

The Baltic states and security in the Baltic Sea region: Dark clouds in blue sky

By Kristi Raik

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Abstract

The three Baltic states can feel more secure today than ever before. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are firmly integrated into European and transatlantic structures, most importantly through their membership in NATO and the EU. Since 2014, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has weakened the regional security situation, but has also led to a united response of the EU and stronger presence of NATO, which increases stability and predictability. However, there are dark clouds in the sky. First and foremost, there is a new level of uncertainty about the commitment of the US to European security and the rules-based international order. Second, Europe is stepping up its efforts in the field of security and defence, but the process is slow and there is no shared vision of its goals and priorities. Third, Russia continues to pursue stronger influence in its nearby regions and tries to deepen political divisions within the EU and NATO. This report looks at each of the dark clouds and discusses the positions of the Baltic states in the broader regional security framework. It argues that the most difficult question the Baltic states are facing is how to prepare for a possible withdrawal of the US without making it more likely to happen.

Keywords

Baltic states, security, NATO, United States, European Union, Russia

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this article represent those of the author and do not represent the opinion of the Centrum Balticum Foundation, and thus, the Centrum Balticum Foundation does not bear any responsibility for the opinions expressed in the report.

Table of contents

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. Introduction..... | 3 |
| 2. US, NATO and cracks in the transatlantic relations..... | 3 |
| 3. European defence cooperation: How to turn risks into opportunities? | 5 |
| 4. Living with Russia's discontent | 7 |
| 5. Policy conclusions | 9 |
| References..... | 9 |
| Earlier publications in the BSR Policy Briefing series..... | 11 |

1. Introduction

In many respects, security of the three Baltic states is in a better shape than ever before. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are deeply integrated into European and transatlantic institutional structures, most importantly through their membership in the EU and NATO. After the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, military defence and deterrence provided by NATO has been strengthened through increased presence of allies. Furthermore, the Baltics are paying increased attention to their 'total defence' and ability to withstand various non-military threats stemming from propaganda, cyber attacks and energy vulnerabilities. In economic terms, the countries are in the process of catching up with EU average.

Yet there are dark clouds in the blue sky. First, there is a new level of uncertainty about the commitment of the US to European security and more broadly to the rules-based international order, which is a crucial issue for security in the Baltic Sea region and Europe as a whole. It is in the interest of the Baltic and also Nordic countries to maintain strong transatlantic ties in spite of new tensions in the relationship.

Second, Europe – both European states individually and the EU collectively - is stepping up its efforts in the field of security and defence, and the Baltic states are participating in various new European initiatives. However, the process is slow and there is no shared vision of its goals and priorities. At worst, the EU's efforts may contribute to the weakening of the transatlantic link, but fail to reach a sufficient strengthening of European capabilities - a scenario that the Baltics should actively seek to prevent.

Third, Russia continues to pursue its goal of a stronger great power status and influence in its nearby regions, which may gain more space and traction due to the overall weakening of the West and political divisions within the EU and NATO. Maintaining European and Western unity vis-à-vis Russia is another shared interest of countries in the Baltic Sea region other than Russia.

This report looks at each of the dark clouds and discusses the positions of the Baltic states in the broader regional security framework. Finally, it outlines some policy-oriented conclusions from the Baltic states' perspective, with a view to managing tensions and safeguarding regional security.

2. US, NATO and cracks in the transatlantic relations

Security guarantees provided by NATO are obviously the key issue for security of the Baltic states. Russia's aggression against Ukraine, continuing since 2014, has seriously weakened security situation in the Baltic Sea region. At the same time, it has had the effect of clarifying the purpose and focus of NATO. The initial response of NATO was the Readiness Action Plan adopted at the Wales Summit in 2014, which increased the size of NATO Response Force and established a multinational Very High Readiness Joint Task Force of 5,000 troops, which can be mobilised within a few days. Two years later, the Warsaw Summit decided

on the principles and elements of the Alliance's "Strengthened Deterrence and Defence Posture". The summit held in Brussels in 2018 reviewed the progress in implementing the posture and approved a range of additional measures to ensure its credibility and effectiveness (Brauss 2018).

Most importantly for the Baltic states, NATO has launched the multinational combat-ready enhanced Forward Presence battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, led by the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany and the US respectively. This has significantly enhanced the deterrence effect of NATO, since any military incursion would automatically mean a conflict with the whole alliance.

