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The Role of Baltic Defence Co-operation for the Security of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION[1]

Historians, writing on security issues of the Baltic states between the two World Wars, when Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania enjoyed a brief period of independence until they were annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, often observe that the three countries lacked genuine defence co-operation. Looking in retrospect, this fact is presented as one of important elements in the explanation as to why the three countries lost their independence, one by one, without even trying to militarily resist the fate ascribed to them by the Molotov-Ribentrop accords of August - September 1939. Would the history be different if they did? Difficult to say, but the three countries would certainly have been much more capable of resisting external pressures if they stood united and ready to assist each other.

Whatever the lesson of history, the three Baltic states were determined not to tread the same path and repeat mistakes of the past after the restoration of independence in 1990 -1991. The start of contacts and co-operation between the (para)militaries and fledgling defence establishments of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania could be traced back to the very early 1990s. Even more importantly, from the outset, this co-operation was also a symbolic expression of the understanding of a common destiny and of security interdependence. Of course, in the years that followed, the Baltic solidarity and the Baltic dimension in the foreign and security policies of the three countries was many times overwhelmed by other tracks, most notably, the vigorous efforts of the three states to anchor their security with the European and Trans-Atlantic institutions. This at

[1] The views and opinions expressed in the paper are entirely those of the author and do not reflect any official position .

times has resulted in quite visible elements of competition among the three. Nevertheless, co-operation among the militaries was developing and getting more sophisticated with every as it was largely based on joint long-term and ever-expanding projects.

During the last decade there was plenty of political rhetoric about the role and importance of Baltic defence co-operation. The Baltic defence projects are rather well known internationally and are often set as examples for other transitional countries in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. However, very little systemic academic analysis has been made during these years on the subject. Records from the early 1990s are hard to find partly due to the lack of proper recording and registering systems at the time, and partly due to the rather informal nature of this co-operation. Only from 1995, after trilateral defence co-operation agreement has been signed between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, co-operation became more formalised.

This paper will have a closer look into some of the central issue areas of Baltic defence co-operation. It does not attempt to provide a chronological description of events, developments, or achievements. Instead will concentrate on analysing major trends, factors, and considerations that were driving Baltic defence co-operation in the course of the 1990s as well as the implications, which this co-operation had on both the development of the national defence forces of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and the aspiration of the three states to join the North Atlantic Alliance.

Starting with a brief historical overview and the context in which the Baltic states started the development of their defence structures in the early 1990s, the paper proceeds with

examining the rationale for Baltic defence co-operation and discussing the constraints within which the Baltic defence establishments were operating. In the following, the paper will present in greater detail the nature, the objectives, and some specific features of the four major Baltic defence co-operation projects – BALTBAT, BALTRON, BALTNET, and Baltic Defence College (BDC). Finally, the paper will provide an assessment of the prospects for Baltic defence co-operation in the near to mid-term future.

Historical Background and Context of Baltic Co-operation

Security Environment after the Independence

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had declared their independence from the Soviet Union in 1990 – 1991. However, they did not receive broad international recognition until after the failure of the August 1991 military coup in Moscow and the following the establishment of diplomatic relations with Russia. Soon afterwards, in September 1991, the three Baltic nations were admitted to the United Nations. The following years were marked by re-establishment of the basics of nationhood, transition towards a democratic system of governance and market economy, as well as by the dismantling of remnants of the Soviet system. In their foreign policy, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania turned to the West with a determination to “return to Europe”, from which the three countries were deprived for decades. This track of the foreign policy remained remarkably unchanged in all three states. Most visibly, this policy was expressed in the rush of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to anchor their future with the Western Europe and, in particular, the institutions, which represented the “Western values”. Hence, the desire of the three

countries to join the EU and NATO, which remains the paramount objective of their foreign and security policies. Efforts and resources invested for the achievement of these objectives have brought Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to the freshold of both organizations.

At the same time, for most of the 1990s, the security relations with Russia were limited to the necessary minimum, and until the end of August 1994, was largely focussed on the withdrawal of Russian troops from the territories of the Baltic states.[2] Although, formally, during the 1990s the relations between the Baltic states and Russia remained relatively stable, there were a number of ups and downs as both sides were trying to settle the issues deriving from the independence of the Baltic countries. Perhaps the thorniest issue between Russia on the one side and Estonia and Latvia on the other, was the alleged discrimination of the rights of the Russian speaking population in these two countries, which are hosts to rather significant numbers of Russian minorities.[3] The resolution of this issue required active involvement and certain pressure on both sides from international organizations, first of all OSCE, EU, and Council of Europe. By now the issue of Russian-speaking minorities is not as visible on the international agenda as it used to be, although Russia seeks to maintain certain pressure on the Estonian and Latvian governments by raising it in different forums[4].

[2] Lithuania succeeded in having Russian troops withdrawn by the end of August 1993 – one year earlier than from the other two. A small contingent of Russian military personnel remained at the early warning radar site in Skrunda, Latvia until it was finally dismantled in 1999.
[3] The ethnic policies of the Soviet Union and industrialisation resulted in the increase of Russian population in Estonia and Latvia to 30 and 34 per cent respectively.
[4] The OSCE decided to close its field missions in Latvia and Estonia at the end of 2001, considering the rights of the Russian minorities in both countries are observed in accordance with the international standards.

