where the armed forces of the Baltic states found beneficial to collaborate in order to enhance their organisational learning and build their military capabilities. For instance, although BALTBAT was closed in 2003, the Baltic states sought to enhance cooperation between their land forces to the point of developing a combined land forces doctrine.⁶

All of the above was capped by quite an elaborate framework of political and military coordination and decision-making, starting with the Ministerial Committee (defence ministers) and Military Committee (chiefs of defence), supported by such bodies as Baltic Management Group (representatives of the ministries of defence and armed forces) mandated to supervise all BALT-projects, down to various project steering groups and ad hoc working groups. Consultations and coordination (e.g. annual defence planners’ talks) at various levels became a matter of routine to such an extent that sometimes it was even difficult to find any

⁶ See Estonian Ministry of Defence, “Co-operation between the land forces of the Baltic states” at <http://mod.gov.ee/?op=body&cid=387>

new topics to invigorate the discussions. So, by the time of accession to NATO in 2004 and despite some political rivalry between the three countries during the Membership Action Plan process preceding the accession, Baltic cooperation in defence could be regarded as a great success story.

Looking back at the time of accession to the Alliance, the Baltics appear to have entered it with their military cooperation being solidly within the category of issue partnership, with some clear advances into broad cooperation and even with certain elements of mutual integration. The latter was obvious in the case of BALTNET, which required a high degree of technical and human interoperability in air surveillance and which was prepared for plugging into the NATO system. Other BALT-projects were more focused on specific issues such as westernizing senior staff officer education (BALTDEFCOL) or working on a capability for international peacekeeping missions (BALTBAT), with a central issue of partnership still being integration into NATO. However, by virtue of involving all three services (land, air, naval) as well as training and education authorities and because of extensive policy coordination, BALT-projects also supplied a basis and created the right context for broadening Baltic military cooperation as a customary method of dealing with challenges in the area of defence policy. Thus, the signs of much broader trilateral cooperation started gradually appearing.

It can be concluded that NATO integration fostered issue partnership between the Baltic military and laid the ground for broad cooperation after accession to the Alliance. External pressure and involvement were critical to this end, as virtually none of the Baltic military cooperation projects was possible without them. However, actual membership can be regarded as a game-changing event. How did it affect Baltic military cooperation? Did it continue evolving to become broader than just several projects or even towards deep mutual integration across multiple areas? The following section examines the present, or the period of the last few years after accession to NATO, and determines the current state of Baltic military cooperation.

Present: National ambitions and constraints strike back

With membership in the Alliance, the Baltic states experienced the feeling of the “end of history”, to use Fukuyama’s terms.⁷ A defining factor of their security and defence policy, including of the trilateral defence cooperation, of the last ten years suddenly was removed from the agenda of the Baltic states, while conceptual thinking about what will or should replace it was slow to catch up.⁸ In this conceptual vacuum, the BALT-projects suddenly became precarious. Even the term used to refer to them – “projects” – implied their temporary nature and some definite end to them. The outcomes of this uncertainty and re-thinking are mixed, and this chapter explores them in greater depth.

One of the acts of revision was related to the BALTBAT, which was closed just prior to the accession to NATO. The battalion was resurrected under a different rationale - as a common contribution to the NATO Response Force (NRF) in the first half of 2010 (NRF-14), showing an understanding that Baltic military cooperation could be used as a vehicle of increasing visibility and weight of the Baltic states in the Alliance. However, there is no grand vision for the project beyond the NRF duty tour time. Instead, there should be some concern that, should the battalion be actually deployed on the NRF mission, the Baltic defence organisations would break under the financial cost of this deployment.⁹ Consumed by the deep economic crisis, Latvia has already essentially pulled out from the project due to severe defence budget cuts, leaving Lithuania and Estonia to shoulder even a greater burden than expected.¹⁰ Thus, the BALTBAT hardly counts for

⁷ See Kestutis Paulauskas, “Security Dimension of Northern Europe after the Double Enlargement”, *Baltic Defence Review*, No. 11, Vol. 1/2004, pp. 104-114.

