

# 1. SECURITY AND GEOPOLITICS

## SUB-REGIONAL DEFENSE SYNCHRONIZATION – WHAT CAN THE BALTICS OFFER FOR A STRONGER ALLIANCE?

OLEVS NIKERS, OTTO TABUNS

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to outline and discuss the origin and sustainability of a modern sub-regional security alliance among small countries – focusing on the Baltic states as the members of NATO. We are going to discuss the formation of alliance outside the realm of the power balancing of the Cold War period, when the main Alliance-building theory was formed. Yet, on the one hand we have the NATO collective security system, and on the other hand – the challenges still faced by small nations, the members of NATO, bordering with major revisionist power in the region. On the one hand, this paper will outline historical background of defense interoperability among the Baltic countries before the World War II, and on the other hand, it will discuss current issues of the Baltic States security cooperation which were identified and analyzed within the Baltic Security Strategy Project by scholars and government professionals of the Baltic States. The most challenging question, both for scholars and practitioners, is whether small states can together contribute considerably to the collective defense system and simultaneously strengthen their defenses and enhance deterrence by synchronizing their security and improving their intra-regional military interoperability within the collective security system.

### KEY WORDS

Air-defense, Baltic States, Baltic Sea region, security, deterrence, NATO, regional integration, maritime security.

DOI: 10.26410/SF\_1/19/1

**OLEVS NIKERS**  
nikers@jamestown.org

**OTTO TABUNS**  
ottotabuns@gmail.com

Baltic Security Strategy Project

---

## Introduction and Framework of the Analysis

The issue is related to the security and defense cooperation among the Baltic countries and the sub-regional context of

the collective security system, its interconnection with deterrence policy and alliance formation.

The importance of this issue is determined by the increasing importance of the defense co-operation among the Baltic States as well as by an increased role of Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian self-defense capabilities in the context of both national security and regional security over the recent years. Alongside the issues of the NATO collective defense, the self-defense and regional co-operation capabilities of the Baltic States themselves is becoming more crucial.

Since the Baltic States joined NATO, a great emphasis has been put on the collective defense guarantees that became increasingly important after Russia's aggression in Ukraine in 2014. In parallel with this development, in recent years, self-defense capabilities have also been improved, including the ability of the Baltic countries and societies themselves to use the resources at their disposal – both financial and logistical resources as well as human resources to ensure national defense. This trend is also reflected in the conceptual and policy documents of the Baltic States.

Today, the Baltic States are more willing to jointly explore and find answers facing common security challenges in areas such as defense and deterrence.

Although the integration of defense within the existing small member states of NATO is not in opposition to the principle of collective defense, the security cooperation among the Baltic States, since the restoration of their independence, has been very limited mainly due to the differences in the defense systems of these countries and in political guidelines<sup>1</sup>.

However, the formation of such a security alliance and the integration of defense is at the center of attention, considering the situation of a real military threat and tasks,

<sup>1</sup> Romanovs, U., Andžāns, M. "The Trilateral Military Cooperation of the Baltic States in the "New Normal" Security Landscape", September 29, 2017

since each Baltic state is not a standalone player even within the framework of NATO's collective security system. Collective capacity of the three Baltic countries, as well as NATO itself, to respond in the event of hybrid warfare and conventional warfare depends on the level of operational and institutional cooperation among the Baltic States. To a great extent, the defense integration also affects the ability to fulfill tasks of the host nation support, as well as successfully carry out mobilization tasks in such a way that the national resources are effectively allocated for the protection of the state as well as the vital needs of the national economy. These aspects are important, a belief in the principles of collective defense is so high that total defense mechanisms in each Baltic state would not even be triggered. Building a strong security and defense alliance plays a role not only in defense but also in deterrence, which is a key element of the Baltic security strategy and a cornerstone of collective security during peacetime.

After 2014, the security and defense priorities of the Baltic States changed. They previously focused on the fulfillment of obligations in the NATO collective security system, for example, the participation of National Armed Forces units in international operations. Due to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, when the question of the security of the Baltic States itself was raised, it became clear that the development of self-defense capabilities was not enough and, and starting with 2016, a return to total protection was announced<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> See interview with Latvian MoD Parliamentary Secretary Mr. A. Panteđejevs, Latvijas Avīze, 27.04.2017: <http://www.la.lv/atzist-kludu-lidzsineja-aizsardzibas-koncepcija-lai-to-labotu-bus-jamaina-domasana/>, also see MoD State Secretary Mr. Jānis Garisons quoted on October 29, 2016 from the Riga Conference 2016: [http://www.tvnet.lv/zinas/latvija/632112-am\\_valsts\\_sekretars\\_jaatgriežas\\_pie\\_totalas\\_aizsardzibas\\_koncepta](http://www.tvnet.lv/zinas/latvija/632112-am_valsts_sekretars_jaatgriežas_pie_totalas_aizsardzibas_koncepta).

