

NATO Summit 2021: Reinforcing Collective Defense in the Baltics

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

While small in size and population, the Baltic states are key NATO members and staunch defenders of economic freedom, liberal democracy, and human rights.

Deterring Russian aggression and defending the Baltic states will be far easier and cheaper than liberating them.

At the 2021 NATO summit, the U.S. must push NATO to act strategically and continue to implement durable, robust measures to deter Russian aggression in the region.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Brussels on June 14, 2021, offers an opportunity for the Alliance to continue its focus on bolstering collective defense in the Baltic region. While great strides have been made over the past seven years to deter Russian aggression, the effort is far from complete. The Alliance must keep a focus on the region, avoiding any premature belief that additional measures are no longer necessary.

The Baltic region is one of the most complex regions that the Alliance is obligated to defend. While small in size and population, the Baltic states represent something much bigger geopolitically: They are staunch defenders of economic freedom, liberal democracy, and human rights. They experienced Russian treachery during more than five decades of Soviet occupation in ways that few other countries did. This

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horrific experience means that the Baltic states do not take for granted the democracy, liberty, and security they enjoy today.

Defending the Baltic states and deterring Russian aggression will be far easier and cheaper than liberating them. In Brussels, the U.S. must ensure that NATO thinks strategically about continuing to put in place durable, robust measures to deter Russian aggression in the region. Deterrence requires more than token actions; it requires a sustained commitment to reinforcing the security of the Baltic region while addressing the Baltics' unique security challenges.

A Complex Region

The Baltic region presents distinctive 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 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' inability to reinforce their defenses.** Key to any potential liberation of the Baltic states would be the swift arrival of robust reinforcements and equipment to the region. However, contested airspace, especially in light of Russia's anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities in the region, would make reinforcing the region difficult—if not initially impossible. Even NATO's 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.”¹

- **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.

Important Progress Has Been Made

NATO has taken good steps for safeguarding the Baltic region in recent years, including the adoption of a new defense plan for the Baltics and Poland in July 2020.² The four Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) multinational battalions stationed in Poland and the Baltic states, announced in 2016, have so far been a success. The U.S. serves as the framework nation for the battle group in Poland, the United Kingdom is in Estonia, Canada is in Latvia, and Germany is in Lithuania. EFP troops are under NATO command and control; a multinational divisional headquarters located in Elblag, Poland, coordinates the four battalions.

One issue that remains controversial within 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.

In order to 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. In 2020, NATO scrambled jets 350 times for Russian aircraft approaching or violating NATO airspace, many of these incidents in the Baltic region.³ Air defense would require a robust fast-jet and airborne surveillance presence in addition to air defense assets. Despite positive discussions and aspirational talk, NATO has not agreed on a common position for a Baltic Air Defense.

Another matter to consider is the role of the Kaliningrad oblast in regional security. Kaliningrad is a small Russian exclave along the Baltic Sea (slightly larger than Connecticut), bordering both Lithuania and Poland. Kaliningrad is part of Russia's Western Military District, and approximately 25,000 Russian soldiers and security personnel are stationed there. It is home to Russia's Baltic fleet, which consists of around 50 vessels, including submarines. Perhaps most important for Moscow is that Kaliningrad is at the heart of Russia's A2/AD strategy.

Russia's permanent stationing of Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad in 2018 occurred a year to the day after NATO's EFP deployed to Lithuania.⁴ Iskander missiles can carry nuclear or conventional warheads and have a range of 250 miles, placing Riga, Vilnius, and Warsaw within their reach.

Russia reportedly has deployed tactical nuclear weapons, the S-400 air defense system, and P-800 anti-ship cruise missiles to Kaliningrad.⁵ Russia also has facilities for storage of tactical nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad. Russia is modernizing runways at its Chernyakhovsk and Donskoye air bases in Kaliningrad, providing Russia with nearby bases from which to fly near NATO airspace.

Many of the aerial incidents that cause NATO planes from Baltic Air Policing to scramble involve Russian planes flying from or to bases in Kaliningrad. Additionally, Russia plans to re-establish a tank brigade and a "fighter aviation regiment and naval assault aviation (bomber) regiment" in Kaliningrad and to re-equip the artillery brigade with new systems.⁶

Keeping a Baltic Focus

While progress in defending the Baltics has been made, the Alliance should not become complacent. Rather, NATO should use the upcoming Brussels Summit to:

- **Prepare to reinforce the Baltic defenses quickly.** The exercise Defender Europe 20 focused on large-scale troop movements from the U.S. to the Baltic region and Poland, and, despite being scaled back due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was successful. The U.S. and NATO should analyze lessons from Defender Europe 20 (and the ongoing Defender Europe 21 with a focus on the Balkans and Black Sea), identifying road-blocks and implementing fixes.
- **Maintain the military-mobility focus.** NATO must ensure that the Baltic states have the infrastructure and ability to receive large numbers of forces and their equipment. Improving military mobility is one security vector where the Alliance and European Union cooperation could bring positive results.
- **Ensure that EFP battalions consider the security needs of the region.** Some EFP host nations have called for additional assets to be added to the battalions. "It is extremely important to strengthen allied presence with long-range components, such as fire support, air

defence support and on-shore (port)/off-shore components.”⁷⁷ The U.S. should encourage additional NATO allies to contribute to EFP battalions and insist that each have a full range of needed assets and enablers at their disposal.

- **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. NATO needs to show an enduring commitment to the region by stationing armed forces in the Baltics permanently.
- **Acknowledge the importance of a Baltic Air Defense mission.** While the Baltic Air Police has been useful for policing the region’s airspace, 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 a 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 EU is out of the question due to internal divisions on defense matters. Therefore, a multilateral regional approach that includes both NATO and individual EU members is needed.
- **Work with the non-NATO Nordic countries to improve the air defense of the Baltics.** Due to their geographical location, non-NATO Finland and Sweden would form an important part of any Baltic Air Defense strategy. NATO must continue to work closely with Helsinki and Stockholm to ensure regional coordination and cooperation.
- **Factor Kaliningrad into NATO’s Baltic region contingency planning.** No credible defense of the Baltics can be carried out without neutralizing the threat from Kaliningrad. NATO defense planning must take Russian A2/AD capabilities in Kaliningrad into account.
- **Keep a close watch on Zapad 21.** If past iterations are any guide, Russia’s planned Zapad 21 exercise, set to begin in September 2021, could involve hundreds of thousands of troops. Russian military exercises are a source of serious concern because they have masked

real military operations in the past, such as Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine.⁸ In addition to being alert for the exercise being used as cover for military operations, NATO should closely monitor the proceedings for, as one analysis notes, “the presence of Russian forces in Belarus after the exercise and the possible participation of Chinese forces.”⁹

Conclusion

Any action that NATO takes to reinforce the security of the Baltic region would be a responsible defensive measure designed to defend Alliance members, not to provoke a war with Russia. Deterring Russian aggression and defending the Baltic states 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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Endnotes

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