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# NORDIC-BALTIC SECURITY AND US FOREIGN POLICY

A DURABLE TRANSATLANTIC LINK?



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the more than two decades that separate the end of the Cold War from the Ukraine crisis, a security link of considerable importance has developed between the United States and the Nordic-Baltic region. The dynamics of the partnerships maintained by the Nordic and Baltic states and the US as well as, more broadly, NATO, have attracted increased international scrutiny since 2014. This paper seeks to examine both the strengths and weaknesses that have defined the security ties between the Nordic-Baltic region and the United States during the post-Cold War era.

As the 1990s began, the Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – sought to Westernize their security structures. Nordic initiatives proved important to ensure that relevant civil-military assistance was forthcoming despite some concerns. It is argued that this assistance proved formative for later Baltic accession to NATO, and was thus a significant contribution which ensured that the region became better integrated within the expanding transatlantic security community. As was demonstrated by their contributions to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan after 2002, the newly transformed Baltic military organizations emerged as niche security providers in the expeditionary context. Drawing on their long-standing expertise in international conflict management, the Nordic states contributed significant civilian and military resources to the same mission. These expeditionary contributions further strengthened the region's transatlantic security ties.

The US has played a managerial role in the transatlantic reassurance/deterrence measures that have been put in place since the onset of the Ukraine crisis in March 2014. With NATO stepping-up its monitoring of key flashpoints while streamlining rapid response capabilities should any ally find itself in difficulty, Washington has worked closely with its allies and partners to improve European defence capabilities both before and after the crisis. This has included significant contributions to joint military training exercises, deeper bilateral military cooperation and providing new options for defence procurement.

While many strong connections have been accomplished, a number of factors could potentially place US-Nordic-Baltic security cooperation under stress. Firstly, while the US is not abandoning Europe, its “rebalance” to Asia, disillusionment with European defence expenditure cuts and the effects of changing domestic demographic shifts on US foreign policy mean that Europe should not expect the same type of US security presence that it enjoyed during the Cold War. The transatlantic partnership will face a number of uncertainties should Europe not assume a greater share of the collective security burden, and the Nordic-Baltic region is no exception in this regard.

Questions surrounding the defence of various Baltic Sea islands and orchestrated destabilization using Russian-speaking minorities have the potential to impact regional and transatlantic security relations, including bilateral and multilateral security assistance, for example, in the form of NATO's Article 5.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the two decades and more that separate the end of the Cold War from the current Ukraine crisis, the Nordic-Baltic region has developed an especially strong defence and security relationship with the United States.<sup>1</sup> This has taken place bilaterally involving individual states, multilaterally, and within the context of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The security link that has developed throughout this time has proven remarkably adaptive to the emerging challenges that have required collective transatlantic action over the last twenty years.

This process began during the early 1990s with the Nordic security assistance, which served as the foundation for the then newly re-independent Baltic states to later emerge as allies that were increasingly flexible in the face of collective transatlantic security challenges. The partnership has involved engagement on a global level with US-Nordic-Baltic cooperation to export security taking place in distant strategic environments as diverse as Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa. However, in the contemporary security context currently defined by the Ukraine crisis, US “rebalancing” towards Asia, turbulent domestic politics on both sides of the Atlantic and the European economic and financial crisis have shown that the durability of the security link between the United States and the Nordic-Baltic region still has the potential to come under stress.

This paper seeks to assess questions related to the durability of Nordic-Baltic-United States security relations under changing global security circumstances. Section one will analyse the contribution of Nordic assistance towards Baltic security as the latter restored their independence during the early 1990s. It will be argued that this created the foundation for the Baltic states to later emerge as capable small allies within NATO. Section two will argue that the transatlantic link within the Nordic-Baltic region has been maintained through successful expeditionary security provision, most notably under NATO’s ISAF in Afghanistan. Sections three and four will examine the transatlantic reassurance/deterrence effort during the Ukraine crisis and its implications for Nordic-Baltic security, as well as the changing US perception of European defence and the consequences for Europe arising from the US’s proposed “rebalancing” towards Asia.

The final section will discuss potential “grey zones” in Nordic-Baltic security in a transatlantic context. On the Nordic side, the focus is on complicated contingency defence for the Baltic island of Gotland (Sweden) and the Åland Islands (Finland), while concerns on the Baltic side come with regard to the position of Russian-speaking minorities in relation to the “hybrid” tactics that Moscow previously utilized during the March 2014 annexation of Crimea. This paper will argue that while a strengthened post-Cold War security link with Washington has emerged for the Nordic-Baltic region through its strong commitment to Western-led out-of-area crisis management, the durability of this link could nevertheless come under stress due to issues concerning the region’s territorial defence in light of the Ukraine crisis and contemporary shifts in the US foreign policy outlook.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper will refer to the Nordic states as Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden and the Baltic states as Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

## ESTABLISHING SECURITY COOPERATION DURING THE 1990S

In broad convergence with the evolving security perception of the United States, the Baltic and Nordic states have undertaken a number of important cooperative security policy measures since the early 1990s. The time in which this cooperation has occurred has coincided with an era in which the transatlantic partnership has had to continually adjust to manage increasingly multi-faceted global security challenges. This has been evidenced by the way that NATO – the prime institution underlying this partnership – has changed its stance from Cold War deterrence against the threat of the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact to assume a contemporary management role focused upon the alleviation of wider security problems in a regional or global context.

In order to locate the Nordic-Baltic security relationship within the framework of a wider transatlantic security partnership, it is worth first outlining the circumstances in which the Nordic states, acting as providers, undertook a crucial role in facilitating the development of Baltic security and defence policy during the early 1990s. Nordic assistance supported both the enhancement of Baltic territorial defence capacity as well as setting the basis for the Baltic states to eventually emerge – in their own right – as niche security providers in line with the expeditionary dimension of transatlantic security provision.

Having re-established their independence at the beginning of the decade, the 1990s was not surprisingly an era when the Baltic states found themselves as security consumers.<sup>2</sup> Clive Archer has argued that the security conception initially favoured by the fledgling Baltic policy elite focused almost exclusively on the narrow idea of collective defence, a practice that was better suited to the then very recently defunct Cold War era.<sup>3</sup> This perception contradicted the increasingly widening notion of security which both the EU and NATO were developing as the 1990s progressed, with both attempting to adjust their security posture towards the management of global and regional “risks” rather than an inter-state “threat”.<sup>4</sup>

Such divergence thus had the potential to undermine the Baltic quest for NATO membership – at that time their core security objective – if policy thinking in this area did not evolve considerably. The neighbouring Nordic states had long embraced the idea of security comprised of an indispensable balance between both military and civilian aspects. Thus, Nordic assistance, which broadly consisted of the transfer of expertise and financing, ultimately facilitated a shift in the Baltic security conception to include

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2 Apart from a small number of personnel with experience from the Soviet military and some enthusiastic young recruits, the Baltic armed forces possessed “no money and little infrastructure” in the years immediately following the restoration of their independence in 1991. These circumstances dictated that initial security consumption would be inevitable, see James S. Corum, *Development of the Baltic Armed Forces in Light of Multinational Deployments*, (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2013), pp. 7–8.

