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NATO Summit 2016: The Alliance Must Defend the Baltic States

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The July NATO summit in Warsaw offers an opportunity to focus on one of the most complex regions the alliance is obligated to defend: the Baltic States. NATO should think strategically and take long-term measures that include the eventual permanent basing of troops in the region, the establishment of a Baltic Air Defense mission, and a commitment to regular training exercises focused on rapid troop reinforcement in the region.

A Complex Region

The Baltic region presents unique military and political difficulties that the U.S. needs to overcome. These challenges include:

- **The Baltic States' geographical isolation.** Militarily speaking, the three Baltic States—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—are isolated from other NATO members. To the north of the Baltic States are non-NATO (but friendly) Finland and Sweden. To the south and east are Russia and Belarus. To the west, Lithuania shares a border with the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. Only Lithuania shares a land border with another non-Baltic NATO member: a tiny 65-mile border with Poland, to the southwest between Kaliningrad and Belarus, known as the Suwalki Gap.

- **The Baltic States' small size.** The Baltic States are small in population and size. Combined, the three have roughly the same geographic size and population as Missouri. The Baltic region is probably the only region inside NATO that is too small to depend on rapid reaction forces based elsewhere for its defense.
- **NATO's critical dependence on non-NATO countries.** It would be extremely difficult, but not impossible, for NATO to respond to an incident in the Baltic region without the acquiescence of non-NATO Finland and Sweden.
- **Domestic European politics.** Recent polling shows that any NATO response that placed large numbers of troops in the region would be politically difficult for most European governments.¹

A Forward Presence

Currently, the U.S. rotates one infantry company (approximately 150 soldiers) in each of the three Baltic States and Poland for training. Other NATO members have also sent soldiers to the region on a rotational basis. In 2015, NATO established four NATO Force Integration Units in the region. These multinational command and control centers will facilitate the rapid deployment of Allied forces to the region as required. In terms of manpower they will be small.

One issue that remains controversial inside the alliance is the question of permanently stationing NATO troops in the Baltic States. The only way to guarantee the security of the Baltic States against a conventional Russian military threat is by having

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robust troops and military capabilities on the ground. The Baltic States are too small to rely on a strategy of defensive depth that could buy NATO enough time to mobilize and deploy a sizable force to the region.

There is a common misconception that the 1997 Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation (NATO–Russia Founding Act) prohibits permanently basing NATO soldiers in Central and Eastern European countries. This is not true. Regarding the question of permanent bases, the act states:

NATO reiterates that *in the current and foreseeable security environment*, the Alliance will carry out its collective defence and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces.² (Emphasis added.)

When reading the phrase “in the current and foreseeable security environment,” it is important to remember that Russia and NATO agreed to this act 19 years ago. Russia’s commitment to Euro-Atlantic security has changed since the days of goodwill in 1997.

At the June defense ministerial meeting, NATO decided to base “battalion-plus”-size units (about 1,000 troops, so slightly bigger than the average battalion) in each of the three Baltic States and Poland on a “persistent” basis. The full details will be announced during the Warsaw summit, but it is expected that these troops will be sent to the Baltics and Poland on a rotational basis. So far, the U.S., U.K., and Germany have each committed to serve as framework nations for three of the four battalions, but no other NATO member has officially come forward for the fourth battalion. The deployment of four battalions is a step in the right direction but NATO should not believe that this is enough to deter Russian aggression.

Baltic Air Defense

Realizing that it was not feasible for the three Baltic countries to procure a fast-jet capability required to protect Baltic airspace, NATO decided that it should take up the task as a permanent part of its collective security mission and that the mission should continue indefinitely. Currently, the Baltic States are protected from the air by the Baltic Air Policing mission consisting of eight NATO aircraft, of which only a handful are in the air at any given time.

However, in order to protect the presence of NATO’s pre-positioned equipment, rotational troops, and key infrastructure and transport nodes required for rapid reinforcements in the Baltic region, NATO needs to develop a strategy promoting air defense, not just air policing. This would require a robust fast-jet and airborne surveillance presence in addition to air defense assets.

The commander of the U.S. Army in Europe, Lieutenant General Ben Hodges, and Lithuania’s Defence Minister Juozas Olekas have expressed concern over the lack of air defense capability in the region.³ However, beyond public aspiration by some officials in the region NATO has not agreed on a common position for Baltic Air Defense.

Train Like You Fight

There is a military adage that one should train as if one is going to actually fight. To meet the challenges in the Baltic region the alliance must:

- **Be prepared to reinforce the Baltic region quickly.** NATO should hold annual exercises focused on quickly deploying large number of troops to the Baltic region on short notice.
- **Establish a permanent military presence in the Baltic region.** The deployment of four rotational battalions to the region is a good start but more needs to be done. The Russian threat will

1. See, for example, “Many NATO Countries Reluctant to Use Force to Defend Allies,” Pew Research Center, June 8, 2015, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/06/10/nato-publics-blame-russia-for-ukrainian-crisis-but-reluctant-to-provide-military-aid/russia-ukraine-report-46/> (accessed June 15, 2016).

2. Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security Between NATO and the Russian Federation, May 27, 1997, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm (accessed June 15, 2016).

3. Jen Judson, “US Army Grapples with Short-Range Air Defense Gap in Europe,” *DefenseNews*, June 14, 2016, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/show-daily/eurosatory/2016/06/14/us-army-grapples-short-range-air-defense-gap-europe/85860378/> (accessed June 15, 2016).

remain for the foreseeable future. The U.S. and NATO need to show an enduring commitment to the region by permanently stationing armed forces in the Baltics.

- **Set the record straight.** It is time to put the myths about prohibition of permanent bases to rest. The 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act is probably one of the most-quoted but least-read documents in the debate over transatlantic security. NATO should make a public proclamation that the act does not prohibit the establishment of permanent bases in Central and Eastern Europe if the alliance so chooses.
- **Integrate the battalions into each Baltic nation’s defense planning.** The four battalions should not be deployed to the region just for show. They should form the tip of a very long spear that NATO can deploy in the event of a crisis, and should be fully integrated into a plan for the defense of the Baltic region.

- **Agree to establish a Baltic Air Defense mission.** While the Baltic Air Police has been useful for defending the region’s airspace, more needs to be done. A robust Baltic Air Defense mission is needed to ensure that the region can be defended on the ground, in the air, and at sea.

Strong Defense

Any response that NATO makes to reinforce the Baltic region would be a responsible defensive measure designed to defend the alliance, not to provoke a war with Russia. Defending the Baltic States and deterring Russian aggression will be far easier and cheaper than liberating them. From a military and diplomatic point of view, it makes no sense not to have robust capability in Central and Eastern Europe.

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