⁸ The tri-lateral defence cooperation agreement, signed in 1995 as a basis for the BALT-projects, was revised and updated only in 2008. See Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence, “Baltic military cooperation boosted”. Available from: http://www.kam.lt/en/news_1098/news_archives/news_archive_2008/news_archive_2008_-_05/baltic_military_cooperation_boosted.html

⁹ Unofficial calculations indicate that deploying the BALTBAT together with the NRF beyond Europe (e.g. to Afghanistan) and sustaining it for half a year would cost around 60 mln. EUR.

¹⁰ Estonian Ministry of Defence, “Baltbat remains a joint project of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania” (28 July 2009). Available from: <http://www.kmin.ee/?op=news&cid=2027>

more than an issue partnership: on the face of it, for the NRF deployment, but in reality - to build land forces capabilities in line with tough transformation objectives that underpin the idea of the NRF.

Perhaps due to the smallness of the Baltic navies and the ability of their commanders to see things eye to eye, BALTRON fares quite well. It was eventually consolidated as a platform to prepare naval assets of the Baltic states for duty on NATO Naval Mine Countermeasures (NMCM) force.¹¹ There was a period of uncertainty when the three countries were decommissioning their obsolete vessels, thus creating a perception of BALTRON being somewhat of an empty shell. But with the purchase and delivery of replacement vessels well underway and with other BALTRON structures such as the divers' training centre in Latvia and naval communications training centre in Estonia functioning properly, BALTRON can be seen as a stable and viable project. It perpetuates a solid issue partnership on the Baltic military cooperation agenda.

At the same time, another issue partnership inherited from NATO pre-accession years – education of staff officers – made further advances towards broad cooperation and even integration. Since most of joint staff officers of the Baltic states are educated together at the BALTDEFCOL, with no corresponding national courses available, the three defence organisations have become mutually dependent on each other in this area. At the same time, new courses for air force and navy staff officers of the Baltic states were created, in Lithuania and Latvia respectively, to plug the gap of education below joint staff officers level. BALTDEFCOL's development into a full-fledged joint staff college created the imperative to harmonize professional development requirements for staff officers in all three countries. The result was the Combined Baltic Officers Professional Development Programme, which attempts to bring three national systems into a single coherent framework and forge a common approach.¹² This brought the Baltic states closer towards the trilateral integration

¹¹ See Estonian Defence Forces, "The Baltic Naval Squadron – BALTRON". Available from: http://www.mil.ee/index_eng.php?s=baltron

¹² See Baltic Defence College, "Historical Overview of the Development of the Baltic Defence College and its' Courses". Available from: <http://www.bdcol.ee/?id=15>.

level in a vital area of defence, despite significant difficulties in sustaining the BALTDEFCOL in the circumstances of decreasing foreign involvement. However, further integration requires bringing three military cultures much closer to each other, which is hardly appreciated by the defence leadership of the three countries.¹³

Also, the BALTNET served as a precursor to deeper integration dynamics with regard to air space control. A pressing necessity to cooperate in providing support to NATO's Baltic Air Policing Operation, conducted from the air base in Šiauliai, Lithuania, demonstrated very well that militarily the Baltics were joined at their hip more than they had realised prior to their accession to NATO. Even in this area, much "bloodletting" took place over whether the so-called Control and Reporting Centres (CRC) for NATO's operation should be developed separately in each country or together, more in line with BALTNET's architecture. The spat was painful to the point that endangered BALTNET itself – one of the few areas where Baltic military cooperation acquired the characteristics of mutual integration. In the end, a single CRC for the Baltic states was established, which was hailed as "a great leap forward in cooperation" by the Lithuanian officials.¹⁴ Further evolution in the direction of ever deeper integration, however, is uncertain and depends on the results of the joint working group developing assessment of alternative solutions for air policing function in the future.

