

Russia and the Baltics: A Testing Ground for NATO–EU Defence Cooperation

by Lucrezia Sapienza

Russia's growing international assertiveness is particularly relevant to the Baltic region. Due to its geographic position and double-membership in the EU and NATO, the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania represent both a weak spot for NATO and a key testing ground for enhanced cooperation between the Alliance and the Union.

The recent Joint Declaration on EU–NATO cooperation signed on 10 July 2018 clearly identifies countering “hybrid” threats as a common objective.¹ Considering the variety of unconventional means employed by Russia, this field is of utmost importance for Baltics states.

Whatever the likelihood of a Russo-Baltic conflict, the defence of the Baltics – also supported by the UK, Norway,

Canada and Poland – will continue to influence NATO's allocation of resources, in line with plans set forth in the 2014 and 2016 NATO summits.

Russia's increased emphasis on “hybrid” capabilities has been defined by some as new generation warfare (NGW). This type of warfare includes, and increasingly combines, conventional, non-conventional and nuclear capabilities such as brinkmanship, covert operations, disinformation campaigns, cyber operations and propaganda.²

Conventional capabilities still represent the strategic backbone of Russia's defence posture. The development of Anti-Access Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea and an

¹ Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation, Brussels, 10 July 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156626.htm.

² Ulrich Kühn, *Preventing Escalation in the Baltics. A NATO Playbook*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018, <http://bit.ly/2x34koR>.

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increase in the number of rapid reaction forces in the region challenge NATO's ability to deter offensive manoeuvres or internal subversion.³

The permanent deployment of nuclear-capable Iskander and Oniks anti-ship missiles in Kaliningrad, the general increase in Russian military exercises in Europe and the modernization of its armed forces and navy are adding to NATO's alarm.⁴

The ultimate fear is that Russia may employ both its A2/AD capabilities in Kaliningrad and the vulnerability created by the Suwalki Gap – the 100km stretch of land on Poland's border with Lithuania dividing the Russian enclave on the Baltic Sea from Belarus – to prevent access to the North-Eastern flank of NATO, presenting the Alliance with a Crimea-style "fait accompli".⁵ Moreover, mindful of the "little green men" strategy deployed in Ukraine in 2014,⁶ and of the 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict, several NATO members fear covert operations and interference in their internal affairs.

³ Guillaume Lasconjarias and Alessandro Marrone, "How to Respond to Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD)? Towards a NATO Counter-A2/AD Strategy", in *NDC Conference Reports*, No 01/16 (February 2016), <http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=906>.

⁴ Ian Williams, "The Russia–NATO A2AD Environment", in *Missile Threat*, last modified 15 June 2018, <https://wp.me/p8e3o8-kW>; Guillaume Lasconjarias and Lukáš Dyčka, "Dealing with the Russian Bear: Improving NATO's Response to Moscow's Military Exercise Zapad 2017", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 17|18 (October 2017), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/8368>.

⁵ Thomas Karako, "Looking East. European Air and Missile Defense after Warsaw", in *CSIS Reports*, 14 July 2016, <https://www.csis.org/node/37223>.

⁶ Steven Pifer, "Watch Out for Little Green Men", in *Spiegel Online*, 7 July 2014, <http://spon.de/aeg1T>.

While the conventional domain remains the key element, "hybrid" threats are also very relevant due to a number of characteristics present in the Baltic region. In Estonia and Latvia, for instance, Russian minorities accounted for about 25 per cent of the total population in both countries in 2017.⁷

These communities remain reliant on Russian media, making the targeting of disinformation campaigns easier. On the other hand, concerns related to the discrimination of Russian minorities in the region adds further complexity to the issue, fostering additional instability and ethno-national fragmentation that in turn provides pro-Russian parties with solid ground to advance their claims.