3 Clive Archer, “Nordic Involvement in the Baltic States Security: Needs, Response and Success”, *European Security*, vol. 7 no.3 (1998), pp 43–62.

4 For an extensive analysis of this change in NATO’s posture after the Cold War, see Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, “Reflexive Security: NATO and International Risk Society”, *Millennium*, vol. 30 no. 2 (2001), pp. 285–309.

greater liberal emphasis on areas such as international peacekeeping, civil defence, internal security and the emergency services.<sup>5</sup> This widening security conception was to emerge later on as a major asset for the Baltic states' security policy within the transatlantic security context as it laid the foundations that enabled each state to quickly develop compatibility with NATO's security structures and thus helped to ultimately ensure that each Baltic state successfully met the conditions of NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP) leading up to accession in 2004.

Addressing the transformation in Baltic civil-military development specifically, Soviet rule had left in its wake a negative civil-military culture, remnants of which initially remained in the newly established Baltic armed forces of the early 1990s. This was the view of the Baltic Defence College's inaugural Commandant, Michael Clemmesen, who observed that the quality of military training was poor and the treatment of service personnel was often counter-productively harsh. The Baltic states lacked the financial resources to invest in an array of social services and military spending was a very low priority. In terms of the civilian defence policy establishment, Clemmesen outlined a considerable dearth of expertise in the respective Baltic defence ministries.<sup>6</sup>

Although the arrangement only existed for a brief time beyond 1992, an example of effective Nordic security provision easing these difficulties came through the so-called "Viro-projekti", under which Finland was to have an especially constructive influence on Estonia's defence progression, providing considerable financial aid to enable a build-up of defence capacity and Western-quality training. In terms of the high command, which was singled out as being of core importance, organizational experience was transferred from retired Finnish officers to those taking up the leadership of the Estonian Defence Force (EDF).<sup>7</sup> While the sentiments of some NATO members would soon change, many Western actors were initially reluctant to provide the same kind of military training because they were conscious of not wanting to risk provoking Russia. Conversely Finland, as a militarily non-aligned state, could perform this task in a suitably low-key manner.

With the support of the Nordic states and other Western allies, a joint Baltic Battalion (BALTBAT) for peacekeeping was established in 1994. This was essentially a project that sought to put the wider security conception then being acquired by the Baltic states into action. In first aiming to transfer knowledge and skills gained from the Nordic experience of UN peacekeeping, Annika Bergman outlines that, from the Nordic perspective, the project was compatible with the wider Nordic traditions of international solidarity and support for multilateral institutions.

Hence, perceiving well-trained peacekeepers as always being in demand by the United Nations (UN), the Danish Ministry of Defence expressed the view that Nordic assistance in this regard was a simultaneous effort to support the capacity of Baltic security policy

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5 Archer, "Nordic Involvement in the Baltic States Security", p54.

6 Michael Clemmesen, "Foreign Military Assistance" in Hans Mouritzen (ed.), *Bordering Russia: Theory and Prospects for Europe's Baltic Rim* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 234-239.

7 Erik Männik, "Development of the Estonian Defence: Finnish Assistance", *Baltic Defence Review*, 7 (2002), p. 36.

as well as the UN.<sup>8</sup> While the project held these normative undertones, it also served to improve both the territorial defence and NATO integration prospects of the Baltic three. Firstly, with most Western states paying heed to the “Russia first” priority stressed in President Clinton’s US foreign policy during the 1990s, the development of a joint-peacekeeping battalion provided a politically benign setting for the Baltic states to receive support from partners which nevertheless stood to bring side-benefits for their territorial defence capacity. Indeed, BALTBAT proved to be a well-defined gathering point for the Western assistance available to support greater military professionalization. The various enhancements ranged from donations of military equipment to the language training required for international deployments.<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, the BALTBAT project proved formatively beneficial as the Baltic states progressed through the NATO accession process. As peacekeeping was an aptitude in particular demand within the transatlantic division of labour at that time, the Baltic states themselves perceived BALTBAT as an effort to demonstrate that their security conception was developing along lines that were compatible with NATO’s evolving strategic concept. Indeed, as Albert Zaccor has argued, in Lithuania’s case, Vilnius came to see being part of an interdependent security web as a better option for eventual NATO integration compared to the initial prioritization of a narrow emphasis on territorial defence.<sup>10</sup> Nordic security assistance proved to be a key facilitator of this strategic transition.

Finally, with the challenge of the Membership Action Plan (MAP) awaiting the Baltic states after NATO’s Washington Summit in 1999, the progress that was made through earlier cooperation with the Nordic states served as important preparation for what was then to be the consuming task for the Baltic security policy establishments. The Nordics can be credited with providing the Baltic states with the early tutelage which assisted the promulgation of civil and democratic control over their armed forces, and guidance which encouraged military education promoting respect for liberal values such as human rights, as well as the significant role for civilian expertise in military and security planning that was built into this. With Nordic assistance, embedding these tendencies early in the transition process provided the Baltic states with the springboard to successfully meet the requirements of NATO’s MAP process later on.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, this enshrinement of liberal civil-military reform created the opportunity for the Baltic states to emerge as niche security producers in line with transatlantic

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8 Annika Bergman, “The Nordic Militaries: Forces for Good?” in Lorraine M. Elliott and Graeme Cheeseman (eds.), *Forces for Good: Cosmopolitan Militaries in the Twenty-First Century*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 176–177.

9 Mel Huang, “Security: Lynchpin of Baltic Cooperation”, in Graeme P. Herd and Jennifer D.P. Moroney (eds.), *Security Dynamics in the Former Soviet Bloc*, (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), pp. 36–38.

10 Albert Zaccor, “The Lithuanian Army: A Tool for Re Joining Europe”, *European Security*, vol. 6 no.1 (1997), p.111.

11 Based on its incentivizing of the internalization of these liberal norms within candidate states, the argument has been made that NATO was a key influence for the spread of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, see Rachel A. Epstein, “NATO Enlargement and the Spread of Democracy: Evidence and Expectations”, *Security Studies*, vol. 14 no. 1 (2005), p. 65.



objectives within the expeditionary setting. Thus the cumulative effect of dual Nordic and wider NATO influence on Baltic security policy was a two-fold strengthening of the wider region's transatlantic link, with Baltic territorial integrity assured after 2004 under the military guarantees of NATO's Article 5. The link was strengthened further when the Baltic states emerged as contributors to Western-led out-of-area missions, most notably ISAF in Afghanistan.

