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**THE MILITARY
AND POLITICAL
SITUATION
IN THE BALTIC REGION
IN THE LATE 20th/
EARLY 21st CENTURIES:
THE PROSPECTS
OF 'UNEASY PEACE'**

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In this article, we consider the development of international relations in the Baltic region in the late 20th/early 21st centuries. This study aims to analyse the security prospects of the Baltic region in view of the changes in the overall geopolitical situation in Europe and in the relations between Russia and its closest neighbours and the leading NATO countries.

We examine the ideas and forecasts of international and Russian experts relating to the state and dynamics of military security in the region at the first stage of the Baltics' membership in NATO. Another focus is on changes in the strategy of the NATO leadership for the Baltic region as a priority zone of potential warfare and, thus, for the presence of the alliance in the area. We stress that the steps taken by the NATO leadership prompted the Russian side to assign a special role in the country's foreign policy to the Kaliningrad region and to take practical steps to ensure peace and security in the region.

Keywords: international relations, cooperation, politics, security, Baltic region, Russia, Kaliningrad region, USA, NATO

Introduction

After the new administration took over in the US, media outlets started to discuss the possibility of another 'reset' of the Moscow – Washington relations. In September 2017, *The Telegraph* wrote that the Russian side had relayed to the new US leadership a 'roadmap' suggesting 'immediate steps to restore diplomatic, military, and intelligence channels severed between the two countries'. The document was reported to call for 'meetings between the two countries' security service heads, consultations on situations in Afghanistan, Ukraine, Iran, and North Korea' [2]. In

effect, this allegedly 'secret' document was the extended report of the Russian International Affairs Council.¹ The roadmap did address the prospects of the Russian-US strategic partnership across a number of areas. However, it never claimed the status of a national programme or strategy, being a mere analytical report. The commitment of the parties to stronger bilateral relations provoked a reaction even from official Beijing. Chinese think-tanks and state media were concerned that 'the scales could be tipping away from Beijing's favour and in a direction that could further challenge China's regional and global ambitions' [3].

Despite the euphoria that swept the media waiting for changes in the US policy under the 45th President of the US, Donald Trump, experts argued that the US would still strive for world leadership and continue geopolitical confrontation with Russia. Some expected that the tension would extend to nuclear armaments as far as to provoke nuclear warfare [4].

In 2018, the stance of the US towards political dialogue with Russia remained equivocal. The influence of the American political establishment on Donald Trump's position was not always compensated by the ambition of the president to secure the economic benefit of his country in any dealings with its allies. For example, at the 2018 G7 summit held in Quebec, Trump said: 'NATO is as bad as NAFTA.² It's much too costly for the US'. Later, the President's Press Secretary softened this statement, emphasising that Trump was merely calling for NATO allies to 'shoulder their fair share of [...] common defense burden' [5].

It is very unlikely the US will abandon its leading role in NATO in a short-term perspective. However, some decisions of the current administration (withdrawal from UNESCO, relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem, and suspension of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty) lead one to expect other extraordinary political initiatives. All this is of special concern to the country's allies in the Baltic, which, over the past 15 years, have built their military and political doctrines on confrontation with Russia.

The countries of the Baltic region on their way to NATO

The international processes taking place today clearly testify to the global balance of power shifting towards developing states, as well as to the emergence of new centres of power. Thus, the Russian

¹ *A Roadmap for U.S. – Russia Relations*, 2017, Moscow, Russian International Affairs Council; Center For Strategic And International Studies, available at: <http://russiancouncil.ru/papers/Russia-USA-Roadmap-Report30-En.pdf> (accessed 07.04.2018).

