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# Could a BLACK-BAT Have Secured Ukraine?

Paul Poast and Johannes Urpelainen believe the answer is yes. In fact, they're convinced this military option, which could pattern itself after the three-nation Baltic Battalion, remains the most reliable one to secure Kiev's long-term future.

By Paul Poast and Johannes Urpelainen for ISN

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[This site](#) and the news are understandably dominated by Ukraine. World leaders have described the situation as potentially "[apocalyptic](#)" and Russia's forceful acquisition of Crimea harkens back to a time of [territorial power politics](#), increasing fears of a renewed Cold War.

Many commentators have offered their insights into the ongoing crisis and how it could play out over the coming months and years. We are not seeking to add to this commentary. Instead, we ask a different question, "if Ukraine survives the present crisis, then what?" Moreover, what could have gone differently over the past two decades to prevent the crisis from occurring? Was a showdown over Ukraine inevitable?

We argue that it was not inevitable. This contention is based on the relationship between states in democratic transition and international organizations (see [here](#) and [here](#)). States in the midst of consolidating their democratic institutions can and have made use of international organizations to facilitate their transitions. The experience for some of these states, especially those in Eastern Europe, suggests that the situation in Ukraine did not need to reach the point of crisis. In fact, it seems that Ukraine's inability to join certain regional international organizations (IOs) has played a major role in bringing the crisis about. This suggests that Ukraine's future can be secured by creating its own IO modeled on the Baltic Battalion (BALTBAT).

## Ukraine and regional international organizations

Ukraine has membership in a number of IOs, such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. But Ukraine lacks full membership in the most lucrative regional IOs, namely NATO and the EU. Ukraine has remained outside these organizations during a time where other post-Soviet states throughout Central and Eastern Europe have secured membership. While some of these other states were the relatively stable and large countries of Central Europe (e.g. Poland), others were immersed in the devastating wars following the collapse of Yugoslavia (e.g. Croatia), and still others, like Ukraine, directly border Russia (e.g. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania).

Ukraine's accession failure was not due to a lack of effort on the part of its post-Soviet government. Following the end of Communist rule, the Central European countries of Poland, Hungary and

Czechoslovakia created the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) to signal to their Western neighbors a competence and willingness to engage in regional economic cooperation and, eventually, to pursue Western integration. However, the 'Visegrad three' decided to prevent Ukraine from joining CEFTA. The leaders in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia were aware of Ukraine's desire to be a CEFTA member, but as Hungarian Prime Minister Jozsef Antall remarked, "Ukraine should be able to join the world and the European countries through various channels. However, I do not think it would be expedient to include Ukraine [in an association with the Visegrad countries]"<sup>[1]</sup> Ostensibly, the reasons pertained to Ukraine being in a different stage of development than the Visegrad three countries. Instead, CEFTA expanded into Slovenia, leaving Ukraine out.

We cannot prove that Ukraine's membership in CEFTA or other regional organizations would have changed the country's future, but there are reasons to believe so. For the Visegrad group, CEFTA was a critical early step toward a decidedly Western foreign policy - one that eventually led to EU and NATO membership. Had Ukraine followed a similar course, it could have achieved a more secure position *vis-à-vis* its mighty Eastern neighbor.

What, then, could Ukraine have done differently? The Baltic experience offers some lessons.

### **The Baltic model**

During the Second World War, Hitler was desperate for Ukraine's [land and natural resources](#), and this desire motivated his ignominious Russian campaign. Hitler, however, never pined for Lithuania, Latvia, or Estonia as he did for Ukraine (though he did [publicly acknowledge](#) that the fate of Lithuania was in Germany's interests). Nevertheless, the Baltic experience offers lessons for Ukraine in the realm of geopolitics.

Upon independence, the Baltic states [feared a renewal of Russian aggression](#). NATO members, particularly the United States, shared this concern, but Russia was adamantly [opposed to Baltic membership in NATO](#). Wary of provoking Russia, NATO withheld membership from the Baltic states.

Rather than accept their fate, the Baltic states took the initiative in proposing the Baltic Battalion (BALTBAT) to help pool together military resources. In a Memorandum of Understanding, the Nordic states (some of whom, like Denmark, were also NATO members) offered material and technical assistance to BALTBAT.

This was a smart move by the Baltic states. States with fledgling democratic institutions (such as the Baltic states at the time and Ukraine at present) tend to benefit from forming their own organizations, as the road to membership in more lucrative established organizations, such as NATO, is often unavailable. Forming their own organizations enables these states to tailor institutions to suit their needs, pool limited resources, provide a low cost means for established states to filter assistance through the organization, and, perhaps most importantly, signal a desire to participate in the increasing international 'legalization' favored by the established Western democracies.

### **Following the Baltic model?**

Were similar options available to Ukraine? Given its inability to join CEFTA (and, ultimately, EFTA and then the EU) could Ukraine have followed a similar path by creating its own IO? And would such a strategy be effective today?

A regional integration scenario might prove viable for non-NATO members in the Black Sea region, such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. In a Black Sea equivalent of BALTBAT - call it BLACK-BAT - both regional NATO (particularly Turkey) and non-NATO states could provide technical and material

assistance to these Black Sea states. While BALTBAT was oriented towards peacekeeping operations, a BLACK-BAT organization might take on a different focus, such as naval cooperation in the Black Sea and beyond. Indeed, Ukraine actually took steps in this direction. Just as the Baltic states offered to participate in NATO peacekeeping operations without a guarantee of NATO membership, Ukraine participated in [NATO's "Ocean Shield"](#) naval operations to prevent piracy off the eastern coast of Africa.

Besides regional integration, Ukraine's other alternatives appear unattractive. First, Ukraine could follow the example of Austria during the Cold War, by existing as a [neutral buffer](#) state between NATO and Russia. However, [research shows](#) that the fate of buffer states is precarious, as the major powers on either side have an incentive to invade and occupy the buffer.

Second, Ukraine could suffer the fate of Germany after World War II: being [divided into two countries](#), a "West" Ukraine and an "East" Ukraine (producing the irony that the decision to split Germany in 1945 was reached at the [Yalta conference](#)). Splitting the country recognizes the [sharp divisions](#) between the Eastern and Western halves of the country. Ukraine, as [Lincoln Mitchell](#) writes, is a country "where the western half was Poland, the eastern half was Russia, and Kiev was pulled in both directions". A West Ukraine would be free to join NATO, while East Ukraine could either be annexed by Russia or remain in its sphere of influence as an independent state. However, particularly if Russia annexed East Ukraine and took steps to stop NATO accession of West Ukraine, NATO and Russia might again be drawn into conflict.

Third, NATO could call Russia's bluff. Russia eventually relented [to Baltic membership](#). The United States and its allies could move forward with accession talks. Of course, this risks provoking even more aggressive measures by Russia.

In the short to medium term, none of these are attractive alternatives. Each risks either unnecessarily escalating the crisis or permanently relegating Ukraine to secondary status in the European system. The Baltic experience points to a more constructive approach, one in which Ukraine can take charge of its own security without concerns of Russian reprisal or Western rejection. To paraphrase [Theodore Roosevelt](#), this middle course suggests that Ukraine's leadership avoid inflammatory rhetoric towards Russia, but grab hold of a BLACK-BAT.

*For more information on issues and events that shape our world, please visit the [ISN Blog](#) or browse our [resources](#).*

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[1] "Three Visegrad Leaders Discuss Ties," 14 March 1992, in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report: East Europe (hereafter, FBIS-EEU) 25. March 1992: 2-3.

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