

## DEVELOPMENTS IN THE BALTIC REGION

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### Introduction.

At the 30th session of Heads of State and Government, NATO took a number of important decisions on strengthening the Northeast flank of the Alliance territory. Decisions that apparently have gone beyond the bulk of the media, given the time spent on four immature politicians who dared to ridicule the main NATO sponsor. Although details of those decisions have not yet been published, the Kremlin appears to take the potential effect of those decisions very seriously. Whether the Russian President's strong criticism is meant for national or international consumption or again taking the opportunity to grill Belarus, may be confirmed in the near future.

### Pressure on Belarus Neighboring States.

In the past few years, a number of incidents confirmed that Moscow considers the Baltic Sea as Russian territory and does not tolerate non-Russian involvement there. Incidents involving maritime naval vessels and reconnaissance aircraft have also made it clear to Sweden and Finland that being a member of a strong Alliance is probably in their advantage.



Nevertheless, the Baltic region incidents are apparently not that threatening for a referendum on a potential NATO membership. Maybe Russian further involvements in the Baltics or the flaring up of the crisis in the Donbass can convince their society to take the appropriate steps to become a NATO member nation.

Exercise ZAPAD 2017 (*Picture Deffi.lt*) has provided an indication how Moscow is intended to bring (one of) the Baltic states back under Moscow's control and the Baltic Sea, Belarus, Kaliningrad and the Suwalki Gap will play key roles to get those states back. But Minsk has stressed repeatedly in the run-in to ZAPAD 2017 that it will not be taken hostage by Moscow nor will be exploited as a Russian instrument to meet Putin's demands. Lukashenko has stressed that Russian troops contributing to ZAPAD 2017 will leave Belarus territory shortly after ENDEX, that Belarus will not agree to a Russian Air force Base within its borders and an expansion of the Russian military contingent at Ostrovets is a non-issue. His remarks seemed to be a clear signal that the Moscow-Minsk relations have been cooled<sup>1</sup> and signaling an end to their longtime brotherhood.

Although the Ostrovets garrison was and still is an excellent opportunity for Moscow to strengthen its military presence, there is no information that a reinforcement has been materialized. The troops at Ostrovets are not formally under the authority of the Russian Ministry of Defense, so the statement that "all Russian military units are back to their garrison locations" was not in conflict with a possible reinforcement of Ostrovets's garrison. The information that the staff of the Ostrovets garrison was

part of the National Guard of St. Petersburg was a sound ground to start a NATO investigation. The results of that research are still in the pipeline of NATO headquarters.

The ongoing political mist surrounding the Minsk-Moscow relationship and the weaknesses of NATO communications through the Suwalski gap and Baltic Sea approaches are essentials for the security and interests of the Alliance in general and eastern member states in particular. Therefore, getting the military and political pressure off their shoulders is one of the priorities of the politicians and military in Brussel and Mons. Another Crimea and Donbas should be prevented. At any case.

### The Baltic Scenario.



**Essential regions and Belarus as a launch platform. Source: DElfi Lt.**

The 2017 article "How to destabilize the Baltic region" explains how the Baltic region can be destabilized by hybrid instruments. The next step is a military operation at the request of troubled Russian ethnic entities in one or more Baltic States. As with the Crimea and Donbas operations, surprise and speed are essential preconditions and ZAPAD 2017 and various maritime exercises in the Baltic Sea provided an indication of how Moscow intends to carry out an operation on the Baltic States. The Baltic Sea is important for Moscow for the following reasons.

- Primarily through the operational and commercial transit routes to the Atlantic, North Sea and Western European industrial areas and ports.
- Secondary: it forms the northern flank of the Russian Central Front and
- Finally: the shipyards in Saint Petersburg are key to build and maintain the largest surface and underwater platforms that are the core of the Russian maritime component.