² Author's note: North American Free Trade Agreement.

expert community has to focus on describing an optimum form of Russia – US relations. To attain this, it is important to analyse the history of Russia-NATO relations and Russia's military security objectives in the North-West. The Strategy for the National Security of the Russian Federation stresses that, amid growing international instability, countries of the world are increasingly assuming responsibility for situations in their regions. Regional and subregional trade and other economic agreements are becoming an important mechanism to prevent crises.³ The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation substantiates these assumptions. The document emphasises Russia's commitment to international security and stability at strategic and regional levels.⁴

The eastward expansion of NATO, which took place in the early 1990s–late 2000s, became an essential part of international political dialogue. It was often discussed in the context of the situation in the Kaliningrad region of Russia – a territory that both plays an important role in promoting Russian interests in the Baltic and has a significant effect on European security in general. This is not surprising: the geopolitical interests of Germany, Poland, Lithuania, and some other European countries overlap in the Baltic region. According to Vladislav Vorotnikov, 'NATO membership was a top priority of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Baltics. On the one hand, it met the demands for security of both political elites and the victimised public consciousness. On the other hand, it allowed elites to present their countries in the international arena as outposts against Russia and borderlands between the West and the East' [6, p. 10].

Russian officials and defence experts have often stressed that the alliance and its enlargement pose a military threat to the Russian Federation [see, for example, 7, p. 98]. Galina Gribanova and Yuri Kosov write: '[in the 1990s], the NATO strategy did not focus on the Baltic Sea region as a priority area of potential military conflicts. The Baltic Sea region used to appear on the agenda only when some incidents occurred' [8, p. 58].

This problem has been addressed by Russian specialists in Baltic studies – Nikolai Mezhevich, Gennady Fedorov, and Yuri Zverev. They stress that the situation changed in the late 2000s. As a result,

³ Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of December 31, 2015, No 683 'On the Foreign Policy Strategy of the Russian Federation', 2015, *Rossiyskaya gazeta*. available at: <https://rg.ru/2015/12/31/nac-bezopasnost-site-dok.html> (accessed 07.04.2018) (in Russ.).

⁴ Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016), 2016, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (official website)*, available at: http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248 (accessed 07.04.2018) (in Russ.).



'the region, which was considered for twenty years an area of relative stability and rapid socioeconomic development, is evolving within the model of hybrid conflict, drifting towards military confrontation' [9, p. 4]. Another Russian international relations expert, Konstantin Khudoley, concludes his analysis of the evolution of the Baltic from the 1990s by emphasising that '[d]espite the 'turn to the East' that took place during the confrontation with the West, the Euro-Atlantic line of Russian foreign policy will remain a priority' [10, p. 14]. The international law component of the Russia–NATO relations has been addressed by Igor Kuznetsov [11] and Aleksandr Nikitin [12], who view NATO eastern initiatives as a long-term strategy for the deep integration of Central and Eastern Europe into the alliance.

Some international researchers examine these processes within a broader context of geopolitical changes and stress the ambitions of Russia and the US to secure military and political leadership [13]. For example, Kimberly Marten writes: 'NATO's expanding role in the Balkans and both NATO and US use of airstrikes without Russian consultation and approval probably mattered more than NATO's geographic expansion in status considerations' [14, p. 160].

The enlargement contributed to both the combat capability of the alliance and spurred its military activity. In 2002, NATO held a major exercise at Russian borders. First after the collapse of the USSR, it involved pre-emptive nuclear strike practice [15]. The military infrastructure of NATO was developing. In Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, it was expanding eastward. Even civil aerodromes were to be repurposed. Overall, NATO was planning to engage 120 airfields as forward deployment bases. Aerodromes in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia gave the NATO aviation an opportunity to reach Russian objects east of the Volga.

Discussions held at the Russia-NATO Council meetings, which was established at the summit in Rome on May 28, 2002,⁵ did not ease Russia's concerns about the possible deployment of NATO troops and armaments in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. This scenario was viewed as likely by some Russian politicians, since the US was planning to redeploy part of its European troops from 'old' alliance members (Germany) to Eastern European candidates. The pessimism of the Russian military was fuelled by the Baltics being very unlikely to join the adapted CFE Treaty.⁶

The problem was that the Baltics could have joined the treaty only after it had come into effect, which required its ratification by the sig-

⁵ *Russia-NATO Council* [official website], 2018, available at: <https://www.nato.int/nrc-website/ru/about/index.html> (accessed 07.04.2018) (in Russ.).

⁶ Author's note: the adopted CFE Treaty was concluded at the OSCE summit held in Istanbul on the initiative of Russia in 1999.



natories to the CFE. Russia made an official proposal to the Baltics that the four countries should assume mutual responsibility for 'containing' their armed forces and preventing a disproportional increase in their combat potentials. This proposal was not accepted [16].



