



Nordic-Baltic Security and the US Role

SEPTEMBER 2015

The United States and the Nordic states enjoy a strong, productive relationship. With similar levels of economic development and the shared liberal democratic values of human dignity, rule of law, and individual empowerment, the Nordic nations and the United States often share common perspectives on a wide range of pressing global issues, from crisis management to economic liberalization to combating climate change. This positive rapport rests on the United States' and other Western powers' support of the Nordic region and its Baltic neighbors during the Cold War and was further solidified during the tumultuous period that followed the break-up of the Soviet Union. At a time when the stability of the northern and southern flanks of the former Soviet Union were in doubt, leading NATO members, in concert with the Nordics, spearheaded engagement and enlargement with the newly freed nations of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. As a result, twenty years later, this area of Europe is not only stable but thriving.

However, stability in the Nordic-Baltic area is under increasing stress. Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support for the separatists in eastern Ukraine have brought on a vastly different European security environment. Provocations against the Baltics and Nordics through airspace violations and bellicose language from senior Russian leaders, including President Vladimir Putin himself,¹ add to the tension and insecurity of the region. The persistent nature of these actions makes this the new normal in Russia's relations with its European neighbors.

1 During a private meeting in September 2014 with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, Putin is claimed to have said, "If I wanted, in two days I could have Russian troops not only in Kiev, but also in Riga, Vilnius, Tallinn, Warsaw and Bucharest," a similar comment he made to then-President of the European Union Commission Manuel Barroso a few months earlier. See Justin Huggler, "Putin 'Privately' Threatened to Invade Poland, Romania and the Baltic States," *Telegraph*, September 18, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11106195/Putin-privately-threatened-to-invade-Poland-Romania-and-the-Baltic-states.html>.

Transatlantic Security Initiative

The project on Nordic-Baltic Security and the Transatlantic Link responds to the new security environment in Europe's north, and draws together leading experts from both sides of the Atlantic to formulate new ideas for enhancing security and deepening defense cooperation in the Nordic-Baltic region. Key project themes include US engagement in the region, the future of NATO partnerships, regional defense cooperation, and the changing Nordic-Baltic security environment. This project is conducted in partnership with the Ministry of Defense and Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland.

There are two immediate challenges that the Nordic and Baltic nations must address. First, the Baltic nations remain vulnerable to both overt and hybrid Russian incursions. They each have small militaries and Russian soft influence is considerable. The NATO planning required to counteract a coercive or even hostile Russian act is lacking and the security of these three NATO allies is in question, especially in the event of sudden crisis that might outpace a proper Alliance response.

Second, NATO partner nations Finland and Sweden find themselves in a new security environment, one in which their current capabilities may not be enough to match Russian action, as shown in failed efforts to locate suspected submarines or respond to air incursions within acceptable timelines. Speaking broadly, this new situation has implications for not only Swedish and Finnish defense and security policies but also on those agreements existing between them and NATO as well as bilaterally with the United States. Therefore, to preserve the European security environment created after the Cold War, every effort must be made to enhance the collaboration between the United States and the nations of the Nordic-Baltic region.

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The Benefits of Collaboration

Transatlantic cooperation on Nordic-Baltic security has distinct benefits for each party. For the United States, continued engagement in the region advances its goal of a Europe whole, free and at peace and helps secure one of the major success stories in terms of Euro-Atlantic integration in the early post-Cold War era. It also sends a strong signal of US support for regional collaboration across Europe by highlighting the already successful cooperation within the Nordic region. Having long resolved major historical divides, the Nordics enjoy close security and defense cooperation in a model for the rest of Europe to emulate. Although each country retains a strong national identity, each also understands and fosters the idea of linking its efforts to broader transatlantic initiatives and solutions.² The Baltics, while not as integrated as their Nordic counterparts, are also moving toward a more collaborative relationship. The United States, as an honest broker outside the European continent and with strong ties to each, can facilitate this growing collaborative trend among the Nordic and Baltic nations.

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For the Nordic and Baltic states, collaboration with the United States yields important dividends, the most significant being deterrence. For the Baltic nations, the United States is still the ultimate guarantor for their security, a fact their policymakers readily acknowledge. Sweden and Finland, despite being outside NATO, are close NATO partners and each recognizes the important relationship they share with the United States.³ This

2 For a broader discussion on assets that the Nordics possess and that the United States can leverage, see Ian Brzezinski, "U.S.-Nordic-Baltic Engagement in a Globalized World," in Kurt Volker and Ieva Kupce eds., *Nordic-Baltic-American Cooperation: Shaping the US-European Agenda* (Washington DC: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2012), p. 170.

