Western Promises
Sustainability and Consequence for Baltic Security

Out of the new geopolitical landscape that emerged from the fall of the Soviet Union, the emergence of three small nations on the western coast of the Baltic became important. These states raced to ensure their independence by assimilating into the Western European family of nations as rapidly as possible. Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia have drawn on their prior experience of independence during the interwar period of 1918-1940 to create national strategies with the aim of protecting their post-Soviet autonomy. The Baltic nations continued integration with western economic, political, and military institutions is sustainable, and will be pursued into the foreseeable future.

The past two hundred years of history of the Baltic nations is important, as it greatly influenced the nations’ security strategies through the 21st century. Despite being a part of the Russian Empire in the 19th century, all three Baltic nations strived to retain their cultural, linguistic, and religious independence from increasing efforts to “Russify” the region. Estonia and Latvia were majority Lutheran and Lithuania was largely Catholic, helping to combat the spread of the Eastern Orthodox variant of Christianity into the region. Also, the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian languages all use romantic characters in their written forms as opposed to Cyrillic. Along with trade ties to Western Europe, these key cultural factors helped to ensure societal integrity and contributed to an affinity towards the West rather than the East.

The twenty-year period of independence following the Brest-Litovsk Treaty of 1918 allowed all three Baltic nations to pursue a developmental strategy in line with Western European values. However, this process was cut short in 1940, when a Soviet invasion led to the first occupation. The new puppet governments set up by the invaders largely surrendered Baltic independence by becoming member states of the Soviet Union. Dissenters were sent to the gulags in Siberia or simply executed. The next year, with the German invasion of The Soviet Union, the Baltic nations fell into Nazi hands. The Germans were viewed as liberators to many inhabitants of the region; however this was not consistent across all three nations. The Soviet counter-offensive in 1944 led to the final occupation of the Baltic nations, which would last until the fall of the Warsaw Pact.

It is difficult to underestimate the impact that this succession of repeated occupations had on the Baltic States’ views of state security. The Soviet deportations of hundreds of thousands of political prisoners, resistance fighters, and their families left a very real impression on what independence and self-determination means to the people of the Baltic lands. Thus, the issue of state integrity and independence is viewed as a serious privilege, one where the consequences of failure are still fresh in national memory.

Geographic and Ethnic Challenges for Baltic Security
The simple factor of geography presents a challenge to Baltic security, as all three Baltic Nations are fairly close to major population centers of Russia. Estonia is the most egregiously close, as her capital, Tallinn, is less than 250 miles away from St. Petersburg. Another liability is the Polish-Lithuanian border, which runs between Kaliningrad and Belarus with a width of only 40 miles. In a military conflict, this corridor could very easily be cut off, isolating all three Baltic Nations from their NATO allies via land. The Russian exclave of Kaliningrad boasts over 1 million inhabitants, is home to Russia’s Baltic Sea fleet, and reportedly Iskander tactical ballistic missiles. Undoubtedly, Kaliningrad’s location, and active military forces, the proximity to Russian soil, and past attempts at Russification of the region constitute a considerable threat to Baltic national security.

The presence of substantial ethnic Russian minorities in the Baltic Nations presents an opportunity for Kremlin-initiated agitation, although this threat is more pronounced in Latvia and Estonia than Lithuania. 31.3% of
Latvia’s population and 27.9% of Estonia’s population is ethnic Russian, Belarusian, or Ukrainian while Lithuania has roughly 7%.

Latvia and Estonia have taken tough stances against Russian minorities. Following the end of the Soviet Union, both nations required language tests in their respective native tongues in order to qualify for national citizenship. Many ethnic Russians were left disillusioned, as both Latvian and Estonian are fairly difficult languages to learn, and those of the older generation often had little desire to adopt another language at all. Some did not accept the Russian Federation’s offer of citizenship for all former citizens of the Soviet Union due to the higher standard of living and increased opportunities in Latvia and Estonia. A large portion of these individuals received grey passports, which, after 2007, allowed for unrestricted travel throughout the Schengen Zone, in addition to relatively easy travel throughout Russia and members of the Commonwealth of Independent States. However, grey-passport holders are unable to vote in national elections in Latvia and Estonia, making true democratic representation difficult to achieve.

In addition to the aforementioned freedom of movement a “stateless” grey-passport holder enjoys, most ethnic Russians are fairly content living in the Baltic Nations. Lt. Col James Corum, Dean of the Baltic Defense College in Tartu, Estonia, expressed that during his time teaching at Tartu University, many of his ethnic Russian students have thrived in the Estonian educational system and were eventually employed by Estonian firms. Corum also claimed that they do not have much interest or attachment to the Russian state. This speaks to the long-term trend of assimilation, even with the starkest example of ethnic tension in Estonia. Lithuania, which features a smaller proportion of ethnic Russians, has largely integrated them into their society. This is partly due to less political representation of the smaller ethnic population, forcing collaboration between marginal Russian interest groups, such as ethnic Poles. Additionally, Russian-orientated media outlets are of great concern to Baltic policymakers and elites. Media can influence certain worldviews or beliefs, particularly when targeted at ethnic, cultural, or linguistic groups. Television stations such as First Baltic, RTR, Planeta and NTV Mir have been known to present information with a decidedly Kremlin bias. Russian civil society groups and media entities have consistently operated with the intent of undermining Baltic independence. Baltic governments aren’t ignoring these perceived efforts to influence domestic Russian-speaking populations. Early this year, a Lithuanian media watchdog agency banned Russian television channel NTV Mir from operating for three months due to a provocative movie, which expressed an alternate view of the 1991 Soviet massacre of 13 Lithuanian civilians in an attempt to take control of the Vilnius television tower.