Other problematic questions in the relations between Russia and the Baltic states included difficult and protracted negotiations on land and maritime borders; regular airspace violations by Russian aircraft, which were almost a daily occurence in the early 1990s[5]; demands of the Baltic states to compensate for the damage inflicted on the respective societies during the Soviet period and, more specifically, return their former embassy buildings abroad that were seized by Russia in 1940. Also, the governments of the three Baltic countries were rather nervous about the concept of the "near abroad", which Russian policy makers were using to define the area of Russia's particular interest into which the three Baltic states were included (and which implied a different treat from the rest of the abroad) as well as by the rise to power of some radical politicians, such as Zhirinovski, leader of Russia's so called Liberal Democrats.

Lithuania was also faced with the necessity to provide a possibility for military transit between the Kaliningrad exclave and the mainland Russia. Though the issue was never free of political controversies, especially in the context of Lithuania's aspiration to become NATO member, the agreed arrangements were functioning rather smoothly[6].

Baltic Defence Co-operation: Historical Overview

The similarity of the geopolitical situation of the Baltic states, their bitter historical experiences, and the mutual support during the revolutionary changes brought to the

[5] Between April 27, 1992 and May 19, 1995, Lithuania registered 5,339 violations of its air space, in which Russian aircraft flew 3,018 times without permits.
Stankevicius, Ceslovas "*Enhancing Security of Lithuania and Other Baltic States in 1992-94 and Future Guidelines*" http://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/94-96/stankevi/home.htm

[6] Lithuania applies the same rules for Russian military transit as was established by Germany for the withdrawal of the Russian troops from the former German Democratic Republic.

Central and Eastern European region by the end of the Cold War - all were important uniting factors, which also constituted a foundation for the Baltic defence co-operation. Moreover, on the practical level, the three countries faced the same challenge of having to build up and to professionalise their Armed Forces. As a result, in the security realm Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia had very much in common, perhaps more than in any other area.

It is also important to note that the fact that the Baltic states have not inherited Armed Forces from the Soviet period make their case very different from the rest of the other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. This, however, does not necessarily mean that their starting point was much worse than that of the CEE countries like Poland, Romania or Slovakia. In the latter cases the greatest challenges of the new political leaderships were to downsize, reorganise, and re-train significant parts of their militaries. The Baltic states had the privilege of starting the development of the defence structures from scratch. They could focus their defence efforts and resources on the achievement of their national security objectives, most notably, creation of NATO interoperable capabilities. In sum, a number of factors, including geographical proximity, history, common threats and challenges, same political aspirations, and same zero-level starting positions in the development of the military structures, were in a sense making active security and defence co-operation between the Baltic states natural.

At the same time, of no lesser importance was the fact that the Western countries often regarded and treated the three Baltic countries as some sort of geopolitical unit and preferred to provide support to all three simultaneously rather than individually. As it will be elaborated in the discussion on Baltic defence co-operation projects, the Western

countries began providing substantial assistance to the Baltic states only after the three agreed on their common project – BALTBAT. This approach of the Western countries also stimulated creative thinking within the Baltic defence establishments, which resulted in the proliferation of joint Baltic initiatives, which led to common projects.

Foreign Military Assistance in the Early 1990s

A very limited amount of foreign military support from the Western states began to become available from 1992-1993. At the time this support was limited to "soft" and non-contentious areas and was, most probably, meant as a symbolic expression of solidarity and support to the sovereignty of the Baltic states. Such assistance included transfers ofused, vehicles, communication equipment, uniforms, etc. On a few occasions some basic infantry training was provided[7]. However, the largest part of defence co-operation activities during this period could be justily described as mutual familiarisation and fact-finding.

The principle contributors, which included the Nordic countries, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States were rather cautious in their approach. These Western countries and NATO as an Alliance were keen on sharing information and providing training in such areas as democratic control of armed forces, budgetary and accounting procedures, environmental safety, etc. But none of these areas (although the offerings used to be gratefully accepted) at the time were considered a real priority by the Baltic defence establishments. The Baltic countries saw as a real priority in developing some sort of military capability to defend the sovereignty of the respective

[7] Brett, Julian "Lessons learned from the BALTBAT project", Report commissioned by MOD Denmark and MoD United Kingdom, Jan. 2001.

countries for the case if the positive political trends in the region reverse. Consequently, their priorities for support were focused on military hardware needs and combat training requirements, which most Western countries were not yet ready to provide. As one of the Western writers on the subject explained “the general perception was that Baltic defence structures were developing haphazardly, were inadequately resourced, and (not surprisingly) overly dependent upon outmoded experience, which was predominantly of Soviet origin”.

Indeed, it is difficult to speak about any long-term defence planning in the Baltic states in the early 1990s. Not only that the planning capacities were lacking, but also the dominant feeling among the political elite in Baltic states was that they face very realistic and immediate military threat and the presence of the Russian troops on the territory was a daily reminder of the threat. Therefore the political and military leadership felt that they have to concentrate on immediate objectives rather than to spend time on discussing whatever long-term military development plans and priorities.