While this section has primarily focused on the Nordic-Baltic cooperation in the 1990s which paved the way for the later enhancement of the region's transatlantic link, it must be remembered that mild differences in perceptions existed between the Western partners sponsoring the enhancement of Baltic security. For instance, the Finnish Defence Force's then Chief of Defence, Juhani Kaskeala, has claimed that Finland came under pressure from major NATO allies such as the US, the UK, and Germany concerning the idea that should Finland join NATO, Helsinki would be responsible for Estonia's defence should a conflict arise. The attraction of NATO membership to Finland declined for a significant time thereafter, with the Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari telling the US Secretary of State Warren Christopher that "The Nordic countries cannot guarantee the security of the Baltic states – only the US military deterrence is able to do it".<sup>12</sup>

However, beyond this discord, the influence of both the US and the Nordic states should be perceived as a successful division of labour. The US, as NATO's cornerstone state, provided the incentive of hard security guarantees that served to assure Baltic political development, while the Nordic states supported wider civilian notions within the Baltic security conception. This enhanced comprehensive security domestically. However, perhaps more importantly from the perspective of transatlantic partnership, this also supported more holistic Baltic security policies which later enabled stable expeditionary engagement within "increasingly complex military-political-social environments", the latter being a trait that was especially demanded of those undertaking transatlantic security provision from the 1990s onwards.<sup>13</sup> Thus the strength of the Nordic-Baltic transatlantic link was enhanced both in terms of territorial security and though increased capability to contribute to transatlantic security objectives.

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12 Juhani Kaskeala and Martti Ahtisaari cited in "Finnish Daily: Finland Refused to Join NATO for Fear of Having to Defend Estonia", *Eesti Rahvusringhääling*, March 24 2015. <http://news.err.ee/v/bad78113-2e2f-42fe-aa45-221c54d661ed> .

13 Anthony Forster, *Armed Forces and Society in Europe*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2006), pp. 5–6.

## THE NORDIC-BALTIC REGION AND GLOBAL SECURITY COOPERATION

As the lone superpower in the international system, the focus of US foreign policy is naturally configured with a global perspective. The transatlantic partnership forged over many decades between Washington and its European allies has been a key connection as the US has sought to lead in areas such as crisis management, the prevention of genocide, counter-terrorism, counter-piracy etc. Assuming that the alleviation of the aforementioned global-level problems served the common good during the two decades and more that lie between the end of the Cold War and the ongoing Ukraine crisis, Washington has encouraged its European allies to increasingly develop their expeditionary capabilities. During this period NATO has largely been perceived as a place where the transatlantic partnership can pool and develop its security management resources.<sup>14</sup>

First brought to light by the NATO air campaign against Serbia in 1999 but fostered predominantly by the less-than successful allied experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq after 2001 and 2003 respectively and illuminated by Robert Gates, then US Secretary for Defence, in his farewell speech to European allies in 2011, it is often perceived that a troublesome divide has emerged in the transatlantic partnership. This is often based on the idea that it is the US and a select few others which commonly shoulder the largest share of the security burden by taking on the strenuous combat intensive missions while a sizeable group of allies are only interested in less burdensome civilian security projects.<sup>15</sup> Gates framed this explicitly in 2011, “In the past, I’ve worried openly about NATO turning into a two-tiered alliance: between members who specialize in ‘soft’ humanitarian, development, peacekeeping, and talking tasks, and those conducting the ‘hard’ combat missions”.<sup>16</sup>

While the transatlantic partnership is genuinely out of balance concerning the essential areas of defence spending and combat risk-sharing, the importance of cooperation in “softer” areas should still not be totally dismissed as a means through which greater transatlantic security links can be established. Indeed, it has been argued that to retain its relevance as a flexible organization for security management, NATO must meet the triple challenge of collective defence, crisis management and collective security inclusively.<sup>17</sup> Cumulative fulfilment of these three core tasks requires both “soft” and “hard” aspects.

In discussing contributions to expeditionary crisis management arising from the Nordic-Baltic region, beginning with the Nordic states, this section will give a brief insight into how the different kinds of contributions that have been made have served to enhance

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14 See, for example, Patrick Morgan, “NATO and European Security: The Creative Use of an International Organization”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 26 no.3 (2003), pp. 49–74.

15 See, for example, James Sperling and Mark Webber, “NATO: From Kosovo to Kabul”, *International Affairs*, vol. 85 no. 3 (2009), pp. 507–508.

16 Robert Gates, “The Future of NATO”, Speech Transcript, US Department of Defense, June 10 2011. <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1581>.

17 David S. Yost, *NATO's Difficult Balance*, (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2014).

the region's transatlantic link. The Nordic contribution to international peacekeeping under the auspices of the UN is well known. It has been recorded that the Nordic states provided 25% of the total troop contributions to UN peacekeeping missions during the Cold War era.<sup>18</sup>

While two states within the Nordic constellation – Sweden and Finland – cemented their official position of military non-alignment after WWII, the role that both assumed in this regard had hidden benefits for the West. The major NATO allies were not politically suitable for peacekeeping tasks during the Cold War. However, with neutral European states such as Finland and Sweden possessing the same liberal ideology while holding the access to shape peacekeeping doctrine, their contributions in this area made sure that Western influence was not absent from a central component of the UN's conflict management function.

The collapse of the Soviet Union transformed the international system and changed the suitability requirements for international peacekeepers. The outbreak of inter-ethnic conflict in the Balkans had consequences for European security in the early 1990s and NATO moved to adjust its strategic concept from its Cold War emphasis on deterrence to out-of-area security management. Hence, as Peter Viggo Jakobsen outlines, peacekeeping techniques and best practice rapidly became aptitudes of prime transatlantic demand, and the armed forces of major NATO powers such as the US and UK turned to their Nordic partners for insight and expertise transfer in this field. With the dramatic rise in suitable contributors to international peace operations since the 1990s, it has been argued that the Nordic states have lost their comparative advantage in this regard.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, far greater post-Cold War Western involvement in crisis management has largely brought the Nordic states into line with US recommendations for greater military transformation towards expeditionary force structures. While not exclusively due to the US-Nordic partnership, the relationship has nonetheless enabled the countries of the region to reform their armed forces to varying degrees and refocus their foreign and security policies. Denmark and Sweden have arguably undergone the deepest transformations (near complete focus on expeditionary operations in concert with the US, NATO, the UN, and the EU [the latter only in Sweden's case]), while something similar, but more modest, has occurred with Finland and Norway.<sup>20</sup>

This has meant that the Nordic states have been able to transform themselves from a region which imported a large degree of their territorial security during the Cold War into a significant security export region, with roles played in conflict zones ranging from Bosnia and Kosovo to Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa. Regarding the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, both Norway and Sweden took on

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18 Statistic cited in Baldur Thorhallsson, "The Size of States in the European Union: Theoretical and Conceptual Perspectives", *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 28 no.1 (2006), p.25.

19 Peter Viggo Jakobsen, "The Nordic Peacekeeping Model: Rise, Fall, Resurgence?", *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 13 no. 3 (2006), p. 381.

20 "Enhanced Partnership in Northern Europe", US Department of State. <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rt/epine/>.

significant burden-sharing tasks in leading Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) in Afghanistan's north. Given the "whole-of-government" perspective which emphasizes both the civilian and military dimensions of security provision long favoured by both states, this was a multi-faceted task that both could lend important specialist expertise to.<sup>21</sup> While not a PRT leader, Finland was also on hand to provide civil-military assistance in areas as diverse as security capacity-building, policing, and security on the occasion of an Afghan parliamentary election.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, Denmark has been argued to have emerged from ISAF with a particularly strong relationship with the US. When many allies were shying away, Denmark decided to deploy its combat troops in the volatile Helmand province in the Afghan south, and its strong support of the US has been argued to have created levels of access to Washington's policymakers that many other NATO allies would be envious of.<sup>23</sup> Nordic contributions also proved significant during the campaign to remove Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 with Denmark and Norway for a time flying close to 25% of the strike missions in the air campaign. Furthermore, Norway raised eyebrows in Washington when Oslo announced it would join the major biennial US naval exercise RIMPAC in Hawaii in 2014.<sup>24</sup> Denmark, Norway, and Finland also played key roles in the effort to remove the Assad regime's chemical weapons from Syria in late 2014.

