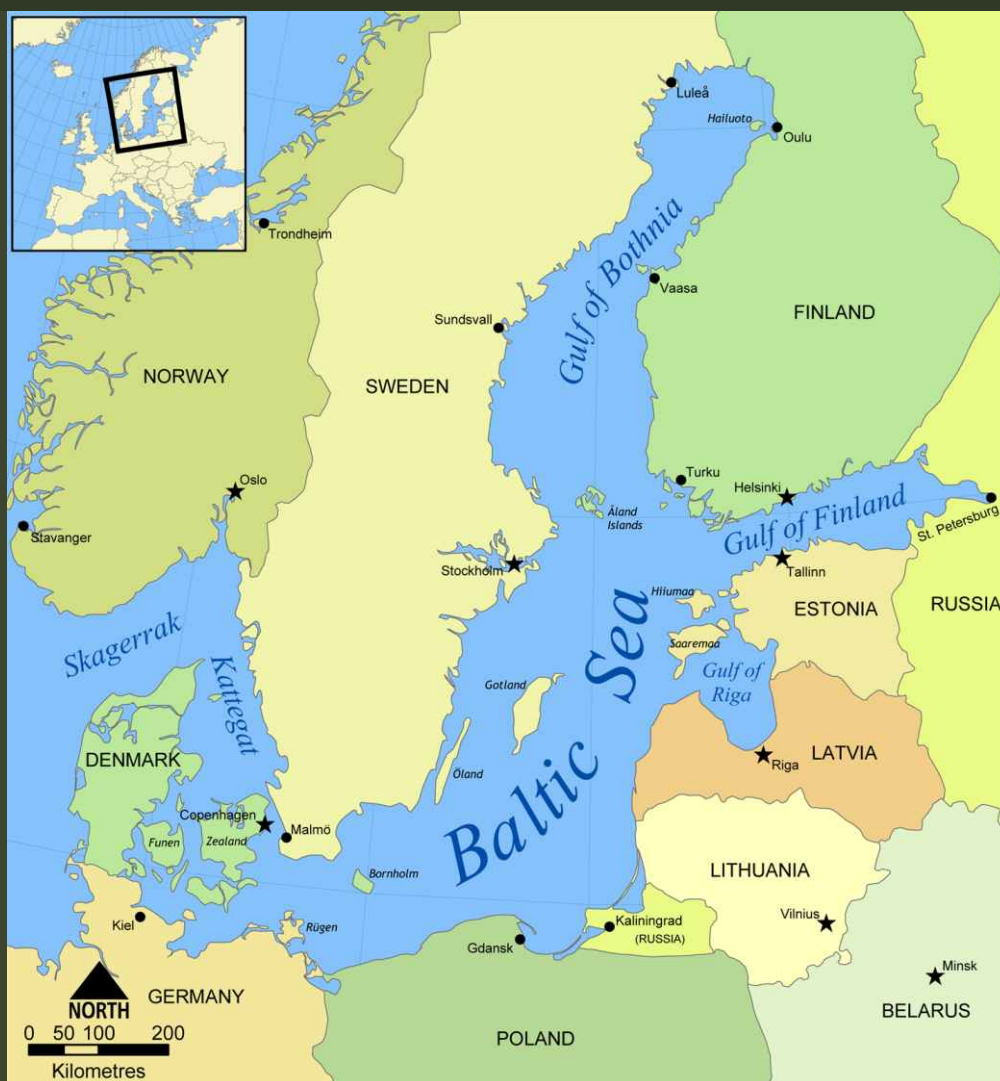




Baltic Military Cooperation: Seeking a Common Response



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Introduction

The strategic review addresses three main questions. Firstly, what have been the successes and shortcomings in Baltic military cooperation? Secondly, what has determined the development of cooperation and what has hindered it? Last of all, is there a common military response as to how to defend the Baltics from potential Russian military aggression? Strategic review will focus on common Baltic military projects, as they can be regarded as the practical outcomes from Baltic military cooperation. Basing on the conducted interviews with policymakers and researchers the aim of the strategic review is to analyse whether the ambiguously assessed Baltic military cooperation provides any tangible common military response to the increasing threat from Russia.

