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# Outlines for future conventional arms control in Europe: A sub-regional regime in the Baltics

**POLICY BRIEF**

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## About the authors

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# Outlines for future conventional arms control in Europe: A sub-regional regime in the Baltics

Evgeny Buzhinskiy and Oleg Shakirov<sup>1</sup>

Modern technological progress in the military sphere enables the rapid deployment and build-up of armed forces in any given direction. Past decades have also witnessed an increasing prominence of maritime power projection. Today, the increasing capacity for the deployment and concentration of forces and a lack of regulation of the maritime domain pose a serious threat to European security, increasing the risks of armed clashes and the unintended escalation of crisis situations in interstate relations to the level of large-scale conflicts.

Given the deteriorating politico-military relations between Russia and NATO countries and concerns about the situation in the Baltic region, it is important to pay attention to these trends when considering the future of conventional arms control in Europe. Instruments that help to prevent destabilising build-ups of forces and to enhance security in the maritime domain could be viewed as essential elements of any arms control regime for the Baltic region.

## Prevention of Destabilising Build-Up of Forces

Interpretations of the causes and implications of the ongoing crisis in European security vary greatly among the countries involved, not least between Russia and NATO countries.<sup>2</sup> Informed by different views, states have different threat perceptions. Yet, what has been similar recently in the ways both Russia and NATO countries talk about European security is their concerns about the possible quick build-up of forces by the other side. Such risks are perceived by both sides to be particularly high in the Baltic region.

From Moscow's perspective, the governments of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland artificially stoke the threat from Russia, citing perceived aggressive intentions on Moscow's part. Responding to such sentiments, in recent years NATO has been actively increasing its military presence in the region. NATO is conducting air policing missions in the Baltics. It has deployed, on a rotational basis, Enhanced Forward Presence multinational battle groups to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. These are buttressed by unilateral US military measures. More generally, NATO has placed an emphasis on the increased readiness and mobility of its military formations as evidenced, *inter alia*, by the creation of two new commands – the Joint Force Command headquartered in the United States and the Joint Support and Enabling Command headquartered in Germany. As stated in NATO's 2018 Brussels Summit Declaration, the US-based command will "focus on protecting the transatlantic lines of communication," while the Germany-based command will "ensure freedom of operation and sustainment in the rear area in support of the rapid movement of troops and equipment into, across, and from Europe."<sup>3</sup>

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The Russian Federation's Military Doctrine considers the movement of NATO military infrastructure to Russia's borders as one of the main external military dangers. In 2016, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General of the Army Valery Gerasimov pointed out to NATO that creating command and control infrastructure in the Baltics, stockpiling offensive armaments along the Russia–NATO contact line, increasing the capacity of airfields and ports, and repositioning military materiel would all “allow the alliance to quickly build up its presence by moving [the] NATO Response Force into the region.”<sup>4</sup>

On the NATO side, states in the Baltic region have similar concerns about the possibility of Russia's rapid movement of forces into the region. Poland's 2014 National Security Strategy states that “[in Poland's] closest vicinity, there is a large concentration of military potentials, also in offensive posture,”<sup>5</sup> without specifying the location. According to the 2016 National Defence Concept of Latvia, that country's government believes that “[m]ilitarily Russia develops and exercises capabilities that can be used to launch an unexpected military attack against the Baltic countries that would split them from the rest of the NATO and obstruct implementation of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.”<sup>6</sup> In Lithuania, the 2018 National Threat Assessment posits that “Russia's ability to quickly deploy the forces and its fast as well as centralized decision making process enables it to have an obvious advantage (at least at the initial stage of the conflict) against the neighboring states in the Western Strategic Direction (to which Lithuania is attributed).”<sup>7</sup>

Against this background, it is likely that Russia and the NATO countries concerned might be interested in a conventional arms control regime in Europe that could help prevent a destabilising build-up of strength along the contact line between Russia and NATO.

In this context, static information about the armaments and equipment of participating

states would not be of primary significance. The proposed approach would require acceptance that asymmetries might remain but existing postures do not pose a major threat to either side. Ultimately it would seek to prevent the worst-case scenario where one side might reciprocate a quick build-up by the other one. Hence, measures of constraint would be focused mainly on troop movements that could lead to a dangerous confrontation.