3 A deeper look at Sweden's relationship with the United States can be

leads to close security collaboration between the various parties. Both Stockholm and Helsinki anticipate assistance from outside in times of crisis. That assistance may vary, from exerting diplomatic pressure against Russia at one end of the spectrum to providing combat forces in their defense at the other.

Beyond the existential nature of national security, the Nordics also value the US ability to be a regional facilitator. Current cooperation structures limit Nordic and Baltic nations' abilities to collaborate with one another. Norway, Denmark, and the Baltic states are wary of any regional cooperation that could be seen as diminishing the role of NATO and/or of the United States in their region: Denmark's "opt out" policy regarding EU defense matters is the starkest example (although this may change in the near future). Sweden, on the other hand, would like to use its historical influence and EU membership as a driver for further cooperation among the regional powers. The Nordic nations' disparate defense priorities also limit deeper cooperation. For example, Finland remains primarily focused on territorial defense while Denmark's forces are almost exclusively expeditionary, making alignment on substantive policy issues more difficult. One forum that can help reconcile these priorities is the United States' Enhanced Partnership in Northern Europe (e-PINE), which includes the five Nordic, the three Baltic nations, and the United States. Initiated in 2003, e-PINE facilitates collaboration on common areas as collective security, healthy societies, and vibrant economies.⁴ By leveraging the United States and forums like e-PINE, the Nordics and Baltics can use third parties to articulate issues that, if left to themselves, may result in an impasse.

Translating Theory into Practice

The prospect of closer US and the Nordic and Baltic cooperation will enhance the positive impact of each party and will provide stability in the region at this crucial time. There are four practical areas of collaboration that the United States and its Nordic and Baltic partners should focus on: deterrence and assurance, capabilities through cooperation, soft power security, and closing the NATO gap.

Deterrence and Assurance. First and foremost, regional stability must be ensured if further progress is to be

found in the Swedish government report entitled *International Defence Cooperation: Efficiency, Solidarity, Sovereignty* (October 2014), p. 51; For a thorough review of Finland and its government's views on the relationship with the United States, read their Ministry of Foreign Affairs report, *Finland and the United States of America: A Hundred and One Ways to Develop Transatlantic Cooperation* (2011).

4 Damon Wilson and Magnus Nordenman, "The Nordic-Baltic Region as a Global Partner of the United States," in Robert Nurick and Magnus Nordenman eds., *Nordic-Baltic Security in the 21st Century: The Regional Agenda and the Global Role* (September 2011), p. 67.



Surface units from Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States steam in formation during a recent iteration of exercise Baltic Operations (BALTOPS). BALTOPS is NATO's largest maritime event and in 2015 included 49 ships and 5,600 personnel from 17 nations. *Photo credit: US Navy.*

made in other efforts. Therefore, the application of US and Nordic power, both hard and soft, to deter against Russia is critical. The United States is already taking positive steps in this direction. One example of hard power is Operation Atlantic Resolve. Established in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine and as a show of solidarity with NATO allies, it consists of deploying rotational US land forces in the Baltics, as well as in Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria.⁵ Additionally, the United States committed \$1 billion to the European Reassurance Initiative in 2014, which is being used to build capabilities in the newer Alliance members and facilitates the pre-positioning of combat equipment.⁶ The administration went on to request another \$789 million for fiscal year 2016, demonstrating US commitment to bolstering alliance security.⁷ On the economic and energy-focused soft power side, the United States continues to leverage sanctions against Russia, expanding their scope from individuals to banks and energy companies, including prohibitions

on oil and shale gas technology transfers.⁸ These are complemented by the impactful sanctions imposed by the European Union, providing another aspect of deterrence and defense beyond strictly military means.

The new security environment has also accelerated the drive towards more regional defense cooperation, which has already been underway since 2009 under the umbrella of Nordic Defense Cooperation (NORDEFCO). This regional defense cooperation trend is especially pronounced between Finland and Sweden. Also, recently the Nordics agreed that the Baltic states would be invited to participate in a wider agenda of NORDEFCO activities. The United States has also participated in regional NORDEFCO exercises.