Successes and shortcomings in Baltic military cooperation

Military cooperation between the Baltic States dates back to the early 1990s, when all three states began to reform their armed forces. The assistance of foreign countries, mainly the Nordic countries, was of utmost importance because they approached all three countries as one unity, sharing their knowledge on the development of particular capabilities. The first common grand project was the development of the Baltic Peacekeeping Battalion (BALTBAT) which was launched in 1994 and aimed to reform and develop the armed forces of the Baltic States according to Western standards (Ito 2013, 246). This was followed by the Baltic Naval Squadron (BALTRON), with the aim of developing mine countermeasure capabilities in all three countries. The Baltic Air Surveillance Network military project provided a joint radar network. After joining NATO, the Baltic Defence College (BALDEFCOL) was established, providing common military education for the officers of the Baltic States' armed forces, thus shaping a common understanding about threats and the ways of addressing them. Overall, Baltic States cooperation during the 1990s and the first years after joining NATO, was regarded as one of the normative examples for military integration in the Baltic Sea region.

Nevertheless, in assessing the development of common projects, up until now it should be noted that they have faced challenges in putting them into practice and that they don't provide common Baltic military capabilities for purely defence matters. BALTBAT, having been assessed as a successful project (Ito 2013, 279), ceased to exist after the joining of the Alliance. There have been attempts to renew this kind of military format but without feasible results. The most recent push forward in this regard has been the formation of the Baltic Battalion for NATO Response forces led by the Estonians.

BALTRON now faces challenges in maintaining Baltic solidarity, as the Estonians have declared their intention to withdraw their ship from the project, and instead choosing to participate in the NATO Mine Countermeasure Standing Group. The only common project that is perceived by officials and researchers to be functioning well, is BALDEFCOL, providing high level military education for military officers from the Baltic States and developing friendly networks that are valuable throughout their military careers (Official No.4 2014). Considering the successes and shortcomings of Baltic military cooperation, questions arise about the main factors that have determined this cooperation and the main reasons for its decline.

Determining factors for Baltic military cooperation

The logic behind Baltic military cooperation is underpinned by various factors such as common threats, geography and operational realities, complementary development of armed forces, and the absence of alternative cooperation platforms.

Common threats. The Baltics States share both external and internal threats that largely determine their interdependence in addressing these threats. As one Latvian official puts it, “we are like climbers in [sic] the mountain climbing tied up all together with one rope” (Official No.3 2014). Since gaining independence the dominating external threat for all three Baltic States has been Russia which largely shaped the Baltic regional identity as such (Jurkynas 2007). There can be identified three main issues in the Baltic States’ foreign policy recent years – energy security, the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood Policy, and Europe-US relations – which all directly derives from relations with Russia (Jurkynas 2014). Also there are similar internal security concerns as large Russian speaking minorities and divided societies, information security, pro-Russian political parties, energy dependence, and visible Russian presence in the Baltic economies (Official No.3 2014).

Geography and operational realities. When it comes to the defence of the Baltic States, from a military perspective, all three countries are geographically trapped in one operational region. This is an essential driver for Baltic States military cooperation. All three countries are interdependent in their national defence, the fall of one would directly affect others [sic] two (Jermalavičius 2014). Acknowledging these operational realities, the military levels in all three countries have always backed a deepening and strengthening of military cooperation in the Baltics. As a Latvian official puts it “the defence depth of Baltics is its unity” because operationally the region is challenged and insecure due its narrow land territory between Russia and the Baltic Sea (Official No.4 2014). The perception within NATO as well is non-disputable as “when it comes to the core of the matter the Baltics are still one operation region for the NATO” (Jermalavičius 2014). Hence, if in every day communication the Baltic States are treated as individual countries, when it comes to the real defence and operational matters the Alliance tends

to express its concerns for the internal disputes among the Baltic States (Official No.3 2014).