What is very notable, however, is that no other major new trilateral cooperation projects of the same ambition as original pre-accession BALT-projects have been launched, despite some interesting common initiatives. There has been much talk and expectations with regard to, for example, the Baltic Command and Control Information System (BALTCCIS) project launched back in 2001. Some officials even envisaged a common Baltic C3I management system emerging from this project.¹⁵ However, after

¹³ See Tomas Jermalavicius, *Ten Years of the Baltic Defence College: Challenges and Future Prospects*, International Centre for Defence Studies, Tallinn, 2009.

¹⁴ Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence, "An arrangement for the Joint Baltic Airspace Control and Reporting Centre (CRC) deployment in Karmelava made". Available from: <http://senas.kam.lt/index.php/en/109005>

¹⁵ See Baltic Assembly, "Speech of Raimonds Graube", 22nd Session (27-28 Novem-

the accession, it ended being a modest project which facilitated development of capabilities for three separate national uses and was promptly ended in 2006,¹⁶ as there has been little need and interest in the project.

Even such worthy ideas as cooperation in defence procurement have not really taken off (although joint Estonian-Latvian procurement of Lockheed Martin long-range radars was very successful). This is not surprising: defence procurement is a very complex area even nationally. Multinational procurement requires a very high degree of competence and is attended by much greater transparency than national process. If Latvia's and Lithuania's Corruption Perception Indices are anything to go by¹⁷ and assuming that defence cannot be immune to general trends in the society, not everyone might have been interested in increased transparency of defence procurement in those countries.

Some small-scale projects such as joint munitions acquisition were discussed at various points, to little effect. In recent purchase of medium-range air surveillance radars, Estonia chose to join its tender with Finland rather than Lithuania and Latvia.¹⁸ It is not surprising then that the lack of joint procurement programme eventually creates technical interoperability challenges to such co-operation projects as BALTBAT¹⁹. Combined with the pressures of the economic crisis, these led the Baltic states to address the topic more seriously, with the policymakers finally agreeing on the need to harmonise defence procurement procedures and processes in the three countries.²⁰ If this happens and joint procurement starts

ber 2003). Available from: <http://www.baltasam.org/?DocID=295>

¹⁶ See Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence, "Tarptautiniai projektai" ("International projects"). Available from: http://www.kam.lt/lt/tarptautinis_bendradarbiavimas/tarptautiniai_projektai_627.html

¹⁷ In 2008, Lithuania was 65th from the top and Latvia stood at the 52nd place out of 180 countries in the CPI table, where the least corrupt were Denmark, New Zealand and Sweden (Estonia ranked 27th). See Transparency International, "CPI 2008: cpi 2008 table". Available from: http://www.transparency.org/news_room/in_focus/2008/cpi2008/cpi_2008_table

¹⁸ See Estonian Ministry of Defence, "Estonia concluded a contract for the procurement of two medium range radar systems" (4 June 2009). Available from: <http://www.kmin.ee/?op=news&id=1963>

¹⁹ Margus Kolga, "Quo vadis Baltic defence cooperation?", *Estonian Foreign Policy Yearbook*, Tallinn, 2006, pp. 119-136.

²⁰ See Joint Communiqué of the Ministerial Committee, Tallinn, 23 April 2009.

in earnest, the Baltic states will have made another major step towards broadening cooperation in defence.

Why has accession to NATO, instead of unequivocally bringing Baltic military cooperation to a new level – that is, much broader cooperation or even deep military integration – so far produced such a tentative effect? There is one critical combination of factors: foreign disengagement, diverging national responses to NATO's global strategy, and competitive instincts present in the three defence organisations. Firstly, Western mentorship and coaching, with their disciplining effects on the behaviour of the Baltic defence establishments, is decreasing: the Baltics now can define their vision and ambitions as they please. There is no one to name and shame, or to knock their heads together. In the Baltic states, there might be a degree of feeling that teaming up with the big and powerful is a better investment of effort than sticking together, or that trilateral integration may somehow impinge upon deeper integration of each country into the Alliances structures.