However, more needs to be done to further bolster deterrence and defense in the Nordic and Baltic regions. While the presence of nine hundred American soldiers and their combat gear is a positive step,⁹ it fails to match the considerable scale of Russia's military assets in the western region. While going pound-for-pound with Russia is neither financially feasible nor numerically

5 US Army Europe website on Operation Atlantic Resolve, <http://www.eur.army.mil/atlanticrosolve/>.

6 White House, "FACT SHEET: European Reassurance Initiative and Other U.S. Efforts in Support of NATO Allies and Partners," June 3, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/03/fact-sheet-european-reassurance-initiative-and-other-us-efforts-support->

7 Paul McLeary, "Source: DoD to Request \$585B for FY16," *Defense News*, January 27, 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense-policy-budget/budget/2015/01/27/budget-fiscal-2016-defense-department/22408891/>.

8 US State Department, "Ukraine and Russia Sanctions," accessed July 29, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/ukrainerrussia/>.

9 Michelle Tan, "Army Expands Operation Atlantic Resolve to Six Countries," *Army Times*, February 20, 2015, <http://www.armytimes.com/story/military/pentagon/2015/02/20/army-expands-atlantic-resolve/23693557/>.

practical given global American defense and security obligations, a more assertive positioning of US forces is required to deter Russia and force its leadership to recalculate the costs of threatening the Baltics and Nordics. For the Nordics, with a combined force of approximately 84,000 active duty personnel and associated mechanized equipment, combat aircraft and naval assets, the fighting power they *could* together bring to the field is substantial.¹⁰ However, what they *would* actually bring collectively to a conflict is unknown. Therefore, more effort toward discussions and planning among the Nordic collective and in consultation with other Nordic-Baltic security actors like NATO and the United States should occur to ensure that the deterrence and assurance will be in place if needed.

Greater Capabilities through Greater Cooperation. While the Nordic countries absorbed the financial crisis better than most, they are not immune from the increasing costs of defense, particularly as inventories age and must be replaced. This is one of the reasons cited for the inability of Sweden to locate the suspected Russian submersible within its territorial waters last October. Faced with budgetary cuts, Stockholm decided that anti-submarine capabilities were not as important as other more expeditionary forces and deactivated their older sub-hunting helicopters without a replacement until 2018. That, combined with a reduced number of ships, made the October challenge critical. The Baltics are even more attuned to the financial impact of defense spending and require economies of scale to make that a reality. Latvia's government recently announced it will increase its defense spending to 2 percent but not until 2018, while Lithuania is looking to target 1.5 percent, still a half point below NATO's stated goal for each ally.¹¹ In both cases the overall budget numbers, even at these higher percentages, are still less than \$1 billion each, limiting their individual research and development and purchasing power for military equipment. Many of these nations procure US defense material, such as Norway's purchase of the F-35 Lightning II, Finland's acquisition of the AGM-158 Joint Air-Surface Strike Missile, or Lithuania's use of the M101 Howitzer artillery system.¹² However, to maximize capabilities and justify tight procurement budgets, all governments involved must show how these systems can work together on a multinational level. Increased levels

of consultation during development and acquisition phases on all sides increases the likelihood of system interoperability and should be a driving philosophy for each nation's defense posturing.

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The integration of technology is only as good as the integration of the personnel involved. As part of NATO, the United States enjoys deep ties with the Nordic and Baltic nations. However, standardized training and across-the-board Alliance commonalities run the risk of leaving NATO partners Sweden and Finland behind. More must be done on both sides to bridge gaps in capabilities under the auspices of the NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner (EOP) Program. Codified at the NATO Wales Summit in 2014, the intent of EOP is to deepen the cooperation with key partners through staff exchanges, training events, and the like in an effort to create better interoperability between NATO and partner forces.¹³ The United States should use EOP to champion Sweden's and Finland's continued participation in exercises, such as the annual NATO naval training event known as Baltic Operations (BALTOPS), and emphasize contingency planning for the Baltics with active Swedish and Finnish input. The United States and these nations should also work toward joint personnel staff assignment and educational exchanges to maximize combined force capabilities.

Security through Soft Power. The use of soft power elements by the United States and the Nordic and Baltic

10 World Bank, "Armed forces personnel, total," accessed August 17, 2015, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.TOTL.P1>.