As the Russian troops were withdrawn and relations with Russia were gradually becoming less tense and problematic, the Baltic states could shift their focus and channel their scarce resources to co-operation with the Wester countries and, first and foremost, NATO. The launch of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme by NATO in January 1994 provided a political framework and, quite importantly, certain resources for more active defence co-operation both between the three Baltic military structures and their Western counterparts. Initially, important element of participation in the PfP for the Balts was the so-called “flagwaving” i.e. symbolic demonstration of their presence as part of the international military community. As to practical benefits of participation in

the PfP in its early years, those were rather limited. Due to human and financial limitations, Baltic participation in PfP activities often was rather symbolic. Also, the PfP activities were limited to non-Article 5 activities and thus could not substitute for national military training.

However, as the three countries have officially applied to join NATO in early 1994, the participation in the PfP and in other international defence co-operation activities has gained a very specific meaning – preparation for the eventual NATO membership. This objective was becoming ever more central as the content of the PfP improved, as the Baltic states were developing their military structures, and as the prospects for joining the Alliance were becoming more and more realistic.

The Role of Peacekeeping

As the UN was expanding its operations in the former Yugoslavia in 1992-1993, international peacekeeping was becoming a natural leitmotiv of international military co-operation in Europe. As such, it was a neutral and therefore convenient subject, which both NATO and its former adversaries in the East found as both relevant and acceptable. Later, as NATO was becoming more and more involved in “out of area” operations, which provided NATO with a new, post-Cold War, role and thereby has played an important part in the overcoming of the NATO’s “identity crisis”, which was widely perceived in the early 1990s.

In the result of this shift of NATO’s prioritties, a large part of what the Baltic states were doing in the development of their national defence structures and capabilities with

assistance from NATO and from the Partner states was in one or another way tied in, or associated with, the PfP programme and its objectives. This political correct *chapeau* of PfP and peacekeeping was very convenient to keep for a number reasons. First of all, a connection to the Partnership for Peace in a way legitimised the intensive development of military capabilities in the Baltic states, which could otherwise give rise to political controversies. As a NATO co-operation Partner and a PfP country, Russia could hardly criticise initiatives and co-operation projects that were part of the PfP framework. Also, very importantly, many Western governments found it politically much easier to support development of joint Baltic capabilities that were in the "spirit of PfP" rather than to provide direct bilateral military assistance to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Last but not least, participation in, or organization of, PfP activities was eligible to NATO or bilateral funding, which was highly important given the dire financial constraints faced by the defence establishments in the three Baltic countries.

The orientation towards active participation in international peace operations from the early days of development of defence structures had a number of (mostly positive) implications on the Armed Forces of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Being relatively small countries, none of the Baltic states could afford sending and sustaining a sizeable military unit in an international peacekeeping operation. Hence, the case for pooling the efforts as well as resources was very strong. Even then external support both in terms of expertise, materiel and logistics was badly needed. Luckily, there was a large number of countries, led by the Nordic states, willing to assist. This resulted in the establishment of a whole cooperative network, co-ordinated through the Baltic Security Assistance Group (BALTSEA), which comprised the three Baltic states and all the supporting countries. The number of activities between the Baltic militaries and their Western

counterparts was increasing with every year. As a result, the Armed Forces of the Baltic states and their defence establishments very soon have acquired intimate knowledge and gained practical experience of Western military practices and traditions. I would even argue that in the course of the 1990s the militaries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania became and remain the most "westernised" sectors of their respective societies, working under the same standards and aspiring for the same quality of results.

Also, participation in international peacekeeping operations, which the Baltic countries began in August 1994 with the deployment of a Lithuanian platoon (LITPLA 1) to the UNPROFOR II (within Danish foster battalion), provided rapid political dividends. The Balts could claim (not without pride) that they have succeeded not only in resolving all disputes within their region, but are also actively contributing to the international peace efforts. Hence, they are not consumers but providers of security and stability. And so will it remain, as they become members of NATO.

Last but not least, successful participation in peacekeeping operations helped in creating new and better image of the armed forces within the societies of the Baltic states. One of the heavy legacies from the Soviet period was the highly negative public attitude towards the military in general and military conscription in particular. Nowadays, in all three countries the defence establishments enjoy relatively high ratings of popular approval[8]. This can also be attributed to the well-publicised participation in international peace operations.

[8] Weekly opinion polls conducted by a major Lithuanian daily "Lietuvos Rytas" indicate that Lithuanian Armed Forces are trusted by approximately 40 per cent of the population and distrusted by 20-25 per cent. This is a much higher rating of approval than for most other state and non-governmental institutions. Comparable situation is also in the other two countries.

The following chapter will discuss in greater detail the four Baltic defence co-operation projects, which constitute the core of the trilateral military co-operation and which are essential elements both in the build up of the national defence capabilities of the three states and their NATO integration efforts.

Baltic Co-operation Projects: Role and Objectives

BALTBAT

The first, the largest, and the most complex project was launched in September 1994, when Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have committed themselves to "establish and form a joint peacekeeping unit (….) to exercise mandates given by the UN and/or CSCE for peacekeeping, also in co-operation with NATO and WEU".

On the same month, in September 1994, an international Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was concluded between the three Baltic states and five Western countries - the four Nordic countries and the UK - which by that time expressed their readiness to provide assistance to the project. Later, several other Western nations joined the group of supporters either formally by signing the Memorandum or, like the US, by rendering substantial assistance to the project without being a signatory to the MOU. By 1999, the group of supporters included more than a dozen of Western countries, with some, obviously, being more actively involved in the support to project implementation than the others. Since the launching of the project, the leading nation in the supporters' group was Denmark, which throughout the 1990s was also one of the

most generous supporters of defence development efforts in the Baltic states and one of the most active advocate of Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian membership in NATO.