Alarm bells about the Baltic cooperation should have started ringing after Lithuania had failed to secure participation of Estonia and Latvia in the Lithuanian-led Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan. What could have easily been a joint venture – a Baltic-led PRT – ended up as a national project of Lithuania, to which Estonia and Latvia showed little enthusiasm of subscribing. Instead, they opted for partnerships with the UK and Norway respectively. However, parting ways in what is a crucial mission of NATO means having very different sets of practical priorities, concerns and interests. Taking separate boats in NATO's venture of global power projection is tantamount to turning Baltic military cooperation into an undertaking with little intra-alliance strategic rationale.

The resurrection of BALTBAT for the sake of maximising the contribution to a key transformation project of the Alliance provides a silver lining in this regard, just as BALTRON's role in training for the NMCM and BALTNET's role in the NATO Integrated Extended Air Defence (NATINEAD). But it is highly questionable for how long Baltic military cooperation can rest on the same few BALT-projects to advance their intra-alliance broad cooperation or mutual integration agenda, while national

responses to new challenges take different tracks as in the case of the PRT or even with regard to more fundamental strategic issues. For instance, the Baltic states continue to exhibit their diverging strategic visions concerning the armed forces format: Latvia moved to the all-volunteer force (AVF) format in 2006, with Lithuania following closely behind in 2009 (although it is having some second thoughts), but Estonia continues practicing conscription. A synchronised move to the AVF format would have opened a range of new opportunities (as well as pressures) for mutual integration and would have facilitated integration with other NATO allies.²¹ However, national interpretations of defence transformation prevail over trilateral as well as alliance-wide vision in the three capitals, reducing the chances for moving up the intra-alliance cooperation ladder.

Finally, there is a great degree of competition between the three states for visibility, recognition and praise within NATO. Combined with the lack of patience in managing the intricacies of trilateral projects, this leads to nationalisation of initiatives and a “go it alone” attitude. The Centre of Excellence on Cooperative Cyber Defence (COE CCD) – a perfect case of issue partnership among several NATO allies (including Lithuania and Latvia) was an Estonian initiative, not an idea nurtured and brought to reality in a pan-Baltic framework. Estonia gets all the credit, and certainly deserves it, but it leaves the other two scrambling to find their own pet projects rather than pursuing ever closer Baltic integration. For example, Lithuania mulled the idea of a centre of excellence on energy security.²² This competitive approach may eventually erode the spirit of and support to Baltic military cooperation in the three defence organisations.

All in all, since accession to NATO, the Baltics have achieved

²¹ During his visit to Vilnius, Chairman of NATO Military Committee Admiral Gianpaolo Di Paola was reported to have expressed positive views with regard to Lithuania's decision to move to the AVF format and said that “all allies must work together and, therefore, the principles of organizing the armed forces should be similar across the entire Alliance”. See Egle Samoskaite, “NATO Admiral Tells Lithuania Not to Feel Itself Exceptional” (in Lithuanian), *www.DELFI.lt* (29 April 2009). Available from: <http://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/article.php?id=21902855&categoryID=7>

²² Jurate Damulyte, “Energy security centre – so far only a vision” (in Lithuanian), *www.DELFI.lt* (4 June 2008). Available from: <http://www.delfi.lt/archive/article.php?id=17263089>

mixed results in advancing their military cooperation. BALT-projects remained at the heart of it: two of them – BALTDEF-COL and BALTNET – have prompted precarious yet important progress towards deeper defence integration; BALTRON and the resurrected BALTBAT perpetuate intensive but, as in the case of the latter, rather fragile issue partnership. There are also elements of broader cooperation going on beyond these projects such as regular combined exercises. Hopefully, joint defence procurement will become a reality soon, which, while concentrating on a specific issue of reducing the costs, will definitely prompt a wave of expanding the cooperation agenda. However, the three countries differ in their vision of defence, their understanding of how their national interests can be advanced within the Alliance and their willingness to stick together, particularly in NATO-led operations. This constrains the possibilities of breaking new ground and elevating Baltic military cooperation to a qualitatively new level.