At the same time, vulnerabilities were discovered in NATO's collective capability to protect the Baltic States in accordance to the Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, which closely relates to the presence of Russian military forces in the region (Kaliningrad), vulnerability of the Suwalki Gap and, finally, massive Russian military forces against the smaller in number Baltic armies, as the armies of the militarily stronger NATO countries and their capabilities are still relatively far from the potential defensive positions of the Baltic States<sup>3</sup>.

In order to be able to use the defense and collective defense instruments of the Baltic States and to cope with the mentioned security challenges, the most important defense and deterrence policy implementation is the support and ability of the societies and individuals of the Baltic States themselves to be united in the event of a threat to these countries.

In general, the Baltic States focus on (1) integrating into a collective security system (2) building self-defense capacity (3) compatibility of NATO forces and self-defense capabilities (including providing host nation support). We would argue that it is necessary to add a concept of the small state defense integration, which in the context of today's debate includes at least three Baltic States, to this list.

Thus, the "integration of the defense of small states" becomes a working defense concept alongside collective security and self-defense mechanisms as an additional factor of deterrence and defense.

Deterrence and alliance formation has traditionally been studied in the context of Cold War power balancing, discussing these concepts as a part of great power confrontation. However, the issue of the deterrence policies and alliance development among small countries through different strategies and tactics is of great importance to us today.

One of the most important concepts within deterrence theory is that of credible deterrence, one of the main defense policies of the 21st century, based on realistic actions to deter potential aggressors. The policy of deterrence in the context of international relations is not novelty and has been studied in several publications regarding the Cold War. In addition, the deterrence policy is also viewed and studied in the 21st century foreign policy processes, which more closely relate to nuclear policies not in the context of traditional (conventional) or unconventional (hybrid war) tensions, as it is currently the case.

Most of the classical articles and research on deterrence theory have referred to the Cold War and nuclear weapons. In his paper, "Conventional Deterrence," John Mearsheimer concludes that the success of deterrence policy depends on the strategy of a potential enemy<sup>4</sup>. He distinguishes between three strategies: (1) attrition strategy (high probability with uncertain outcome of the war and high costs); (2) limited-aims strategy (highlights low risk and relatively low cost); (3) Blitzkrieg war strategy (targeted destruction of the opponent at relatively low cost). According to Mearsheimer, out of all three strategies, deterrence policy would not work in the event of Blitzkrieg strategy, because a potential opponent would be able to succeed by rapidly expanding the armed forces, which would contribute to

<sup>3</sup> See a Rand Corporation study: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/nato-russia-baltic-states-overrun-in-hours-rand-corporation-report-a7384381.html>, also see Linas Jegelevicius article: "Baltics still an easy prey for Russia as "porcupine strategy" may work best to last longer, 04.11.2015., <http://news.err.ee/117119/baltics-still-an-easy-prey-for-russia-as-porcupine-strategy-may-work-best-to-last-longer>.

<sup>4</sup> Mearsheimer, J.J., *Conventional Deterrence*, Cornell University Press, 1983.

breaking the line of defense and destroying the rear units. The attrition strategy and limited-aims strategy, on the other hand, have the greatest potential to be discouraged, as these strategies generate doubts about success, and high costs to little benefit.

How does the defense integration of the Baltic States affect the deterrence in the collective defense system? National self-defense measures and the creation of a strong regional coalition are equally important alongside collective defense and deterrence instruments. It is also important to understand whether close integration of the Baltic States is possible at all. What are the contributing and inhibiting factors?

Stephen Walt in his classical study on *Origins of Alliances* examined the role of ideology in formation of alliances<sup>5</sup>: what is the impact of culture, history and geography? What is the role of the countries' geography and history integrating their defenses and the impact of these factors on the implementation of deterrence policies in regional policy and collective security?

The preconditions for future integration of the Baltic States defense and security are set in their geography, political system and similar historical experience. The most binding element is the common historical experience. Historically, the attempts to form a functioning defense alliance among the Baltic countries failed, which greatly contributed to their demise in front of Russia's strategy of offensive.

Here, we can also observe the values of free and democratic societies being shared among the Baltics, which makes them more open for building a strong defense and security alliance.

The urgency to synchronize defenses of the Baltic States relates to the need to develop an operational area which would be

relevant to the crisis situation in the territory of 3B. This should be also reflected in the deployment and organization of standing NATO forces in the Baltic States as well as for the Baltic States themselves, to synchronize defense capability development policies, procurement and elements of military command.

Defense synchronization of the Baltic States in certain areas is a key precondition developing certain denial capabilities, as for example, it mostly refers to maritime security and air defense in cooperation with NATO and other Baltic Sea Partnering countries.

