

# The Baltic Sea Area: a New Geopolitical Focal Point

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**The Baltic Sea area currently finds itself in geopolitical focus. The Baltic countries are small and difficult to defend, and even a limited attack against them would mean that Russia would be able to challenge both NATO and US leadership globally. The probability of this is low, however, since the risks for Russia are high and have become even higher since the spring of 2017, when NATO began to position military units in the Baltic countries and Poland. These forces are comprised of just one battalion-sized battle group per country, but constitute an effective “tripwire” against Russian conduct. In the event of any military conflict in the Baltic Sea area, however, Sweden’s territory will be engaged. It is therefore vital that Swedish decision-makers understand the region’s geopolitical dynamics.**

## THE BALTIC SEA AREA IN STRATEGIC FOCUS

Sweden’s neighbours, especially the Baltic Sea countries, have come into military-strategic focus in recent years. This situation is different from the Cold War, when the focal point was the central front, in the middle of now unified Germany. From the Swedish perspective, the Baltic Sea area was not without drama during that time, but geopolitically it was something of a backwater. Today, however, the Baltic Sea area is a focal point for the growing confrontation between Russia and the West.

Russia’s aggression against Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine since 2014, while in themselves nothing to do with the Baltic Sea area, demonstrated Russia’s willingness to use military force for political purposes and served as wake-up calls for all the smaller countries in Russia’s vicinity, including Sweden and Finland. This is in addition to the type of information warfare that Russia has long pursued, especially against the Baltic states. Within the latter framework, with the aim of destabilization, Russian actors have disseminated the message, among other things, that the Baltic countries have no credibility as states, their political establishments are engaged in persecuting their

Russian-speaking minorities, and that they have a “fascist” past that is reflected in their current politics. This type of “active measure” contributes to the image of a Russian revanchism in the region, which, along with the significant Russian rearmament process over the past ten years, awakens apprehension over future Russian military action.

Sweden’s central position in the Baltic Sea area means that any security developments in the region are also going to be decisive for Swedish security. Understanding how geopolitical dynamics function in our neighbourhood should thus be of vital importance to Swedish decision-makers.

## FOCAL POINT BALTIC

The Baltic states are small in both territory and population; they lack strategic depth and have limited armed forces and no air force. If Russia’s geopolitical revanchism were to express itself again in the future, this makes them the most exposed of the NATO countries. Were Russia seriously willing to challenge the West and US global leadership militarily, this would most easily be achieved by a limited attack against some part of a Baltic country.

Such an action would present the USA and other NATO members with the choice of either actively beginning a war against Russia – which could theoretically quickly shift into some form of nuclear war – or meeting Russia halfway through some form of negotiated solution. The latter alternative would effectively undermine US leadership in the eyes of the entire world and probably also lead to the dissolution of NATO, since the organization would have failed in its prime mission – to defend the territory of a member country. In many Western capitals, none of these alternatives are appetizing.

However, the overall picture is not so bleak as it might initially appear. The probability of Russia being willing, without provocation, to risk war against the entire Western world is not especially high. The military geography, moreover, is relatively favourable for the Baltic states. Much of the region bordering Russia and



Belarus consists of lakes, marshes and similar terrain that would be relatively easy to defend if army units were in the area. In addition, the Baltic countries have made large defence commitments in recent years: Estonia has long spent 2 per cent, or somewhat more, of GNP on defence; and both Latvia and Lithuania will reach this level in 2018. Estonia and Lithuania are currently planning for two brigades of ground forces each, which is the same level that the Swedish armed forces aim for. The fact remains, however, that none of the Baltic states could manage to defend themselves for long on their own against a Russian opponent. Resolving their defence problem through integration with both the EU and NATO has therefore been an obvious solution for the Baltic countries ever since they regained their independence more than 25 years ago.