So, when talking about the subject matter in some five or ten years, will we be discussing the same good old BALT-projects? Do they exhaust the entire potential of Baltic military cooperation? Or is there room and, more importantly, need for thoroughly integrating the defence organisations of the Baltic states with each other within the framework of broader NATO integration? The next section addresses the question of the alternative futures of Baltic military cooperation and examines the merits as well as disadvantages of different models.

Future: Is geography still our destiny?

Looking into the future, defence policymakers of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have to agree on a common vision and define the desired level of ambition of trilateral military cooperation. Otherwise, their declarations of political will and solidarity will increasingly sound hollow and not produce anything beyond what has already been achieved. Or, having set the ambition high, they may encounter practical difficulties beyond the ability of the three small defence organisations to resolve. In this section, I will look into what models could be pursued in theory and why, only

slightly touching upon practical issues, mapping of which would require a much deeper inquiry.

The first option is to keep the level of ambition firmly concentrated on partnerships related to several strictly defined issues. Essentially, this is the policy of not going beyond the existing range of BALT-projects and adding only some projects of temporary nature such as burden-sharing in providing support for NATO's air policing operation. Some projects would be mainly trilateral, perhaps with some involvement of more experienced NATO allies as mentors; some projects would require broad international involvement such as the BALTDEFCOL. In some cases, only two out of three nations may team up for a particular project (e.g. in defence procurement) as an ad hoc cooperation undertaking. The defining criterion is whether a particular project is necessary in creating and maintaining some specific defence capability, in a cost-effective way, that the Baltic states lack or lag behind compared to other NATO allies.

In all cases, there would be no "sacred cows": projects can be closed, extended, redefined or restarted as the circumstances change (as it happened with the BALTBAT) and as decided through the existing trilateral consultation and coordination mechanisms. In relation to some of them, deeper integration could be pursued in a very narrow field, while in other projects reduction of mutual interdependence might be sought: for instance, integrative elements spurred by the BALTDEFCOL which led to the common staff officers' professional development framework might be abandoned. However, taking into account the difficulties of giving more substance to that framework (such as developing common understanding of "jointness" or a common philosophy of the profession of arms²³), this would probably not be considered as a major sacrifice by the defence leadership of the three countries.

This cooperation model gives much flexibility in deciding whether the Baltics should stick together or seek partners elsewhere – a matter of practical calculations as much as political. Given that the level of capability development in three countries is very similar, such opportunities for developing them in

²³ This issue is elaborated in greater depth in Jermalavicius, *Ten Years of the Baltic Defence College*.

close partnership would present themselves for a long while. The downside is the risk that eventually Baltic military cooperation would wither away as the three defence organisations mature and the underlying strategic purpose of building defence capabilities and facilitating transfer of know-how from more advanced NATO allies becomes less pressing. It would entail the acceptance that the phenomenon of Baltic military cooperation is temporary, more of an ad hoc character, and would be more in line with the notion that any regional defence blocks or communities within the Alliance are not necessary. Gradually, more and more emphasis would be placed on creating a dense web of cooperative relationships with as many diverse allies as possible.

The second option is to ascertain that much broader defence cooperation is desired by the three Baltic states. In addition to recognizing the need to develop their military capabilities through a coordinated effort in a cost-efficient manner, this form would also reflect two additional points. Firstly, that there are regional security issues which can be best managed through common military preparations and cooperative activities which often do not merit involvement of the entire Alliance (although other countries adjacent to the Baltic Sea often should be engaged as well through such formats as Nordic-Baltic Eight, or NB8)²⁴. Secondly, that Baltic contribution to NATO's activities as well as political visibility can be much enhanced if they act in unison in all areas of Alliance's agenda and especially in operations.