In the Baltic Interoperability report of the Baltic Security Strategy Project, a defense expert Glen Grant uses scoring of the level of uncertainty avoidance among the populations of the three Baltic countries to predict impact of social and cultural factors for alliance formation. Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians have a high preference for avoiding uncertainty. Countries exhibiting high uncertainty avoidance maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior and are intolerant of unorthodox behavior and ideas. At the same time all three rank pretty high on the individualism rate – being rather individualistic societies<sup>6</sup>.

In a recent class at the Baltic Defense College a war game was held, where students had to look at the United States national security strategy and then engage with the US officers in the three States (the "US Ambassadors"), and try to push for adding items that would benefit them and improve their security. Each Baltic State delegation went to the US diplomat separately with their own country-specific requests and proposals. This speaks volumes about how the countries think, or do

<sup>5</sup> Walt, S.M., *Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> Grant, G., in Nikers, O., Tabuns, O. (eds) *Baltic Interoperability Report*, The Jamestown Foundation, 2018.

not think, about cooperating among themselves, and how they seek to maximize their bilateral relationships with the US.

Other signs of high uncertainty avoidance are reluctance to take risks, bureaucracy and emotional reliability on plans, rules and regulations. It should be considered that plans may not be followed but their existence is vital for reducing stress as they reduce uncertainty. Here, the importance for interoperability is clear.

These might indicate some of the outstanding challenges for the Baltic States to overcome so to achieve a functioning security alliance and avoid historical mistakes.

## Tools of the analysis

Experts of the Baltic Security Strategy Project (BSSP) have researched and drafted the first Baltic Security Strategy Report. The Report is intended as a guide for security decision makers in the Baltics and their Allied states in regard to the Baltic defense and deterrence, societal security, economic security and cyber security. A dozen of articles provide an assessment and recommendations using an intraregional and interdisciplinary approach. The main objective is to promote a top level discussion on the Baltic security at the relevant Baltic, European and American formats.

The main findings of this research leads us to a conclusion that not only the synchronization of Baltic defenses is vital within the context of effective military capabilities in the region, but all the spectrum of security issues should be reconsidered, allowing a greater emphasis on the intraregional and wider Baltic sea regional cooperation.

Based on our research, we may conclude that enhanced security cooperation and defense integration among the Baltic States is an ultimate instrument for maintaining and developing regional security. It complements the NATO's collective secu-

urity and Europeans Security and Defense Policy instruments, especially in the field of military mobility.

This process should not only strengthen the defenses and security of the Baltic States but also make a credible deterrence policy towards Russia and offer even more successful concept.

The need of further development of the security cooperation between the Baltic States in the fields of energy security, cyber security, financial and societal security and resilience, relates to the consolidation of the common positions of the Baltic States in their relations with the strategic partners of the EU and NATO, as well as with Russia and other parties, improved cross-border cooperation, synchronization of public and private cooperation, synchronization and coordination of the activities among the security and controlling authorities over common peacetime security challenges, the exchange of classified and unclassified information on threat prevention experience and daily routine activities, including measures countering hybrid incidents.

## Baltic defense cooperation 1918-1940

After the end of wars for independence (1918-1920), to a large extent, the cooperation among the Baltic States was inhibited by border claims. Soviet Russia recognized Lithuanian claim on Vilnius. Latvian rights to what is now the Eastern part of the country was contested by both Lithuania and Poland. Due to Estonian assistance to Latvia during the War and the decision of an international border commission, some parishes in Northern Latvia, as well as the Ruhnu Island were recognized as Estonian. Estonian, Latvian and Polish claims towards Russia gave ground for talks of alliance, however Estonia and Latvia signed separate agreements once areas populat-

ed by mostly titular nations of the respective states were recaptured from the Red Army.

In terms of infrastructure, all three Baltic countries inherited a railway system mostly in Russian gauge of 5 ft. There were two Standard (European) gauges (4 ft. 8 1/2 in.) of tracks connecting Eastern Prussia to Riga, crossing cities such as Kaunas and Jelgava on the way, and Riga to Liepāja via Māteikiai. However, the standard gauge system ended at the Western bank of the Daugava River, not allowing Germany to use the railway across the river. This was done in a similar way as in Warsaw, preventing a surprise attack and fast progress across the key transit system.

The rail system interoperability, however, was useful in Latvian and Estonian common military effort in 1919, when Estonia sent two armored trains to assist Latvian Armed Forces against the Russian and German troops led by Bermont. It was also useful for Polish and Latvian common effort in the Battle of Daugavpils in August 1920. The city of Daugavpils is situated at the junction of St. Petersburg-Warsaw, Moscow-Ventspils and Riga-Orel rail lines, which allowed both countries to move 40 000 troops, provisions and ammunition, as well as tanks across a terrain with hills and lakes.