Absence of alternative cooperation platforms. Although Estonia tends to seek alternative cooperation platforms with Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO) countries, especially with Finland and Sweden, this cooperation takes place on an ad hoc, and not on a strategic basis. The main reasons for Finland's reluctance to cooperate on a strategic basis with Estonia are the antagonistic approach and perception of Russia. Since 1945, Finland has built constructive and friendly relations with Russia (Official No.1 2014). Another important factor for an absence of willingness among NORDEFECO countries to take on board Estonia or any other Baltic country is the fact that they are in the initial phase of military integration (Jermalavičius 2014) and pretty much differ between themselves, sharing divergent military cultures and perceptions of Russia as a threat. In turn, Poland is often mentioned as Lithuania's direction in seeking alternative cooperation. Also, this platform is not considered as viable as it has no strategic character and often is hampered by "big politics and heated emotions" hence negatively echoing on defence policy (Official No.1 2014). Latvia, which is caught in between, has tried to act as a mediator but has in recent years also strengthened its strategic partnership ties with Scandinavian countries, especially Norway. Considering the options for the Baltic States as a one block to build cooperation with NORDEFECO or Poland it would be possible only if there is internal consensus among the Baltic States themselves about common strategic views (Official No.1 2014). Hence, despite all attempts to build new cooperation platforms for each Baltic country, this has not resulted in viable options to the existing Baltic cooperation framework.

Complementary development of armed forces. During the 1990s, the vast majority of foreign assistance mainly came from Scandinavian countries which approached the Baltic States as one unity. For instance, the first common project, BALTBAT was guided by Danes in concert with other Scandinavian countries (Ito 2013, 245). The same can be said about the BALTRON project where great role was played by Germany, giving away two mine countermeasure ships and one mine seeking ship to Latvia, and two mine seeking ships for each Lithuania and Estonia (Jankovs 2014). Hence, the foreign attempts were through joint military projects to build common Baltic military capabilities. Additionally, since joining NATO, the armed forces of the Baltic States have been developed according to the Alliance's standardisation system. Lastly, the Baltic States have been very active in participating in the same international operations conducted by NATO or EU. According to Corum, the transformation and development of the Baltic States' armed forces was determined by the active participation in international operations (Corum 2013, 1-6). Although the Baltic States have never participated under one leading nation's framework, the operational experience gained has been similar. As a

positive exception can be regarded Latvian Special Operation Unit's participation in Lithuanian Special Operation Force Group in Afghanistan from 2011 till 2013 (MIL 2014). Hence, due to the purposeful approach of foreign assistance, membership in NATO, and participation in the same international operations, the armed forces of the Baltic States have developed in a complementary way.

Hindrances to Baltic military cooperation

Despite the strong arguments for Baltic military cooperation laid out in the previous section, there are three factors that significantly hamper it – differing defence budgets, divergent strategic views and dissent of personalities.

Differing defence budgets. The fact that the Estonians were not harshly affected by the economic crisis in 2008 and they managed to allocate 2 per cent from their gross domestic product for the defence sector has made the Estonians arrogant and they have started to look down upon Latvians and Lithuanians openly in their political rhetoric, criticizing neighbours for not spending enough on the defence (Jermalavičius 2014). On the one hand it has significantly affected any concerted military procurement for the Baltic States. For instance in the case of procurement of armoured personnel carriers (APC) each Baltic State buys different ones, if Latvians procure only used APC with an aim to modernize and adjust them for national defence needs, then Estonians are procuring brand new ones and more advanced models (Official No.4 2014). Hence, the financial issue has a direct relevance in why all three Baltic States do not procure the same military armament and equipment. But, it only partly explains why there is a shortage of *joint* military procurements for the Baltic States. Latvian officials disagree on the efficiency of joint military procurements as such, because even if there were equal financial opportunities for all three Baltic States to procure the same equipment, the administrative and legal framework makes it much more expensive. The Baltic States' joint procurement of Carl-Gustav Ammunition in the framework of the European Defence Agency that resulted in a 20 per cent rise in the price could be mentioned as an example. So these kind of pooling efforts simply do not pay off (Official No.2 2014). There is a different situation at the military and tactical level, where close cooperation especially in military training aspects can be observed, for instance Estonians come to train on training ground in Latvia because they lack land territories where to conduct exercises (Official No.1 2014). Hence, at the military tactical level, the Baltic military actually do conduct pooling efforts but for grand military projects or procurements, economic rationale is lacking and there is an inability to agree upon strategic views.