Furthermore, it is a positive step for Baltic Sea security that Finland and Sweden have become increasingly closely engaged with NATO and cooperate on a common threat assessment, contribute to discussions on deterrence and defence, and take part in exercises (Salonius-Pasternak & Vanhanen 2018). It is no secret that the Baltic states would prefer seeing their Nordic neighbours as NATO members, in order to strengthen collective defence and deterrence and further reduce the likelihood of potential Russian aggression. However, as long as Finland and Sweden prefer not to take the step to full membership, which would undeniably be perceived as a hostile move by Moscow, a special partnership and close pragmatic cooperation with NATO help to make the security environment more stable and predictable.

The positive effect of the increased presence of NATO allies in the Baltics is overshadowed by the new level of uncertainty about the direction of US foreign policy under president Donald Trump. The US has shifted the focus of its security strategy on rivalry with major non-Western powers, especially China, but also Russia (United States of America 2017). At the same time, it has shown on a number of issues a reduced interest in and commitment to multilateral cooperation, be it on climate change, migration, trade, human rights or arms control. Furthermore, president Trump has repeatedly expressed admiration for authoritarian leaders, such as Putin and Kim Jong-un, and by contrast, contempt for his Western allies. He has been particularly annoyed and confrontational with the EU. Hence, some fundamental pillars of US post-WWII foreign policy have become under doubt, such as commitment to the transatlantic alliance and European security, as well as maintaining international security and rules-based global order (Munich Security Conference 2018).

The Baltic states have invested a lot not only in strengthening the commitment of NATO in the region, but also their bilateral relations with the US. During the Trump presidency, this has required an extra effort to work broadly with those forces in the US administration and Congress that hold a consistent approach to the importance of securing the Baltics and deterring Russia in Central and Eastern Europe. The passing away of one of the strongest long-time friends of freedom and security of the Baltic states, senator John McCain, in 2018 was deeply mourned in the Baltics and seen as a symbol of changing times (Mihkelson 2018).

The three Baltic presidents made a joint visit to Washington in spring 2018, which had an appearance of continuity on the surface. Yet later on, the media reported about Trump having mixed up the Baltics with Balkans and accused the former of having started the wars in former Yugoslavia in the early 1990's (Le Monde 2018). Even more worryingly, there are reports that Trump has repeatedly (privately) suggested the withdrawal of the United States from NATO (New York Times 2019).

Beneath the drama of the US president's statements and tweets, the change of actual policies towards Europe does not appear that radical after all – a point that the Baltic states are keen to highlight. The US has in fact significantly increased its spending on European security under the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), which provides for more US troops in Europe, particularly Poland, enhanced pre-positioning of equipment, more exercises and training, and improved infrastructure. The annoyance of the US at Europe's low defence spending predated Trump and is largely deemed justified; Europeans have undertaken a more serious response than ever before. So far, so good.

However, longer-term global trends are likely to make Europe decreasingly relevant for US foreign policy interests. It is important to differentiate between the effect of Trump and longer-term change. America's 'Pivot to Asia' was creating concerns among European allies already during the Obama presidency, but since then, the rise of China has been even faster than most experts expected, involving rapid

technological progress, expanding global economic presence and rise of military expenditure. Obama's efforts to engage China as a partner in global multilateral structures have been replaced with Trump's mission to constrain China as a systemic adversary. At the same time, there is continuity in US foreign policy since the Obama era with regard to the understanding that the US is suffering from overreach and is paying too much for international security.

A brief look back at Europe's recent history helps to explain the decline of Europe's relevance for the US. During the Cold War era, Europe was situated in-between the two superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union. While the latter was seeking to expand its influence in Europe, containing the Soviets on European territory was a major priority for the US. Geography made sure that Europe was a hotspot of competition between major powers and a key ally of the US.

Today, Europe is a declining power (like the US), struggling to find its place amidst the tightening US-China competition. The EU and the US have failed to pursue a common approach to China, although their assessments regarding the risks related to China's rise have moved closer to each other. With the US increasingly preoccupied with China and Asia, Europe faces a new geopolitical environment where it is much more on its own and threatened to become squeezed between major powers in a future bipolar world order (Demertzis et al. 2019).

