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Baltic States Adjust Their Security Policy

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Faced with uncertainty about U.S. policy in NATO and U.S.-Russia relations, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have attempted to adapt their security policy to these circumstances. Mainly, this has involved a gradual increase in defence spending and an intensification of activity among the Baltic States after Russia's actions in Ukraine. The Russian threat to these states remains the dominant determinant of the security policy of the Baltic States, which because of their limited potential in military terms will instead seek to specialise in areas highly relevant to NATO's ability to deter aggression and respond to new challenges.

The turning point in the continuity of the security policy of the Baltic States was Russia's aggression against Ukraine. As early as May 2014, during a meeting of the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian defence ministers in Tallinn, the three agreed to increase efforts to ensure collective security and a permanent NATO presence in the region. Meanwhile, Donald Trump's statement during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign that he might seek to reduce the presence of NATO in Europe led to fears that this fundamental pillar of the Baltic States' security policy—the strong alliance with the U.S. and NATO guarantees—would be undermined. The inconsistency in communications from the new U.S. administration on future relations with Russia only exacerbated their concerns. In response, efforts to strengthen their own capacity and commitment to Allied defence gained momentum.

Increasing the Baltic States' Defence Capabilities. The perception of Russia as the main threat to their security is reflected in political and military documents of all three Baltic States. In January, Lithuania approved a new "National Security Strategy," which points directly to the possibility of aggression from Russia. In addition to efforts to modernise infrastructure for the rapid and efficient deployment of Allied forces in the country, Lithuania's other priority is to increase its self-defence and mobilisation capabilities. Lithuania also plans to conduct more regular exercises.

Latvia has begun implementing its "National Defence Concept for 2016–2020." It insists on strengthening its operational capabilities and investing in military infrastructure necessary for incoming Alliance support. At the same time, the Latvian government announced it would strengthen border protection, including stronger public involvement in defence.

The Estonian Ministry of Defence in February adopted a "Development Plan" for 2018–2021, in which the priority is the development of an innovative armoured infantry programme. Moreover, a Cyber Command will be established and a command centre is envisioned to manage air operations and investment in capabilities to control the Baltic Sea area.

Since Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2014, the Baltic States have announced plans to increase the number of armed forces and improve training. In practice, this has presented especially Lithuania and Latvia with a great organisational challenge. After accession to NATO, they modernised their forces, focusing on specialisation of expeditionary units, which resulted in a significant reduction in total military personnel. Only Estonia has maintained conscription, but within a mixed model that allows parallel

development of a fully professional army. Lithuania brought back basic service for five years in 2015. It now has about 8,700 soldiers, Estonia has 6,000, and Latvia has more than 5,300.

The feeling of insecurity is also reflected in the strengthening of so-called territorial defence units. The largest units in operation are the Estonian Defence League (Kaitseliit), numbering 15,500, the Latvian National Guard (Zemessard), with about 8,000, and the Lithuanian Voluntary Forces For National Defence (KASP), about 4,700 with 500 professional soldiers. Their role in the state security structures may increase because of the small number of professional troops in the main formations.

In addition to these efforts, the Baltic States are constantly implementing rearmament plans. In April, Estonia signed a service-and-support contract for infantry combat vehicles purchased in 2014. It also is developing unmanned systems. Latvia decided to arm its border guards and purchase anti-tank weapons. In 2016, Lithuania bought armoured transport vehicles and installed modern radar systems.

New Initiatives. The Baltic States are keen to swiftly implement the decision of the NATO summit in Warsaw to strengthen the Alliance's Eastern Flank, primarily through a rotational presence in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia of battalion-sized battlegroups (about 1,000 troops). Baltic State defence ministers agreed in Brussels in January to simplify the procedures required to establish a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (JRC) by June, which would help with smooth deployment of the battlegroups. The president of Lithuania has pointed to the need to establish a permanent presence of NATO forces in the Baltic States and to move the Alliance's command centres closer to its eastern borders.

Among the Baltic countries, only Estonia—just one of five in the whole Alliance in fact—has met the goal of allocating 2% of GDP on defence (2.07% as of 2016.). It plans to further increase this spending in 2017 to around 2.2% of GDP. Lithuania and Latvia, have declared they will reach the goal in 2018 (in 2016, it amounted to 1.5% and 1.41%, respectively). Lithuania even has ambitions to raise its defence budget to 2.5% by 2020. Meeting the defence spending criterion is intended to make the Baltic States be viewed as more than a security "recipient."

The U.S. hints at limiting its engagement in Europe means that Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia want to more strongly signal their contributions to the Alliance. Given their limited potential, they seek instead highly specialised, niche areas. Among them is countering the growing threat of Russian hybrid warfare and disinformation activities. They emphasise their experience and know-how, such as organising educational campaigns to combat propaganda. The Baltic States are counting on building up these skills as effective instruments to offer in strengthening cooperation with the most influential NATO members.

Conclusions and Perspectives. Fearing a change in U.S. policy on NATO, the Baltic States have responded in several ways, notably by increasing defence spending. The U.S. pressure on this issue has been effective. Their investments in increasing their self-defence potential will continue along with increasing Alliance involvement on NATO's Eastern Flank. Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia will still treat the United States as the main guarantor of security in the region, but can be expected to seek increased cooperation with European partners, namely Germany, the UK, and the Nordic countries. Strengthening bilateral military cooperation with Poland also will be conducive to the stationing of a Polish contingent in Latvia.

NATO's growing military presence in the region increases the likelihood of Russian provocations involving Alliance forces, a possibility confirmed in reports by the special security services of all three Baltic States. The probability of this kind of activity in the short term will increase during Russia's *West 2017* manoeuvres, planned for September this year. During the exercises, Russia is expected to check troop readiness based on the implementation of a new military doctrine.