Fig. 1. CFE territory in 2003 [17]

The prospects of European security were widely discussed at the time. Against this background, a conference entitled *North European Regional Integration: Challenges and Prospective Agenda* was held in Moscow on May 31, 2003. The event focused on international relations in the Baltic Sea region, world politics, changes in the policies of Russia, the US, the Nordic countries, and the Baltics, the eastward enlargement of NATO and Russia's reaction to it, and the entering into force of the adapted CFE Treaty. Most speakers paid attention to soft security in the Baltic region and possible international collaborations in solving environmental, economic, social, and other problems.⁷

The conference was a landmark. As its speakers emphasised, the international political situation had been sufficiently transformed by the time to expedite positive changes in the Baltic region. Enough time had passed from the disintegration of the USSR for the views of the Russian expert community and political leadership to change. The attitudes of national elites towards NATO enlargement became much less negative. The Northern European region was expected to play the key role in Russia's integration in Europe. Thus, the country demonstrated

⁷ North European Regional Integration: Challenges and Prospective Agenda, 2018, *Research and Academic Forum on International Relations website*, available from: <http://www.obraforum.ru/pdf/k2003program.pdf> (accessed 24.12.2018) (in Russ.).

that its north-western foreign policy was aimed at ensuring stability in the region and creating more comfortable conditions for all the actors. Many speakers stressed that the favourable backdrop had been created by the waning of the Baltics' concerns about the possible military pressure from Russia. This was partly a result of the three countries' impending accession to NATO and the EU.

On March 29, 2004, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia joined NATO. This stirred up reaction from some members of the Russian military and political leadership: the eastward enlargement of NATO was not in line with the country's interests. The expansion was perceived as distorting the post-war power balance in Europe. With the Baltics in mind, the then Russian Minister of Defence, Sergey Ivanov, 'demanded that NATO abandon its "anti-Russian stance" and prevent its members from anti-Moscow statements' [18]. Moreover, the location of NATO military bases at Russian borders both was against good neighbourly spirit and created tension in international relations, which persists to this day.

After the accession of Poland (1999) and Lithuania (2004) to NATO, the Kaliningrad region became even more vulnerable to external threats. Russia became a potential target of blackmail by neighbouring states, which could block maritime, air, and land connections to the region. The NATO rhetoric transformed the projected construction of a Grodno–Kaliningrad transport corridor, which was actively discussed in 1995–1999, into the so-called 'Suwałki gap'. Today, the defence of this gap is a key priority of the alliance [9, p. 12].

Since Peter the Great, Russia has viewed the Baltic Sea instrumental in forging partnerships with European states. Russian ports in the shallow-water narrow end of the Gulf of Finland, which freezes in the winter, can be easily blocked. Thus, it is easy to understand why Russia is increasing its naval presence in the southern, ice-free part of the Baltic Sea. Obviously, with its forces in the Kaliningrad region, Russia both ensures the security of the region and has the opportunity to influence European security in general. Some European researchers believe that further militarisation of the Baltic and the Kaliningrad region will lead to greater tension in the Russia–EU–NATO relations [19].

Unfortunately, expectations held by some experts that the problems of military security would play a smaller role in the intergovernmental relations in the Baltic Sea region have not been fulfilled. Ivan Timofeev writes: 'The Baltic of today is a most intricate area for Russia-NATO interaction. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, all of them members of the alliance, serve as its frontier zone in direct contact with its Eastern neighbour'. He stresses: 'After the Ukraine crisis, the Baltic turned into a most vulnerable point for escalation' [20].

Similar conclusions have been drawn by Nikolai Mezhevich and Yuri Zverev. They consider a local military conflict as a possible scenario for the Baltic [9, p. 21]. Apparently, in the early 2000s, Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland were interested in a constructive Russia – NATO dialogue. Primarily, this applied to political forces that did not have value and ideational differences with Russia. The ‘permanent conflict’ principle was sometimes overridden by trade-driven pragmatic relations. For example, since May 1, 2004,⁸ Poland has been very active in implementing the eastern foreign policy strategy of the EU. The country has sought to strengthen its position as a major actor in the Russia – EU – NATO relations. This gave Poland an additional advantage in the dialogue with the EU leaders, especially, Germany, and translated in the economic benefits generated by the proximity to the Kaliningrad region.