Russia's more assertive "cyber-approach" since the 2000s is also raising alarm. The so-called Web War I in 2007, a cyber-attack against Estonian institutions, media and banks allegedly perpetrated by Russia set an important precedent.⁸ Since then, Russian hackers have been implicated in cyber campaigns against Georgian media outlets and institutions in 2008, and in Ukraine with the so-called Operation Armageddon starting in 2013.

⁷ Statistics Estonia, *Population by Ethnic Nationality, 1 January, Years*, June 2017, <https://www.stat.ee/34278>; Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, *Statistical Yearbook of Latvia 2017*, Riga, 2018, p. 129, <https://www.csb.gov.lv/en/statistics/statistics-by-theme/economy/gdp/search-in-theme/163-statistical-yearbook-latvia-2017>.

⁸ Stephen Blank, "Web War I: Is Europe's First Information War a New Kind of War?", in *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (July 2008), p. 227-247, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495930802185312>.

To achieve a stronger deterrence posture vis-à-vis Russia the three Baltic states have long relied on NATO as the most relevant framework for their collective defence. Building on their fulfilment of the 2 per cent GDP defence spending threshold, reached in 2014 by Estonia and in 2018 by Latvia and Lithuania, their goal remains that of defending their regional interests within NATO. Accordingly, following the Ukrainian conflict, the Baltics have strongly encouraged a more forceful approach to deter Russian aggression, urging NATO to provide reassurance on its North-Eastern flank.

The establishment of the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) agreed during the Warsaw Summit in 2016, is one answer to such a call for action. The four multinational battlegroups deployed to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, and led respectively by the UK, Canada, Germany and the US, serve to reinforce NATO's strategic posture in the area but also make it easier to trigger Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty in case of a Russian strike.⁹

In spite of the multitude of actors involved, there is space for a greater EU role in the Baltics. Building on the recent Joint Declaration and the EU Global Strategy, EU–NATO cooperation in the Baltics should focus on countering hybrid threats by: (1) enhancing the resilience of critical infrastructure, services and networks; (2) "strengthening the voluntary framework for cyber

crisis management", in cooperation with NATO and the US; and finally, (3) by offering "factual rebuttals of disinformation".¹⁰

The level of preparedness deeply influences the ability to counter hybrid threats. Increasing the mobility of assets and personnel has a direct effect on responsiveness. As a result, the PESCO military mobility initiative, in cooperation with NATO, would ensure faster response times in accordance with the 2016 and 2018 joint declarations.¹¹

The Baltic region could thus represent a key testing ground for the future of NATO–EU defence cooperation. The renewed commitment shown by the latest Joint Declaration is compatible with the objectives outlined in the EU Global Strategy with its focus on cyber and hybrid threats. However, to effectively enhance defence cooperation with Baltics states the EU will need to engage in a careful balancing act with other key actors: namely NATO and the US.

Only a more efficient and coordinated effort involving both NATO and the EU will be able to mount a comprehensive defence of the Baltic region. The recent

⁹ NATO, *Warsaw Summit Communiqué*, 9 July 2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm.

¹⁰ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, June 2017, p. 21–23, <https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en/node/331>.

¹¹ Joint Declaration by the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission, and the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Warsaw, 8 July 2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/ra/natohq/official_texts_133163.htm; Joint Declaration on EU–NATO Cooperation, cit.

declaration is no doubt a step in the right direction but the risk of duplication remains. Considering the role of the US in the region and Washington's concern regarding independent EU defence capabilities, this task might not be easy to accomplish.

Finally, it is important to remember that deterrence and reassurance of the Baltic states are as important as risk-reduction measures and transparency: while a Russo-Baltic conflict might be unlikely, an incident or the lack of effective communication might fuel an inadvertent escalation or miscalculation with unknown and potentially disruptive consequences at the global level.

Thus, enhanced EU–NATO cooperation to deter Russia should also be accompanied by efforts to engage Moscow, seeking to deflate tensions and establish agreed rules of the game capable of mitigating the risk of a slippery slope towards escalation.

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