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Time for the Baltic Air Policing Mission to Become the Baltic Air Defense Mission

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In the event that the U.S. and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) need to respond to a military conflict in the Baltic Sea region, the ability to overcome Russia's anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capability will be crucial. Additionally, NATO's newly created Forward Enhanced Presence means that a new way of looking at the defense of Baltic airspace is required. While there has been much discussion about Russia's A2/AD in the Baltic region, very little discussion has been had of NATO's—specifically, what needs to be done to ensure that this critical shortfall in capability is quickly rectified. The U.S. should lead an effort to move NATO's current mission of Baltic Air Policing to a more robust Baltic Air Defense.

The Current Situation

Realizing that it was not feasible for the three Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—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. The Baltic Air Policing mission was established in 2004 to enforce the sovereign airspace of the three Baltic countries. During the years leading

up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine there was growing skepticism among some European allies about the need for such a mission. After the events of early 2014, NATO agreed that the Baltic Air Policing mission will remain in place for the foreseeable future.

Currently, eight planes (four American, four Belgian) participate in the Baltic Air Policing mission, and are based at two regional airbases (the military air base section of Šiauliai International Airport in Lithuania, and Ämari Air Base in Estonia) of which only a handful are in the air at any given time. NATO contributions change every four months. During heightened security, the number of planes has surged: Soon after Russia invaded Ukraine, for instance, NATO temporally quadrupled the total number of planes in the mission from four (which was standard at the time) to 16.¹ During the massive Russian military exercise Zapad 2017, the U.S. increased from the number of fighters it based at Šiauliai Airport from four to seven.²

In addition to providing security to the Baltic states, the Baltic Air Policing mission has contributed to the security of non-NATO countries in the region. On the night of March 29, 2013, Danish fighter jets based in Lithuania as part of an air policing mission intercepted Russian fighter jets and bombers as they carried out a simulated bombing raid just outside Swedish airspace. The Swedish Air Force did not respond in time because its fighter jets were not on standby due to the Easter holiday that weekend.

The Russian Threat

Russian provocative military flights in the Baltic Sea region remain a threat to U.S. allies and interests. In 2016, NATO aircraft intercepted Russian military

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aircraft in the Baltic Sea region 110 times.³ While the number of intercepts was down from a high of 160 in 2015, it remains far above the 43 recorded in 2013; NATO officials believe the decrease in 2016 could have been due to Russia shifting resources to the Syrian theater.⁴

This year has seen a similar pattern of provocative military flights near, and at times into, the airspace of U.S. allies in the Baltic Sea region. In July, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated: “We have seen an increase in air activity in the Baltic region.”⁵ In May, a plane carrying Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, flying without a filed flight plan and without establishing radio contact, briefly violated Estonian airspace, very likely to send a political message. In another incident in August, Spanish jets taking part in Baltic Air Policing, and Finnish jets flying from airbases in Finland, scrambled to intercept two Russian MiG-31 fighter jets and a transport plane flying near Estonian airspace.⁶ The incident came less than 24 hours after Vice President Mike Pence’s visit to Estonia.

In addition to violating the sovereign airspace of the Baltic nations, Russian flights in the region are often reckless. In June, a U.S. reconnaissance plane flying in international airspace over the Baltic Sea was intercepted by a Russian fighter, which flew within five feet of the U.S. aircraft. The incident prompted protests from the U.S, which deemed the Russian plane’s actions to be “provocative,” with a U.S. spokesman saying, “Due to the high rate of clo-

sure speed and poor control of the aircraft, the interaction was deemed unsafe.”⁷ Russian military aircraft often fly with transponders switched off and without a filed flight plan, dangerous behavior which poses a risk to civilian aircraft, and that has led to several near collisions.

Baltic Air Defense

In order to better 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. 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 missiles to the region. During Vice President Pence’s recent visit to Estonia, this topic 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

The Commander of the U.S. Army in Europe, Lieutenant General Ben Hodges, and Lithuania’s Defense Minister Juozas Olekas have expressed concern over the lack of air defense capability in the region.⁹ However, beyond public aspiration by some officials in the region NATO has not agreed on a common position for Baltic Air Defense.

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Time to Act

It is important that the U.S. and NATO take their obligations to Baltic security seriously. One area in which these obligations have been overlooked is the region's air defense. The U.S. must lead on this issue by:

- **Agreeing 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.
- **Thinking creatively about what framework would work the best for Baltic Air Defense.** At first glance one might think that NATO would serve as 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 EU members, and is led by Washington.
- **Working with the non-NATO Nordic countries to improve the air defense of the Baltic.** Due 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.
- **Setting the record straight about permanently based troops.** A Baltic Air Defense strategy will likely mean permanently based troops and equipment in the region. Opponents claim that the 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act prohibits permanently based troops. This claim is false. NATO should make a public proclamation that the act does not prohibit the establishment of permanent bases in Central and Eastern Europe.

A Defensive Measure

Any response that the U.S. makes to reinforce the Baltic region would be a responsible defensive measure designed to defend NATO members, not to provoke a war with Russia. This response includes a robust Baltic Air Defense mission. Air defense in the Baltics is essential for defending the sovereign airspace of the Baltic states. Furthermore, should reinforcements ever need to reach the Baltic theater, air defense would be a decisive factor in providing protection for the infrastructure, equipment, and troops—essential for allowing them to arrive quickly and securely.

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