The Baltic region amid military escalation and political confrontation

As early as 2012, Russian experts wrote that the accession of the Baltics to NATO did not have a dramatic effect on the post-war balance of power: ‘NATO’s military involvement in the Baltic States has so far failed to create an armed force capable of damaging Russia’s defences’ [21].

However, today the military and political situation in the Baltic region has evidently reached a new bout of tensions reminiscent of the mid-2000s. There are reasons to believe that this tendency will persist and new risks associated with military security will emerge. The latter may turn into military dangers and threats to national security. Below, we will discuss the facts supporting these beliefs.

Since 2012, the numbers of NATO contingents stationed at the western borders of Russia have increased threefold. Today, these forces are ready to deploy within 30 days, compared to the earlier notice period of 45 days. The US missile defence system in Europe has been brought to the level of initial operational readiness. The intensity of NATO aerial reconnaissance actions at Russian borders has increased 3.5-fold and marine reconnaissance 1.5-fold. The frequency of NATO military exercise at Russian borders has doubled. The alliance carried out 282 exercises in 2014 and as many as 548 in 2017. Each year, over 30 military exercises are conducted at Russia’s western borders. Their scenarios are based on armed confrontation with the country.⁹ The Minister of Defence of Russia, Sergey Shoigu, commented on the outcomes of the 2018 NATO summit in Brussels:

⁸ Author’s note: the date of Poland’s accession to the EU.

⁹ Expanded meeting of the Defence Ministry Board, 2018, *President of Russia*, Official website, available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56472> (accessed 04.01.2018) (in Russ.).



'Over 100 exercises have been held since the beginning of the year, with up to 80 thousand personnel involved. The numbers of personnel participating annually in military exercises has increased tenfold over the past five years and the number of combat aircraft employed from 11 to 101'. The Russian side was also concerned with the involvement of Finland and Sweden in NATO structures [22].

Russian side could not ignore these developments. On April 1, 2016, the 11th Army Corps was formed in the Kaliningrad region as part of the Baltic Fleet.¹⁰ In February, 2018, one of the brigades of the corps was equipped with Iskander-M ballistic missiles. This was confirmed by the Head of the State Duma Defence Committee, Vladimir Shamanov. He said: 'The constantly expanding military infrastructure of foreign states near Russian national borders will become the first target for Russia'.¹¹

This statement provoked a reaction from the NATO leadership and the Baltic States. They insisted that the Russian side was intentionally disturbing the balance. Galina Gribanova and Yuri Kosov write that most of the concerns of the Baltics and the alliance were caused by the fact that '[Iskander-M] missiles can carry nuclear or conventional warheads and have a range of 250 miles, placing Riga, Vilnius, and Warsaw within their reach' [8, p. 61]. At the same time, the position of NATO on increasing the defence capabilities of non-member states is obviously selective: what is permitted to some states is not permitted to others.

A vivid example is the decision made at the NATO summit in Warsaw on July 8, 2016, to station four battalions in the Baltics and Poland. According to the Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, this was 'proportionate measured defensive response' to Russia's actions [23]. The summit also agreed to create a joint intelligence and security division. Alongside its principal tasks of collecting and analysing information, this new structure was to ensure the effective use of the data submitted by the alliance allies [24].

Another source of possible threats to Russia is the NATO decision to bring the Baltic region states to a new level of military preparedness by granting Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia the status of leading nations within NATO. Thus, to maintain defence capability in the northwest, Russia has to estimate the situation in real time and take informed military and political decisions, which, among other things, will require additional government spending.

¹⁰ Coastal defence troops of Russian Navy to be transformed into army corps, 2018, *Flot. Com (analytical portal)*, available at: <https://flot.com/2017/%D0%92%D0%BC%D1%8415/> (accessed 04.01.2018) (in Russ.).

¹¹ Deputy Shamanov: Russia deployed Iskander ballistic missiles permanently, 2018, *Vesti.ru*, available at: <https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2984428> (accessed 04.01.2018) (in Russ.).