12 Jaroslaw Adamowski, "Latvia, Lithuania to Raise Defense Spending," Defense News, July 30, 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/europe/2015/07/29/latvia-lithuania-raise-defense-spending/30843863/>.

12 Tony Osborne, "Norway Paves the Way for F-35 Acquisition," *Aviation Week*, October 6, 2014, <http://aviationweek.com/defense/norway-paves-way-f-35-acquisition>.

13 Douglas Lute, "The Wales Summit: Strengthening NATO Partnerships," United States Mission to NATO, November 20, 2014, http://nato.usmission.gov/sp_11202014.html.



A Finnish Air Force F-18C Hornet takes off for a training flight. The Hornet, made by the US-based Boeing Corporation, is an example of close US-Finland defense cooperation through technology exchange. Photo credit: Dave_S/Flickr.

nations will also foster a secure regional environment. For the Baltics in particular, having resilient energy and economic structures in place that can withstand Russian pressure is crucial. Meanwhile, the United States can learn from and bolster the broad expertise of Nordic nations in the Arctic, from addressing environmental challenges to capitalizing on commercial opportunities.

Russia's uses its energy supplies as leverage over its neighbors and the Baltics are particularly susceptible to this tactic. The sooner Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania can diversify their energy portfolios, the less leverage Russia retains. Fortunately, each is taking steps to make this a reality. In fall 2014, Lithuania installed a liquid natural gas (LNG) terminal (appropriately named *Independence*) in the port city of Klaipėda.¹⁴ Latvia is aggressively working to become an end-user hub for the future Lithuania-Poland pipeline by 2020.¹⁵ Estonia is a leader in shale extraction technology and negotiated with Finland for LNG terminals on each side of the Gulf of Finland.¹⁶ In the short term, the United States can work through investments and research and development to provide technology and expertise to these nations as

they continue their energy diversification efforts. In the long term, the United States has an opportunity to offer a stable alternative supply of energy to the Baltics as it continues to increase its own shale-extracted supplies and become a net supplier over the next decade.

Building resilience in the Baltics also includes evaluating the broader economic condition of each nation and looking for opportunities to collaborate by strengthening institutions. One example is Latvia's banking situation. Latvia was one of Europe's hardest hit nations in the global financial crisis; from 2008 to 2010, it saw its gross domestic product (GDP) shrink by 25 percent, while its unemployment peaked at 20 percent.¹⁷ To its credit, the country aggressively executed austerity measures to arrest the downward GDP trend, but even with those steps and the resulting turnaround, Latvia still saw 115,000 of its citizens (circa 5 percent) leave the country.¹⁸ Sharing lessons learned in areas of common economic concern, such as mortgage mis-handling, and offering mentorship in subjects like avoiding a bubble economy before a full-blown crisis takes hold will allow the United States and Nordics to assist the relatively fledgling institutions of the Baltics.

14 Delfi, "Floating LNG Terminal 'Independence' Sails into Klaipėda," October 27, 2014, <http://en.delfi.lt/lithuania/energy/floating-lng-terminal-independence-sails-into-klaipeda.d?id=66226156>.

15 "PM: Alternative Gas pipeline through Poland and Lithuania Will End Latvia's Energy Dependence," *Baltic Course*, October 9, 2014, <http://www.baltic-course.com/eng/energy/?doc=97441>.

16 "Finland and Estonia to Build LNG terminals," Euractiv.com, November 18, 2014, <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/energy/finland-and-estonia-build-lng-terminals-310096>.

17 Anders Aslund and Valdis Dombrovskis, "How Latvia Came Through the Financial Crisis," Peterson International Institute for Economics, July 14, 2011, <http://www.iie.com/publications/papers/dombrovskis20110714ppt.pdf>.

18 Mark Adomanis, "Latvia Is a Success Story, If By 'Success Story' You Mean 'Disaster,'" *Forbes*, January 3, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/markadomanis/2013/01/03/latvia-is-a-success-story-if-by-success-story-you-mean-disaster/>.



A US Coast Guard crew practices search and rescue operations during exercise Arctic Shield 2015 near Oliktok Point, Alaska. As the Arctic continues to open, the US and its Nordic partners will each benefit from closer collaboration in this part of the world.

Photo credit: United States Coast Guard.