In practice, this policy would require a long-term effort to expand the scope of cooperation beyond the BALT-projects or air policing matters which currently dominate the agenda. First and foremost, political will to do as much joint procurement as possible would have to become a reality, probably followed by cooperation in equipment maintenance as well as in combat service support function. There is also many other areas where cooperation would yield tangible benefits in terms of better management of security risks, resource savings or organisational learning. For

²⁴ A good example of a broad cooperation agenda in security matters is the report prepared by Norway for the discussions among the Nordic foreign ministers. See Thorvald Stoltenberg, *Nordic Cooperation on Foreign and Security Policy*, Oslo, 2009. Available from: <http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/UD/Vedlegg/nordicreport.pdf>.

instance, while being midjets in the world of defence research and development (R&D) on their own, the Baltics could become more serious partners for other NATO allies if they developed trilateral cooperative projects in this field. The list of regular cooperation activities, programmes and projects could be expanded in all domains of defence as long as there is enough will, imagination and practical necessity.

This approach has its own disadvantages and stumbling blocks. It would require much bigger organisational capacity to manage the substantially larger trilateral cooperation agenda than the current list of BALT-projects or ad hoc issues. Broadening Baltic cooperation may also come at the expense of relations with other allies, for practical reasons (limited resources available for cooperative initiatives) as well as in terms of perception created by it both within the Baltic states and outside. Less tangible but no less important would be the impact on defence identity of the three countries: it would be hard to many of those who currently are promoting a “go-it-alone” attitude to see the name of their country being eclipsed by the label “Baltic” within NATO’s security and defence community. Some would probably argue that we already are lumped together too much and need more differentiation between the trio within the Alliance.

However, whether they want this or not, the Baltics are bound together by their geography and their strategic position. Looking from outside the region, those concerned with NATO’s collective defence commitment see it as a single geostrategic unit, regardless of national differences and ambitions.²⁵ Herein lies the rationale for the third option, which is to make a strenuous push onto the ladder of trilateral defence integration across the board, not just in a few narrow areas such as airspace control or military education. This would reflect a clear and unequivocal recognition that, firstly, the worst-case scenario of Article 5 contingency in the region would be a matter of survival for all three countries rather than for just one, with the other two simply coming to assist. Secondly, that credibility of NATO’s collective defence in the region will depend

²⁵ See Ahto Lobjakas, “NATO Commander Seeks Defence Plans for the Baltic States”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (7 October 2008). Available from: http://www.rferl.org/content/NATO_Commander_Seeks_Defense_Plans_For_Baltic_States/1294790.html?spec=2

as much on the efforts of the Baltic states to unite their military preparations as on the willingness of other Allies to defend them.

The war between Russia and Georgia in 2008 should have reinserted a sense of realism into the strategic assessments of the Baltic states as well as NATO. Concerns about Russia's behaviour are further reinforced by its plans to mandate the use of force outside its borders to protect Russian nationals.²⁶ As collective defence is reasserting itself as a core mission of NATO on its 60th anniversary, regional military integration strategy for the Baltic states does not sound like a proposition out of touch with strategic realities or too outlandish in the context of NATO's mission.

Regional military integration as a strategic instrument of bolstering NATO's credibility would be a most demanding and ambitious undertaking for which the current level of Baltic military cooperation is grossly inadequate. The requirements for such integration would probably shape the Baltic military cooperation agenda for decades to come. At the political and strategic level, it would call for continuous coordination and common decision making on various aspects of defence policy and planning. This would include a serious discussion on what implications different armed forces formats and defence models may have on the effectiveness of common military action and how to iron those differences out. Appreciating and accommodating, if not eliminating, differences in strategic and military cultures of the three countries would also be necessary in the long term: as long as the Estonian military elites see Finland with its total defence as a role model in military affairs, while the Latvians or Lithuanians are focusing on creating a small deployable force for NATO operations, there is little room for convergence and integration.