From the perspective of the Baltic states, ISAF in Afghanistan would prove a particularly important experience concerning their efforts to enhance their transatlantic link. Given Baltic territorial security fears, scant financial resources and limited experience with out-of-area operations as fledgling NATO allies as ISAF began in earnest, the Baltic performance in expeditionary burden-sharing under ISAF proved quite impressive.

Flagship Baltic contributions included Estonia's ability to take up the combat mantle in Helmand when many long-established allies were reluctant to do so, and this was in a way similar to the situation with Denmark in that it ensured particularly strong recognition from Washington. Latvia's role as lead coordinator for the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) facilitating the logistics for the supplies ISAF required and its activity in security capacity-building were also important, this despite its worst domestic economic crisis since the early 1990s occurring after 2007. Lithuania's management of the PRT for Ghor, albeit less strenuous in terms of casualties compared

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21 See Karsten Friis and Sanaa Rehman (eds.), *Nordic Approaches to Whole-of-Government – in Afghanistan and Beyond*, (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs).

22 See Charly Salenius-Pasternak, "Finland's ISAF Experience: Rewarding, Challenging and on the Edges of the Politically Feasible", in Nik Hynek and Péter Marton (eds.), *Statebuilding in Afghanistan: Multinational Contributions to Reconstruction*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p. 286.

23 Peter Viggo Jakobsen and Jens Ringsmose, "Size and Reputation – Why the USA has Valued its 'Special Relationships' with Denmark and the UK Differently since 9/11", *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, vol.13 no. 2, (2015), pp.135–154.

24 Magnus Nordenman, "On the Transatlantic Edge: Nordic Security after the Afghan War and the Ukraine Crisis," *RUSI Journal*, vol. 159, no. 3 (2014), pp. 46–52.

to combat tasks, was an arduous task in terms of labour and resources. Despite serious pressures which could have tempted abandonment, Vilnius persevered to the end.<sup>25</sup>

Bridging the collective ISAF experience of the Baltic states in terms of their adaptability as transatlantic allies, comments made by US Vice-President Joe Biden when the Baltic presidents met with President Barack Obama in 2013 succinctly frame the positive US perception of Baltic burden-sharing in Afghanistan. Biden outlined that, by their actions, the Baltic states had positively changed their diplomatic discourse with Washington from one centred on what the US could do to alleviate the Baltic security situation to a contemporary discourse focused on how the Baltic states and Washington can cooperate in assisting the resolution of global challenges.<sup>26</sup> With Washington's recognition forthcoming, Baltic adaption to NATO's security provision demands within the Afghan theatre has somewhat facilitated the casting off of the "net security consumer" label. While the lead-in logic may be paradoxical, Baltic contributions to NATO's core objectives during the ISAF era strengthened their transatlantic link and thus granted added diplomatic value with regard to their territorial security policies.

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25 For greater elaboration on this issue, see Eoin M. McNamara, "When Contributions Abroad Mean Security at Home? The Baltic States and NATO Burden-Sharing in Afghanistan" in Robert Czulda and Marek Madej (eds.), *Newcomers no More? NATO and the Future of Enlargement from the Perspective of the 'Post-Cold War Members'* (University of Warsaw: Institute of International Relations, 2015), pp. 153-168.

26 Joe Biden, "Op-Ed By Vice President of the US Joe Biden", Embassy of the United States in Vilnius, Lithuania, 30 August 2013. [http://vilnius.usembassy.gov/press\\_releases/2013/08/30/2013--op-ed-by-vice-president-of-the-u.s.-joe-biden](http://vilnius.usembassy.gov/press_releases/2013/08/30/2013--op-ed-by-vice-president-of-the-u.s.-joe-biden).

## THE TRANSATLANTIC LINK AFTER UKRAINE

While the logic of expeditionary forces has dominated both US strategic thinking and that of the wider transatlantic partnership since the early 1990s, a previously unforeseen reversal back towards the examination of territorial defence capabilities has come to the surface since the onset of the Ukraine crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Considering the risk of the crisis spilling over from the proximate post-Soviet region, the Nordic-Baltic region has figured centrally in the US strategy, which aims to enhance security in Europe in light of emerging security challenges.

The US approach to European security has evolved considerably during the past two decades so that currently it can be described as a two-pronged approach. First, the US supports the ability of institutions and organizations to deal with the changing security environment, fundamentally by pushing for and helping to develop its allies' and NATO's capabilities and supporting other (sub-regional) cooperation, such as the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO). The same logic applies to US support of enhanced regional defence cooperation links for the Baltic states within NATO. Second, the US has increased and deepened bilateral cooperation with countries interested in both developing new capabilities and seriously modernizing their armed forces.

Looking at what the US has done concretely since 2014 to support allies and NATO as a whole, four lines of effort can be discerned: immediate; ongoing but enhanced; longer-term and structural and/or institution-building actions. As immediate concrete military responses to events in Ukraine, the US increased the number of F-15C fighter jets on duty as part of the Baltic Air Policing mission from four to ten, as well as deploying twelve F-16s to Poland and six to Romania. The US also deployed a total of 600 soldiers from the 173rd Airborne Division to the Baltic states and Poland.

While the rotations of 150 soldiers in each country were derided by some as merely symbolic, their political and military value was clear to more objective observers. The presence of American soldiers enabled concrete joint training with host nation forces, while acting as reconnaissance and lead-in elements – as well as a military-political tripwire – should more troops and equipment need to be brought in. The 173rd AB units were relieved by around 600 soldiers from the 1st Brigade 1 Cavalry Division from Texas with its considerably heavier fighting vehicles that are typical of US Cavalry units. These immediate reassurance/deterrence actions as well as increased surveillance and planning efforts have since been subsumed under the broader Operation Atlantic Resolve effort.

As well as playing the key managerial role behind these measures, the US has worked with its allies to increase or expand its ongoing military exercise efforts in Europe. This has included establishing a number of exercises at short notice. Some of the more notable of these include: Sabre Strike 14 (580); BALTOPS 14 (1300); Flaming Sword 14 (140 SOF); Combined Resolve II (1200); Platinum Lynx 14 (75); Platinum Eagle 14 (75); Summer Shield 14 (100); Sabre Guardian 14; and Rapid Trident 2014, which was held in western Ukraine in September 2014.

The number of exercises held under the Operation Atlantic Resolve umbrella points to the seriousness of US efforts to support and develop European defence capabilities. Of course, many of the exercises now placed under the Operation Atlantic Resolve umbrella had been planned prior to 2014, showing that Washington had taken its enduring

commitment to developing and supporting European defence and security seriously even before Russia's invasion of Crimea.