On the other hand, considering common Baltic military projects, then the Estonians are the ones who have withdrawn their participation from BALTRON due to a lack of personnel and ships. Although they claim that from the strategic perspective,

participation in the NATO Mine Countermeasure Standing group is much more important than participation in BALTRON, it is clear that reasons for this decision was the shortage of naval military personnel (Jermalavičius 2014). The Estonian withdraw [sic] would not be perceived that critical by Latvia and Lithuania but the problem is *how* they did it by criticizing other two Baltic countries for not investing enough resources into the project (Official No.4 2014). This rhetoric had a negative impact on Baltic unity as such. In return, the Latvians and Lithuanians criticize the Estonians for not spending money for the defence efficiently. Another argument is that in absolute numbers the defence budgets of the Baltic States are not that differing (Official No.1 2014). But this argument should be evaluated cautiously, because the data provided by NATO on member state defence expenditure clearly indicates that Estonians do spend more – 475 million euros, whereas the Latvians spend 291 million euros and the Lithuanians 354 million euros (NATO 2014a, 4). So, in summary, the financial aspect has had a partial impact on the development of common military projects and joint procurements of the Baltic States but it certainly has created a hindrance to constructive cooperation and good inter personnel relations. As a Latvian official puts it the financial aspect “materially does not have any significant impact on the Baltic cooperation but mentally it certainly plays its role” (Official No.3 2014).

Divergent strategic views. There are no common strategic views among the Baltic States (mainly at the Ministry of Defence level) about what mutual cooperation should be like and with whom to cooperate. Estonia tries to position itself as a small but very successful country which allocates a respectable amount of financial resources for defence matters. Their ambitions have also increased within the Baltic State cooperation framework, not only through open critical rhetoric towards the other two Baltic States for not spending enough on Baltic defence but also in practical projects. The development of Amari Air Base in Estonia serves as an example. The Estonians also advocated for the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission to be run from their air base and not exclusively at the Lithuanian Šiauliai Air Base. They only achieved their goal in 2014, due to the Ukrainian crisis when NATO strengthened the mission. Now the Estonians have a fully operational air base where Danish airplanes are located. The air base issue has become one of the main dispute objects between Estonians and Lithuanians and has negatively affected the Baltic unity (Official No.2 2014).

Lithuanians in turn, see Baltic cooperation as a very ambitious perspective lacking calculation about the practical realization of their initiatives. One of the initiatives is to develop a joint Baltic division which is not possible in existing circumstances as there are limited military personnel in all three countries, there is nobody who could command such a division, and there are other practical issues which are complicated to address. The Latvians are usually the ones who advocate for deeper military integration and

military interdependence. For example, one of the latest initiatives is the development of a joint headquarters for the Baltics that would coordinate planning activities, cooperate with NATO planners and deal with crisis management operations. The development of this particular initiative is hampered by the Estonians who raise concerns about the supranational character of the headquarters which could violate their national interests (Official No.1 2014). Differing views can also be observed on the issue as to with whom strategic partnerships should be developed, as each Baltic State tries to build cooperation on bilateral bases – the Estonians with the Finns and Swedes, the Latvians with the Norwegians and Swedes, and the Lithuanians with the Polish. As mentioned above, none of these attempts can be assessed as successful because the cooperation takes place only on an ad hoc basis and the Scandinavian countries are reluctant to develop a strategic partnership with the Baltic States due to their perception of Russia. Hence, the differing strategic views of Baltic States, often determined by national interests, are the ones that seriously hamper cooperation between the countries and the financial aspect is secondary, as the latter always follows the strategic lead.

Dissent of personalities. Interpersonal relationships between particular officials at the ministries of defence of the Baltic countries are another topical issue that hampers dialogue and military cooperation because these personalities have significant influence on other policy makers (Jermalavičius 2009, 146). A Latvian official even suggested that this issue be raised at the government level, because in recent years relationships do not improve, on the contrary, due to the Estonian rhetoric it has even worsened (Official No.1 2014). But this attempt would probably not bring any results either, as very often “the big politics of Baltic States (inability to reach common view on projects such as Rail Baltic, Visaginas nuclear plant, gas terminal etc.) negatively affects military cooperation” (Official No.4 2014). So strategic differences imbedded in national interests are present across all sectors of the Baltic States. Military cooperation is usually mentioned as one of the good examples of Baltic States cooperation. In the defence sector, in a general estimation according to Zdanavičius, policy makers in the Baltic States are rational but they evaluate short term perspectives, not seeing positive aspects of the cooperation in a longer term outweighing the negative ones. (Zdanavičius 2014). As far as the long term perspective is concerned, then the Latvian official who has witnessed the development of Baltic military cooperation from its very beginning is optimistic noting that personalities (both political and officials at ministries of defence) come and go, but considering the substance and the primary purpose of the Baltic cooperation which embrace operational realities then it is permanent and stable (Official No.4 2014).