With large number of nations involved in the project, BALTBAT required an adequate institutional set up for the management of this highly complex, expensive, and highly politically salient project. As a result, a number of working groups and decision-making bodies have been established for the development and implementation of the project. Perhaps the best known among those were the BALTBAT Steering Group, responsible for political decision making and coordination of support and the BALTBAT Military Working Group, responsible for all practical military aspects related to the implementation of the project. However, a tremendous amount of work has been accomplished in a large number of specialised working groups established for the resolution of the multitude of practical issues, ranging from establishing proper legal framework, to provision of logistical support, and to deployment of BALTBAT subunits into peace operations.

The difficulties in the implementation of the BALTBAT project could hardly be overestimated. The Baltic countries have set themselves a task to create a military unit meeting the highest international standards, while having at the same time to create their military structures from scratch. There was a lack of practically everything except for the political will among the leadership of the three Baltic countries and enthusiasm on the part of the three fledgling defence establishments.

Of course, such problems as the scarcity of resources and of the lack of adequately trained military personnel in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were well known before the

launch of the project. It was only in the light of firm determination of the defence leadership in the Baltic states and prospects for substantial support from a number of Western countries that the task looked feasible. The problem, which was clearly underestimated, was the fact that the implementation of the BALTBAT project was affecting a number of institutions in the Baltic states beyond their military structures. Those often were unready and sometimes unwilling to co-operate in such a complex multinational project, especially as appropriate legal framework was lacking. So many things the Baltic states had to do for the first time in their history. In particular, the project implementation was often obstructed by lengthy procedures for border crossings between the three Baltic countries, paper work related to military transit, taxation of various training materials designated for BALTBAT, cost-sharing arrangements, and others. This was often causing frustration among the supporting countries as well as the BALTBAT soldiers. And as the project was of such a high political visibility, information on all the practical difficulties was immediately reaching the policy level and was forcing the BALTBAT Steering Group and other senior political bodies to get involved into micro management of the project.

The nature of the above mentioned problems might suggest that it was somewhat premature to start the project already in 1994. Perhaps many of the practical problems encountered in the process of implementation of the BALTBAT project could be avoided or were made less complicated if the project was launched a couple of years later. By then the Baltic militaries would have acquired more experience of international defence co-operation and the legal framework would have had fewer loopholes. On the other hand, and I am a favourite of this perspective, the BALTBAT project could be regarded as a catalyst of the necessary changes and developments. It produced a shock on both

the Baltic defence establishments and on other relevant state structures, forcing them to address a whole set of problems in a very short period of time and under immense pressure and monitoring of the supporting countries. This was the first major test to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which, taking into account their expressed aspiration for NATO membership, they did not have a right to fail.

Perhaps the most crucial element in avoiding failures in a project like BALTBAT is setting a right level of ambition. The question of deployment was absolutely central in this regard as it had direct relevance for the battalion's organization, equipment requirements, training needs and logistic support structures. A deployment to a UN operation would most likely require ensuring full logistic support for the battalion and, what was especially daunting, the UN would most probably expect BALTBAT to stay in a mission for a reasonably long period, probably a few years. This would require creating additional battalions for rotation, which the Baltic states would clearly be unable to provide. An alternative could be deployment of significant subunits. This would be much more financially affordable and easier to sustain in a mission area, but the option was politically less attractive. The final compromise was that BATLBAT had to acquire "an independent capacity for attending peacekeeping tasks"[9], but, at the same time, admitting that this could only be a "temporary" deployment i.e. a "one shot" deployment for a fixed period, which would not require rotating the battalion or its subunits.

Readiness for such a deployment was achieved after a series of battalion level exercises at the end of 1997. However, by that time it was clear that it was unlikely to

[9] MWG meeting on 10th January 1995, quoted from Brett, Julian "Lessons learned from the BALTBAT project", Report commissioned by MOD Denmark and MoD United Kingdom, Jan. 2001.

find a deployment slot for BALTBAT within the existing UN operations. The area where the battalion in fact *could* play a meaningful role was the NATO-led SFOR operation in Bosnia. But BALTBAT as a unit was not trained and equipped for this type of missions and there was therefore an unacceptably high risk of failure. As a result of these considerations, the whole battalion was not deployed, but its companies were rotated within the Danish foster battalion, and performed in the mission very well.

To balance the picture of overwhelming success, one has to mention some of the criticism that the BALTBAT project faced, especially during its first years. Firstly, it was argued, that the strenuous efforts to establish units for send troops abroad are leading to the creation of elitist units (BALTBAT and Lithuanian-Polish battalion (LITPOLBAT) were the cases in point). The major consequence was that those units were consuming a disproportionate amount of the scarce defence resources of the three countries. They were also getting all the best pieces of equipment and most talented officers from other national units, thereby retarding the development of the other units and structures in the national defence forces. Secondly, critics claimed that the skills, which the soldiers were acquiring during the peacekeeping training as well as during the participation in military exercises, were in fact irrelevant to the national defence needs of the respective countries[10]. Thirdly, the very substantial bonuses, which the soldiers were getting while deployed in a mission, was becoming an ever more important motivating factor to join and to stay in the Armed Forces. And, specifically for BALTBAT, that its structure and logistic support chain, were so different from the other units of the national forces, that it

[10] This argument was becoming weaker as NATO joined peace operations and the UN "blue helmet" peacekeeping was becoming rather obsolete.

was making it non-interoperable with the rest of the national forces and, therefore, of little use for the national defence purposes.