The third line of effort has been longer-term, through the development of the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI).<sup>27</sup> The \$1 billion initiative is meant to boost the United States' "rotational presence", the prepositioning of equipment, and to conduct additional training with allies and partners. While belittled by some, \$1 billion is a considerable sum to spend in a year and is in the same ballpark as what the US contributes annually to NATO's three budgets (military, civil and the NATO Security Investment Program). The idea of prepositioning equipment and rotating forces into and out of regions is not new; they are the very concepts on which the two-year-old US global force posture plan is based. The European Rotational Force (ERF) was planned well in advance of this year's events in Europe.

The above mentioned Combined Resolve II exercise marks the first major combat training rotation of the European Rotational Force, and it is set to be the first user of the European Activity Set (EAS), which is a battalion-sized set of US military vehicles and equipment pre-positioned at the Grafenwoehr Training Area. The EAS includes the most up-to-date equipment in the army inventory, including the M1A2 Sep v2 Abrams tank and the M2A3 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle.<sup>28</sup> The US Marines have also updated the type of equipment prepositioned in caves in Norway, adding among other things heavy M1A1 Abrams tanks, amphibious assault vehicles and Assault Breacher Vehicles. Originally prepositioned during the 1980s, much of the equipment was taken into use for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Discussions about the need to update and refill began in 2013. Supplies currently hold the basic equipment required for a Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) of 14,000 to 18,000 marines.<sup>29</sup>

The prepositioning of equipment and vehicles with units based in the US rotating into Europe for months at a time is of course very different from what Europeans regarded as reassurance during the Cold War: "mega bases" with permanently stationed troops. Considering current political, economic and military realities, a considerably more sustainable and relevant approach is the maintenance of a "sustained, persistent presence". This will be complemented by the fourth line of effort by the US and other European NATO allies, developing longer-term structures which take into account the changed security environment in Europe.

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27 "Fact Sheet: U.S. Support and Reassurance Initiatives for the Baltics and Central Europe", The White House, September 3 2014. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/03/fact-sheet-us-support-and-reassurance-initiatives-baltics-and-central-eu> .

28 For more on both the European Activity set and Combined Resolve, see "What Is Combined Resolve IV", US Army Europe's Training Command, January 16 2015. <http://www.eur.army.mil/jmtc/CombinedResolve.html> .

29 Dan Lamothe, "The Pentagon is Adding to Its Arsenal of Weapons in Norway's Caves". *The Washington Post*, August 12 2014. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2014/08/12/the-pentagon-is-adding-to-its-arsenal-of-weapons-in-norways-caves/> . And Joseph Trevithick, "Why is the Pentagon Stuffing Caves in Norway Full of Tanks?" *The Week*, October 22 2014. <http://theweek.com/article/index/270353/why-is-the-pentagon-stuffing-caves-in-norway-full-of-tanks> .

The fourth line of effort by the United States is institutional and structural in nature. Together with European NATO allies, the goal is to rebalance NATO. The main purpose of this rebalancing is to shift planning, training and deployment practices back towards territorial defence and to ensure that NATO member troops and equipment are present in the eastern-most member states. This does not mean that NATO will ask members to continuously station large forces with other allies; rather host-nation support capabilities are strengthened, thereby increasing the ability to quickly receive forces should the need arise.

With the Baltic states among the principal beneficiaries, the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) formally introduced at NATO's Summit in Wales in September 2014 has thus, for the moment at least, stayed within the confines of NATO's "scalability" approach to security in the east. Agreed to both assure eastern allies and deter Russian aggression, measures include the creation of a 5,000-strong Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) as a "spearhead" within the NATO Response Force (NRF) where some sections can be capable of deploying within 48-72 hours.<sup>30</sup> Six "forward units" consisting of about a dozen NATO personnel will be stationed in the Baltic states, Poland, Bulgaria and Romania to provide command and control should a response from the VJTF be required.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, as the VJTF will not be fully operational until 2017, an "interim spearhead force" consisting of a brigade of Dutch, German and Norwegian troops has been ready since January 2015.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, beyond the shuffling of labels, as Jens Ringsmose outlines, these moves should still not be exaggerated as particularly innovative considering the pre-established framework of the NRF. These contemporary initiatives will now set the basis for tailoring the response force more towards regional territorial defence, constituting modest evolution from the NRF's original conception as a mechanism primarily for out-of-area crisis management. Furthermore, with the possibility of British, German and US troops coming into the Russian line of fire should the force be called into action, the creation of the VJTF can have a wider political significance in serving to stall conflict escalation, considering the potentially severe consequences which might arise for the major powers under a deployment scenario.<sup>33</sup>

The second prong of the US approach to the strengthening of European security concerns the supporting of individual countries bilaterally, whether or not they are allies. Partially, this approach is simply pragmatic, reflecting an increasing frustration in the US that most European countries are relying on the United States for defence to a greater

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30 "NATO Response Force", The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, February 23 2015. [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_49755.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49755.htm) .

31 "NATO Chief Warns of Challenges After 'Black Year'", *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, January 30 2014. <http://www.rferl.org/content/nato-chief-warns-challenges-black-year/26822033.html> .

32 Michael R. Gordon, "Nimble New NATO Force to Take Form Next Year", *The New York Times*, December 12 2014. [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/03/world/europe/nato-to-create-interim-rapid-response-force-to-counter-russia.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/03/world/europe/nato-to-create-interim-rapid-response-force-to-counter-russia.html?_r=0).

33 Jens Ringsmose, "NATO's Response Force Reloaded: How Much Support, To Counter Which Threats?", *Europe's World*, February 3 2015. <http://europesworld.org/2015/02/03/natos-response-force-reloaded-much-support-counter-threats/#.VVi8CLmqkqo> .



degree than during the Cold War.<sup>34</sup> Grand buzz-phrases such as “smart defence” and “pooling and sharing” suggest increases in capabilities, but in practice these have not led to actual increases in defence capabilities. With an eye towards this, the US has sought to find other ways to bolster European and NATO members’ security. This can be evidenced in part from recent experience within the Nordic-Baltic region.

Examining a possible predicament for the Baltic states as NATO allies, a question of contingency largely surrounds their military preparedness for the 48-72 hour time-lag separating an armed encroachment on their territory and the arrival of NATO ground forces. It has been argued that prudent management of this scenario involves a Baltic defence strategy that would aim to at least sharply delay the progress of the encroaching side through the cultivation of a hostile combat environment which would severely hamper the enemy force.<sup>35</sup>

The effect of this strategy is determined by three interlinked aspects: training, tactics and technology. While the two former aspects have been honed over a considerable time period, the Baltic states are further advantaged by their access to NATO’s networks in procuring the most innovative defence technology suitable for small militaries. Their link to the American defence-industrial sector will likely be of prime importance in this regard. For example, Estonia was among a select group of allies sanctioned by Washington to procure the US-manufactured Javelin anti-tank missiles during the autumn of 2014.<sup>36</sup> Harnessing the transatlantic link in order to acquire first-rate military technology facilitates the opportunity to partially compensate for a disparity in troop numbers, while also creating the potential strategic advantage to escalate the adversary’s hostility perception and thus enhance conventional deterrence capability.