These are all worrying developments for Europe as a whole, but especially for small European states whose security depends strongly on the US. The Baltic states matter to the US as part of Europe, their relevance being tied to Europe's place on the US agenda. Any amount of emphasis placed on bilateral relations is secondary to this broader framework. The broader trends point to the need for the Baltic states to start preparing for an era of reduced US interest and presence in the region. However, this is a scenario that the Baltic states certainly wish to prevent from materialising, above all because there are no credible alternatives to US security guarantees; Europe remains militarily too weak in foreseeable future. Thus, they are faced with the devilish question, how to prepare for a possible withdrawal of the US without making it more likely to happen? The somewhat schizophrenic task is to work for further strengthening (or at least continuity) of the US engagement, while proactively shaping the European efforts to get ready for an opposite scenario. The US, for its part, is faced with a choice, whether it prefers to "maintain a weak and divided European continent" that is dependent on America for its security, or whether it will help Europeans become a more autonomous, and consequently more relevant but also more difficult partner (Polyakova & Haddad 2019, 110).

3. European defence cooperation: How to turn risks into opportunities?

One of the consequences of Donald Trump's presidency of the US has been a significant increase in European defence cooperation. Another explanation to the EU's new emphasis on defence in recent years is increased instability in neighbouring regions, including Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Thirdly, the Brexit process has removed some earlier brakes to deepening the Union's defence dimension, a development in which the UK was always the most reluctant partner. As a result of all these factors, defence cooperation became a high priority on the EU agenda. At the same time, the focus of the EU's defence dimension has shifted from external crisis management to protection of the Union, its member states and citizens.

The Baltic states have generally been constructive partners in the development of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. At the same time, the importance of the EU for national and regional defence has been marginal, although the EU's broader and indirect significance for their security is huge. The new defence initiatives have somewhat increased the EU's role in regional defence and security in two broad aspects: first, the EU has started to contribute to member states' defence capabilities in new ways, and second, it has undertaken a number of new initiatives to counter so-called hybrid threats.

The first aspect is promoted through the so-called Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) on defence, which includes joint projects for developing defence capabilities and enhancing operational readiness. The twenty-five member states that participate in PESCO have also committed to "regularly

increasing defence budgets in real terms, in order to reach agreed objectives" (Council of the European Union 2017). Estonia and Latvia participate in three PESCO projects and Lithuania in two (Gros-Verheyde 2018). The most important PESCO project for regional security is aimed at improving military mobility and is pursued in cooperation with NATO (Kepe 2018).

Secondly, the EU is developing measures to counter so-called hybrid threats, including disinformation, election interference and cyber attacks (Tammsaar 2019). Strengthening Europe's resilience against such threats is one of the priorities of EU-NATO cooperation (European Union and NATO 2016; 2018). The Baltic states are active in this area in the framework of both organisations. Estonia is hosting NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (COE), Latvia NATO Strategic Communications COE, and Lithuania NATO Energy Security COE. In the framework of its presidency of the Council of the EU in 2017, Estonia organised the first-ever strategic table-top exercise of cyber security called EU CYBRID.

While the practical contribution of EU initiatives is modest, European defence cooperation has advanced also in a number of more ambitious smaller formats. The UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force, launched in 2015, is an important initiative for northern Europe. It initially involved the Nordic-Baltic NATO members plus the Netherlands; Sweden and Finland joined the group in 2017. Furthermore, Estonia is the only Baltic country that has joined the French-led European Intervention Initiative (EII), launched in June 2018, which aims at more ambitious cooperation among a smaller group of countries willing and able to develop a shared strategic culture and operational readiness (Lebrun 2018). The smaller initiatives are meant to be complementary to the framework of NATO and the EU. However, they raise concerns over institutional coherence and fragmentation of scarce resources of small states in particular.

The EU's new defence initiatives fall under the broader agenda that calls for European sovereignty and Europe's strategic autonomy. Both concepts have been most vocally promoted by the French president Emmanuel Macron as part of his push for reforming the EU and revitalising French leadership in Europe. The French agenda of strategic autonomy in the field of security and defence has been received with suspicion and concern in the Baltic states and Poland due to its thinly veiled anti-American undercurrent. The tensions have been exacerbated by the hostile attitude of the current US administration towards the concept. While France can be seen to actively aim at Europe's reduced ties to the US, and thereby increased autonomy and sovereignty, the Eastern member states actually aim for the opposite: ever closer security cooperation with the US.

The French push for strong words and high ambitions has to some extent had a counterproductive effect, making it more difficult to keep the EU united in this field and focused on the shared, pragmatic goal of everyone – Europe's East, West and the US – to strengthen European defence capabilities and the ability of the EU to take more responsibility for European security, where necessary. While the multiplicity of smaller initiatives creates practical concerns related to fragmentation and coordination, the proclaimed goal of Europe's strategic autonomy raises more principled and strategic questions about Europe's defence. It is crucial for the Baltic states (and several other member states) that the EU's defence cooperation is complementary to NATO and strengthens both organisations.