Organisationally, trilateral defence integration would entail setting a host of combined agencies to take over and pool together national functions in the areas such as joint procurement, maintenance, defence R&D, concept development and experimentation (CD&E), standardisation, doctrine development, military education, C4I etc.. They would serve as Baltic points of contact for corresponding NATO agencies. It would also require

²⁶ BBC News, "Kremlin bill on using army abroad" (10 August 2009). Available from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8194064.stm>

a vast trilateral staff exchange programme,²⁷ especially in such areas as policy and planning, intelligence, training and operations. A natural extension would be commonly owned capabilities, in the spirit of NATO joint capabilities projects, as well as more common units. For instance, BALTBAT could be turned into a standing unit for the suggested Allied Solidarity Force (ASF) to respond to Article 5 contingencies outside the region²⁸. In a similar vein, the eventual air policing solution currently under investigation in a common working group could include acquisition of common assets for this function.

A critical condition for successful trilateral integration strategy in the Alliance's framework, however, would be effective linking of it with corresponding NATO policies and structures as well as the involvement of key Allies from outside the region, especially the United States. U.S. financial and technical assistance, its advice, better access to its intelligence and technology and an intensive programme of common Baltic-U.S. training would fortify strategic partnership between the Baltic states and the most powerful NATO ally. This is not to diminish the value of other allies and the need for their solidarity as well as practical support. However, without U.S. backing and some presence, the credibility of collective defence in the region would suffer dramatically, with or without trilateral Baltic defence integration. At the end of the day, as George Friedman rightly put it, NATO is "effective only if the United States is prepared to use force".²⁹

Achieving meaningful, deep and broad trilateral defence integration of the Baltic states would be an arduous and long journey. It would probably be more expensive in financial terms than just going alone: almost all measures that could be envisaged would entail extra costs, but they would also deliver more – more ca-

²⁷ Only a small-scale pilot arrangement for exchange of civil servants has been tried between the defence ministries of Estonia and Latvia so far.

²⁸ The ASF idea was launched by the UK at the NATO defence ministers' meeting in Krakow (see Reuters, "Britain hopes for deal on NATO force at summit", 20 February 2009. Available from: <http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSLK829718>, accessed: 24 February 2009). The idea was endorsed by the Baltic defence ministers in the Joint Communiqué of the Ministerial Committee (23 April 2009).

²⁹ George Friedman, *The Next 100 Years: A Forecast for the 21st Century*, (New York: Doubleday, 2009), p. 115.

pability, more knowledge, more visibility³⁰ (our experience with the BALTDEFCOL serves as a good example to support this argument). Of course, each of the Baltic states would individually lose quite some flexibility in decision-making: going alone or doing nothing when the other two insist on action would become almost impossible in many areas. Politically, such degree of pooling national sovereignty in defence, well above what NATO membership calls for, might appear unpalatable to many decision-makers or the general public.

On the other hand, attending to military interests in isolation from each other, or poisoning good will for integration with momentary grievances and clashes of personalities, makes no strategic sense. The Baltic states definitely do not want to end up like those isolated authoritarian countries of the inter-war period, which failed to cooperate in defence because of some petty disagreements, and suffered such a terrible fate. At the end of the day, the choice might well be between pooling sovereignty in the form of trilateral military integration or losing credibility of NATO's collective defence in our region. It will take robust and mature leadership as well as long-term strategic vision to avoid the latter and to advance the former. Although the choice between several levels of cooperation is possible and would finally bring clarity as to what the purpose of Baltic military cooperation is, it should be seen as an exercise of farsighted management of strategic risks and regional security imperatives rather than as a kicking ball in the game of competing national ambitions.

