

ISSUE BRIEF

A US Strategy for Building Defense and Deterrence in the Baltic States

JUNE 2016 DAMON WILSON AND MAGNUS NORDENMAN

Since the start of the Ukraine crisis, the Baltic States have come into sharp focus as a key friction zone between a much more assertive Russia on the one hand and the United States, NATO, and the broader transatlantic community on the other.

The region has also become an arena for repeated dangerous encounters between aggressively maneuvering Russian jets and warships and NATO and US forces.¹ This has been coupled with other kinds of coercive and intimidating measures, such as the snatch of an Estonian intelligence officer—from Estonian territory—by Russian forces shortly after President Obama’s visit to Tallinn in 2014, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s 2016 statement threatening the use of force if Sweden and Finland choose to seek NATO membership at some point in the future.²

Additionally, Russia is developing a powerful network of anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities in the Baltic Sea region, based on long-range weapons that would jeopardize US and NATO access and ability to operate in the region during a crisis or in war. While the possibility of war remains remote, the transatlantic community must be prepared for direct conflict between Russia and NATO over the Baltic States.

NATO and the United States have made promising first steps to better secure the Baltic States and the broader region. But meeting the challenge of an assertive Russia under Vladimir Putin will require a long-term strategy by NATO, and the United States in particular. The United

The Brent Scowcroft Center’s **Transatlantic Security Initiative** brings together top policymakers, government and military officials, business leaders, and experts from Europe and North America to share insights, strengthen cooperation, and develop common approaches. This issue brief is part of a broader project in partnership with the Ministry of National Defense of Lithuania aimed at bolstering collective defense and deterrence on NATO’s eastern flank and in the Baltic Sea region.

- 1 See Thomas Frear, et al, “Dangerous Brinkmanship: Close Military Encounters Between Russia and the West in 2014,” European Leadership Network, November 2014.
- 2 Damien Sharkov, “Russia’s Lavrov Warns Sweden Against NATO Membership,” *Newsweek*, April 29, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/russias-lavrov-warns-sweden-na-to-membership-453890>.

States is needed not only to provide leadership, but also to bring unique resources and perspectives, and to catalyze further action among NATO members and within the Baltic Sea region.

Defense and Deterrence in the Baltic States

The transatlantic community is waking up to the urgent need for bolstered collective defense and deterrence in the Baltic States and the broader Baltic Sea region. The Baltic States are small, and the direct geographic connections between them and the rest of NATO are very limited.³ Coupled with Russia's growing A2/AD network, this makes deterring aggression against the Baltic States, and defending them if war breaks out, a challenging proposition, but far from an impossible one.⁴ Recent war and decision games played in Washington, both by government and think tanks, have also highlighted the need for having robust forces from NATO members postured in the region, along with well-prepared and exercised reinforcement arrangements.⁵

The United States and NATO have responded to this challenge by bolstering defense and deterrence in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The three Baltic States have played host to repeated NATO exercises in recent times, and now also host US rotational forces (albeit small) on a consistent basis.⁶ NATO's upcoming Warsaw Summit seems increasingly likely to result in the creation of multi-national battalions for each of the Baltic States, along with Poland, which would indeed be a very welcome development that would not only enhance defense and deterrence in the region, but also would tie other NATO nations to the effort in northeast Europe

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in a tangible way.⁷ The US European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) is slated to increase significantly, to nearly \$3.5 billion for fiscal year 2017, which is a nearly four-fold increase from its humble beginnings in 2015.⁸ The ERI not only provides funding for US training and exercises in Europe, and in particular in northeastern Europe, but also enables the United States to preposition heavy equipment for exercises and to speed the rate of reinforcements during a crisis.

The Baltic States themselves have also exhibited new urgency in bolstering their own defenses in light of Russia's aggressiveness. Estonia has maintained defense spending at NATO's prescribed level of 2 percent of GDP for quite some time; Latvia and Lithuania are driving toward that goal quickly. Lithuania, for example, is on track to reach 2 percent of GDP for defense by 2020, if not before.⁹ Vilnius has managed to achieve political consensus around this goal, which ensures that the path forward on defense spending will not easily fall victim to changing political winds. Furthermore, Lithuania has re-introduced conscription (a measure the Lithuanian public broadly supports) to fill its military ranks, and this measure sends its own important message about Lithuania's willingness to do what it can and must to bolster its own defenses.¹⁰

These kinds of commitments have always been important within the transatlantic community, but they are especially crucial now, as politicians in the United States have increasingly questioned Europe's commitment to bear its share of the burden within the Alliance.