Latvian mobilization plans since the demobilization that followed the War of Independence in 1920 had a number of premises that took into account the geography and transport infrastructure. In regard to a possible war with the Soviet Union, it was assumed that the Eastern part of Latvia was not suitable for spatially extensive warfare. In contrast to Western forests and Southern plains, the East of Latvia is hilly and covered in hundreds of lakes up to 30 square miles wide and many between 100 and 200 feet deep. Therefore the Soviet

Union could be expected to use the limited axis of railway to provide communication and logistics.<sup>7</sup>

The procurements of armored vehicles and tanks were rather influenced by Allied pressure and the needs of the Baltic States to gain British and French support for their recognition and the inclusion in the international trade. The concept of interoperability in the sense of shared technology, upkeep and ammunition was not seriously entertained by Baltic leaders, especially once the power was taken over by authoritarian rule and the ideas of nationalism and autarchy. This was illustrated most sharply in the late 1930s, when, for example, Latvian Armed forces were strictly limited in performing live fire exercises due to an extreme deficit of ammunition, inhibiting the firing skills, the actual battle preparedness and the morale of the troops who could observe the situation<sup>8</sup>.

The concern of maritime security laid ground to Finnish-Estonian cooperation, altogether, their batteries around Tallinn and Helsinki could effectively close the gap to any naval traffic, affecting themselves as well as Russia, Sweden and Germany during a potential conflict.

Estonian and Finnish coastal artilleries had a common fire management system linked by an undersea radio cable. Furthermore, Estonia bought two British made submarines and used the same torpedoes, mines as the Finnish navy, training Estonian personnel in Finland and holding common war games starting in 1937.

Latvian Navy included mobile coastal artillery, submarines, naval aircraft, and light high-speed vessels armed with torpedoes and light cannons. Compared to land

<sup>7</sup> Rozenšteins, H. *Latvijas kara ģeogrāfija*. Rīga, 1935. p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Kuzmins, V. *Latvijas bruņoto spēku mobilizācijas plāni 1939-1940.gadā*. Militārais apskats, Nr. 3/4 (132-133), Militārās literatūras apgādes fonds, Rīga, 2009, p. 49.

forces and air forces, the Latvian Navy was the most expensive structure of the Latvian Armed Forces<sup>9</sup>.

Klaipėda, detached from Germany in 1919 and made a protectorate of the Entente, was taken over by Lithuanian troops in 1923. Despite the fact that they had bought a minesweeper for the defense of Klaipėda city, the Lithuanian Naval force was established only in 1935.

The 80 foreign-made airplanes were mostly British and French (as well as a Soviet plane captured in 1920). Estonian geography, dominated by seaside, including Tallinn situated on a peninsula, prioritized seaplanes and kept them in balance with other types of aircraft.

The 131 aircrafts imported between 1923 and 1938 included mostly British, French, Italian fighter planes, Czech, Belgian and British reconnaissance planes, and some Swedish and Finnish hydroplanes. In the late 1930s the skills of Latvian designers and the capabilities of the State Electrotechnical Factory allowed Latvia to begin producing locally designed airplanes domestically.

Lithuanian Air force was established in 1919. Beginning with a British plane retrieved from the Soviet forces, first planes were bought from Germany and some were designed and produced locally, totaling 123 aircrafts. Main airbases were situated in Kaunas, Īliai and Paņevėžis, while Palanga and Rukla were used seasonally.

The failure of delivering 30 Hawker Hurricanes was a key motivator for Latvia to establish and speed up national aircraft development and production. Between September 1939 and June 1940, 5 fighters and 12 bombers were produced and taken into active duty.

Lithuanian domestic effort in developing and producing domestic aircrafts was motivated by limited access to the sea. Therefore, the air force did not evolve as part of the naval forces like in Great Britain or in close connection with coastal defense as in Estonia. So there was no competition for or redistribution of resources.

Even here, interoperability, in the form of key procurement partners, was biased by threat perception at the foreign policy level. Lithuanian experience and perception of Poland, and less so of Russia, was crucial in cooperation with Germany, in contrast to Estonian and Latvian cooperation with, mostly, the British.

The Baltic States had top literacy rates in the Russian Empire and many Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians were well versed in Russian, the language of administration and education (since 1885, everything except religious education; printing in Lithuanian and Latvian in East Latvia was prohibited), as well as in German or Polish (the language of many landlords.). This, combined with a lack of extensive similar knowledge in either the Soviet or German army, gave a strategic advantage in understanding encrypted communications without delay. This served the Finnish army very well during the wars against the Soviet Union, for the same reasons<sup>10</sup>.