*“The increasing capacity for the deployment and concentration of forces and a lack of regulation of the maritime domain pose a serious threat to European security.”*

Constraints on the movement and build-up of forces have been considered in previous arms control negotiations. In the process of preparing the Agreement on Adaptation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, a set of issues related to military transit was elaborated in detail. Future negotiators could draw on those ideas.

The area of application of the proposed agreement would include Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, part of the Western Military District of the Russian Federation (the exact area should be subject to negotiation), as well as the Baltic Sea. The inclusion of the Republic of Belarus and of certain parts of German territory adjacent to the Baltic Sea could also be discussed. Achieving a mutually acceptable agreement within the specified area of application, will be helped by the absence in practice of any local conflicts, disputed territory or aggressive intentions on either side.

***The essence of the arrangement could be as follows.*** Russia would consider significantly lowering the intensity of military activity in

the Western Military District, ensuring that forces in the Pskov and Kaliningrad regions take a more pronouncedly defensive posture, and pledging not to strengthen them in the future. Meanwhile, NATO countries would do the same with respect to their armed forces in the region. The key element of such an arrangement would be a strict limitation of all movements of forces and assets towards the line of contact between Russia and NATO.

Specifically, such movements could only take place in two cases: for defensive military exercises and for the implementation of planned rotations of forces and assets. Importantly, the temporary deployment of forces within the meaning of Article 8, paragraph 1B of the Agreement on Adaptation of the CFE Treaty in the Baltic region would hardly be acceptable to Russia, considering, *inter alia*, the proximity of Russia's vital administrative, cultural and industrial centers to the border with NATO countries. A similar logic could also be applied by the Baltic States from their own perspective.

For each such movement, prior notification would be given, indicating the purpose, destination, start and end time, the number of armaments and equipment moved, as well as troop numbers. Relevant information would also be provided on their withdrawal from the area of application. Limitations on the size, duration, and frequency of such movements would be agreed. To ensure effective implementation of the proposed agreement, and predictability and confidence between its participants, an enhanced regime for the exchange of information and verification, including active inspection activities, should be developed for the Baltic region.

As tensions decreased due to the implementation of such a regime, the parties could proceed to gradually introduce appropriate stabilising measures with respect to elements of their existing military infrastructure, potentially going as far as to agree on mothballing each side's individual facilities – runways, warehouses,

berths used by warships, etc. The goal is to limit and make the possibility of deploying large military formations at such facilities as difficult as possible. Thereby, security guarantees and stability in the North of Europe would be strengthened.

### **Naval Confidence- and Security-Building Measures for the Baltic Sea**

Current tensions in European security also sharpen the need for a framework to manage naval activity in the Baltic Sea in such a manner that the security and confidence of littoral states is enhanced.

While there are precedents for agreements that limit certain types of naval activities (for instance, the regulation of warships' transit under the 1936 Montreux Convention or the provision on the non-presence of non-littoral states' armed forces under the 2018 Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea),<sup>8</sup> applying such restrictions to the Baltic Sea does not appear feasible now.

Since 2014, proposals have been made to tackle increased tensions in the naval domain by focusing on the prevention of incidents. In particular, an oft-cited report by the European Leadership Network recommends *inter alia* the expansion and further development of bilateral agreements on the prevention of incidents and examination of the possibility of multilateral incident prevention agreements.<sup>9</sup> With regards to the latter, the case of the recently concluded Agreement on Prevention of Incidents in the Caspian Sea,<sup>10</sup> a five-party document, could guide thinking on how littoral states could move from a bilateral to a region-wide format.

Another, potentially more comprehensive approach than just incident prevention that could be considered would involve the development of a set of confidence- and security-building measures for the Baltic Sea. Such CSBMs, whose undertaking is encouraged in Chapter X of the Vienna

Document 2011, could be modeled along the lines of existing arrangements used in other areas, specifically the Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures in the Naval Field in the Black Sea.

In geopolitical terms, there are similarities between the situation in the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea, as littoral states in both cases involve both Russia, NATO countries, and states that are not formally aligned with either of the two (even though their relations with each side differ a lot).

There are also significant political and legal differences. Unlike in the Baltic Sea, there are specific restrictions in place for the Black Sea under the Montreux Convention. On the other hand, issues related to territorial disputes in Black Sea littoral states hinder further development of CSBMs there. The Baltic Sea is free of such disputes and this could be beneficial for agreeing a more advanced set of CSBMs.