#### **THE US AND THE DEFENCE OF THE BALTIC SEA AREA**

From a Baltic Sea perspective, the USA is the only Western power capable of seriously balancing Russian military revanchism. This state of affairs has not always been clear in Washington, DC. Every US president since the end of the Cold War has begun his term with a positive attitude to Russia and by declaring a willingness to create a better relationship with that country. An especially clear example was Barack Obama, who initiated the so-called reset policy towards Russia in 2009, even though only a year before the Russian military had occupied large portions of the territory of a loyal US partner country, Georgia. As late as 2012, Obama took the decision to halve the number of US army brigades permanently stationed in Europe, and to withdraw all the USA's heavy tanks from the continent. Russian actions in recent years – especially regarding Ukraine in 2014 – once again made Russia a strategic enemy of the USA in the eyes of the Obama administration. That the 2017 Trump administration, especially President Donald J. Trump himself, has an explicit agenda to improve relations with Russia is, in this light, just a variation on an earlier theme.

Trump's political ambition has, however, already been outflanked by military realities. The US Department of Defense continues to implement the plans decided on by the Obama administration to strengthen the defence of the most exposed European allies. Within the frame of the *European Reassurance*

*Initiative* (ERI), obvious military pre-positioning of US troops and material is now under way. The aim is not just to reassure the European NATO member states of US support, but also to actively deter Russia from acting militarily against any NATO country. The US European Command (EUCOM) has regained its heavy units, including tanks, which train jointly and build the capability of the Baltic countries as well as Poland. EUCOM has also regained its status as a "warfighting" command, having been in a largely supporting role since the end of the Cold War.

During Obama's final four years, the commitment to ERI was quadrupled in monetary terms. In the Trump administration's first budget, for 2018, a further 40 per cent increase is proposed. It is therefore possible to claim that even if the president's rhetoric is noticeably Russia-friendly, the Pentagon's resources go where the geopolitical problems are. For Europe's part, this means the Baltic Sea area.

There are several reasons for this. The most obvious is that a successful Russian challenge to NATO – and the NATO Treaty's article 5 on collective defence – would powerfully undermine US global leadership. The second is that central actors in the Trump administration – such as the Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, the Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, and the National Security Adviser, H.R. McMaster – are not naive about Russia, but perform realistic geopolitical analyses of the country's actions and the US countermoves that are required.

President Trump's own position in this matter is, at time of writing, unclear. He has expressed considerable understanding of Russia, and especially for its president, Vladimir Putin. At the same time, he has strongly criticized European NATO member states for their inadequate commitment to their armed forces. He has not, on the other hand, reduced the US military commitment to Europe and the defence of small European states against potential Russian aggression. On the contrary, as mentioned above, he proposes to increase substantially the US budget allocation for this purpose. It is possible to interpret his criticism of European NATO members as a negotiating tactic, whereby Trump, through his criticism and relative unwillingness to express unconditional support for NATO, seeks to force the European members



to increase their defence expenditure. Most NATO countries today clearly spend less than the 2 per cent of GNP that the organization defined as a minimum when Obama was president. Trump's rhetoric and criticism should thus perhaps be seen less as a part of his view on Russia and more as a new US strategy to increase European defence commitments, which in many cases are directed precisely at meeting possible Russian aggression.

### **NATO AND THE ENHANCED FORWARD PRESENCE**

In contrast to the situation during the Cold War, a majority of the Baltic coastal states are now NATO members and consequently participate in the organization's joint defence planning. For a long time after the official inclusion of the Baltic countries as NATO members in 2004, NATO's military structure did not carry out any defence planning for these countries. It was not until 2010 that NATO as a whole began to take the Baltic Sea area seriously from a military-strategic perspective. The existing defence plans for Poland – which Poland had demanded when it became a member of NATO in 1999 – was broadened to include the Baltic states. This was controversial at the time, since several influential NATO countries opposed such planning, which would portray Russia as the only imaginable enemy – something which Germany and some NATO officials considered unnecessarily provocative.

After Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, it became simpler to argue that there was a need not only for defence plans, but also for substantial defence resources for the new so-called front states, primarily the Baltic countries and Poland. The NATO Summit in Warsaw in 2016 established a new concept: an *enhanced Forward Presence* (eFP). This comprises NATO units that are based for longer periods in the front states. Through their presence and their battle capability, they constitute an essential contribution to the defence of these countries. The concept was operationalised as one battalion-sized battle group per country plus support units from additional NATO countries. It was also decided to implement this relatively quickly, beginning in early 2017.

During the summer of 2017, the concept was put into effect in all the front states. A British heavy infantry battalion has been based in Estonia, along with a French mechanized infantry company. In Latvia, there is now a Canadian motorized infantry battalion, a Spanish mechanized infantry company and a Polish battle tank company, together with lesser support units from Italy, Slovenia and Albania. In Lithuania, Germany has based a mechanized infantry battalion, which is supported by a Norwegian infantry company and units from the army of the Netherlands, among others. In Poland, the USA has based a battalion-sized battle group from the motorized brigade that the USA has permanently stationed in Germany. In addition, the UK and Romania have also contributed modern battle units within the Polish part of eFP.

At least 12 NATO countries now participate in the direct defence of the Baltic countries and Poland. The troop strength is slightly more than 1100 soldiers per country, which means that the entire operation is about the size of a brigade, or around 4500 personnel. From a military standpoint, this is of course primarily a so-called tripwire unit. This means that on its own the force is not large enough to be able to deter a military attack from a major power such as Russia but in the event of such an attack, the aggressor would enter directly into war with half of NATO at the same time and indirectly with the entire Western world. The deterrent effect should be considered very large. That the force is no greater than one battalion-sized battle group per country also means that it cannot be claimed that it is capable of offensive military action: It is much too small for that. Given the military-geographic realities and the growth of the Baltic armed forces, these forces could – after the requisite joint training – also directly contribute in a substantial way to the defence of the Baltic countries.

Depending on the degree of early warning and the amount of resources an attacker commits, the Baltic and Polish armed forces – together with NATO units – could serve as an effective brake against a substantial Russian military attack. Additional resources would include NATO's established rapid response forces, such as the NATO Response Force (NRF) and the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). The NRF (maximum 40,000 soldiers) and VJTF (about 5000



soldiers) have no permanent base, but are deployed according to need.

Through these measures, NATO may have found a reasonable balance between deterrence and provocation. Russian representatives and the Russian media depict the entire process as destabilizing for the region, perhaps because it ought to reduce Russia's discretion or freedom of military action in the region.

### **CONSEQUENCES FOR SWEDEN**

Over the past two decades, and with relatively broad political unity, Sweden has replaced its traditional neutrality policy with a solidarity policy, as it is called in the report of the Parliamentary Commission on Defence Policy (*Försvarsberedningen*). Sweden is not a member of any military alliance but it does have obligations – of a type that are still not clearly defined – to all EU member states by virtue of the Treaty of Lisbon (article 42:7). In addition, since 2009 it has made declarations of solidarity with all the EU member states and the Nordic countries. Every imaginable military conflict in the Baltic Sea area would lead to Sweden's territory being much coveted by the warring parties, especially for operations directed at the Baltics.

This means that Sweden is likely to be rapidly drawn into a conflict process. The security situation in the Baltic Sea area today has more similarities with the Cold War than at any time since 1991, albeit that it lacks any strong ideological dimension. Geopolitically and militarily/strategically, however, the focal point of the conflict has moved considerably closer to Sweden. This is something that Swedish decision-makers and the Swedish defence establishment are now being forced to deal with. Good insights into the geopolitical dynamics of the neighbourhood are a necessary foundation for this.

### **FURTHER READING**

Mike Winnerstig (ed.), *Tools of Destablization: Russian Soft Power and Non-military Influence in the Baltic States*, 2014, FOI- R--3990--SE.