
22. The Baltic states and security in northern Europe

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I. Introduction

At first glance, the enlargement of the European Union to the east in May 2004 and the three Baltic states' membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in March 2004 could appear to provide the perfect framework for the countries around the Baltic Sea to agree on a common security policy. Such an agreement would give them a larger say in different forums such as the United Nations, the EU and NATO, thus putting them in a better position to promote their common interests. With few—if any—serious unresolved problems between them and with a common interest in promoting peace and stability in the region, this should be an attractive option for the region's states.

The aim of this chapter is to try to identify and discuss some of the obstacles that make it difficult to reach common solutions to the questions of how stability and security are best promoted in the Baltic Sea region and, in particular, to agree on what are the threats to the region's states. As the title of this chapter implies, the problem is examined mainly from the viewpoint of the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This is not to insinuate that it is the Baltic states that are to be blamed for the difficulties in agreeing on a common security policy for the region. All the states around the Baltic Sea are pursuing agendas or have views that make it difficult for them to agree on common solutions. Of course, if all the states around the Baltic Sea belonged to the same military alliance—NATO—it would be much easier to coordinate military and other security activities; but the absence of this common platform should not preclude the possibility of reaching common standpoints on 'hard security' within the framework of the European Security and Defence Policy and the NATO Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. The fact is, however, that such common positions are not forthcoming.

II. A history of cooperation

To a large extent, the states around the Baltic Sea share a common history; filled with conflicts, but in which common interests have often prevailed. The

* The views presented in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Swedish Defence Research Agency (Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, FOI), the Swedish National Defence College (Försvvarshögskolan, FHS) or any other organization.

Hanseatic League of the 14th and 15th centuries was perhaps the most striking example: although more or less all countries in the region were at odds with each other during that period, commerce between them flourished. During the 1700–21 Great Northern War, although Denmark and Sweden were at war they continued to run the Nidingen lighthouse jointly to facilitate navigation in the Kategatt. The fact that Sweden lost one-third of its territory—Finland—to Russia in 1809 did not stop the exchange of people and goods between the two countries. The extensive activities of Swedish companies such as Ericsson and Nobel Industries in Russia before World War I, at a time when Russia was seen as the main military threat to Sweden, is a further example of the Baltic Sea acting as a uniting rather than a dividing factor. The period 1945–89 was the great exception.

Since that dark period ended in 1989–90, a great deal of the earlier cooperation has been restored and developed to levels far above anything that existed before. Swedish financial institutions are now major players in the banking business in the Baltic states. Some Finnish companies have moved their headquarters to Tallinn. There are plans to create a ‘Baltic grid’ connecting all countries around the Baltic, thereby making it possible not just to trade electricity freely between the countries but also to handle emergencies such as the loss of production in a particular area or facility.

Common intergovernmental institutions such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States¹ and the Helsinki Commission² have been created to handle questions concerning disease control, combating organized crime, civil security, nuclear safety, border control, customs, protection of the marine environment and other security-related issues. The EURO-BALTIC Programme for Civil Protection has been initiated to develop cooperation between the rescue services in the Baltic region. Parliamentarians from the Nordic countries and the Baltic states meet regularly within the frameworks of the Nordic Council, the Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference.

During the past 10 years extensive military cooperation has developed between the Baltic states and the Nordic countries. Military units from the Baltic states have participated in peace operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina as integral parts of Danish and Swedish battalions. Sweden, in addition to donating equipment equivalent to the needs of approximately three infantry brigades, has had some 50 officers working full-time as instructors and advisers in the Baltic states during the past five years, mainly in Latvia and Lithuania. Finland has made similar efforts in Estonia. Denmark and Norway have also been active in providing both donations and advice. The Nordic countries were

¹ The Council of the Baltic Sea States was established in Mar. 1992 as a regional forum for inter-governmental cooperation in any field of government other than military defence. The 12 members of the Council are Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Russia, Sweden and the European Commission. See the Council’s website at URL <<http://www.cbss.st/>>.

² The Helsinki Commission is the governing body of the 1992 Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area (the Helsinki Convention). The 10 parties to the Convention are Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Sweden and the European Community. See the Commission’s website at URL <<http://www.helcom.fi/>>.