In the case of Finland, a state that is not a NATO ally, Finnish-US arms procurement cooperation dates back to the late 1930s, when Finland was able to purchase forty Buffalo Brewster planes diverted from the US Navy. In 1992, Finland decided to buy 64 F-18 Hornet aircraft from the US, starting a new era of closer military and defence cooperation. In 2012, after a half-decade effort, the US permitted Finland to buy its most advanced air-to-ground missile, the Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM). At the time only the United States itself and Australia had been permitted to procure the missile, although Poland has recently joined the small group of JASSM users.

The deep-strike capability of the missile increases Finland’s conventional deterrence and strengthens overall territorial defence capabilities. At the same time it also indirectly strengthens NATO’s north-eastern flank and deepens the bilateral relationship between Finland and the US, while also having an impact on the distribution of military

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34 Jorge Benitez, “Will the U.S. ‘Rebalance’ its Contribution to NATO?”, *Defense One*, October 20 2013. <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2013/10/will-us-rebalance-its-contribution-nato/72281/>.

35 Lars Wallin and Bengt Andersson, “A Defence Model for the Baltic States”, *European Security*, vol. 10 no.1 (2001), pp.100-101.

36 “Estonia – Javelin Missiles”, Defence Security Cooperation Agency (US Department of State), October 7 2014. <http://www.dsca.mil/major-arms-sales/estonia-javelin-missiles>.

capabilities across the Baltic sea region.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, considering this trend, it should also be noted that Finland is not alone among its Nordic counterparts; the Nordic states have for a considerable time had strong links with the US in terms of industry and capability development and both Norway and Denmark are F-35 partners (although Copenhagen has yet to make a final decision on its choice for the next generation fighter jet for its air force). At the same time, Sweden's Gripen jets rely to a substantial degree on sophisticated US technologies.

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37 For more on the implications of the US sale of JASSM to Finland, please see Charly Salonijs-Pasternak, "Not Just Another Arms Deal: the Security Policy Implications of the United States Selling Advanced Missiles to Finland", Finnish Institute of International Affairs Briefing Paper 112 (2012) [http://www.fia.fi/publication/279/not\\_just\\_another\\_arms\\_deal/](http://www.fia.fi/publication/279/not_just_another_arms_deal/).

## REBALANCE AND CHANGE IN US FOREIGN POLICY

As previous sections have outlined, the transatlantic security link connecting Washington with the capitals of the Nordic-Baltic region is reinforced by a series of fundamental strengths. However, dealing first with issues indicating uncertainty from the US side of the partnership before moving onto Nordic and Baltic security issues that are causing doubt over the next section, there are also weaknesses concerning each side of this triangular partnership. A broader theme within US foreign policy that requires elaboration is Washington's much-discussed strategic "rebalance" (née "pivot") towards Asia.

Concerning the contemporary setting, this "rebalance" coincides with a time of US disillusionment regarding the perceived reluctance of its European allies to stall their declining defence expenditures together with a general weariness towards global engagement. The broader US foreign policy community is uncertain about the future role of the US on the global stage, and this comes at a time when many Americans are weary of global activism in the wake of two less-than successful wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup> There are also calls from both leaders and regular citizens that the US needs to reduce its foreign engagement and instead focus on domestic rejuvenation through, among other things, investment in infrastructure renovation and expansion, additional resources for education, and resolving some of the tough and lingering social issues that are present in American society.<sup>39</sup>

American weariness with regards to global engagement and disappointment with its European partners and allies also comes at a time when Asia appears to be inevitably rising to global prominence in economic, political, and also military terms. The US announcement of a "rebalancing" towards the Asia-Pacific region is a response to this emerging global security environment. However prudent it may be, it has served to introduce further uncertainty to the transatlantic relationship, and perhaps the US could have better communicated to its European partners its significant – but far from radical – plans for the Asian "rebalance". This may have prevented overblown fears in some corners of Europe that the drawdown of US troops would signal the first steps towards eventual neglect of the continent.

While the US has sought to reassure its European partners that the rebalancing towards Asia does not mean that Washington is abandoning Europe, it does not seem to have had the desired effect. Not only that, the US "rebalance" towards Asia is not occurring without reason – there is a real shift of economic, political, and military power away from the West and towards Asia and the global south and there is little to suggest that this trend will be reversed in the coming decades.<sup>40</sup>

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38 Pew Research Center, "Public Sees US Power Declining as Support for Global Engagement Slips", December 3 2013. <http://www.people-press.org/2013/12/03/public-sees-u-s-power-declining-as-support-for-global-engagement-slips/>.

39 See, for example, Richard N. Haass, *Foreign Policy Begins at Home: the Case for Putting America's House in Order* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

40 See, for example, US National Intelligence Council (2012), *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* (Washington, DC).

The demography of the United States is also rapidly changing, and this could also diminish America's instinctual orientation towards Europe. Major European immigrant groups in the US have served as cultural, political and interpersonal bridges between the US and countries such as the UK, Ireland, Poland, Italy, Sweden, Norway and others. These relationships have played real roles in sustaining the transatlantic relationship and building domestic political support within the United States for efforts such as NATO enlargement into Central and Eastern Europe. More recent waves of American immigrants have instead been drawn from Latin America and Asia, and America's new immigrants are quite understandably and naturally more interested in the US relationship with countries such as Mexico, India, El Salvador, and South Korea. Thus, while their consequences should not be exaggerated, these transformations in US domestic and foreign policy include a degree of well-founded uncertainty; the dynamics of American involvement are changing, thus leaving many questions open for European policymakers on how they must manage this change precisely.

## NORDIC-BALTIC SECURITY: EXAMINING STRATEGIC “GREY ZONES”

Uncertainty originating from the Nordic side of the region’s transatlantic security link presents itself through the questions for regional defence posed by the absence of Sweden and Finland from the NATO alliance. It is plausible that NATO membership for both states would close a potential “grey zone” concerning the defence of Europe’s north-eastern flank, while removing some of the obstacles currently frustrating attempts to deepen Nordic Defence Cooperation, as well as Nordic-Baltic defence cooperation.