Intensive combat training of the military personnel of the Baltic NATO and the rotational deployment of aerial border patrol forces affected air safety in the region. In 2016, this problem merited the special attention of the international political leaders, including the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin. On his order, the country's Ministry of Defence drafted proposals for increasing flight safety in the Baltic region. They were presented at a meeting of the Russia–NATO Council on July 13, 2016. Following the meeting, Jens Stoltenberg said that NATO welcomed 'that Russia has signalled that it wants to pursue risk reduction measures'.¹² However, the head of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, continues to emphasise that, despite the initiative from Russia, talks have not yet taken place.¹³

Stoltenberg stressed that NATO has to do everything possible to avoid misunderstandings and incidents involving Russia and that Russia could not and should not be isolated. He added that, despite the growing military activity of NATO in Europe and at Russian borders, the alliance leadership was interested in coordinating rules for interactions with Russia and avoiding any misunderstandings, incidents, or accidents. Nevertheless, as early as January 2017, dozens of US Special Operations forces arrived in Lithuania. The Director of the State Security Department of Lithuania, Darius Jauniškis, called the deployment of US troops a response to Russia's actions: 'NATO and other countries would not put up with Russia's aggression in the region'.¹⁴ Moreover, by the end of 2017, a network of advanced aerodromes ready to receive combat and support aircraft of the US and Western European air forces connected Zokniai in Lithuania, Lielvārde in Latvia, and Ämari in Estonia [25].

Earlier in 2017, the Minister of Defence of Poland, Antoni Macierewicz, said that his country required a stronger US military presence:

¹² Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, 2016, *NATO*, available from: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_134102.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed 31.07.2016).

¹³ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to media questions at a news conference following the talks with Finland's Foreign Minister Timo Soini, Haikon Kartano Manor, Porvoo, May 4, 2017, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs official website*, available at: http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/2743998?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_7OvQR5KJWVmR&_101_INSTANCE_7OvQR5KJWVmR_languageId=en_GB (accessed 12.06.2018) (In Russ.).

¹⁴ Lithuania confirms deployment of US special operators, 2017, *Delfi*, available at: <https://en.delfi.lt/lithuania/defence/lithuania-confirms-deployment-of-us-special-operators.d?id=73345104> (accessed 20.11.2017).

the deployment of at least two US divisions in Poland was necessary for the country to withstand external threats. The *Sejm* increased military spending to 2.5% of GDP. An increased defence budget is required to cope with the 'threat coming from the East'.¹⁵ A similar stance was adopted by the Baltics. The defence budget of Lithuania reached USD 747.74 million in 2017, which is almost twice the 2005 figure. The country is discussing the prospect of increasing military spending to 2.5% of GDP.¹⁶ The defence expenditure of Estonia and Latvia is also growing. Statistics show that the annual increment has reached 15% in recent years.

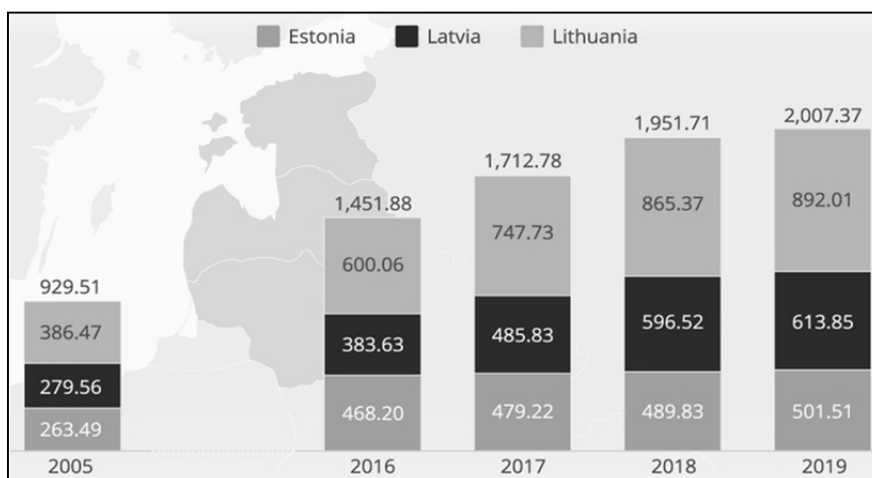


Fig. 2. Defence budgets of the Baltics in 2016 – 2019, USD million¹⁷

According to the official NATO report, the defence budgets of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Poland reached the US administration requirement of 2% of GDP. This will obviously translate into greater numbers of the member states' troops.¹⁸ One might even expect the