The interconnections, including extensive Baltic minorities in Russia, soldiers of Baltic extraction in Russian military formations (including the Red Riflemen) and family ties also created serious drawbacks. The Museum of Occupation found evidence of many high ranking Latvian army officers being agents of Soviet intelligence as far back as the 1920s and early 1930s. Therefore, it also provokes a question of how it affected the threat assessment and the following

<sup>9</sup> National Armed Forces of the Republic of Latvia, 2018. [http://www.mil.lv/lv/Vienibas/Flotile/Par\\_juras\\_spekiem/Kara\\_flores\\_vesture.aspx](http://www.mil.lv/lv/Vienibas/Flotile/Par_juras_spekiem/Kara_flores_vesture.aspx)

<sup>10</sup> Rislaki, J. Kur beidzas varavīksne, Jumava, Rīga, 2004.

foreign and security policy considerations, including the intraregional cooperation. As, in contrast to Lithuania, four out of first five peacetime mobilization plans showed Germany as a primary threat to Latvia. It could partly be explained by German ethnic policy in the context of a sizeable community of Germans in Latvia (i.e. a possible German intervention, as illustrated by German actions in the Ruhr, Austria, Czechoslovakia). The situation did change after repatriation of Baltic Germans to Germany. Simultaneously, the Soviets abstained from aggression up until the Winter War in November of 1939, making it easier to accept Soviet bases and troops on the Baltic territory as part of "collective security measures" in October.

Latvia and Estonia saw Germany and the Soviet Union as primary threats. This was illustrated by their mobilization plans. Whereas Lithuania viewed Poland as their primary threat, seeking cooperation with Germany and the Soviet Union to contain Poland. As a result, Estonia and Latvia cooperated only between themselves. Lithuania joined them in forming the Baltic Entente once Poland concluded non-aggression pacts with the Soviet Union and Germany, preventing Lithuania from military cooperation with either Berlin or Moscow in case of a renewed conflict with Warsaw. So, it took sixteen years after proclaiming statehood for all Baltic States to conclude the first common sub-regional cooperation framework.

Although Lithuania did not perceive Germany as a principal threat up until the late 1930s, Latvia did. Their mobilization plans included an option for a response in a case of German invasion of Lithuania. Latvia and Lithuania had no defensive fortifications between them. This was used by the Soviet Union in 1940, when a lot of the armed forces tasked with military occupation entered Latvia through Lithuania, rather than crossing the Latvian-Soviet border in the East.

The key weakness was the elementary lack of information exchange. Mobilization plans considered both threats from the Eastern and the South-Western flanks and were prioritized according to the current threat perception. Any changes would take at least six months to prepare, exercise, and implement. Thus, German aggression followed by Soviet pressure led to chaos in the defense planning in Latvia and other two Baltic States. Estonia accepted the ultimatum without even informing Latvia or Lithuania. Whereas Latvian armed forces were more combat-capable in June 1940 than in September 1939, the Soviet Army's presence in Lithuania made the principles of the Latvian mobilization plans useless.

Individually, the independence of the Baltic States was not sustainable, especially using or threatening to use overwhelming military force on two fronts. Despite the nominal changes in state actors, and the changed Polish and German borders in what is now Western Belarus and Kaliningrad, the source regions of military forces not allied with the Baltic States have stayed the same as in 1940. In this regard, the interoperability of the train system throughout the Baltic States, Belarus, Kaliningrad and the rest of Russia was (and still is) a double-edged sword.

Separately, the countries spent more resources on defense than today. For example, Latvia spent 25% of its budget for defense in 1939<sup>11</sup> compared to 5.7% in 2017<sup>12</sup>. And by 1940 even that was not enough to give confidence of being able to deliver. Common planning, procurement and upkeep opportunities, even when already using

<sup>11</sup> Latvijas statistiskā gadagrāmata, Rīga, 1939. <https://www.csb.gov.lv/lv/statistika/statistikas-temas/iedzivotaji/iedzivotaju-skaitis/meklet-tema/261-latvijas-statistiska-gadagramata-1939>

<sup>12</sup> Cik centu saņem nozares no katra nodokļos nomaksātā eiro (infographic), Latvijas Avīze, Rīga, December 15, 2017. <http://www.la.lv/infografika-cik-centu-sanem-nozares-no-katra-nodoklos-nomaksata-eiro>

the same equipment (e.g. Renault tanks) were ignored due to political considerations of narrow interest groups becoming more important than the national security interests in the basic sense of independence, if nothing else. Therefore, the key lesson of needing a better interoperability goes both in promoting smart defense by sharing costs, as well as instilling greater confidence by the effect of scale given by forces with high interoperability.

The conventional threat can be looked at in many scenarios but one point is fundamental; Russia will act with little or no warning and with deception. The importance of communication and decision making is paramount<sup>13</sup>.

## The challenges of Contemporary Baltic Interoperability

NATO defines interoperability as “the ability to act together coherently, effectively and efficiently to achieve Allied tactical, operational and strategic objectives”. Additionally, the term is understood as “the capability to communicate, execute programs, or transfer data among various functional units in a manner that requires the user to have little or no knowledge of the unique characteristics of those units”. This explanation, given by the Official NATO Term database, has been commonly agreed and therefore serves as a point of reference for the defense planning of each of the Baltic States, among others.