Moreover, Finland and Sweden hold sovereignty over two island territories in the Baltic sea – the Åland Islands and Gotland respectively – both of which are of potentially high strategic importance not just for these states themselves but for collective defence surrounding the Baltic Sea rim and, by extension, for NATO as a whole. In Gotland’s case, as Karlis Neretnieks has outlined, if a belligerent party were to take control of mobile anti-vessel and surface-to-air missiles from the island’s territory, the capabilities of the opposing force(s) would be heavily compromised. Gotland is situated just over 150 kilometres from Russia’s Kaliningrad Oblast, and if Russia were to seize the island and transport the aforementioned capabilities there, NATO’s allied defence in the region would be severely complicated under such circumstances.<sup>41</sup> With Stockholm in the past perhaps anticipating the redundancy of future regional tensions, Gotland had been without a permanent Swedish military presence since 2005, but Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist has since advised the stationing of a company of 150 troops on the island as a first means to redress this situation.<sup>42</sup>

Although it is a lower-profile example, a similar logic can potentially apply to the position of the Åland Islands with regards to the emerging security challenges facing the Nordic-Baltic region. However, in peacetime at least, military planning accounting for the Åland Islands remains a sensitive prospect considering its exceptional governance circumstances under Finnish sovereignty with a number of long-standing agreements – binding under international law – that affirm the Åland Islands’ de-militarization.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, arising from doubts surrounding some of the aforementioned issues within NATO, Washington is arguably one of the biggest proponents of Swedish and Finnish membership. However, the US is also hesitant to push too hard as it is sensitive to the potentially negative ramifications a high US profile would have on the budding domestic NATO debates in Finland and Sweden. Regardless, a joint Finnish-Swedish commission on the pros and cons of NATO membership, as suggested in the recent Bertelman report, would contribute to Washington’s expectation that Helsinki and Stockholm take their

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41 Karlis Neretnieks cited in Matt Ford, “After Crimea, Sweden Flirts With Joining NATO”, *The Atlantic*, March 12 2014. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/03/after-crimea-sweden-flirts-with-joining-nato/284362/>

42 Richard Milne, “Sweden Sends Troops to Baltic Island amid Russia Tensions”, *The Financial Times*, March 12 2015. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/660d038c-c8bc-11e4-8617-00144feab7de.html#axzz3aPZCICUv>

43 For a detailed overview of this issue, see Teija Tiilikainen, “Åland in European Security Policy”, in Alyson J. K. Bailes, Gunilla Herolf and Bengt Sundelius (eds.), *The Nordic Countries and the European Security and Defence Policy*, (New York: Oxford University Press for SIPRI, 2006), pp. 349–355.

security seriously, no matter what the findings of the commission would be.<sup>44</sup> For the time being at least, transatlantic defence efforts involving Sweden and Finland will have to take place within the framework of the “enhanced cooperation opportunities” agreed between the two states and NATO in the early autumn of 2014. The understanding allows NATO to potentially utilize Finnish and Swedish defence assets, such as air bases, in the event of a crisis. Within the NATO setting, this nevertheless represents an optimistic step towards the improvement of contingency planning for collective defence around the Baltic sea rim.<sup>45</sup>

The Baltic states are firmly embedded within NATO defence structures.<sup>46</sup> However, for sections of the international media at least, an area of uncertainty has been discussed considering the Russian “hybrid” tactics deployed in Ukraine, the position of Baltic Russian speaking minorities, and the potential for Moscow to encourage these groups to mobilize against the states within which they reside. This would represent an effort to accentuate social destabilization. It would also be a move which increases the “fog of war”, thus potentially stifling NATO decision-making considering its response under Article 5. Since Crimea, Russia’s wider European strategy has been argued to be targeting narrow points of EU and NATO difficulty which, if agitated, can nonetheless trouble the collective security posture of both institutions.<sup>47</sup> With a number of these pressure points concerning the Baltic states, given the Russian emphasis placed centrally on externally sponsored social destabilization as a form of geopolitics, the difficulties and risks surrounding Baltic domestic politics in connection with their security strategy need to be analysed.

The issue of security by way of social cohesion is most pressing for Estonia and Latvia. Both contain Russian-speaking minorities of approximately 25% within their borders. A largely misleading discourse, sometimes popular within the Western media, posits ethno-linguistic minorities in both states largely as a uniform bloc open to persuasion from either Russian propaganda or the influences of the wider Estonian or Latvian societies within which the minorities reside.<sup>48</sup>

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44 Tomas Bertelman, *Forsvarspolitiskt Samarbete*, (Stokholm: Swedish Ministry of Defence, 2014).

45 Charles Duxbury and Juhana Rossi, “Sweden and Finland Forge Closer Ties with NATO”, *The Wall Street Journal*, August 28 2014. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/sweden-and-finland-forge-closer-ties-with-nato-1409237354> .

46 The following paragraphs of this section draw on points made in an article already published by McNamara, see Eoin M. McNamara, “Russian Strategy and Baltic Defence After Crimea” in Diāna Potjomkina and Andris Sprūds (eds.), *The Latvian Foreign and Security Policy Yearbook 2015*, (Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2015),.

47 Matthew Kaminski, “Putin Has Exposed Europe’s Cracks”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 June 2014. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/putin-has-exposed-europes-cracks-1402950676>.

48 For an essence of this rhetoric, see Richard Milne, “Spotlight Shifts to Estonian Town if Russia Tests NATO’s Mettle”, *The Financial Times*, April 11 2014. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9f829192-c07d-11e3-8578-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3KB2msKQS>.

This perspective neglects a number of crucial nuances. Firstly, membership of an ethno-linguistic minority on its own should never be insinuated as an indicator of disloyalty towards the state within which the minority resides. Counter to the “collective mindset” assumption, the integration levels come in different shades across the minority groups, with some fully fledged bi-lingual participants in Estonian or Latvian society, while, on the flip side, others find themselves largely disconnected from the titular societal group as either Russian or “non-citizens”. In Estonia, 54% of Russian speakers hold Estonian citizenship, while others remain less integrated.<sup>49</sup> Russian-speaking “non-citizens” are frequently perceived as the most disenfranchised within the ethno-linguistic group, with just over 13% and 7% of the Latvian and Estonian populations respectively holding the status of “non-citizen”. Those holding Russian citizenship but residing in either state is 4% in Latvia and 7% in Estonia.

However, even the situation with “non-citizens” is more complicated than it appears at first glance. “Non-citizen” status is far less restrictive in terms of visa-free travel to Russia compared to Estonian citizenship. Thus, neither is it a clear-cut indicator of non-integration, as those holding this status may wish to retain it in order to avail themselves of an arrangement perceived as advantageous. Furthermore, those within this bracket rarely seek permanent relocation to Russia.<sup>50</sup>

Baltic Russian ethno-linguistic minorities have also undergone a different identity formation process since the Soviet Union’s collapse compared to most of the citizens of the Russian Federation. During the early 1990s, affinity towards a nostalgic Soviet identity may, in some quarters, have been stronger than one towards Russia. Many also considered themselves of Belarusian or Ukrainian identity.<sup>51</sup> While Russian influence through media and cross-border interactions has no doubt played a strong role since, Baltic Russian identity has also been partially crafted through engagement with the Estonian or Latvian ethnic groups. Therefore, there is a strong case to argue that many within the Baltic Russian ethno-linguistic minorities are not of the same mindset as those of Vladimir Putin’s support base in the Russian Federation.<sup>52</sup>

While the aforementioned complications undermine the view that Baltic Russian speakers can be readily geopolitically leveraged by the Kremlin in order to subvert Estonian or Latvian security through social destabilization, security risks potentially arising from the divided social composition in both states remain nonetheless. As Benjamin Reilly argues, political parties operating within divided societies can frequently attempt to utilize “the nationalist card” in attempting to maximize their share of the vote within the bounds of a particular ethnic group. If this is perceived to be successful it can encourage competition between political parties through escalating rhetoric as two

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49 Martin Ehala, “Russian Minority in Estonia After Crimea”, *Aspen Review: Central Europe*, No. 2 (2014), p. 47.