3 Ralph Clem, "NATO and the Baltic Region," *Air and Space Power Journal*, Spring 2016, p. 78.

4 See Bantz J. Craddock and Franklin D. Kramer, "How NATO Can Defend the Baltics from Conventional and Hybrid Attacks," *NATOSource*, Atlantic Council, May 10, 2016, <http://www.atlantic-council.org/blogs/natosource/yes-nato-can-succeed-in-defending-the-baltics>.

5 Julianne Smith and Jerry Hendrix, "Assured Resolve: Testing Possible Challenges to Baltic Security," Center for a New American Security, April 2016, pp. 6, 11-12.

6 See Supreme Allied Headquarters Europe, "Readiness Action Plan," <http://www.shape.nato.int/readiness-action-plan>.

7 Esteban Villarejo, "NATO Urged to Have Presence in the East," *Defense News*, May 17, 2016, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/europe/2016/05/16/nato-urged-have-military-presence-eastern-flank/84243928/>.

8 The White House, "FACT SHEET: The FY17 European Reassurance Initiative Budget Request," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/02/fact-sheet-fy2017-european-reassurance-initiative-budget-request>.

9 Craig Caffrey, "Lithuania Plans 35% Increase in 2016 Defense Budget," *Jane's 360*, October 1, 2015, <http://www.janes.com/article/54928/lithuania-plans-35-increase-in-2016-defence-budget>.

10 The BBC, "Lithuania to Reintroduce Conscription Over Security Concerns," February 24, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31607930>.



US Marines take part in the Baltic Operations (BALTOPS) 2012 amphibious operation exercise in Lithuania.
Photo credit: US Navy/Flickr.

The United States and the Baltic States

The US commitment to the Baltic States and the broader region is long-standing, and helped transform the region after the end of the Cold War. The United States worked with its friends and allies to help persuade Russia to withdraw its forces from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania after the fall of communism, and continued the effort by supporting the Baltic States in the creation of their own militaries, and then in the pursuit of both NATO and European Union membership. If this had not happened, the eastern half of the Baltic Sea region may have become a place of instability and tension. Instead, the region could well be described as the unreported success story of post-Cold War Europe, with fast and deep Euro-Atlantic integration, peace, stability, and growing prosperity. Indeed, the region represents perhaps the best example of the US long-term vision for the entire continent; a Europe whole, free, and at peace.¹¹ This,

11 See, for example, Damon Wilson and Magnus Nordenman, "The

of course, stands in stark contrast to other European regions in the immediate post-Cold War era, which fell instead into disorder and war.

Russia, however, has now turned its back on the transatlantic cooperation that produced such remarkable stability in northeast Europe. Rather, today, the Kremlin seeks to challenge the European security order by calling into question the place of the Baltic States within the transatlantic community. Moscow is looking to the Baltic States not because they appear geographically and militarily vulnerable, or because these three states once formed part of the Soviet Union, but primarily because their European integration, as well as their domestic political and economic development represent a great accomplishment for the Euro-Atlantic community in the post-Cold War era.

Nordic-Baltic Region as a Global Partner of the United States," Atlantic Council, September 4, 2013, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/articles/the-nordic-baltic-region-as-a-global-partner-of-the-united-states>.

In this context, one should not forget the centrality of the United States. It is US leadership in Europe, and the United States as a guarantor of the European security order, that is being challenged in the Baltic Sea region. The challenge for the United States in the Baltic region is, therefore, two-fold: to preserve and strengthen the European security order in the face of continued Russian assertiveness, and to secure the Baltic Sea region as a place of peace, stability, democracy, and economic and social dynamism.

The United States brings a number of key aspects to bolstering defense and deterrence in the Baltic States. US military capabilities are, of course, key considerations, and high-end capabilities, such as long-range strike, electronic warfare, cyber, and heavy maneuver and amphibious forces, will have to be brought to bear by the United States in case of a crisis or all-out war in the region. But the United States also brings a set of intangible qualities that are needed to build long-term deterrence in northeastern Europe. The United States can serve as a catalyst for action within NATO, which is especially important at times of broader uncertainty about the future of Europe. The United States can initiate, encourage, and coordinate action at a regional level, which is becoming increasingly important as allies and partners in the Baltic Sea region look for ways to bolster cooperation and build credible defenses in a regional context.