The overall balance of forces would likely allow NATO to eventually prevail in a conventional conflict with Russia. But Russia's military strength in the Western Military District and its aggressive military modernization program give it a short-term advantage in the Baltic region. Thus, prudent defense planning in all three Baltic States includes

‘surprise attack’ scenarios which would entail a period of fighting alone before Allied reinforcements could arrive.

To avoid these scenarios, the Baltic States aim first and foremost to deter by denial, i.e. to have, militarily, the ability to inflict sufficient pain on an adversary as to dissuade him from attempting an attack. Such a strategy requires both military capability, and the demonstrated ability to employ it effectively. So far, to the extent they have been tested, both elements have proven adequate. However, limited defense cooperation between the three states also means that both these elements are weaker than they might be.

Whilst the nations do exercise together and also closely with the integrated NATO reinforcements, doing so in a crisis is a whole new ball game with many more critical considerations than just working together. Interoperability must be looked at as coherence both in terms of political agreements and for the capability of the multinational military groupings to deliver violence as a working team<sup>14</sup>. There are many questions that arise from this issue: is it possible at all to have military interoperability between the states with totally different security concepts, do decision makers understand what it all means to fight seriously, is there the political will to send troops to another country, and who can and will give the orders? It is clear that NATO interoperability training has been highly effective at the tactical level. English is now spoken widely at least by commanders and in this regard the three Baltic States stand out as NATO leaders. Also the technical ability to work alongside others grows daily as exercises and relationships improve. But arguably this is not the big challenge. That

<sup>13</sup> Grant, op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> Gigova, N. Massive NATO exercise starts in Poland and the Baltics, CNN, June 4, 2018. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/03/world/nato-exercise-poland-baltics-russia/index.html>

is how the nations will respond to an attack of any sort in those critical hours and perhaps days before NATO is fully engaged<sup>15</sup>.

The Baltic Sea region is complex both politically and geographically. The three Baltic States are often lumped together within NATO as one distinct grouping, likely for ease of description – or perhaps just because of intellectual laziness. This grouping has merits but it is culturally wrong. Thinking that the three will act together in common interest and unison in a crisis may lead decision makers down dangerous false alleys. Even taken as a conceptual grouping the three states do not stand alone. The rest of the Baltic region and the many countries providing NATO reinforcements must also be brought into focus<sup>16</sup>.

NATO has shown little coherent leadership in terms of creating cooperative defense within the Baltic States. The simple act of creating three separate eFP HQs and not endorsing the new Divisional sized headquarters as a full NATO HQ sharply reduces the coherence of any future Baltic military response. There are dangerous gaps in authority and responsibility that need closing. It also creates multiple decision centers for any future NATO and national activity. Some eFP contributions are NATO, and in some cases, like with the Canadian troops deployed to Latvia, there is also an additional national contribution. This also creates further political decision making incoherence<sup>17</sup>.

The EU through ESDP has not so far given its top attention towards the Baltic Defense because NATO is fully engaged. But this argument misses the complexity of the region both for NATO and the EU. Sweden and Finland are not engaged as part of any cooperative venture and the EU could play a serious role by trying to link the two

more firmly into a cooperative operational space. The EU is also creating political uncertainty for the region by the vacillation of some countries about the continuance of sanctions against Russia for their invasion of Ukraine. This weakness will be exploited by Russia and will almost certainly be reflected by some within discussions in the Baltic political spaces as arguments for supporting a Russian line in a crisis. There has not been complete the EU coherence in this matter. Several states like Italy and Spain are showing a certain reservedness in their resolve against Russia,<sup>18</sup> opposing the introduction of the EU sanctions and favoring a “business as usual” approach with Russia<sup>19</sup>.

## Air Defense

In the event of a military crisis involving the Baltic states and Russia, Russia would be expected to make efforts to secure air superiority over the Baltic region and to use air assets to attack the Baltic and NATO targets<sup>20</sup>. Air superiority would also make possible the use of airborne infantry forces, one of Russia’s key rapid reaction capabilities, to seize strategic locations and to disrupt defensive operations.

Against such a threat, the Baltic states presently possess only very limited air defense capabilities. A comprehensive air defense system, however, is well beyond their financial reach. This situation creates vulnerabilities not only for the three states themselves, but also for NATO, whose reinforcement of the region in the event of a crisis would be hindered by a lack of

<sup>18</sup> Shagina, M., EU sanctions policy towards post-Soviet conflicts. UNISCI Journal, Nr. 43, January 2017, p. 77. <https://www.ucm.es/data/cont/media/www/pag-91857/UNISCIDP43-4SHAGINA.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>20</sup> Breedlove, P.M. “Toward Effective Air Defense in Northern Europe,” Atlantic Council Issue Brief, February 2018. <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/toward-effective-air-defense-in-northern-europe>

<sup>15</sup> Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

air cover. Air defense is thus probably the most pressing military capability shortfall in the Baltic region<sup>21</sup>.