Indeed, those arguing that BALTBAT as a military unit was having little direct defence value for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had a point. As was mentioned above, BALTBAT was launched first and foremost because it was a politically attractive project. Perhaps its structure, logistics or management were not ideal. At the same time, and this is extremely important, the BALTBAT project always had a much broader meaning for its designers than merely the establishment of a trinational peacekeeping unit. Even though an operational peacekeeping battalion had to be the final outcome of the endeavour, the most valuable result of the BALTBAT project had to be its spill over effects on the rest of the national defence forces of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In other words, the development of international peacekeeping capabilities was far from being seen aim in itself. More importantly BALTBAT was one of important means to assist the development of modern, western-type armed forces in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

More specifically, BALTBAT had to contribute to the *"westernization"* of the fledgling defence forces of the Baltic countries. This concept encompasses a wide range of issues from introduction of tactical manuals and operating procedures of defence forces of the Western countries into the daily training, to the spread of English language knowledge, and replacement of Soviet traditions with Western military culture in its broadest sense. It was expected that BALTBAT soldiers, after a period in the Baltic Battalion, would return to key positions in the national military systems and start changing the old habits and traditions, which were mostly coming from the Soviet army.

Thereby BALTBAT would become an important factor in the process of developing NATO interoperable armed forces in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Secondly, the BALTBAT project has created conditions for the provision of military support to the Baltic States in a manner non-provocative to other countries. Western countries have different national policies, priorities and different sensitivities when rendering defence related support of the Baltic states and, as was mentioned earlier, most of them find it politically easier and more attractive to support joint projects like BALTBAT rather than to render direct military assistance to the national armed forces of the Baltic countries. Perhaps this was due to the fact that support rendered to the development of peacekeeping capabilities for UN missions and other operations in the "spirit of PfP" could hardly be considered a controversial issue by anyone. At the same time direct transfers of military hardware and provision of combat training of Baltic military units could raise eyebrows in the East. The latter consideration as well as the initial successes of the BALTBAT project were the major incentives for the Baltic countries to launch a number of other Baltic projects: the ***Balt***ic Naval Squad***ron*** - BALTRON, the ***Balt***ic Air Surveillace ***Net***work - BALTNET, the ***B***altic ***D***efence ***C***ollege - BDC.

In addition, all their important differences notwithstanding, Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians would admit that their countries are of comparable size, have similar recent history, and share the same threats to their security. Looking from outside, the differences become even less visible, while the similarities prompt the Western states to regard and treat the three Baltic countries as a single geopolitical unit. Close Baltic defence co-operation is therefore *a priori* considered in the West as a highly positive

and even natural state of affairs. Consequently, disagreements, which unavoidably occur in the process of co-operation are immediately interpreted as irresponsible behaviour on the part of the Balts and therefore come under sharp criticism from the supporting states. Because of this image in the West and also because this makes matters so much more simple, the Western states are readier to deal with all three Baltic countries simultaneously rather than on the individual basis. Therefore one could easily make a claim that it was the attitude of the supporting countries rather than anything else, what promoted defence co-operation Baltic states to the present level.

The BALTBAT project also has a remarkable multinational structure for project management and co-ordination of support, which was later copied by the other Baltic initiatives. The coordination of the assistance and general management of the project was taking place through the regular meetings of multinational BALTBAT Steering and BALTBAT Military Working Groups, chaired by Denmark. A majority of countries represented at these groups were signatories to the Memorandum of Understanding concerning support to BALTBAT. The formal commitment to support a specific military project in the Baltics made by a large group of Western countries, which included both NATO and non-aligned states, was important not only for practical also for political reasons, signalling that the West cared about security of the Baltic countries. Thereby it contributed to self-confidence building in the Baltic countries vis-à-vis potential security threats.

In sum, the initial successes of the BALTBAT project provided the Baltic states with an answer as to what kind of initiatives are most likely to attract support of Western countries. External assistance was considered essential for the development of the

national defence capabilities, as the defence budgets in all three states were very small both in relative and in absolute terms. Of no lesser importance was the very fact of long-term continuous engagement of major Western countries in the Baltics, which the BALTBAT project provided better than any other defence co-operation initiatives. Therefore, it was only natural that Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian political and military authorities took the opportunity to extend the BALTBAT type co-operation to other areas, by launching new initiatives, which are discussed below.

BALTRON

In many respects the launch of the Baltic naval squadron could be regarded as an extension of the BALTBAT project. Both projects were similar in their objectives, which included contribution to stability in the region and possible participation in international peacekeeping (though for naval forces it was considerably less likely), both were developed as initiatives “in the spirit of PfP”, and both aimed at strengthening defensive capabilities of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania through multilateral assistance to their defence co-operation. The structures for the management of the project – BALTRON Steering Group and BALTRON Naval Working Group were identical to the respective groups in the BALTBAT project.

