

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4882 | JULY 6, 2018

Brussels NATO Summit 2018: Bolstering the Defense of the Baltic States

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The security and defense of the Baltic states deserves to be a key topic at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit on July 11 and 12 in Brussels. The Baltic region is one of the most complex regions that the Alliance is obligated to defend. While decisions made at the 2016 Warsaw Summit—especially the creation of four battle-groups, including one in each of the three Baltic states—were a step in the right direction, the region remains exposed. NATO should think strategically about putting in place durable, robust measures to better deter Russian aggression.

A Complex Region

The Baltic region presents unique military and political difficulties that NATO 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.
- **The Baltic states' ability to reinforce.** Key to any potential liberation of the Baltic states would be swift arrival of robust reinforcements and equipment to the region. However, as detailed by The Heritage Foundation's *2018 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, the NATO Response Force faces readiness challenges.¹ Additionally, contested airspace, especially in light of Russia's A2/AD capabilities in the region, would make reinforcing the region difficult, if not initially impossible. NATO's newly released Joint Air Power Strategy cautions that "the future operating environment may be one in which air superiority can neither be assured at the onset of operations nor, once obtained, be an enduring condition."²
- **NATO's critical dependence on non-NATO countries.** While not impossible, it would be extremely difficult for NATO to respond to an incident in the Baltic region without the acquiescence of non-NATO Finland and Sweden.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://report.heritage.org/ib4882>

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Permanence Needed

At the Warsaw Summit in 2016, NATO announced the creation of an Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP): four multinational battalions stationed in Poland and the Baltic states. The U.S. serves as the framework nation for the battlegroup in Poland; the United Kingdom is in Estonia, Canada is in Latvia, and Germany in Lithuania. EFP troops are under NATO command and control; a multinational divisional headquarters located in Elblag, Poland, achieved initial capability in June 2017, and coordinates the four battalions.³ 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.

In addition to NATO's EFP, the U.S. occasionally rotates forces from Poland and Germany to the Baltic states for training. For example, the 2nd Cavalry Regiment based in Vilseck, Germany, was one of the U.S. units which took part in the recent Saber Strike 18 exercises in Poland and the Baltic states.⁴ Another example is the forward basing of 50 Black Hawk helicopters and 80 soldiers from the rotational aviation brigade based in Germany to Latvia.⁵

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 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 the case. 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.⁶

When reading the phrase “in the current and foreseeable security environment,” it is important to remember that Russia and NATO agreed to this act 21 years ago. Russia's commitment to Euro-Atlantic security has changed since the days of goodwill in 1997.

Baltic Air Defense

In order to better protect 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. Air defense would require a robust fast-jet and airborne surveillance presence in addition to air defense assets.

The Trump Administration has sent positive messages about the possibility of deploying Patriot mis-

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1. Dakota L. Wood, ed., “Europe,” in *2017 Index of U.S. Military Strength* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2017), <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength/assessing-the-global-operating-environment/europe>.
 2. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “NATO's Joint Air Power Strategy,” June 26, 2018, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_06/20180626_20180626-joint-air-power-strategy.pdf (accessed June 28, 2018).
 3. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “LANDCOM Soldiers in Elblag,” February 22, 2018, <https://mndne.wp.mil.pl/en/articlesnews-u/2018-02-226-landcom-soldiers-in-elblag/> (accessed June 26, 2018).
 4. U.S. Army Europe, “Saber Strike 18, June 3-15,” *Fact Sheet*, May 18, 2018, <http://www.eur.army.mil/Portals/19/Fact%20Sheets/Saber%20Strike%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf?ver=2018-06-25-071832-340> (accessed July 2, 2018).
 5. U.S. Army Europe, “Aviation Regionally Allocated Force,” 1st Air Cavalry Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, October 17, 2017, <http://www.eur.army.mil/Portals/19/Fact%20Sheets/Aviation%20Rotation%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf?ver=2018-06-22-114235-563> (accessed July 2, 2018).
 6. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security Between NATO and the Russian Federation Signed in Paris, France,” May 27, 1997, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm (accessed June 15, 2016).
 7. “U.S. Deploys Advanced Anti-Aircraft Missiles in Baltics for First Time,” Reuters, July 10, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-baltics-patriot/u-s-deploys-advanced-anti-aircraft-missiles-in-baltics-for-first-time-idUSKBN19V28A> (accessed July 2, 2017).
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siles to the region. In July 2017, as part of the Tobruk Legacy exercise, the U.S. temporarily deployed a Patriot missile battery to Siauliai air base in Lithuania, the first time the U.S. has deployed ground-based air defense to a Baltic country.⁷ During Vice President Mike Pence's visit to Estonia last fall, the topic of potentially permanent deployment of U.S. Patriot missiles was on the agenda. Reportedly, Vice President Pence told Estonian Prime Minister Juri Ratas that the U.S. is considering such a move but has not decided on a date or time.⁸

Despite positive discussions and aspirational talk, NATO has not agreed on a common position for Baltic Air Defense. In April, Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid emphasized the necessity of air defense saying, "We want to be sure that both NATO's territory and NATO soldiers are well protected." She added, "We need to make sure that there is the air defense and the air support for these forces, in case that is necessary. We need our deterrence to be believable."⁹

Meeting the Challenge of the Baltic Region

NATO member states are committed to defending the Baltic states from Russian aggression. To meet the unique challenges presented by the region, the Alliance should:

- **Be prepared to reinforce the Baltic region quickly.** NATO should continue holding exercises focused on quickly deploying a large number of troops to the Baltic region on short notice. During Saber Strike 18, U.S. officials stated that within a year, they had slashed the number of days to move armored personnel carriers from Germany to Poland from nine days to five days.¹⁰ Continued Allied training should aim to decrease transit times even further.
- **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 threat from Russia

will 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.
- **Integrate the battalions into each Baltic nation's defense planning.** The four battalions should not be deployed to the region just for show or as a "tripwire." Rather, 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 policing 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.
- **Think creatively about which framework would work the best for Baltic Air Defense.** At first glance, NATO might seem the best framework for implementing a Baltic Air Defense program, but Finland and Sweden—essential countries for a Baltic Air Defense—are not in NATO. The European Union is out of the question due to internal divisions on defense matters. So, the U.S. should push for a multilateral regional approach that includes both NATO and individual EU members, and is led by Washington.
- **Work with the non-NATO Nordic countries to improve the air defense of the Baltic.** Due

8. "US VP Mike Pence in Estonia Raises Prospect of Deploying Patriot Missiles," Deutsche Welle, July 30, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/us-vp-mike-pence-in-estonia-raises-prospect-of-deploying-patriot-missiles/a-39899520> (accessed September 27, 2017).

9. "Estonia Calls for Deployment of U.S. Troops, Patriot Missiles," *The Japan Times*, April 5, 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/04/05/world/estonia-calls-deployment-u-s-troops-patriot-missiles/#.WzTcplpKjcs> (accessed July 2, 2018).

10. Carlo Angerer, "NATO Focuses on Speed in the Baltics Amid Worries over Russia," NBC News, June 23 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/nato-focuses-speed-baltics-amid-worries-over-russia-n885261> (accessed July 2, 2018).

to their geographical location, non-NATO Finland and Sweden would form an important part of any Baltic Air Defense strategy. Washington should work closely with Helsinki and Stockholm to ensure regional coordination and cooperation.

Conclusion

Any action that NATO takes 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. The U.S. should lead the way in ensuring that NATO makes additional progress in bolstering the defense of the Baltic states at the Brussels Summit.

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