50 Ott Tammik, “Number of Grey Passport Holders Falls Below 100,000”, *Eesti Rahvusringhääling*, April 24 2011. <http://news.err.ee/v/759a6f74-c555-4f4a-90e4-5f57ad5b921a>.

51 Ammon Cheskin, “Identity and Integration of Russian Speakers in the Baltic States: A Framework for Analysis”, *Ethnopolitics*, vol. 14 no.1 (2015), p. 73–74.

52 Tom Balmforth, “Russians of Narva not Seeking ‘Liberation’ by Moscow”, *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, April 4 2014. <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-estonia-not-crimea/25321328.html>.

or more attempt to demonstrate their nationalist credentials, thus making their position on inter-ethnic issues dangerously hard-line.<sup>53</sup> This effect was seen in the lead-up to Estonia's Bronze Soldier crisis in 2007, where the Reform Party (liberal) and the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (conservative) jostled for the ethnic Estonian segment of the electorate before the March 2007 general election.

This competition brought the Reform Party's perilous promise that, should they be elected, the statue would be moved before that year's May 9 commemoration which had in recent years emerged as an uneasy spectacle of inter-ethnic tension in central Tallinn. With the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991 ushering in an intense era of near constant reform, Tõnis Saarts has argued that one of the crisis' underlying causes was the promulgation of a political culture conducive to a style of politics where the majority force through decisions while seeing little importance in consultation with other stakeholders.<sup>54</sup>

While the two nights of rioting that stretched law enforcement in central Tallinn to breaking point in April 2007 have not since been repeated, these events should nonetheless act as a warning as the wider geopolitical situation changes. Linking this to the wider post-Crimea strategic environment, given the Russian penchant for intervention under the veil of protecting Russian ethno-linguistic minorities in the post-Soviet area, Baltic membership of larger international organizations such as the EU and NATO has been previously argued as crucial in preventing Russian attempts to intervene more heavily in Baltic domestic affairs given the different forms of economic and military deterrence that both actors combined can project towards Moscow.<sup>55</sup>

However, the contemporary context presents some room for doubts regarding whether Russia is the status quo power it most likely was in the Baltic Sea region in 2007. Thus, caution in both domestic politics and policy remains a requirement which will serve to reduce any underlying risks. While difficult to achieve given the competitive realities of democratic politics, the encouragement of a "culture of continuous dialogue and compromise" has nonetheless been recommended to foster resilience through social cohesion.<sup>56</sup> Thus, despite the surface banality of the situation, risk-reduction can still be argued to be a requirement in the Estonian and Latvian contexts.

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53 Benjamin Reilly, "Political Engineering and Party Politics in Conflict-Prone Societies", *Democratization*, vol. 13 no. 5 (2006), p. 812.

54 Tõnis Saarts, "The Bronze Nights: The Failure of Forced Europeanization and the Birth of Nationalist Defensive Democracy in Estonia", *Eurozine*, October 10 2008. <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2008-10-10-saarts-en.html>.

55 Hiski Haukkala, "A Close Encounter of The Worst Kind? The Logic of Situated Actors and the Statue Crisis Between Estonia and Russia", *Journal of Baltic Studies*, vol. 40 no.2 (2008), p. 208.

56 Tomas Jermalavičius, Piret Pernik, Martin Hurt with Henrik Breitenbauch and Pauli Järvenpää, *Comprehensive Security and Integrated Defence: Challenges of Implementing Whole-of-Government and Whole-of-Society Approaches*, (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence Studies, 2014), p.13.



## CONCLUSION

This paper set out to assess the strengths and weaknesses concerning the security link between the United States and the Nordic-Baltic region. While the abrupt escalation of the Ukraine crisis since 2014 might slow progress down in this regard, for over two decades since the Cold War ended, strong cooperation in the area of expeditionary security provision has ensured that the link between Washington and its Nordic-Baltic partners developed considerably. This began from modest origins with Nordic security assistance to the Baltic states during the early 1990s. Early support for both the widening of the Baltic security conception and the liberalization of civil-military structures set the Baltic states on the road towards NATO membership, so the region's transatlantic link was strengthened considerably.

Furthermore, Nordic-Baltic contributions to Western-led out-of-area missions have allowed the accumulation of significant diplomatic capital with Washington. This has been the case particularly with respect to the Baltic states, where their participation in ISAF in Afghanistan served to transform their status from that of fledgling NATO newcomers to allies located at the centre of NATO's core tasks.

There has been much discussion of the US "rebalance" towards Asia and the consequences this might have for European security. Like many other areas of the continent, this will have knock-on effects for the Nordic-Baltic region. This paper has argued that the negative effects for Europe arising from this US foreign policy initiative should not be over-exaggerated. However, in the context of the wider US effort to both reassure its European allies while simultaneously attempting to deter Russian aggression, Europeans, including those within the Nordic-Baltic region, should not expect a return to the type of military deterrence provided by the US during the Cold War. Instead, the US wishes to work closely with its European partners, including those within the Nordic-Baltic region, in order to generate a strong deterrent effect through a more equalized form of military burden-sharing.

While decreasing European defence investment will remain a point of difficulty in this respect, there are also opportunities. The transatlantic link with the Nordic-Baltic region highlights this in the field of technology procurement, where both NATO members and those militarily non-aligned within the region have exploited procurement possibilities with the American defence-industrial sector in order to enhance their conventional deterrence.

With direct relevance for the transatlantic security link, the Nordic-Baltic region retains a number of Achilles' heels concerning territorial defence. On the Nordic side, this paper discussed the potential exposure of Baltic islands such as Gotland (Sweden) and the Åland Islands (Finland) and the problems both could pose for NATO's allied defence posture should a conflict situation emerge in the Baltic sea region. On the Baltic side, although it is difficult to foresee, the reoccurrence of an event like the 2007 Bronze Soldier crisis in Estonia could risk destabilizing internal circumstances as well as wider defence problems should Russia seek to exploit any difficulties. A particularly aggressive Russian posture brings NATO's Article 5 further into the picture. Nevertheless, as this paper has explained, fears occasionally raised in the international media remain somewhat overblown given the current state of Baltic inter-ethnic relations.

Finally, it is worth cautiously noting that the current US focus on the Nordic-Baltic region is not likely to be sustainable by itself in the long-term as the Ukraine crisis has not fundamentally changed Washington's global orientation or significantly altered US plans for its permanent future force posture in Europe, which has been declining for some time now. Thus, the long-term future of the Nordic-Baltic-US relationship can hardly be based on reassuring NATO allies in Europe's northeast alone.

Furthermore, with the exception of interaction through "enhanced cooperation opportunities" with NATO, a US partnership with the region almost exclusively focused on defence and deterrence would by necessity almost exclude Sweden and Finland as they are not NATO members and thereby not covered by the alliance's Article 5 commitments, nor by bilateral US defence obligations. Therefore, while the current situation regarding regional collective defence provides many challenges, where the transatlantic link is concerned, the states of the Nordic-Baltic region should nonetheless not allow their expeditionary strengths to lapse. As the natural view for US foreign policy is a global perspective, commitment towards renewing the transatlantic partnership in this regard will serve to maintain the robust security link with Washington which is currently experienced by those of the Nordic-Baltic region.