¹⁵ Poland believes deployment of at least two US divisions necessary for its defence, 2017, *Mail.ru*, available at: <https://news.mail.ru/politics/31181775/?frommail=1> (accessed 20.11.2017) (in Russ.).

¹⁶ Lithuanian security services officer: deals with Moscow are impossible, 2018, *EADaily*, available at: <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2018/04/07/litovskiy-specsluzhbist-s-rossiey-nelzya-dogovoritsya> (accessed 07.04.2018) (in Russ.).

¹⁷ Defence budgets are surging in the Baltic States by Niall McCarthy, 2018, *The Statistics Portal*, available at: <https://www.statista.com/chart/6626/defence-budgets-are-surging-in-the-baltic-states/> (accessed 07.04.2018).

¹⁸ Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2011-2018), NATO, COMMUNIQUE PR/CP(2018)091 10 July, 2018, NATO, available at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_07/20180709_180710-pr2018-91-en.pdf (accessed 07.06.2018).

military spending targets to increase in the future. The stance adopted by the US will continue to shift the focus of the Baltics from national economic and social development to defence. Whereas, according to Mezhevich and Zverev: '[i]n the understanding of this circumstance, the expert and scientific community of Russia relies on the relatively recent Soviet experience' [26, p. 74].

A US missile defence base was deployed near the Polish village of Redzikowo 300 km away from Kaliningrad. It includes an Aegis Ashore missile defense system and an MK 41 vertical launch system equipped with Standard SM-3 Block IIA and Block IB missiles [27]. The military base was to be brought into full operation in 2018. However, according to Poland's Ministry of Defence, due to technical reasons, this will happen only in 2020 [28]. Some experts believe that the delay was rather caused by problems in the US–Polish bilateral relations and a lack of mutual trust.¹⁹ The editor-in-chief of the *Natsionalnaya oborona* (National Defence) journal, Igor Korotchenko, commented on the issue: 'The Polish government will not have access to the object'. He continues: 'No one will know with what missiles the Americans equip their systems. These may be either anti-ballistic missiles or attacking missiles of the Tomahawk type. This has nothing to do with the Polish village and concerns the US base only'.²⁰

Similar arguments have been put forward by Vadim Volovoy and Irina Batorshina. They maintain: 'The Baltic Republics and Poland have traditionally relied on the US rather than the EU for their security, viewing the latter as a tool to improve their economic well-being'. They stress that '[c]ountries that traditionally support confrontation with Russia, Poland and the Baltics, serve as a conduit for Washington strategy in Europe and a *cordon sanitaire*. This function is implemented through the Intermarium project meant to separate Russia from the EU' [29, p. 18].

At the same time, the Chief of the Cabinet of the President of Poland, Krzysztof Szczerski, said in an interview to the *Rzeczpospolita*: 'Our country will become the centre of the US military activities in the region, an operations base for the US troops'.²¹ Below, he explains: 'The idea of "Fort Trump", which the Polish President introduced to Donald Trump in Washington sought... to convince the

¹⁹ MSZ: baza w Redzikowie z opóźnieniem, 2018, *Defence24*, available at: <https://www.defence24.pl/msz-baza-w-redzikowie-z-opoznieniem> (accessed 07.04.2018).

²⁰ Iskander ballistic missiles to be deployed permanently in Kaliningrad region, 2018, *Vesti.ru*, available at: <https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2953621> (accessed 07.04.2018) (in Russ.).

²¹ '...nasz kraj stanie się centrum amerykańskiej aktywności wojskowej w regionie, swego rodzaju regionalną bazą operacyjną dla sił zbrojnych USA'.