While not members of NATO, it is inevitable that Finnish and Swedish air defenses would be activated in the event of a Baltic crisis. At the very least, Finland and Sweden would need to be ready to respond to incursions into their airspace that stem from the lack of strategic depth of the Baltic States. In these circumstances, Finland and Sweden on the one hand, and NATO on the other hand will share similar goals for air defense and each will benefit from cooperation.

At present, limited arrangements justified on the basis of flight safety permit the exchange of air surveillance data among Finland, Sweden and NATO. In a crisis, a fuller exchange of data will be in the interests of both parties, but this is not something that can be achieved without prior planning and rehearsal. Finnish and Swedish sensitivities make this difficult; nonetheless NATO should pursue appropriate exchange arrangements with the two countries, to be activated on a dual-key basis, and regularly exercised<sup>22</sup>.

## Maritime security

The Baltic States do not have the capability to deny adversary from projecting power into their exclusive economic zones, territorial waters, port facilities and other littoral areas and establishing temporary sea control in those regions. Individually and collectively they are each and all susceptible to the type of naval tactics Russia used against Georgia in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War<sup>23</sup>.

Surprisingly, and unfortunately, the Baltic countries also do not have full, integrated and shared awareness across the maritime surface, subsurface and air domains. Each country has some of the capabilities, to a varying degree, across multiple agencies, with varying success at sharing this information. There also is no full-time command center in place to direct the appropriate level of armed response in a timely manner.

There is a need for a maritime security strategy which should be developed in the nearest future. Such a strategy would discuss the maritime situation, the threats, and the importance of the maritime domain to the national economy and security and verbalizing how it wants to efficiently and effectively tackle the maritime missions it needs to ensure its security.

This strategy would identify the important investments required in order to ensure a robust maritime domain awareness, capable and responsive operational centers, and coordinated or shared maritime security purchasing among the Baltic States to ensure compatibility and to reduce acquisition costs.

A combined and cooperative Naval Operational Center, or the maritime capability of a Joint Operational Center, would best focus the Baltic States maritime security capabilities to mutual benefit. Some high-end naval warfare missions must inevitably be accomplished by NATO forces. A standing operations center would facilitate the planning, rehearsal, and implementation of the needed high-end NATO naval forces and capabilities that the Baltic States can rely on in the case of Russian state-on-state aggression.

The other mine warfare and other constabulary maritime security enforcement missions, can only be executed by Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian sailors at sea on capable, affordable vessels. Sharing the

<sup>21</sup> Lawrence, A. Challenges in Developing a Common Baltic Air Defense, in Nikers, O., Tabuns O. (eds) Baltic Interoperability Report, The Jamestown Foundation, 2018, p. 37.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> Combes, W. Defense and Deterrence, In Nikers O., Tabuns O. (eds) Baltic Security Strategy Report, The Jamestown Foundation, 2019.

development, production and maintenance costs of these expensive vessels, whether they are patrol boats or mine warfare ships, and other armaments is the best way to ensure affordability.

Moreover, there is a need to change the way of understanding of the meaning of coastal navies. Coastal navies need to identify and document their requirements and build their forces to meet their specific requirements. This discussion needs to be a "maritime security" discussion and not a "naval" one. This includes how we talk about coastal navies in both the NATO and European Union maritime strategies, which are not specific enough with respect to small navies, and cause these navies to focus too much thought and money on high-end naval capabilities that take away from what they need to successfully secure their maritime spaces.

While there have been opportunities for common defense acquisition programs (recent examples include self-propelled artillery, infantry fighting vehicles, and short range air defense systems) the three states have apparently been unable to generate sufficient political will to work together and overcome the challenges that inevitably arise in multinational defense cooperation.

What is more, because of limited naval and air force capabilities, a good idea would be to create common services e.g. naval squadron. It must be underpinned by visible cooperation among Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania presenting the will and abilities to be united. It will enhance combined Host Nation Support capacities and those could be strengthened by revised legal regulation allowing faster movement of military assets including creation of so-called 'NATO Schengen Zone'<sup>24</sup>.

## Conclusions

Current and prospective developments and issues within the sub-regional framework among the Baltic countries according to this study do not only challenge existing policies of trilateral cooperation but also theoretical frameworks of deterrence and alliance formation. Now, we are in demand of a broader Baltic Sea defense and security strategy, taking cross-structural and cross-organizational perspectives beyond NATO and the EU.

NATO and the EU must show a more coherent leadership in terms of creating cooperative defense within the Baltic States. The simple act of creating three separate eFP HQs and not endorsing the new Divisional sized headquarters as a full NATO HQ sharply reduces the coherence of any future Baltic military response.

