

NATO and the Baltics:

Regional Views on Deterrence Needs



Egle Murauskaite and Miles Pomper

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NATO's response to Russian military rhetoric and posture has reassured Baltic decision-makers and analysts. However, they emphasize the importance of shared threat perceptions among allies, and call for demonstrable NATO signals of unity and readiness to act in the region.

As the conflict in Ukraine continues, NATO has seen a step up in Russian military posturing – from provocative behavior at air and sea in the Baltic region to nuclear saber rattling rhetoric. At the 2014 NATO summit in Wales, states agreed on several measures to adjust NATO's deterrence posture, emphasizing commitment to defend fellow members against outside attack. In June 2015, the authors interviewed twenty-two policy makers, government security professionals, and independent analysts in Estonia and Lithuania for their assessment of how well these steps were being implemented, their sufficiency to deter Russia, and the nature of the Russian threat.

The interviews indicated that the new NATO measures have had a key desired effect—reassuring jittery new members that NATO (and especially the United States) took their concerns and the Russian threat seriously. Policymakers expressed relief that there was a new interest by Western NATO members in the region after two decades of ostensibly underappreciating the prospects of East-West conflict. While experts suggested that the alliance was moving in the right direction to close deterrence gaps, most felt the need to accelerate the pace of implementation, and solidify NATO's conventional deterrent in the region through larger persistent deployments of equipment and forces (particularly U.S. forces).

NATO assurances for the Baltics

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has substantially reduced its conventional and nuclear forces in Europe. However, the Ukraine crisis and U.S. allegations that Russia had violated testing restrictions of the Intermediate range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty forced NATO to abruptly shift gears. Russian actions to seize Crimea and aid separatists in Eastern Ukraine, using “hybrid warfare” involving irregular forces, raised fears in the Baltics that they could face similar aggression and have little means to deter or repel it. These anxieties were aggravated by Russia's nuclear saber rattling rhetoric and military exercises, in which nuclear weapons were used to restrain NATO's conventional forces, raising questions among analysts about Russia's doctrine and likely behavior in such a crisis. As a result, at the 2014 NATO Wales summit, alliance members approved a Readiness Action Plan designed to speed up the time in which other NATO members could reinforce front-line states subject to an attack.

By the time of our interviews, several elements of the Readiness Action Plan had been implemented. These included dozens of air, sea, and land exercises, as well as persistent deployments of companies of U.S. troops in the Baltic states, the establishment of command-and-control facilities in those countries, and commitments by the regional governments to greater defence spending and enlistment of domestic forces.

Regional Threat Perceptions

Overall, the Baltic experts interviewed expressed satisfaction with the NATO response to date; yet, they shared a clear preference for more conventional armaments and troops — on the scale of a battalion (i.e. several companies) stationed in each of the Baltic states, rather than a company (up to 250 troops).

There was a sense that a direct military confrontation with Russia was highly unlikely in the near term, as was any sudden deterioration of the situation. Still, planning for such scenarios was viewed as necessary and prudent. Aside from the possibility of hybrid warfare, other potential low-probability high-impact scenarios envisioned included:

- Russian provocateurs engaging in an act of symbolic violence against Russians in the Baltic region (e.g. bombing a military train en route to Kaliningrad, violence against minorities) and Russia subsequently declaring it must respond militarily;
- Pro-Russian politicians being placed in Baltic governments (by election financing/rigging or government overthrow), and declaring a change in policy towards Russia, or asking NATO forces to leave;
- Cyber attacks by pro-Russian forces followed by riots;
- Russian action that miscalculates local or NATO reaction, unwittingly provoking an armed conflict;
- Russia using the Baltic states as a pressure point to convince the U.S. to back down in a conflict elsewhere (e.g. Caucasus or Ukraine).

No Interest in New Nuclear Weapons

While Baltic experts expressed a desire for boosting conventional forces in the region and improving their readiness, nuclear weapons were not part of the national security discourse. In part, this reticence reflects an absence of experience and involvement with nuclear strategy: Russia did not include other Soviet republics in nuclear decision-making during the Cold War, and since joining NATO these countries have been content to leave such decisions to the alliance's nuclear-weapon states. Raising questions on the role and utility of such weapons, both strategic and tactical, was perceived as harkening back to a Cold War mentality or avoided, lest it appear as a challenge to national non-nuclear weapon-state status. Moreover, in both countries experts seemed content with a posture in which the alliance's forward-deployed nuclear weapons were stationed mainly in Western European states — altering that status quo, they argued, threatened to turn their countries into nuclear battlefields.

Reliance on Allies

In Lithuania, there was a considerable degree of skepticism whether NATO allies would actually send military forces to defend the region if Article V of NATO's charter (which calls on allies to come to each other's defence) was invoked. In Estonia such doubts were not felt as acutely, and there seemed to be an inclination to avoid invoking Article V, focusing on the use of Article IV instead (it allows any member state that feels threatened to call for alliance consultations). However, there was clear consensus in both countries that if Article V was invoked and alliance members did not send in military forces, it would spell NATO's end. A constant theme was Putin's desire to drive a wedge between Western and Eastern European NATO members, and, in turn, the need for the alliance to show unity and strength. There was recognition of Western Europe being less alarmed than the East about the Russian rhetoric and posturing, and the need to press this as an alliance-wide issue rather than a sub-regional concern.

Deterring Russia

There seemed to be a consensus that NATO did not need to match Russia's level of armaments (nuclear or conventional) or aggressive posturing. Nevertheless, there was a perceived need to demonstrate some level of military readiness and/or increase in capabilities – letting Putin's actions go unanswered was seen as certain to invite new aggression. Views on the value of dialogue with Russia seemed largely pessimistic: the prospects of achieving a de-escalation by negotiations were seen as dim – instead, Russia was viewed as more likely to interpret any Western attempts at diplomacy as signs of weakness.

Experts argued that the main goal in shoring up Baltic defences should be to convince Russia that the region could not be overrun in a blitzkrieg. They emphasized that Russia was engaging in provocation rather than actual threat escalation, with sensitive high-visibility affronts designed to test the reactions (of the public, policy makers, and security services in the Baltic states and their NATO partners). There was a strong emphasis on the need to remain calm and not overreact, avoiding an inadvertent start of a conflict by either side.

Lessons from History and a Point of Caution

Representatives in both countries were eager to recall the historic behavioral patterns of Russian state and leadership – some going back to the 2000s (start of Putin's reign), some to 1980s (beginning of Andropov doctrine), and some reaching back a few hundred years - to remind the Western audiences just how consistent Russian aggression and territorial expansionism has been. A certain I-told-you-so sentiment could be felt, as the West has turned to Eastern European partners for expertise on the Russian regime, following the crisis in Ukraine, particularly as that expertise had dwindled in the U.S. following the end of the Cold War.

A potentially troublesome by-product of this uniform messaging was glossing over or not engaging in issues that might distract NATO attention from conventional reinforcements (e.g. expressing certain preferences regarding nuclear or missile deployments, or representing local popular and political mood shifts). For instance, in Estonia Western concerns that disaffected Russian populations there or in Latvia could be manipulated by Moscow were dismissed out-of-hand. While the Estonian experts are right to cite the many differences between the populations of Eastern Estonia and Eastern Ukraine, the readiness to brush aside the possibility indicated a certain complacency about tackling longstanding grievances that might be misplaced.