However, for many practical reasons, BALTRON was a less complex project. It aimed at creating a trinational squadron of Mine-countermeasure (MCM) vessels, which would include from 3 to 6 ships able to perform a range of tasks, the central of which were to counter the residual mine threat on Eastern coast of the Baltic sea and, with the

development of capabilities, to be able to assume the whole range of mine clearance tasks. Differently from the BALTBAT project, BALTRON did not have to start from scratch – the three Baltic countries had their national navies, whose assets were to be used in the project. The focus on mine clearance is also not accidental. The residual mine threat along the eastern Baltic sea coast remains relatively high to these days and was much higher before the BALTRON started its operations. However, a more important practical consideration behind the MCM choice was the fact that Latvia and Estonia have by that time received two “Condor” class minesweepers ships from the former DDR navy, which constituted the core of their national navies. Lithuania, which did not have MCM ships until the year 2000, could only contribute an auxiliary ship, which also served as a command platform.

Another important difference, if compared with the BALTBAT project, was the stress placed by the Baltic states on the issue of NATO interoperability. Several factors contributed to it. First of all, with the launch of IFOR in 1995, NATO began to play a completely new role in the former Yugoslavia and took over the peace implementation part of the operation from the UN. It looked as if a new general tendency was towards a more rigorous type of peacekeeping, in which NATO could play increasingly active role, especially as it itself began refocusing its efforts and thinking towards forward deployment and “out of area” operations. Also, it seemed rather unlikely that other organization than NATO (or WEU at that time) would be responsible for a naval component of a peace operation. Finally, all PfP training and exercises at sea were conducted on the basis of NATO standard operating procedures. Hence, the importance of using relevant NATO procedures, frequencies and equipment in the BALTRON project.

A very important lesson from the BALTBAT project was that a crucial element for success was the leading country (Chair of the Steering and of the Military Working Groups). Denmark has not only played the role of co-ordinator of external support, but also itself was among the most active and generous contributors, and on many occasions filled in the gaps in support. Germany and Sweden, both major Baltic naval nations, both by that time actively involved in co-operation with the Baltic navies, were natural candidates. However, as a heavyweight NATO member, Germany must have been a preferred candidate for the Baltic states. Also, the fact that Germany had by that time donated MCM ships to Latvia and Estonia (and was planning to decommission a few others) were also factors in favour of Germany's candidacy. Therefore, when Germany agreed to take the leading role in the BALTRON project, it was perceived as a double-edged success for the Baltic states. On the one hand, it was important political and practical engagement of Germany as a leader in a major and long-term defence co-operation project in the Baltics. On the other hand, it was important step in ensuring NATO interoperability of the BALTRON and of the Baltic navies in general (since BALTRON comprised major part of those).

One of the explanations why the implementation of BALTRON was easier the BALTBAT lies in the fact that it was launched a couple of years later, after the navies of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania already had gained some experience of coopeation between them and internationally in the framework of PfP. Also, it seems that navies by their nature are more internationalised than land forces and probably for this reason the knowledge of the English language in BALTRON was never perceived to be such a problem as it

was in the case of BALTBAT. Also, the ship crews and the commanding staff remained rather stable as there were few possibilities to rotate them within the small naval forces.

Thus, the major problems and limitations for the development of BALTRON was not so much related to personnel and training – the squadron was active participant of all major naval PfP exercises in the Baltic sea and had a training programme of its own - as in the field of equipment. Mine clearance operations are generally equipment intensive and most of the needed equipment items are very expensive. Moreover, the Baltic states have declared BALTRON as a unit for co-operation with NATO within the PARP process, which meant that BALTRON ships had to meet all the relevant standard NATO requirements for MCM vessels. This was further adding to the cost as it included a number of additional requirements for the BALTRON ships such as air defence, electronic warfare, and other capabilities. At the same time, while many of the supporting countries were ready in different ways to support training activities, most of them were rather reluctant to fill in the gaps in the field of equipment. Therefore the progress within the BALTRON project most often limited by the equipment constraints.

One of the underlying problems with BALTRON development is related to the more general structure of the Baltic defence forces. Namely, that the navies and the airforces of the three Baltic countries are relatively small, they can effectively perform only a very limited range of tasks, mostly of which are relevant only for a peacetime. Therefore, in the conditions of resource scarcity, the ground forces are as a rule getting priority consideration.

BALTNET

The origins of the BALTNET project are back in 1994, when the US has launched the so called Regional Airspace Initiative (RAI), which, in 1995, was extended to include Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The initiative provided US funding for establishing airspace surveillance centres (i.e. funds to procure US-made equipment designated for processing airspace surveillance data) in the Central and Eastern European countries.

The Baltic states, among which only Lithuania had some military airspace surveillance capacity, have cordially welcomed the initiative. In the light of regular airspace violations by the Russian airforces, this was a step towards addressing one of the core national security areas – establishment of an airspace monitoring, and, as a next step, airspace control and defence systems. Besides, the established system would be fully NATO interoperable, which was its another attractive characteristic for the NATO aspiring Balts.