The EU, through ESDP, has to become more engaged in the Baltic Defense. Sweden and Finland should become part of a cooperative venture, and the EU should turn into a cooperative battle space in order to play a serious role by trying to link the two more firmly.

Within nearest future, a sub-regional military Schengen for ground, air and sea should be developed, including Poland, Denmark, Germany, Finland and Sweden and continue to develop common and harmonized space for the introduction of NATO military command structures, by creating a common Baltic operational policy, procedures, laws, doctrines, plans and training in advance of a crisis.

Also regional combat coordination by a standing operational divisional Headquarters should be created either alone or with NATO, creating a recognized "standing" NATO operational reserve for 3B of at least brigade strength from the nearest countries, i.e. Poland, Germany, Denmark, Finland and Sweden.

<sup>24</sup> Combes, W., *op. cit.*

A Baltic Ammunition Agency, with the primary role in harmonizing public tenders, building stock, providing a gateway with NSPA (NATO) and US and for coordinating other allied support is a necessary instrument for the Baltic interoperability, which should be achieved in the short term. A stronger and a more visible brigade level exercise cooperation and creation of a senior officers and officials strategy and operations course at BDCOL is a prerequisite in training and education of multi-nationally functioning officers.

If necessary, there should be acceptance of differing concepts, structures and equipment in the future, but also a lead nation "Baltic Centre of Excellence and Lead" concept for technical areas like communications, SOF, maintenance, artillery, cyber etc., should be established. This also includes setting up a Multinational/Baltic Formation HQ with the primary task to operationalize the Joint Operational Area. It should not replace national responsibilities, C2 nor freedom of action of national forces, but shall become a hub for operational/tactical thinking.

This, in turn, could be used as agents for transformation and synergy amongst the Baltic structures and tasks. Contingency planning and readiness to exercise command through different phases would be essential but furthermore, functions such as a training and exercise platform, as well as a point of contact for Allied interaction and cooperation is important, too.

## References

- Breedlove, P.M. "Toward Effective Air Defense in Northern Europe," Atlantic Council Issue Brief, February 2018, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/toward-effective-air-defense-in-northern-europe>
- Gigova, N. Massive NATO exercise starts in Poland and the Baltics, CNN,

June 4, 2018. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/03/world/nato-exercise-poland-baltics-russia/index.html>

- Kuzmins, V. Latvijas bruņoto spēku mobilizācijas plāni 1939-1940.gadā. Militārais apskats, Nr. 3/4 (132-133), Militārais literatūras apgādes fonds, Rīga, 2009.
- Latvijas statistiskā gadagrāmata, Rīga, 1939, <https://www.csb.gov.lv/lv/statistika/statistikas-temas/iedzivotaji/iedzivotaju-skaitis/meklet-tema/261-latvijas-statistiska-gadagramata-1939>
- Mearsheimer, J.J. Conventional Deterrence, Cornell University Press, 1983.
- Nikers O., Tabuns O. (eds), Baltic Interoperability Report, The Jamestown Foundation, 2018.
- Nikers, O., Tabuns O. (eds), Baltic Security Strategy Report, The Jamestown Foundation, 2019.
- Rislaki, J. Kur beidzas varavīksne, Jumava, Rīga, 2004.
- Romanovs, U., Andžāns, M. "The Trilateral Military Cooperation of the Baltic States in the "New Normal" Security Landscape", September 29, 2017.
- Rozendšteins, H. Latvijas kara ģeogrāfija. Rīga, 1935.
- Shagina, M., EU sanctions policy towards post-Soviet conflicts. UNISCI Journal, Nr. 43, January 2017. <https://www.ucm.es/data/cont/media/www/pag-91857/UNISCIDP43-4SHAGINA.pdf>
- Walt, S.M. Origins of Alliances, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987.

---

**OLEVS NIKERS** is PhD student at the Riga Stradins University and Director of the Baltic Security Strategy Project. Since 2016, he has been a Senior analyst at the Jamestown Foundation and a member of the Association for Advancement of Baltic Studies. A Fulbright alumnus, Olevs earned his Master's degree in International Affairs at the Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University, in 2016. He graduated from the Baltic Defense College Civil Servants Course, in 2003, as well as the University of Latvia in Political Science,

in 2001. From 2009 to 2010, he was the chairman of the international affairs and security policy think tank for the political party "Jaunais Laiks" (New Era). Olevs was recipient of the Transatlantic Fellowship Program of The World Affairs Institute in 2017.

**OTTO TABUNS** is a visiting lecturer at the Riga Graduate School of Law and co-host of Latvia Weekly current affairs podcast. He has previous experience in strategic communication and defense planning. He is an author of articles on Latvian and European security in fields such as regional military cooperation and societal security. He is the Executive Director of the Baltic Security Strategy Project, a member of Latvian Association of Political Scientists, Latvian Japan Alumni Association, and the Association for Advancement of Baltic Studies.