In particular, CSBMs for the Baltic Sea could include provisions on the prior notification of certain aspects of naval military activities, including activities in which non-littoral states take part. This would require states to exchange notifications on their own activities. But proposed CSBMs would not have to be limited to that. Instead, they could go beyond the limitation stipulated in para (8) of the preamble of the Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures in the Naval Field in the Black Sea, under which these measures do not apply to naval activities carried out by states parties together with third states. For the Baltic Sea, this aspect could be changed so that littoral states would give prior notification on certain naval military activities conducted together with third states.

This provision would create no direct requirements for third states and it would not restrict the passage of any specific warships into the Baltic Sea. Yet littoral states participating in the proposed CSBM

regime would be responsible for notifying all other participating states and for agreeing such sharing of information with their third state partners.

To illustrate, this provision could apply to naval exercises conducted by individual state parties as well as to possible joint exercises. For example, this could include an exercise in the Baltic Sea with the participation of the United States (conducted together with other NATO members) or an exercise where Russia is joined by China (as in the Naval Interaction-2017 exercise).

Specific criteria would need to be negotiated regarding which aspects of military activities were subject to prior notification. From the Russian perspective, these would most likely include activities involving ships equipped with deck aviation, cruise missiles or missile defense systems. Naval activities that involved the movement of ground troops and military equipment could also be considered.

## **Political Aspects and Negotiations**

The overarching political goal of negotiating such proposed agreements in the area of conventional arms control would be to ensure that security in the Baltic region and in Europe in general is not based on mutual deterrence, but rather on cooperation and mutual confidence. While negotiators would also be working on more specific objectives related to managing confrontational relations between Russia and NATO, they should not lose sight of cooperative security as a long-term vision.

Negotiations on constraining the movement of forces in the Baltic region could involve Russia, Belarus, and NATO. On the NATO side, balance needs to be struck between involvement of the alliance as a whole and the participation of key states affected by the proposed agreement, i.e. countries in the area of application. These states – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland – need to be

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encouraged by their NATO allies to engage in negotiations and reassured that an agreement would not be reached over their heads. At the same time, they should take ownership of the negotiations and future agreement as a way to increase the security of their respective nations and of the region.

Baltic Sea confidence- and security-building measures could be negotiated between littoral states: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and Sweden; the United States and other countries that have a significant military presence in the region should be involved as well to share ownership of such an arrangement. Specific references to Vienna Document 2011 and other existing agreements (such as agreements on the prevention of incidents at sea and the prevention of dangerous military activities) could be made. The proposed arrangement could draw upon the experience and achievements of the Black Sea CSBMs, but negotiators should strive to make it more advanced, along the lines described above.

Both negotiations could be held in parallel, under the auspices of the OSCE. Further thought should be given to what role the Russia–NATO Council might play in this process, given its limitations post-2014. Moreover, multilateral talks on politico-military issues could be helped by trust-building steps in the political sphere between states involved.

Moving forward – after the proposed agreements are concluded and enter into force – due consideration could be given to the possible extension of such measures to other regions of Europe where tensions are high. From the Russian perspective, it is likely that politico-military confrontation would remain at the heart of NATO's strategy towards Russia for the foreseeable future.

## Conclusion

As already noted, Russia and NATO countries could be interested in agreeing constraints on movements of forces in the Baltic region given the obvious threats such movements pose for European security. Naval confidence- and security-building measures are a feasible area of cooperation where Baltic Sea littoral states can address their security concerns.

On other aspects of conventional arms control in Europe, it is unlikely that there will be genuine interest in Russia in further progress in this area unless Western policy towards Moscow starts to change, and an understanding develops that it is impossible to build a reliable security system in Europe without cooperation and interaction with Russia. Likewise, many NATO countries are unwilling to normalise relations with Russia and to cooperate with it on European security issues unless Russia changes its behaviour. The approach outlined here takes into account the lack of trust and reluctance to cooperate on both sides. But it also proceeds from the understanding that in these conditions certain steps to ensure military stability are possible and mutually beneficial.



## Endnotes

- 1 Authors would like to thank Vladislav Chernov for his insights and important contribution to this paper. Authors are also thankful to participants of the OSCE Network Workshop “A New Concept for Conventional Arms Control” (19-20 July 2018) for their valuable comments on the initial draft of this paper and to Sir Adam Thomson for his suggestions to the final draft.
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