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Why the Baltics matter. Defending NATO's North-Eastern border

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The deteriorating European security context

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, most of Europe went on a "strategic holiday". The West had won and the future was bright. Even the fact that at its weakest the Russian Federation was still able to create frozen conflicts at its borders did not dent this optimism. Defence spending in Europe was plummeting throughout the 1990s, and all the way to 2014. NATO's prevailing paradigm changed from being a collective defence organisation more to something of a collective security actor, with many main missions and a plethora of partnerships.

After the shock of 9/11, the Alliance focused on counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan. Military capabilities required to fight a modern near-peer adversary atrophied even further. In this context, some Allies did not take their eyes off Russia – primarily Poland and the Baltic States. Yet they were perceived by major Western Allies as nuisances requiring psychological counselling, as countries who had been traumatised by their harsh history and hence had become incapable of embracing this new reality of partnership with Russia. Even the Russian military aggression against Georgia in 2008 did not change that *Zeitgeist*. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton presented her "reset" button to the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov just seven months after Russian tanks rolled into Georgia.

Then the NATO Summit in Lisbon in 2010 endorsed a new Strategic Concept, which declared that "NATO-Russia cooperation is of strategic importance as it contributes to creating a common space of peace, stability and security. NATO poses no threat to Russia. On the contrary: we want to see a true strategic partnership between NATO and Russia, and we will act accordingly, with the expectation of reciprocity from Russia".[1] This concept is still in force. There was no other way for the Russian leadership to interpret it – the West is weak, Russia can attack its neighbours, conquer their territory, and after a couple of months of slightly deteriorated relations with the West everything will go back to normal.

While there are areas of diplomacy where a degree of ambiguity might be desirable, the collective defence clause of NATO is not among them

Understanding that the West was weak was further fueled by President Obama's reneging on his own red lines in Syria. The US was in retreat and that created space for Russia's nefarious activities.

Then came 2014, the Russian occupation and annexation of Crimea and the start of a still ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine in the Donbass. Lessons the West should have learnt in 2008 now started to sink in. Crimea and Donbass were followed by Russian interference in the Syri-

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1 "Active Engagement, Modern Defence. Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization", NATO, 2010.

an civil war, meddling in US presidential elections, an attempted coup in Montenegro and use of a chemical agent in Salisbury in the UK. There is a rogue state at Europe's doorsteps. And it comes with nuclear weapons.

The challenge faced by Europe seems clear. Alas, many European governments would rather turn their head away. Let's take two examples. According to the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, NATO and Russia promised to base their relations on shared commitment to a set of principles like democracy, transparency, political pluralism, rule of law, "respect for sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all states and their inherent right to choose the means to ensure their own security, the inviolability of borders".[2] Of those seven sets of principles Russia has violated six, the odd one being about supporting, on a case-by-case basis, UN or OSCE peacekeeping operations.

If we consider that Russia tries to overturn the security architecture of Europe then the Baltic States might become not an end but a way to achieve it

The second example concerns Germany's insistence on moving forward with the Nordstream 2 gas pipe-line project, despite the vocal opposition of Poland, the Baltic States, the United States and Ukraine. And despite the fact that Russia has repeatedly used energy as a weapon in its foreign policy arsenal.

The European security equation is further complicated by the current US President. While American actions concerning shoring up defence of Europe and deterrence of Russia have been positive during Trump's presidency, the same cannot be said about the declaratory part of deterrence. During the campaign Donald Trump called NATO obsolete, and after his election it took him a while to reaffirm NATO's collective defence clause. At his first NATO Summit in May 2017 he reportedly omitted this part of his prepared speech,[3] and it took him five months to finally commit to Article 5.[4] While there are areas of diplomacy where a degree of ambiguity might be desirable, the collective defence clause of NATO is not among them. In this the President of the United States must be unambiguous. If not, it is the bedrock of allied security that will be eroded.

2 "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation signed in Paris, France", NATO, 1997.

3 S. Glasser, "The 27 words Trump wouldn't say", *Politico*, 6 June 2017.

4 L. Nelson, "Trump publicly commits to NATO mutual-defense provision", *Politico*, 9 June 2017.

What is so special about the Baltic States?

NATO has 1,163 km of land border with Russia, 967 of which are borders of Poland and the Baltic States. One should add the 1,268 km of borders between Latvia, Lithuania and Poland on the one side and Russia's ally Belarus on the other. This is the only region besides the far north where NATO and Russia touch each other.