The Way Forward

Building defense and deterrence along Europe's eastern flank is a long-term proposition and will require special focus on Europe's northeast and the Baltic States, as it is an immediate point of friction between Russia and NATO, and especially vulnerable in military terms. For NATO and the United States the focus must remain on high-end exercises, capabilities, and operations. Russian use of soft power to influence policy, intimidate nations, pressure governments, and influence publics is indeed real, but a "little green men" scenario in the Baltic States, as happened in Ukraine, is a remote possibility. Instead, the Russian use of hard power against the Baltic States, at a time when the United States is distracted and Europe is in disarray, is the most serious challenge; such a development could very well break NATO and greatly diminish the United

States as a leader of the transatlantic community and as an orchestrator of global alliances.

A long-term US strategy for building collective defense and deterrence should therefore consider the following steps:

Political Vision

Clearly state the US stakes in northeastern Europe. The United States must clearly and publicly signal that vital US security interests are at stake in the Baltic States. The United States is not doing Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia a favor by defending them, but rather securing its own interests in the region, in Europe, and as a leader of global alliances. This statement should be tied to the US standing as a global superpower, able to bring all elements of national power and relationships to bear to deter and defeat aggression. This would serve as an important political deterrent to Russia and

also explain to hesitant European publics and leaders the depths of the United States' commitment to European security. Deterrence is founded on the adversary's perceptions; there must, therefore, be no doubt among those in the Kremlin that the United States and its NATO allies will defend their Baltic allies in any scenario.

Signal long-term commitment.

Russia's attempt to alter the European security order in its favor is a long-term challenge for the United States and the transatlantic community. The United States must show that it understands that this is a long-term contest and that the upcoming Warsaw Summit is merely the beginning of the formulation of a long-range response to the Russian challenge. One tangible way to do this would be to put the European Reassurance Initiative on a multi-year footing, instead of having it re-addressed annually by the US administration and US Congress.

Engage other allies in committing to Baltic defense and deterrence. A continued US presence in the Baltic region, and US participation in the expected multi-national units there, is crucial. However, it is not politically sustainable for the United States to be seen as acting alone in enhancing NATO's posture in the Baltic States. Therefore, the United States must encourage and drive other major NATO members

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to provide long-term contributions to the Alliance presence in the Baltic States.

Posture

Don't avoid a "permanent" presence. The Alliance has gone to great lengths to avoid signaling a direct rupture of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, and the voluntary restrictions therein that, "in the current and foreseeable security environment, the Alliance will carry out its collective defence and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces."¹² Nonetheless, the United States should be clear that it is making arrangements to provide for the permanent presence of US forces in the region, even if still on a rotational basis, for as long as Russia's security posture merits a continued US presence.

Broaden US presence in the Baltic Sea region. The US ground focus on defense and deterrence in the Baltic States is understandable and needed. But to further bolster this presence, the United States and its NATO allies should ensure a consistent and extended presence in the maritime and air domains in and around the Baltic Sea region. This would not only be an appropriate response to continued close and dangerous encounters between Russian and NATO member warships and jets, but also be crucial in order to fully prepare for defense and deterrence contingencies in the region, including to defend Russian A2/AD networks.

Prepare for first response by organizing an informal regional coalition of the willing. NATO—that is, the NATO allies collectively—should be the first responder in case of a crisis with Russia. Recent war games suggest that that may not be the case. In such circumstances, while NATO's decision-making is underway, a "coalition of the willing," led by the United States, will need to respond to a first attack or a rapidly developing crisis. The United States should work now to ensure that an

informal and temporary coalition of willing immediate responders is prepared to act. The United States can help overcome barriers to cooperation and catalyze action among the countries of the Baltic Sea region to achieve this.