Map of the eastern Baltic Sea region

instrumental in starting the Baltic Defence College in Tartu and still provide a substantial proportion of the staff.³ The fact that these activities are declining now, when the armed forces of the Baltic states have acquired enough competence to run their own business, is quite natural and nothing to be sorry about. On the contrary; much of the cooperation is in fact continuing, but on a more nearly equal basis. Both Latvia and Lithuania are procuring ground-to-air missiles from Sweden,⁴ the exchange of students in military schools continues, joint mine-clearing operations are conducted in the Baltic, and so on.

III. Different outlooks

Why, then, with the extremely close connections between the countries in the Baltic Sea region, is it so hard to agree on questions concerning the ultimate threats—those that endanger the very survival of the states in question? This

³ In 2004, more than one-fifth of the staff of the Baltic Defence College come from Nordic countries: Denmark provided 3, Finland 1, Norway 2 and Sweden 4 staff members out of a total of 46.

⁴ Latvia decided in Nov. 2004 to buy the RBS 70 short-range air defence missile system from the Swedish company Saab. Saab Group, 'Another NATO country buys RBS 70', Press release, 25 Nov. 2005, URL <<http://www.saab.se/node3299.asp?id=2004112520700>>. Lithuania has accepted a Norwegian donation of the same type of missile but will buy the necessary maintenance and upgrades from Sweden. Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence, 'Lithuanian airspace to be safeguarded by air defence armaments donated by Norway', News release, Vilnius, 14 Nov. 2004, URL <<http://www.kam.lt/index.php?ItemId=29234>>.

seems especially strange when all the states are far too small to pursue independent security policies of their own.

The main reason for this lack of agreement is the way in which the Baltic states (and to some extent also Finland and Poland) perceive Russia. Alternatively, to put it the other way round, the way in which Sweden, Germany and others do not perceive Russia. For the Baltic states, Russia is a threat when it comes to both 'hard' and 'soft' security. This remains the case regardless of what the rest of the region (or the rest of Europe) may or may not think.

It would be quite extraordinary, in fact, if the 50-year occupation of the Baltic states had not affected the collective memory of the people. Earlier periods of Russian occupation are also a part of this heritage; especially during the latter part of the 19th century, when the government in St Petersburg pursued a harsh 'Russification' policy. National identities in all the Baltic states are strongly linked with their emancipation from Russia. Anything emanating from Russia that could be interpreted as a threat to their freedom or culture will be treated with great suspicion.

Developments in Russia during recent years have in no way lessened the concerns about Russian intentions. Approximately 70 per cent of the members of the Russian Parliament belong to parties that have a nationalistic agenda.⁵ This, combined with Russia's reluctance to ratify border treaties with Estonia and Latvia, Russian pressure on the Baltic states to join the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe,⁶ and harsh rhetoric concerning how Estonia and Latvia are handling their Russian-speaking minorities,⁷ serves to keep their suspicion alive. The 2003 Russian military doctrine has also contributed to a more sinister interpretation of Russia's intentions and of how it could use Russian minorities in other countries as a pretext for military or other actions. The doctrine states that a task of the Russian armed forces is to safeguard Russian economic and political interests, which includes 'ensuring the security of Russian citizens in the zones of armed conflicts and political or other forms of instability'.⁸

Taken together, all this makes military security an important part of the overall security policy of the Baltic states. Consequently, if the EU does not become a credible military alliance with a real war-fighting capability, the Baltic states will do everything they can to make NATO—and especially the USA—a part

⁵ Winiarski, M., 'Hela makten i Putins händer' [All power in Putin's hands], *Dagens Nyheter*, 19 Dec. 2003.

⁶ Larsson, R. L., 'Vad vill egentligen Ryssland med CFE?' [What does Russia really want with the CFE Treaty?], *Kungliga Krigsvetenskapsakademien Handlingar och Tidskrift—The Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences Proceedings and Journal*, no. 5, vol. 208 (2004), pp. 59–67. See also Lachowski, Z., *The Adapted CFE Treaty and the Admission of the Baltic States to NATO*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 1 (SIPRI: Stockholm, Dec. 2002), URL <<http://www.sipri.org/>>.

⁷ Russians accounted for 25.6% of the population of Estonia in 2001 and 32.5% of the population of Latvia in 1997. Turner, B. (ed.), *The Statesman's Yearbook 2005* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2004), pp. 600, 1037.