The common Baltic response to the Ukraine crisis

In assessing the development of Baltic military cooperation over the last twenty years, it can be described as steady and stable, having developed common military projects and building their armed forces in a complementary manner. But there is still a lack of jointly developed military capabilities that would serve Baltic defence purposes. Despite the ongoing cooperation at the military tactical level, mainly in military training aspects, one should make an assessment on practical outcomes from the Baltic military cooperation that are not sufficient. As example is mentioned the slow development of the joint Baltic headquarters and existing mistrust from Estonians, who are not willing to share information crucial for Baltic defence purposes (Official No.2 2014).

It seems that the Ukraine crisis has also not given significant push for an intensification of Baltic military cooperation. Although there is pressure for joint acquisition projects and disputes over Amari air base have been silenced, as Estonians achieved their goal of having their share in the NATO Air Policing mission, a radical breakthrough cannot be witnessed there (Zdanavičius 2014). A Latvian official expressed concerns about the closing of the window of opportunity which opened due to the Ukraine crisis, when strategic partners were willing to increase their military assistance for the Baltic States. But they came across the unpleasant observation that the Baltic States do not speak in one voice due to internal disputes, but ask for assistance on a unilateral basis. It is especially worrisome in the case of the US, where younger generations of politicians do not share the same perception of Russia as a threat, because they are more troubled by the East Asia region (Official No.1 2014). Hence, the Baltic States are urged to work intensively with European partners on convincing them about the seriousness of the Baltic situation.

Despite the lack of obvious improvements in Baltic military cooperation, there are indications for the formation of common Baltic military response. The first one is at the political level, where the Baltic States are working together to bring the proposal to review those articles in the North Atlantic Treaty (1945) that regulate crisis response, therefore addressing the lessons learned from Ukraine crisis, onto the NATO agenda. The Baltic States have also formed the Baltic Battalion for NATO Response Force led by the Estonians, that will participate in military exercises on a regular basis. The outcomes of the NATO Summit in Wales that embrace deployment of NATO member states' troops in the Baltics States on the bases of permanent rotation, regular military exercises and strong rapid reaction unit formation (NATO 2014b) also push the Baltic States to work together. Hence NATO's efforts to secure the Baltic States are directed holistically as it is one operational region which again works as an external pressure for the three countries to intensify their military cooperation.

At the national level, the Baltic States have come up with synchronisation and coordination of their activities along the borders, hence intensifying border cooperation (Official No.1 2014). Also, there are some positive indications that the joint Baltic headquarters initiative will work after all which would be a significant breakthrough for Baltic defence. In this context, it is crucial for the Baltic States to acknowledge that having differing strategic views is a luxury they cannot afford, considering operational realities. The current divergent strategic views stand in the way of the development of a sufficient common military response for the Baltic States.

Conclusions

The purpose of the strategic review was to analyse the main determinants and hampering factors for Baltic military cooperation. It also aimed to elicit whether the Ukraine crisis has given a positive push for cooperation, and the coming up with a tangible common military response. It seems that despite the obvious necessity to cooperate which is characterized by common threats, operational realities, an absence of alternative cooperation platforms, and the complementary development of armed forces, there are still problems for the Baltic States focus their national interests and overcome the concerns about their sovereignty. Although there is very good cooperation and pooling efforts at the military tactical level when it comes to the big question of how to defend the Baltics States, differing strategic views significantly hinder all constructive attempts to come up with a tangible common response. The only factor that still disciplines the Baltic States to keep working together is the external pressure originating from NATO officials and particular member states who urge the three countries to acknowledge operational realities and overcome their individual national interests.

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