Political relations between the Baltic States and Russia have been patchy to say the least. The Soviet Union occupied and annexed these countries in 1940 and then again in 1944. The latter occupation lasted until 1991, or 1994 if you count the withdrawal of Russian troops. Russian leaders have repeatedly claimed that they have a right and obligation to defend Russians wherever they live.[5] Twenty-seven percent of Latvian residents are ethnic Russian, as are 25 percent of people living in Estonia. This creates a potential pretext for Russia to exploit against the Baltic States.

Militarily, the Baltic States do not have much strategic depth and they are poorly connected to the rest of NATO.

Compared to the Russian Western Military District (WMD), the defence forces of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are puny and only lightly armed. In February 2014, Russia used snap readiness exercise involving 150,000 personnel to cover the start of invading Crimea.[6] Such unexpected military exercises are destabilizing, because there is always a risk that one day a snap exercise could turn into a real operation against one of Russia's neighbours.

Because of the size of Russian troops in the WMD, snap exercises and the nature of decision-making in the Kremlin, Russia enjoys in the Baltic States a considerable time and space advantage over NATO. The Baltic States are militarily weak, while the bulk of NATO forces are far away. And the decision-making process in Russia is fast; in contrast, decision-making in NATO's individual countries take considerably longer while a consensus on steps to be taken needs to be found at the North Atlantic Council. It needs to be spelled out, though, that the collective defence clause of NATO's founding treaty talks about both individual and collective steps to be taken in light of armed attack on an ally. That means the US has taken upon itself a treaty commitment to come to the defence of a NATO ally, regardless of whether

5 R. Coalson, "Putin pledges to protect all ethnic Russians anywhere. So, where are they?", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 10 April 2014.

6 J. Norberg, "The use of Russia's military in the Crimean crisis", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 13 March 2014.

the organisation as a whole has come to any decision in that regard.

So-called hybrid threats and hybrid scenarios have been hyped up during the last five years. The situation in and around Crimea was specific – Ukraine had a revolution, president was toppled and fled, Ukrainian armed forces had been hollowed out. The Baltic States are NATO members, hence any plausible hybrid scenario from the Russian side would involve much higher risks. And, having learnt from the Ukrainian experience, the Baltic States will likely escalate their response to a hybrid scenario quickly. The then Estonian Chief of Defence General Riho Terras told the *Financial Times* in May 2014: "If Russian agents or special forces enter Estonian territory you should shoot the first one to appear. (…) you should not allow them to enter", and he continued, "Estonia is a functioning society, we are not like Ukraine (…) but we need to be very well aware of what is happening in Russia and be ready".[7]

What does Putin want?

Starting with Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007, it has been evident that the Kremlin aims at overturning the existing security architecture in Europe. In pursuit of that goal, Vladimir Putin's foreign policy has been opportunistic. Whether it was successful provocation towards Georgia in 2008, or chaos after Ukraine's Euromaidan in 2014, or President Obama's unwillingness to be seriously engaged in the Syrian civil war and dithering on the red lines concerning use of chemical weapons by the regime of Bashar al-Assad, Russia has utilized the chances it encountered – or engineered – and has been ruthless in its use of military force when and where necessary.

Should the Baltic States be worried that Russia could try to reconquer them? There is no reason to believe that it would be in the Kremlin's interest to occupy the Baltic States and in that process "acquire" six million additional subjects who would never accept Russian rule and would fight it with every means they have. Nonetheless, we have seen in the past 30 years that Russia does not need to occupy the whole of the territory of an adjacent country to achieve its foreign policy goal of preventing its Western neighbours from slipping to the West. If we consider that Russia is trying to overturn the security architecture of Europe, then the Baltic States might become not an end, but a way to achieve it.

Let's consider a scenario where a Russian snap readiness exercise at NATO's border turns real and its forces advance 10 miles into a NATO member's territory. Russia would deploy tactical nuclear weapons to the theatre, put its strategic rocket forces on alert and declare that this occupied piece of territory is ancient Russian land and any military activity against it would be considered as an attack on Russia and responded to with nuclear weapons. Russia has developed a so-called "escalate to de-escalate" doctrine, whereby it attempts to signal its seriousness and de-escalate a military situation by a limited nuclear attack. In this situation the US and NATO would have to choose between a nuclear war and the dissolution of NATO. Should the US and NATO dither, and not respond with force to free a NATO member's territory, the Alliance would be dead. American military alliances across the globe would equally be dead. That would mean a new world order and a new European security architecture, which is exactly what Russia is aiming at.