⁸ Defence Ministry of the Russian Federation, *The Priority Tasks of the Development of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation* (Defence Ministry of the Russian Federation: Moscow, 2003), URL <<http://www.mil.ru/articles/article5005.shtml>>, p. 63.

of the security system in the Baltic Sea region. The role of the USA is crucial as it is the only country that has both the means and, in many people's eyes, the resolve to act if there should be some kind of serious political crisis involving Russia and the Baltic states.⁹

Although this might seem a straightforward, and not an unreasonable, position for the Baltic states to take, it is not without problems when these states try to find common ground with the policies and thinking of their neighbours. First, this position runs the risk of upsetting Sweden, and perhaps also Germany, by pressing for a US military presence in the region—or at least some kind of credible contingency planning by NATO. In addition, it could lead to strained relations with other influential NATO members if it causes the Baltic states to back US policies on questions where the USA's views differ from those of other allies. The Baltic states' aim when they do so is, of course, to secure US support for their own cause when needed—Iraq being a case in point. In a worst-case scenario this could lead to a vicious circle in which actions taken by the Baltic states to gain the support of the USA undermine the will of other NATO members to support them, which in turn could lead to a still greater reliance on the USA, and so on.

Even if NATO could act quickly and decisively in the event of a political crisis in the Baltic Sea region, the alliance would have difficulty making a convincing case that it has the ability to defend the Baltic states. The small salient formed by Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania is vulnerable to being easily cut off with modern weapon systems deployed on Russian territory. The Baltic states would probably be quickly overrun if reinforcements were not to arrive in good time or if a massive air campaign were not quickly launched. Considering NATO's resources, current and future, it boils down to a question of the USA making credible its capacity and its will to act. In such a situation the possibility of using Finnish and, in particular, Swedish territory and airspace would be a great advantage. There is of course the nuclear option, but that would lead to deliberations beyond the scope of this chapter.

There are also areas other than the military where the Baltic states have a different outlook compared with many of their neighbours, immigration and investments perhaps being the two most important.¹⁰ Neither of these is considered by Germany, Poland or the Nordic countries to be a potential threat to the survival of the state. For Estonia and Latvia, with their large Russian minorities and their recent experiences, the situation looks different. Even a limited—by European standards—inflow of Russian immigrants would in their eyes be a threat to the identity of their states; and, as they see it, the prerequisites for such

⁹ For more on the Baltic states' understanding of the role of NATO and the USA in their region see chapter 23 in this volume, which also explains Baltic ambivalence about the relative value of the EU and its defence and security policies.

¹⁰ For a full analysis of the Baltic states' published defence and security policies and their actual threat perceptions see chapter 23 in this volume.

a development already exist.¹¹ Both countries have well-developed infrastructure for Russian speakers—such as schools, media and organized interest groups—and there are no problems in getting along in society speaking only Russian. If the economies in Estonia and Latvia continue to grow by about 6–7 per cent each year, the difference in living standards between them and Russia will become very obvious.¹² The temptation for many Russians to seek a better life on the other side of the border might become overwhelming, leading to large-scale illegal immigration. If that happens, the Baltic states' borders with Russia will become like the Rio Grande along the Mexican–US border.

Immigration on such a large scale would be totally unacceptable for the governments of the Baltic states, and they will probably go to almost any lengths to prevent it. This could create problems in many areas. First, they will have a hard time convincing the other EU member states—with the possible exception of some on the Mediterranean—that illegal immigration is such a threat to the security of the state that it should be a part of the ESDP and that the EU should act forcefully to make Russia stop the flow of immigrants. Second, the use of harsh methods to handle the problem is likely to provoke negative reactions in Moscow, which in turn might lead to strained relations between the Baltic states and those EU countries that prioritize good relations with Russia. Lastly, the governments of the Baltic states will have to seriously consider the human rights aspect of their actions. Otherwise, public opinion in many other countries may force their governments to put pressure on the Baltic states to 'behave better', creating a situation in which the Baltic states could become politically isolated. This would leave them bereft of political support in a situation in which such support would be more important than ever.