Although France has taken the lead, it is important to note also that the promotion of European sovereignty and strategic autonomy is far from being just a French mission. A number of European leaders who are undoubtedly strong proponents of the transatlantic alliance have expressed similar ideas and concerns. President of the European Council Donald Tusk has warned EU heads of state that "the disintegration of the European Union will not lead to the restoration of some mythical, full sovereignty of its member states, but to their real and factual dependence on the great superpowers: the United States, Russia and China. Only together can we be fully independent" (European Council 2017). German chancellor Angela Merkel has famously stated that "the times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over. /.../ We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands" (Politico 2017). Furthermore, the EU Global Strategy, adopted in 2016, defines strengthening Europe's strategic autonomy as a common goal of the EU's defence-related activities (European Union 2016).

The meaning of the concept of Europe's strategic autonomy is controversial and contested (see Franke & Varma 2019). However, it is clear that the concept has made its way to the EU's official rhetoric, and

now the battle is over how to fill it with practical content. The Baltic states should focus on shaping it in a manner that takes into account their interests, most notably the need to maintain the US commitment to European security, including in the Baltic Sea region, and credibility of NATO. In foreseeable future, the EU will be neither able nor willing to take responsibility for Europe's territorial defence, which remains the core task of NATO. This is the starting point that conditions the Baltic states' contribution to European defence cooperation.

To sum up, while the EU continues to develop its defence dimension in important ways, its contribution to regional security in the Baltic Sea region remains rather limited. However, as we have argued elsewhere, the EU's most important contribution to security in Northern Europe actually stems not from its defence activities, but its unity and consistency vis-à-vis Russia, including through maintaining sanctions as long as the reasons for the sanctions (the annexation of Crimea and destabilisation of eastern Ukraine) have not been resolved (Kuusik & Raik 2018).

4. Living with Russia's discontent

The Baltic states are acutely aware that Russia's aggression against Ukraine, continuing since 2014, has weakened the security environment in the Baltic Sea region in many ways. With some resemblance to the Cold War era, the region is once again divided into two poles which have distinctly different and competing political systems, democratic versus authoritarian, and conflicting approaches to European security order (Raik 2019b).

On the positive side, there are no unresolved conflicts in the Baltic Sea region and the likelihood of a military conflict is generally regarded as low. Russia's actions against Ukraine and increased military activity in and near the Baltic Sea region have pushed other, especially smaller countries in the region closer together in their threat perceptions and views on regional security. Splitting the Baltic Sea region, the dividing line between Russia and the rest has become more pertinent again. There is no quick solution in sight to the Ukraine conflict, which remains the key source of Western-Russian tensions. Russia's neighbours in the Baltic Sea region have adapted to the changes by stepping up their defence capabilities and cooperation in the frameworks of the EU and NATO and in various bi- and mini-lateral groupings. Increased presence of NATO in the region has been welcomed not only by the Baltic states and Poland, but also Finland and Sweden that are not members of a military alliance. In the changed security environment, the latter have intensified their cooperation with NATO as much as possible, while stopping short of membership.

The Kremlin has blamed the increased presence of NATO in the Baltic states and Poland and deepening cooperation of Finland and Sweden with the Alliance for the worsening security situation and Russia's increased military activity in the region. For example, such comments were made by defence minister Sergey Shoigu as a warning signal right before president Vladimir Putin met with his Finnish counterpart Sauli Niinistö in Helsinki (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation 2019). From the perspective of the other Baltic Sea states, however, the cause-effect relationship works in the opposite direction. In light of Russia's aim to prevent further enlargement of NATO to Sweden and Finland, its actions have appeared rather counterproductive (Raik 2019a).

Before 2014, the Baltic states used to be perceived as 'troublemakers' in Western-Russian relations. This is no longer the case. For many years preceding the Ukraine crisis, they had been warning the West about deeper problems in the Russia relations, stemming from Russia's authoritarian development, increasing military capacity and efforts to re-establish its control in the post-Soviet space through means such as manipulation of separatist conflicts and exploitation of the economic vulnerabilities and dependences of Russia's neighbours (Raik 2016). In 2014, Western policies towards Russia experienced a turning point that implied taking on board the Baltic states' earlier worries. Now the Western countries undertook serious efforts to impose limits on Russia's aggressive behaviour, notably through sanctions, and to step up Western defence capabilities, as described above.