Russia has been preparing for a potential war against NATO (meaning the US in Russian military thinking) since at least 2008. During the 2009 military exercise Zapad ("West" in Russian), Russia mimicked a nuclear attack on Poland. During the last decade, Russian military exercises have become larger and more sophisticated. Since the dismal performance in Georgia in 2008, Russia has invested heavily in military reform and readiness. Also the required resources have been brought to bear. Michael Kofman estimates[8] that if you add up different parts of Russian expenditures on defence efforts and take into account purchasing power parity (PPP), Russian defence spending is in the range of USD 150 to 180 billion, way higher than the USD 61.4 billion reported by SIPRI.[9] Using PPP does make sense in deciphering Russia's defence spending, because Russia is doing all defence acquisitions internally.

In case the US and NATO would dither and not respond with force to free a NATO member's territory, the Alliance would be dead

NATO's efforts have paled in comparison. Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in the Baltic States is sized to be a tripwire. Considerable efforts have been put into enhancing NATO's high readiness

7 S. Jones, "Estonia ready to deal with Russia's 'little green men'", *Financial Times*, 13 May 2015.

8 M. Kofman, "Russian defense spending is much larger, and more sustainable than it seems", *Defensenews*, 3 May 2019.

9 "World military expenditure grows to $1.8 trillion in 2018", SIPRI, 29 April 2019.

forces and follow-on forces. Yet an outstanding issue is the time and space advantage of Russia over NATO. The Alliance agreed at its 2018 Brussels Summit to the "Four 30s" formula, whereby the aim is to have 30 combat battalions, 30 major naval vessels and 30 squadrons of fighters, all at 30 days' readiness.[10] The problem with this formula is that there is no reason to think that a war between NATO and Russia would last that long, or would not go nuclear, within this one-month timeline. Because Russia is so much weaker economically than NATO, it needs to achieve its goals quickly.

What needs to be done

Policy options to tackle this situation are not many. First and foremost, much more attention should be paid to deterrence. That means American forces to be forward deployed in the Baltic States. The US is currently deployed, on a continuing basis, in Poland but not in the Baltic States. Since the Russian military is measuring itself against the US, the absence of American troops from Baltic soil is detrimental to NATO's deterrence posture. The best way to remedy that is to identify the most evident capability gaps of existing eFP arrangements in the Baltic States and for the US to fill those gaps. That means supplementing, not supplanting, existing NATO troop deployments.

The second issue to be dealt with are the maritime and air dimensions of NATO's and American presence in and around the Baltic States. An American military presence does not necessarily need to be from the Army.

Third, because of Russia's considerable Anti-Access Area Denial (A2AD) capabilities in the Kaliningrad region, the reinforcement of the Baltic States is going to be challenging. Furthermore, the military mobility of NATO troops in Europe is far from optimal. This is an area where NATO is cooperating with the European Union.

Fourth, as explained before, NATO member states need to work on the readiness levels of their spear-head forces.

Fifth, as deterrence is partly rhetorical, one hopes that President Trump will refrain from further undermining NATO in the future. In the absence of any conviction that he will adhere to this wish, the US should provide more facts on the ground, compensating for the weakness in public messaging.

Sixth, the Baltic States themselves need to increase their defence spending beyond the current level of 2 percent. Lithuania has committed itself to the increase to 2.5 percent by 2030[11] – a distant target, but positive news nevertheless.

Seventh, all other NATO members whose defence investments are below 2 percent should work to achieve this agreed goal as soon as possible. This is the only facet of NATO that President Trump cares about, and if there is insufficient progress towards that goal the US could well disengage from the Alliance. And that would amount to the end of NATO.

Finally, Sweden and Finland need to be further integrated into NATO. Sweden especially is crucial to the defence of the Baltic States and, since it is not going to apply for NATO membership any time soon, a *de facto* integration is the best second option available.

Conclusion

Over the last decade the Russian Federation has demonstrated that it attempts to overturn the European security architecture. The likelihood of a NATO-Russia military conflict is low, yet it should not be ruled out as a possibility. To reduce the risks, NATO's deterrence posture in the Baltic States should be strengthened by the deployment of American forces on Baltic soil. That deployment should complement, not compete with, existing eFP arrangements.

10 "NATO Agrees To 'Four 30s' Plan To Counter Russia", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 6 June 2018.

11 A. Syutas, "Lithuania commits to spending 2.5 % of GDP on defence by 2030", *Reuters,* 10 September 2008.

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