Conclusions

Baltic military cooperation moved from an era of NATO membership aspirations to an era of membership obligations, still being rather faithfully attached to the established brands of BALT-projects. This article looked into how the rationale behind it as well as its form and content evolved between the pre-accession

³⁰ I am grateful for this remark to Lt.Col. Erki Pekkonen, Finnish Defence Attaché in Estonia, who brought it up during the public roundtable debate with the Baltic defence ministers, held at the International Centre for Defence Studies in Tallinn on 24 April 2009.

years and the time when Baltic military cooperation became one of the strands of intra-alliance cooperation within NATO. By placing it into the continuum of intra-alliance cooperation, it also suggested a way of clarifying its purposes as well as its level of ambition in the future and discussed the merits of several alternative models.

To a certain extent, the objective of building military capabilities and advancing organisational learning of the armed forces, which underpinned Baltic military cooperation during the NATO pre-accession years, remains in place, only this time subordinated to NATO's transformation agenda. The Baltic states still share many similar practical challenges and problems in defence, so this does not come as a great surprise. In addition, this objective is intertwined with the imperative of contributing to the Alliance's missions. So, despite being hampered by national ambitions, competitive instincts and foreign disengagement which emerged after accession to the Alliance, the Baltic states managed to retain their partnership in several areas, albeit refocused and tailored to the membership realities, as well as some low-key elements of broader cooperation which also started appearing prior to NATO membership. Within military education and in the area of airspace surveillance and control, they also seem to have been moving towards deeper trilateral integration.

However, uncertainty about how far the Baltic states are prepared to go in the ladder of intra-alliance cooperation continues. Lacking deeper reflection on what can be achieved in the long-term, and how, by means of trilateral cooperation, they shirk from decisively going beyond the comfort zone of the BALT-projects. There are no major new initiatives in the pipeline, except of a constant struggle to get joint procurement beyond the level of political declarations. This prevailing uncertainty and conceptual vacuum also deprive even most advanced cooperation areas, such as military education, of considerable amount of energy as well as a clear sense of direction, which casts doubt on their viability in the future, despite the assurances of political will to carry on. It is becoming increasingly clear that, at some point, the Baltic states will have to come up with a coherent and effective vision for the future of their military cooperation.

Constructing an effective unifying vision is a fraught matter, especially when there are three different nations involved. On

the other hand, the Baltic states should define what rationale of cooperation is most appealing to them all and thus determine the nature and scope of trilateral engagement. If the focus is development of new capabilities in a cost-effective way, several issue partnerships will suffice. Should they decide that some part of regional security agenda needs to be attended to without constant involvement of the Alliance and that promotion of certain policies and initiatives within NATO merits putting their weight together, systematically and persistently broadening their defence cooperation would be necessary. However, the glue that has best potential of keeping the Baltics together is the very reason they belong to NATO – collective defence. This is where the imperatives of deep trilateral integration are evident if a long-term strategic perspective is adopted by the Baltic states.

Worrying about credibility of NATO's collective defence commitment to the Baltic states and taking steps to bolster it should not be confined to demands for NATO's visibility, presence or contingency planning. Arguing for substantial in-place national force, based on increasing mobilisation reserves, is also hardly an adequate response if the mindset of collective defence is properly adopted and NATO's agenda of capabilities' transformation is whole-heartedly endorsed. Deep trilateral integration across the entire spectrum of defence, with the involvement of some key allies from outside the region, offers a way of making NATO's collective defence more credible in our region while putting the Baltic states at the forefront of progressive thinking about military capabilities in the Alliance. Integration dynamics taking hold in a specific area of airspace surveillance and control, thanks to the necessity to support NATO's air policing operation, demonstrates vividly that trilateral integration within the framework of the Alliance has great potential. Practical challenges of this option are immense, but choosing it removes any vagueness as to where Baltic military cooperation is heading or what long-term benefits are expected from it.