The United States stands to capitalize on the experience and demonstrated leadership of nations like Norway, Denmark, and Iceland in addressing Arctic issues. While there are concerns about the militarization of the Arctic,¹⁹ for the near term at least it remains peaceful and offers considerable opportunities for international cooperation. Trade is increasing as the ice retreats, particularly along the Northern Sea Route. Running along the top of Siberia, it cuts down the transit from the Far East to Europe by upwards of 3,000 miles and is already seeing increased shipping volume, with 53 ships transiting in 2014 compared to just two in 2009.²⁰ Indeed, by 2020, China is expecting 15 percent of its foreign trade to move along this route.²¹ With an increase in Arctic shipping comes a corresponding increase in required supporting logistics, including icebreaking capabilities, communication networks and processes, and if needed, search and rescue and environmental clean-up assets. Each nation within the Arctic Circle has intimate knowledge of the geography in its particular arc as well as spe-

cific capabilities, such as Sweden and Finland's icebreakers or the United States' research and science activities that aid in navigation. Therefore, the United States and its Nordic partners should work together to find solutions in technology and in execution of these areas. This takes on particular interest in light of the US assumption of the Arctic Council chairmanship this year. Comprising eight nations with territory inside the Arctic Circle (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States), it serves as a collaborative forum to coordinate environmental stewardship and sustainable development.²² It is imperative the United States use its two-year tenure to work closely with like-minded nations to promote an increasingly visible agenda of collaboration and consensus in this region.

Bridging the NATO Gap. Finally, in light of the recent tensions with Russia and questions of regional security, the ability of the United States to bridge the gap between Europe's primary alliance and partners Sweden and Finland is critical. Some NATO allies are skeptical of Sweden's and Finland's seemingly ever closer association with the Alliance, grumbling about them gaining many of the benefits and assuming none of the costs.²³ The

19 Read Norway Defense Minister Ine Eriksen Sjøviid's article "Security Challenges in the High North: Norwegian Perspectives" for more on the growing concerns of Arctic militarization in Hamilton, Simonyi, and Cagan eds., *Advancing U.S.-Nordic-Baltic Security Cooperation*, p. 1.

20 Jonathan Masters, "The Thawing Arctic: Risks and Opportunities," Council on Foreign Relations, December 16, 2013, <http://www.cfr.org/arctic/thawing-arctic-risks-opportunities/p32082>.

21 Ibid.

22 Arctic Council, "About Us," accessed April 7, 2011, <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/about-us/arctic-council/about-arctic-council>.

23 Magnus Nordenman, "Special Summit Series: Sweden, Finland, and

THE UNITED STATES HAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE FINLAND'S AND SWEDEN'S VOCAL CHAMPION WITHIN THE ALLIANCE, LOBBYING AT EVERY OPPORTUNITY FOR THEIR PARTICIPATION AND EXPERTISE IN NATO'S PLANS FOR THE REGION.

United States takes a more pragmatic approach, encouraging enhanced partnership and cooperation between the parties whenever possible. US advocacy for Swedish and Finnish participation in those NATO exercises more closely aligned with collective defense and deterrence demonstrates the importance of Sweden and Finland to the broader NATO effort, and how these nations in turn can gain capability from working closely with NATO.

One critical gap that must be addressed is NATO's Readiness Action Plan (RAP) and ambiguity over non-allied

NATO," *NATOSource* (blog), Atlantic Council, August 22, 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/special-summit-series-sweden-finland-and-nato>.

participation. At the Wales Summit, Alliance members agreed to execute reassurance measures for eastern allies, to include defense planning. Importantly, there were no indications Sweden and Finland will be incorporated into or even consulted on the planning process. Moreover, the exercises underpinning the RAP, including possibly future iterations of BALTOPS, could very well be limited to allies only due to concerns about access. The most reasonable scenarios for the defense of the Baltics must incorporate Finnish and Swedish participation in planning development; shortchanging these nations' perspectives and contributions will hinder the full potential of NATO and its partners in this region. The United States has an opportunity to be Finland's and Sweden's vocal champion within the Alliance, lobbying at every opportunity for their participation and expertise in NATO's plans for the region.

Conclusion

While the United States and the Nordic nations share much in values and in practical cooperative mechanisms, there is more that can be done. Priority should be given to bolstering assurance among themselves and their Baltic neighbors, enhancing capabilities through collaboration, leveraging soft power instruments, and finding mutuality between NATO and its partners. In doing so, the United States and the Nordic nations stand to solidify the gains of the thriving region and strengthen European security.

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