When it comes to investments, the Baltic states have become a bridge between Russia and the EU. The Baltic states' 'Russian infrastructure' and the many personal connections between the business communities in Russia and the Baltic states make it easy to invest Russian money in the Baltic states. Russians themselves see this not just as a way to get involved in profitable activities in the Baltic states, but perhaps even more as a way to get inside the EU, with its free flow of capital and services. From most viewpoints this can be seen as a positive development. It brings Russia closer to the EU; capital is made available for investments, which promotes economic growth; and new contacts are built between individuals as well as organizations. All of this is advantageous for all parties concerned, but there is one drawback. The economies of the Baltic states are so small that even limited investments can give the investor control of large parts of strategically important sectors¹³—energy perhaps being

¹¹ In 2000, Estonia had a population of 1.37 million and Latvia 2.38 million. Turner (note 7). Even a limited number of immigrants would therefore upset the balance between Estonians/Latvians and Russians. See also note 7.

¹² SEB Economic Research, 'Baltic outlook—theme: focus on the euro', Skandinaviska Enskilda Banken, Stockholm, Oct. 2004, pp. 7, 10.

¹³ In 2002 the gross domestic product of Estonia was \$6.4 billion, of Latvia was \$8.4 billion and of Lithuania was \$13.8 billion. Turner (note 7), pp. 602, 1039, 1068.

the most obvious case.¹⁴ Combined with the current developments in Russia, where the state seems to be trying to take control of what are considered vital parts of the economy, this opens up the possibility that Russia will use its assets in the Baltic states as a tool for promoting its political interests.

Although they are perhaps of only minor importance in today's world, there are some historical facts that should be taken into consideration when trying to determine to whom the governments in Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius might listen when security issues are discussed. There is a lingering discomfort with Sweden's and Germany's dealings with the Soviet Union in the past. The 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany has not been forgotten. Nor has Sweden's prompt recognition of the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states in 1940 and its action in surrendering some 140 Latvian and Estonian soldiers who had fought in the German army during World War II. Finland, on the other hand, is often held in high esteem owing to its tenacious struggle to preserve its freedom during World War II and its pragmatic view on security matters. Even such distant events as the British support during the wars of liberation in 1918–20 are remembered.

IV. Conclusions

It is improbable that there will be anything like a common 'northern' security policy in the near future. The countries concerned have ways of viewing the world that are too divergent and have different views on what should be considered as threats to their security.

The European Security and Defence Policy, as it currently seems to be developing, will not be an answer to the security needs of the Baltic states. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will continue to rely on NATO, or rather on the USA, when it comes to hard security—which will continue to be a very important part of their security thinking overall. The areas where more cooperation can be expected between the Baltic, Nordic and other European states in the defence field will probably concern military equipment and peace operations: none of them really related to the security of the Baltic Sea region, but nevertheless giving openings for continued contacts on defence matters.¹⁵

It would be very much in the interest of the Baltic states for Finland and Sweden to join NATO. Apart from enhancing the defensibility of the Baltic states it would also, to some extent, counterbalance the influence of Germany and Poland when it comes to military matters in the Baltic Sea region, giving the governments of the three Baltic states more partners to choose from when developing their capabilities and making them less dependent on the agendas of their big neighbours. From a Swedish—and perhaps to some extent from a

¹⁴ The ownership by the Russian oil company Yukos of a 53.7% stake in the Mazeikiu oil refinery in Lithuania—the only refinery in the Baltic states—is often mentioned as an example. See, e.g., 'Lithuania, Yukos complete talks over disputed stake in Mazeikiu refinery', *Moscow News*, 19 July 2005, URL <<http://www.mosnews.com/money/2005/07/19/>>.

¹⁵ See chapters 6, 9, 10 and 11 in this volume.

Finnish—viewpoint, to be tied up in the defence of the Baltic states is a nightmare scenario. Especially in Sweden, such a situation would run counter to all traditional wisdom concerning security policy. This is also one of the reasons why Sweden is so lukewarm about moves to making the ESDP a more potent instrument.

The only reason for the Baltic states to put their trust in the ESDP would be if they came to the conclusion that they could no longer trust the USA as a guarantor of their security. Their alternative would then be to push hard for the ESDP to be developed into a real military alliance. In a scenario of reduced US involvement, it is hard to imagine that the problems connected with such a development of the ESDP would be much easier to solve than those of today when it comes to creating a common security policy in the Baltic Sea region.