It is not unreasonable to predict a scenario where Russian agents enter a heavily Russian region in Latvia or Estonia and attempt to agitate armed resistance against the Baltic authorities. The September 2014 scandal regarding the kidnapped Estonian intelligence agent on Estonian soil has shown Russian authorities’ disregard for national boundaries. The most obvious target of such agitation
would be Narva, a small city of 60,000 in Northeastern Estonia inhabited by 90% ethnic Russians. How successful any agitation would be is questionable, considering the higher standard of living and superior economic opportunities in Estonia versus Russia proper.

The Risk of Dependency on Russian Energy

The question of energy security in the Baltic Nations has been arguably the most pressing issue following their independence. Lithuania and Latvia are, in one way or another, completely dependent on Russian oil and gas for their energy needs. Corum claimed that, “energy supply is a key issue that is mentioned by almost all the Baltic leaders and academics as a major national security concern.” Domestic sources of energy have been stymied by lack of diversification and increasing European Union regulations. Lithuania once relied on the Ignalina nuclear reactor, however European Union concerns with the safety of nuclear energy and the age of the plant led to its decommissioning. Shale gas exploitation has also been delayed due to EU environmental concerns.

The exception is Estonia, which harvests a portion of its energy supply from shale oil and is a net exporter of energy. How long this will remain is questionable, with the dirty nature of this extraction and growing anti-shale oil sentiments in the European Union at large. However, all natural gas imports to Estonia are provided from Russia. As the Baltic Nations accepted European Union economic integration and regulatory compliance, the further dependent they became on their Eastern neighbor, and the more leverage that was awarded to Russia. It is noteworthy to mention that this is not only a problem with the Baltic Nations, but many members of Eastern Europe as well.

With recent events in Ukraine showcasing a resurgent Russia, Lithuania and Latvia are making plans to increase their energy independence. In Spring 2015 the Lithuanian government ordered a floating liquefied natural gas terminal dubbed “Independence.” It arrived in the port city of Klaipeda to accept natural gas exports from the United States and diversify Lithuania’s energy source portfolio, as well as make a political statement. Latvia is continuing to diversify its energy mix by bringing in additional renewable sources such as hydroelectric power.

In addition to attempts to align the Baltic energy sector with Europe, currency and finance have also been pathways towards the West. The arrival of the euro as a replacement of the lita in Lithuania this past January marked the moment all three Baltic Nations became fully integrated into the Euro-Zone. With Latvia and Estonia joining in 2014 and 2011 respectively, the Euro was the natural progression in the Baltic Nations’ quest for Western European integration. All three nations have fairly strong growth rates, even despite the situation in Ukraine and perceived vulnerability to potential Russian military aggression or economic sanctions. While the introduction of the euro brings eases trade with Western European nations, its presence also acts as a component in national security. Any potential invasion of a member of the Eurozone adds another dimension to the scenario, and increased repercussions for the invader.
Baltic Involvement in NATO

All three Baltic Nations have been active participants in NATO since their admission in 2004. In addition, they have all been consistent partners in the NATO-led missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, actively pledging troops whenever possible. While Latvia and Lithuania have struggled to meet the 2% defense spending baseline requested by NATO, Estonia is currently meeting the minimum requirement. Recent rhetoric out of Moscow, the crisis in Eastern Ukraine, and the invasion of Crimea seem to be having a persuasive effect on both Lithuania and Latvia in regards to increasing their defense expenditure as they seek to solidify their position as NATO allies. Lithuania even reinstated conscription for a five-year term in order to bolster army manpower by 3,000 to 3,500 soldiers per annum.

As NATO members, the Baltic Nations are entitled to the Article 5 notion of collective defense. This is the most important aspect of the Baltic nations’ national security strategies. Relying on allies is not only the most logical decision for the nations, but, practically speaking, it is their only option when facing a populous and militarily-powerful country such as Russia. In fact, Lithuanian military doctrine purports that, in case of invasion, small squads of soldiers will conduct guerilla activities aimed at harassing the invading force long enough for conventional NATO reinforcements to arrive. This reflects Lithuanian experiences following the second Soviet occupation, where the “forest brothers” waged unconventional warfare for several years, expecting an American and Western European liberation that never materialized.

The emergence of an unpredictable and militant Russian foreign policy has without question affected the strategic balance in the Baltic States. Russian aircraft have been increasingly willing to violate Estonian airspace, with over five incursions in 2014 alone. These violations have led to the Baltic Air Policing mission being bolstered from a rotating contingent of four aircraft from a single

NATO country, to a multinational force of twelve aircraft. In fall 2014, the United States deployed armored assets to all three Baltic countries, totaling twenty tanks along with infantry support. Despite the perceived escalation of military forces in the Baltics, the likelihood of an engagement with Russian forces remains slim. The main goal of these actions is to send a message that NATO takes its Article 5 obligations seriously and is willing to deploy forces as deterrence.

Nearly twenty-five years of independence have given the Baltic nations the opportunity to align with western institutions in a bid for security from their eastern neighbor. This strategy has been economically and politically successful so far, and appears to be sustainable, assuming both Western societal stability and a continuing international will to protect the Baltic States from eastern aggression.

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