From a commercial and operational point of view, the Baltic Sea is essential to Moscow and in their view, NATO has no business there. Therefore, in the first stage of an operational conflict, Danish approaches and Suwalski gap should be closed and for a successful mission, the Baltic islands Gotland (Sweden), Åland (Finland) en Bornland (Denmark) and the gap between Kaliningrad and Belarus<sup>2</sup> has to be seized and occupied by deploying multidimensional forces. Subsequently, Iskander, Bastion-P and S-400 missile systems have to be deployed to close the Danish approaches. Referenced the Suwalski Gap, the scenario of ZAPAD 2017 has highlighted that the operation should not stop at closing the gap, but the operation should be expanded to the Polish Baltic Sea coast to support the multidimensional amphibious operations on the coast regions of the Baltic states. The extent to which the aforementioned operation will or can be carried out simultaneously, sequentially,

harmonized and / or synchronized depends on developments and events within the political situation and military reaction of Washington, Brussels and Mons.

The above simplified scripted scenario is not an invention of a paranoid anti-Putin thinker. It has been included in the ZAPAD 2017 scenario and the multidimensional reinforcements that Moscow has deployed in Kaliningrad and Belarus underline the credibility of that scenario. The combat power in Kaliningrad equals that of the complete Polish ground component. Can that combat power actually succeed? That depends highly on the operational capability of the Baltic Fleet to effectively block the Danish approaches and Suwalki Gap and support Amphibious operations on the Baltic coast of all Baltic states in a multidimensional way. Even if NATO succeeds in deploying multidimensional troops in the Baltic region, the Russian troops are very capable to make the life of NATO troops so difficult that a successful reinforcement of the deployed NATO troops on NATO's northeastern flank is doomed to fail.

However, the Baltic Fleet is stationed at Baltisk (formerly Pillau in Prussia) and Kronstadt (on Kotlin island 30 kilometers west of Saint Petersburg), still faces a deployability challenge: the combat power is influenced by substantial maintenance backlogs and the fact that it has only one open water port. Since the implosion of the Warsaw Pact, Moscow has lost the other open water ports in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and would like to have them back again to make the Baltic Sea the desired multi-dimensional playing field<sup>3</sup> for the Russian armed forces.

### **Beefing up NATO combat power.**

In 2018, NATO decided to strengthen its combat power in the Baltic States and Poland. In previous articles, the value of that force consisting of four Multinational Battalion Combat Groups (BG), had been discussed in terms of force capabilities and readiness challenges. The result was that due to the rotational nature of those forces the political value is greater than the operational one. The operational planners in Brussels and Mons may have developed a similar opinion and convinced the politicians that the political situation of the North Eastern flank requires more meat on the bone and requires a more robust Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP):

- Development of a full sized army corps headquarters in Germany.
- Stationing an American armored division in Poland. The Polish government has guaranteed the estimated \$ 2 billion for the construction of the headquarters<sup>4</sup>.
- Deployment of additional Battle Groups if military tension increases in the Polish-Baltic region. The current combat power must be beefed up to at least one mechanized brigade per Baltic nation and Poland, which could significantly increase the combat power of the already deployed Battle Groups<sup>5</sup>.
- Positioning of an American brigade in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, such as now in Poland<sup>6</sup>.
- Deployment of additional guided weapon artillery and additional ground-based air defense units in each of the four host countries.

It will not stop with the implementation of those plans. The North Atlantic Council (NAC) has already agreed the upgrade of the combat power of *Reaction Forces* to a level of 40,000 men and to beef up its spearpoint, the *Very High Readiness Joint Task Force* to 5,000 men; consisting of five battalions supported by Maritime and Air Force units as well as Special Forces. Another operational proposals are the four thirties<sup>7</sup> and to minimize the closure rate<sup>8</sup>, the EU has made billions of euros available to improve the infrastructure of the EU partners.

NATO has successfully consulted regional partners; Sweden and Finland. Although Sweden is not a member of the Alliance, the Swedish government has agreed to strengthen the coastal defense, in particular the islands of Gotland<sup>9</sup> and Öland. The island of Gotland, which was demilitarized in the early nineties<sup>10</sup>, now has a military occupation of a battalion minus and the plans are far advanced to further strengthen the island's defense. There will be close cooperation with neighbor Finland<sup>11</sup>.