Regional Cooperation

Engage the broader Baltic Sea region. Sweden and Finland are central actors in the Baltic Sea region and while not NATO members, they are important partners. They will play important roles in a crisis and defense contingency in the Baltic States by, for example, providing additional avenues of approach for reinforcements, contributing certain capabilities, and serving as advocates for action within the European Union and other international bodies. The United States should work to involve these two states in political exchanges, exercises, and planning for defense and deterrence in the Baltic States. Put differently, the Nordic side of the Baltic Sea would add depth and options to the defense of the Baltic States.

Bilateral Defense Engagement

Work with the Baltic States on military transformation. The growing defense budgets in the Baltic States are a welcome development, but also a challenge. It is not easy to digest sharply

increased budgets and put them to good use in a short period of time. The United States has a long record of cooperation around defense and capacity building, and this type of engagement would serve as an opportunity to deepen and broaden the bilateral interactions between the US Department of Defense and the US military on the one hand, and their counterparts in the Baltic States on the other. US engagement should explicitly aim to build the Baltic States' deterrent capacity, including territorial, cyber, and hybrid defense.

Continue gaming. The many war games played over the last year have proven themselves useful in identifying capabilities gaps, faulty planning assumptions, and Alliance dynamics. They have also served a useful purpose in educating leaders and policy experts on current European security dynamics, and socialized leaders on both sides of the Atlantic to the kinds of

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¹² "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation signed in Paris, France" NATO, May 27, 1997 (Updated 2009), http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm.

decisions that they may have to consider and make during a crisis. This is especially important in an age of cyber and non-linear warfare. It is therefore crucial that these efforts continue at all levels, from staff to senior national leadership. Additional games may also uncover emerging gaps and challenges as the NATO posture in the Baltic States continues to evolve and be refined.

The Baltic States must also bring something to the table to help the United States sustain its leadership role in Europe and the Baltic Sea region, and to contribute to broader US efforts. Specifically, the Baltic States should consider:

Continue to support the US global security agenda.

The Baltic States are understandably and appropriately focusing their defense resources on national defense at home. However, it is important that the continued US-Baltic partnership remains a two-way street, where the Baltic States contribute, as appropriate, to advancing global security together with the United States. This would also signal that the Baltic States understand and support that the United States is seeking to deal with a complex set of challenges across the world, and that membership in NATO comes with responsibilities. This can be done with relatively limited means. For example, Lithuania has built an impressive special operations force that has been engaged in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Small elements of it could be deployed in the future to assist US counter-terrorism efforts in other parts of the world.

Help project stability into Europe's East. The Baltic States have been strong supporters of the European Union's Eastern Partnership, and NATO's outreach to Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. The Baltics states are uniquely positioned to help support the aspirations of these former Soviet nations to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic community. Baltic contributions bilaterally and within NATO and the EU can help shrink the political, economic, and social "grey zones" that Russia is seeking to exploit for its own purposes and to prevent the nations between Russia and NATO from fully entering the transatlantic community. This would also ensure the Baltic States assume a key role in a broader strategy to secure and extend the transatlantic community.

Deliver on increased defense spending. Estonia has maintained its level of defense spending around NATO's commitment to 2 percent of GDP for some years; Lithuania is quickly approaching that target. This is an important accomplishment that should not be underestimated for the positive political signals it sends to Washington regarding Lithuania's commitment to its own defense and its understanding of the European security environment. Latvia is also moving in the right direction, albeit at a slower pace. The attention to defense spending must be maintained in the coming years and not simply come to represent a peak. This is especially important given the attention this issue is likely to attract during the US elections.

Conclusion

As the Russian Federation aims to reverse the gains of the post-Cold War period, the Baltic region has become one of its targets. Russian actions have attempted to test NATO's resolve and intimidate its neighbors, while fundamentally calling into question the Alliance's collective defense commitment to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

NATO's response, led by the United States, is intended to bolster the Baltic States' defense and, in turn, deter Russian action to undermine their security. Moscow has unwittingly compelled the Alliance to pursue one of its greatest military transformations since the end of the Cold War, one which has only just begun. US leadership, galvanizing other NATO allies, will remain central to the defense of the Baltics, the credibility of the Washington Treaty's Article 5 defense pledge, and the deterrence of any potential adversary. A coherent strategy for the region, built on a clear vision, a determined force posture, regional cooperation, and a focused program to build Baltic deterrent capabilities—and backed by resources from across the Alliance—will ensure northeast Europe remains stable, secure, and prosperous.

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