Americans of the need to increase their presence in our country. It was a success. However, the US has a more ambitious idea: a stronger military presence in our country will provide not only national but also regional security on the stretch from Estonia to Bulgaria'.²² Today, 4.3 thousand US troops are stationed in Poland. This is the most numerous US contingent on the eastern flank and the fourth largest in Europe, following Germany (37.5 thousand people), Italy (12 thousand people), and the UK (8.3 thousand people).²³

Conclusion

The almost fifteen years of the Baltics' NATO membership demonstrate that threat of the eastward enlargement of the alliance was not exaggerated. Being a voluntary hostage to the bloc politics, the Baltic member states of NATO have to sacrifice regional security and development when tensions run high.

At the same time, Russian civilian and military officials should view the Baltics' NATO membership as an opportunity to promote dialogue with the alliance. A priority area of cooperation is navigation and air safety in the Baltic. Collaborations in this field will undoubtedly contribute to regional networking and mutual trust and improve the tenor of the Russia–NATO partnership. Another promising avenue is the resumption of collaborations within the BALTOPS military exercise. Since 1993, the Russian navy had taken part in the manoeuvres 19 times before the NATO leadership decided to exclude Russia from participation in 2014.

Paradoxical as it may seem, for Russia, minimisation of the negative consequences of the Baltics' accession to the alliance involves closer military cooperation at the Russia–NATO level. This may prevent the emergence of actual threats and contribute to the development of effective tools for regional cooperation.

An analysis of international relations in the Baltic region in the late 20th/early 21st centuries shows the following: active military cooperation makes the region safer for everyone. When the interests of regional partnerships are replaced by global political consideration, the military sector heightens the tensions. Politicians and military of-

²² 'Idea Fortu Trump, jaką polski prezydent przedstawił Donaldowi Trumpowi w Waszyngtonie, miała niejako... przekonać Amerykanów do samej idei zwiększenia zaangażowania w naszym kraju. I to się udało. Ale Ameryka ma jeszcze bardziej ambitną koncepcję. Chce, aby wzmocnienie sił w Polsce zapewniało bezpieczeństwo nie tylko naszemu krajowi, ale całemu regionowi, od Estonii po Bułgarię.'

²³Bielecki, J. 2019, Polska baza USA na flance wschodniej. *Rzeczpospolita*, available at: <https://www.rp.pl/Polityka/301109904-Polska-baza-USA-na-flance-wschodniej.html> (accessed 11.01.2019).

officials should keep this trend in mind. The 'keep the open door' principle suggests that '[s]tability and predictability are more likely to be assured if the United States and Russia resume a structured, sustained dialogue about deterrence, security, and strategic stability more broadly. The priority should be given to discussing measures that NATO and Russia could take to reduce the risk of conflicts arising from an incident or miscommunication' [30, p. 15]. Obviously, this principle remains relevant to this day.

In a short-term and mid-term perspective, the conduct of Russia's partners in the Baltic region will be strongly affected by the interests of the US, which the country promotes using the tools of global politics. In the context of the Kaliningrad problem, the military factor will prevail over soft security, since the latter is beyond the scope of the national interests of the US. Thus, the transatlantic voyage of Abramoses and Bradleys to the Baltic coast and the borders of the Russian Federation seems to be part of the US military strategy rather than an isolated event [31]. The scenario when the EU member states establish an independent European defence union that will forge equal partnerships with Russia and NATO and enter into collaborations with a focus on Baltic security, is not plausible [32, p. 7].

In taking preventive and response measures to ensure military security, Russia should claim leadership in solving the problems of soft security and development in the Baltic region. In other words, in the Baltic, Russia has to become an alternative to the US for those seeking long-term development based on the principle of equal partnership. To this end, it is important to engage all the possible tools of international and interregional cooperation. Here, the Kaliningrad exclave has to play an important role. The achievement of this goal may be expedited by a federal policy furthering the economic development of the region by granting tax exemptions to international companies working in the region, by introducing electronic visas, and by promoting cross-border cooperation.

Overall, history shows that hegemony does not work in the region. A more promising avenue is suggested by the thesis dating back to the late 1950s: 'the Baltic Sea – a Sea of Peace' [33]. In today's situation, which gives little ground for optimism, this thesis can be interpreted as 'better a bad peace than a good quarrel'.

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