However, be it for political or for cost-saving purposes, the US opted for the establishment of one joint system in the three Baltic states, rather than for creation of national centres as was the case in the other Central and Eastern European states. This regional structure envisaged the establishment of a Regional Airspace Surveillance Coordination Centre (RASCC) (located in Lithuania close to Kaunas), which is an internationally manned core element of the system, and of three National Nodes based in each of the three states and manned by personnel of the respective country. Such a configuration was rather unique and, what is especially important here, it in the essence meant an almost complete integration of parts of the national defence infrastructure of the three states in such a sensitive area as airspace surveillance and control. One

should keep in mind the fact that the Baltic states, although being close co-operation partners in security and defence matters, have never seriously considered forming military alliance among them, which would make such an integrated solution natural.

The US assistance package was limited to the installation of equipment for radar data processing but did not extend to address related needs. The recipients were expected to address these problems on their own. In fact, unless the Baltic states decided to invest into the other areas, the US donation (although worth approximately 10 mio. USD) would be of little use. The major shortfalls in this respect (apart for the preparation of facilities for the US equipment) were: absence of secure communication lines between the RASCC in Lithuania and the National Nodes in Latvia and Estonia (the Lithuanian National Node was collocated with the RASCC); equipment for conversion of radar data from old Soviet radars into a format acceptable to the provided US equipment; training of personnel (including English language – operational language of BALTNET); adequate security systems (both physical and electronic) and, last but not least, procurement of primary airspace surveillance radar in all three countries. The US donated modern radar data processing system would be worthless unless it was supplied with adequate information in a right format, which would be subsequently distributed to the users.

This was the context in which the BALTNET project, in many respects replicating BALTBAT and BALTRON model, was launched in 1998. The focus of the project was the elimination of the shortfalls indicated above and thereby enabling the Baltic states to conduct air sovereignty operations over their airspace. Norway agreed to take the lead in co-ordinating (and also was the main provider) of external support. In the result of

multilateral effort (although BALTNET had fewer supporting nations than BALTBAT or BALTRON), the BALTNET has successfully started its operations in the year 2000, gradually increasing its operational capacities. It is a unique example of co-operation among formally non-allied countries even though all *air defence* related matters remain within exclusive competence of each country and will be handled by the respective National Nodes rather than the RASCC.

One may always wonder whether the regional set up of BALTNET was a right decision and not just an unnecessary complication, as the three Baltic states seem not to be ready politically for the level of defence integration implied by the regional configuration of BALTNET. On the other hand, one could hope, that such a regional approach provides the three Baltic states with experience and training, which will make it relatively easy one day to integrate their air surveillance and defence assets into NATO's integrated air defence system.

Baltic Defence College

Baltic Defence College project, another major long-term project among Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, was conceived in 1998 - 1999 in the context of rapidly expanding defence structures in the three Baltic states. Creating an indigenous capacity for officer training was probably the only means to satisfy the constantly growing need for competent staff officers as new military units were developed and major headquarters expanded. At that time a number of Western countries were generously offering training opportunities for officers from the Baltic states at the their institutions of military training. However, the reliance on officer training abroad (although usually it was free of charge

or under very favourable conditions) could not last indefinitely. First of all, the willingness of supporting states to continue this kind of assistance was likely to diminish with time, while the needs were likely to grow further. Secondly, the Baltic states could not conduct any reliable planning of their personnel training for as long as it was fully dependent on the generosity of the supporting countries to provide training slots and funds. Last but not least, knowledge and skills acquired in the Western military education establishments often could not be directly applied in the conditions of the Baltic countries, where the geopolitical conditions, the threats, and the military means were very different. A further complication deriving from the reliance on staff officer training abroad was the differences in doctrines and traditions *among* Western countries. For example, senior officers who have received their education in the German officer training academy in Hamburg used to organise staff work along the principles used in *Bundeswehr*, while those who graduated from the US, French or Nordic schools could find their knowledge and experiences hardly compatible. Thus, the Baltic Defence College was also needed as an institution, which would set general staff work principles, standards and procedures for the entire armed forces of the three Baltic countries – important step in improving interoperability both among the three countries as well as inside.

Thus, there was a number of good reasons to launch the Baltic Defence College project. A university town of Tartu in Estonia has been chosen as the place for the College. The host nation undertook to prepare the necessary facilities, and a long list of additional requirements had to be addressed with support of a number of countries led by Sweden. Again, international project coordination structures, one at a policy level and one at a working level, were set up. A number of interstate and intergovernmental

agreements, including a trilateral Agreement between the three Baltic states on the establishment of the BDC and a multilateral Memorandum of Understanding concerning external support were signed[11]. The host nation was responsible for the preparation of the necessary infrastructure for the College.

The first group of students started their 10-month studies at the BDC already in the fall of 1999. While the majority of students (around 30) is always coming from the three Baltic countries, an ever increasing group of other countries is willing to send their officers to spend a year in the College. For example, in the academic year 2002-2003 the College expects to receive students from as many as 15 nations[12]. Besides the students from the three Baltic states and the project supporting countries, the BDC will train six officers from Bosnia and one from Georgia – thus contributing to Westernization of the militaries of transitional countries.

The teaching staff of the college is equally multinational and is mainly provided by the Western countries. However, the Baltic states are determined to take over the teaching responsibilities in the College as soon as they develop sufficient pool of experts within their forces.