The Baltic states are in a vulnerable position vis-à-vis Russia above all because of their location as the most exposed part of NATO. Russia might seek to put NATO's unity and resolve into test by provoking instability

and intervening on the territory of one of the Baltic states, most likely through a hybrid scenario where its interference would be hard to verify. The threat to the Baltic states thus stems from Russia's broader strategic goals to undermine the unity of the West, discredit organisations such as NATO and the EU, and destabilise Western societies. These goals are inherently linked to the Kremlin's desire to re-establish control over Ukraine. From Russia's perspective, the West is posing major obstacles to the achievement of the latter goal. Hence, the Baltic-Russian relations are an inseparable thread in the texture of the EU-Russian and Western-Russian troubled relationship.

Bilateral diplomatic relations between the Baltic states and Russia have been limited and frosty ever since the former regained independence in 1991. In April 2019, a new opening took place in this regard, as the president of Estonia, Kersti Kaljulaid, paid a visit to Moscow and held a long meeting with her Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin. For the first time since the end of Soviet occupation in 1991, the heads of state of the two neighbouring countries had a meeting where a broad range of international and bilateral issues was discussed. Expectations for the meeting were modest, and so were the outcomes. However, the fact that the meeting was conducted in a respectful atmosphere was a positive achievement as such and placed the Estonian-Russian relations on a somewhat more equal footing. Increased bilateral contacts may help Estonia to build a more solid basis for contributing to the Russia debates in the EU and NATO. At the same time, as long as the fundamental disagreements between Russia and the West over the European security order and Ukraine remain unresolved, the bilateral relationship cannot become genuinely good.

There is no reason to expect Russia's current leadership to change its geopolitical goals vis-à-vis Ukraine and the West (Sherr 2019). The Baltic states oppose unconditional conciliatory steps such as Russia's return to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which are likely to be read by Russia as signs of the West getting tired of opposing Russia's actions against Ukraine and showing readiness to compromise. The Baltic states' fear is that such compromises are bound to happen at the cost of the security of Russia's smaller neighbours. What is at stake are the key principles of European security order, such as the right of every state to decide on its own security arrangements, and the unacceptability of changing borders by use of force. If the Western commitment to these principles comes into doubt, security of the Baltic states will rest on a much shakier foundation.

5. Policy conclusions

Although the Baltic states today can feel more secure than ever, a mixture of old and new elements in the regional security environment are creating uncertainties, some of which are unprecedented. Since 2014, the revival of old threat perceptions regarding Russia have been met with clear responses in the framework of NATO, the EU and regional cooperation fora. The Baltic states need to work closely with their partners and allies to maintain a consistent and united approach of the West to Russia. It is important to base the Western policies on a realistic understanding of Russia's goals to strengthen its great power status and control over nearby countries. In this context, strong presence of institutions such as NATO and the EU in the Baltic Sea region constrains aggressive action and creates stability and predictability.

The major new and unprecedented element of uncertainty has entered the picture with Donald Trump's election as president of the US. The American commitment to European security, a value-based transatlantic alliance and rules-based international order is being brought into question like never before since World War II. So far, this has not had tangible negative effects for security in the Baltic Sea region. The Baltic and Nordic countries have a shared interest to maintain strong transatlantic ties in spite of new tensions in the relationship. There is quite simply no credible alternative in sight to the role of the US in their regional security.

The Baltic states have always tried to avoid making choices between Europe and the US, or the EU and NATO. There have been moments in the past when such choices have been unavoidable, like during the Iraq war of 2003 when the question of supporting the US divided Europe into 'old' and 'new' (the latter including, however, not only Central and Eastern Europe but also 'old' Western European countries, such as the UK and Denmark). During the Trump presidency of the US, the pressure to choose has been growing

again. The Baltic states' positions in many global affairs that currently divide Europe and the US, such as Iran, the Middle East or trade policy, are defined by their membership in the EU and by international law.

In the longer-term future, global trends are likely to decrease Europe's relevance for US foreign policy interests (irrespective of who holds office in the White House), which makes it ever more important for Europe to do more for its own security. The most difficult question the Baltic states are facing is how to prepare for a possible withdrawal of the US without making it more likely to happen. As European defence cooperation is deepening and the EU has become more active in this field, the Baltic states need to contribute to this work, while making every effort to prevent the widening of transatlantic cracks. It has been a decades-long expectation of the US in the past that European states should develop stronger defence capabilities and defence cooperation amongst themselves. As member states of the EU and NATO, the Baltic states have to take ownership of this process in the framework of both organisations and try to shape it in accordance with their security interests.

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