The BALTOPS 2019 exercise held in the spring, a multi-dimensional maritime-oriented multi-week exercise led by Commander US 2 Fleet; Admiral Lewis, in which 18 nationalities (including the Baltic states, Sweden and Finland) participated, signaled NATO's perseverance that the Baltic Sea is not an out of bounds region for non-Russian troops and fleets. The scenario of the exercise focused on keeping the Danish passages open and maintaining the Baltic Sea as a neutral area. For the first time in NATO's history, multi-dimensional amphibious landing operations were held in the east and west of the Baltic Sea. Furthermore, the scenario marked anti-mine warfare, Hellfire target practice and the testing of interoperability in theory and in practice. Admiral Lewis summarized the exercise as follows:

*The end state of exercise is to build readiness... that readiness shows a cohesion in NATO and our allies and partners. It shows unity and commitment to security globally, not just in the Baltic.*

## **Uproar in the offices of the Kremlin**

Despite the still unfavorable time- space factors<sup>12</sup>, the NAC may have make it very clear to Putin that the move to seize one of the Baltic States can become a very expensive one. Putin confronted with NATO's actions will undoubtedly raise his voice and, referring to the content of the 1997 NATO Russia Founding Act (NRFA), will protest against the aggressive nature of the proposed deployments. Given the actions and activities of Moscow in Belarus, its own border region with one of the Baltic States and especially in Kaliningrad in recent years, that is hardly a credible argument. But they also know that in the Kremlin.

What will be Putins reaction? Will he pressure Lukashenko accepting an air force base on Belarus territory, agree to the expansion of the limited military contingent in Ostrovets and to revive the 1995 fraternal covenant? Due to the complications in Syria, it is still calm in the Baltic region . We will see what 2020 brings!

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<sup>1</sup> The "Commonwealth of Russia and Belarus"(Russian: Союз России и Белоруссии [СРБ]; *Sojoez Rossii i Beloroessii* [SRB]), shortly the "Union State" is a supranational entity between Russia and Belarus created on April 2 1996.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to installing ISKANDER-K Ground-to-Ground guided weapon systems with a range of 500 kilometers that can be equipped with a nuclear head, Russia has introduced the anti-ship guided weapons system BASTION-P in Kaliningrad, equipped with ONIKS anti-ship guided weapons with a range of 300 kilometers (when equipped with flying radar platforms) and the ground-to-air guided weapons system S-400 placed with an operational range between 200 and 400 kilometers. (depending on the flight height of a platform) In addition, additional "Pantsir" and the somewhat older S300 air defense units are stationed in Kaliningrad. The Baltic Fleet has equipped its ships with KALIBRE cruise flight weapons that have an anti-ship and anti-ground target capability. In addition, units in the North Military District have organic air defense units equipped with the TOR (SA 15) for the short and the famous BUK (SA-11) for the medium range. A large number of artillery units are also available, such as the SMERCH missile artillery systems with a range of 90 kilometers.

<sup>3</sup> Four: ground, air, maritime and virtual or cyberspace dimension. Five if the maritime dimension divided into a surface and underwater dimension or if the air dimension is supplemented with an aerospace dimension.

<sup>4</sup> The headquarter will be called "*Camp Trump*"

<sup>5</sup> One of the recommendations from the 2016 RAND Corporation study.

<sup>6</sup> The plans will be funded by the European Defense Initiative (EDI) with Americans investing an extra \$ 10 billion since 2015, followed by a \$ 6.5 billion addition to invest in 2019. Critics who question America's loyalty painfully lied. The National Defense Strategy of 2018, endorsed by President Trump, still regards Russia as one of the threat priorities for the United States and instructs the US armed forces to take measures to cope with "Russian Adventurism" and a strong and free Europe.

<sup>7</sup> NATO is developing plans to set up a Response Force consisting of 30 units of brigade size, 30 squadrons of fighter aircraft, 30 Maritime units. The RF must be ready for combat within 30 days.

<sup>8</sup> Time between receiving the assignment, readiness, relocation to the mission area and decisive intervention in the battle.

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<sup>9</sup> Gotland is positioned 90 kilometers from the Swedish mainland, 130 kilometers from Latvia and 248 kilometers from the Kaliningrad enclave.

<sup>10</sup> On Gotland, a Swedish armored division was stationed during the Cold War

<sup>11</sup> The Aurora exercise in 2017 showed such a component as part of the scenario.

<sup>12</sup> In the event of a confrontation, Russia has the advantage because Russia will exploit time-space factors. A RAND investigation indicates that in the current situation Russia can overwhelm the three Baltic countries within sixty hours.