Prospects for Baltic Defence Co-operation

Nowadays the implementation of the joint Baltic projects actively involves significant parts of all three services of the Baltic militaries – army, navy and airforces. Baltic

[11] More information on the structure of the BDC and its legal framework can be found in www.bdcol.ee;
[12] Baltic Defence College, Newsletter no. 38, 21. February 2002

Defence College gradually became integrated into the national officer education systems and is likely to become a traditional step in the career of Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian officers towards the key positions and the highest ranks. In addition to the four major projects described in this paper, there is a number of perhaps less known, but also highly important joint undertakings among the Baltic militaries, which include joint specialist training courses, coordination of policies and activities in a number of functional areas such as logistics, procurement, and NATO integration. The policy-level coordination is assured through regular trilateral meetings of Presidents, Ministers, Baltic Parliamentary Assembly, Commanders of the Armed Forces and services. Thus, there is a comprehensive institutional framework for coordination of policies and for monitoring their implementation.

Speaking about the future of Baltic defence co-operation, one has to bear in mind the changes and developments within the broader international context. Of particular relevance is the predominant international focus on terrorism as the main security challenge for the Euro-Atlantic community and beyond, as well as the upcoming Baltic membership in NATO. In respect to the latter, the most important is not the fact of becoming full members (since for quite some time the Baltic behave as if they were NATO allies), but, indeed, the ever more radical transformation of the Alliance itself, which is increasingly becoming an outward oriented defence policy coordination body. Being full members, the Balts will have their security formally guaranteed by some twenty nations, which is likely to further reduce the need for spending significant part of resources on territorial defence purposes.

Another related pressure will be related to specialisation of their forces for the implementation of specific tasks within the Alliance. This will open new areas for Baltic defence co-operation because the size and military capabilities of any one of them makes it difficult to fill in a meaningful niche within Alliance operations on their own. More will be possible to accomplish by pooling their resources.

On the other hand, membership in the EU and NATO may also reduce incentives for more active trilateral co-operation as the Baltic states. They will no longer need mutual support in the aspiration for membership in the EU and NATO, which was important uniting element. In the eyes of Western policy makers they will no longer associate with a “special case” as they were in the context of NATO enlargement. Finally, on the practical level, Baltic military units and infrastructure elements are likely to become an integral part of larger regional structures. For example, BALTBAT is likely to become closely associated with, if not integrated into, the NATO North Eastern Army Corpus, while BALTNET assets will most probably be connected into the NATO Allied Air Defence system.

Future prospects for co-operation are clearly the brightest in the areas where they may provide tangible benefits. Joint procurement of military equipment clearly has the biggest potential. The militaries of the three states are at similar stage of development they have and, more importantly, they lack the same capabilities. Also, as was mentioned above, there are good reasons for combining their efforts in some specific areas of NATO’s interest. Such co-operation must not necessarily be trilateral, but, for cost saving reasons, the efforts should be combined wherever possible. The first

successful step has already been made by Estonia and Latvia in procurement of long-range radar.

Another area for co-operation is joint specialist training. The success of the Baltic Defence College clearly advocates for joint military training institutions being established to provide training in the areas of common interest. First steps have already been made largely due to the need to ensure sustainability of the joint projects. BALTNET training school, which is collocated with the RASCC, is responsible for training of the personnel working in the RASCC and National Nodes. Also, the preparation of BALTRON diving centre in Liepaja, Latvia, is under way. The Combat Engineer Training School in Lithuania plans to conduct a number of courses in the English language and to invite specialists from other countries, first and foremost from Latvia and Estonia, to take part.

In sum, there are still a number of areas, in which the Baltic defence co-operation may move further than it is at the moment. However, one should not expect any new major breakthroughs, not least because, the three countries are already cooperative partners in a number of major projects, thus, the potential for either widening or deepening this co-operation is rather limited. Also, the political motive of standing united in the aspiration for NATO membership as well as practical defence related support from the Western countries are becoming increasingly less important factors for fostering more or closer links between the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian defence establishments.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the restoration of independence in 1990, defence co-operation between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania was one of the main vehicles for the development of the defence capabilities and for shaping their military structures along the Western models. Joint efforts aimed at creation of Baltic military units and infrastructure elements have attracted very substantial support from a large number of Western countries. This support was essential element for success of the major Baltic defence co-operation projects – Baltic Battalion (BALTBAT), Baltic Naval Squadron (BALTRON), Baltic Airspace Surveillance Network (BALTNET) and Baltic Defence College (BDC). It would not be an exaggeration to say that BALTBAT, BALTRON, BALTNET and BDC constitute the key NATO interoperable elements of the Baltic defence forces. Moreover, they have in many ways contributed to the development of NATO interoperability of other units and national forces as such. Thus, the role of Baltic defence co-operation was overwhelmingly positive in the key areas for strengthening national security i.e. strengthening of the self-defence capabilities of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and for promoting their NATO integration.

Now that the Baltic states are on the threshold of NATO and in the context of very markedly improved general security climate in the Baltic Sea region, the role and objectives of Baltic defence co-operation may have to be redefined. However, as this paper was aiming to show, one of specific features of Baltic defence co-operation was its focus on long-term projects such as joint military units and systems. This means that whatever new objectives will be set, the countries will start not from the zero-level as in

the early 1990s, but with a vast experience of co-operation, deep mutual knowledge and understanding and high level of interoperability among their military forces.

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