

BULLETIN

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Baltic Air Policing: A Mission in the Interest of the Whole Alliance

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Baltic Air Policing has been acclaimed by NATO as an example of a kind of “smart defence”. It should be interpreted as a sign of increasing support for a mission that has become an important symbol of the indivisibility of NATO security. However, not only will the host nations need to increase reimbursement of the mission costs in the near future but also they must help the Allies create new capabilities.

Since six out of 28 Member States do not possess combat aircraft and are unable to guard their own airspaces, they need to rely on NATO capabilities. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have been protected by the Alliance since their accession in 2004, with 14 countries participating in Baltic Air Policing so far. (Poland was as one of the most active countries, with four rotations). Slovenia, which joined NATO in the same year, has been protected by the Italian and Hungarian air forces. Air policing over Iceland (since 2008) has been carried out by the U.S., Canada and Norway. Albania (since 2009) has been protected by Italian and Greek planes. It is all because in the 1970s NATO realised that pooling national assets for air defence would create more effective protection for the whole Alliance territory. Since then, the integration of the radar systems, military equipment as well as command and surveillance have been advanced, with the areas where countries lacked capabilities having been filled by NATO.

Shift in Attitude about the Baltic Air Policing Mission. From the outset, the presence of the allied air forces in the Baltic States proved to be a controversial issue. In the view of some allies, the possibility of an attack on the territory of former Soviet republics was highly unlikely, and placing NATO planes there could be perceived as provocation. Those sceptical of the mission also stressed that Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are not doing enough to enhance their own security. Therefore, the mission was granted temporary status. Meanwhile, supporters of the mission argued that the three countries should specialise in the development of particular capabilities (special forces, expeditionary units, etc.). Recently, however, there has been a shift in the attitude of the Alliance to the security of the Baltic States. On 8 February 2012, the North Atlantic Council decided to extend Baltic Air Policing indefinitely, with periodical reviews, the first scheduled for 2018. During the NATO summit in Chicago in May, the Member States agreed that Baltic Air Policing exemplifies the “smart defence” concept, which involves pooling and sharing of assets and resources. On 27 June, NATO approved the previously suspended €7 million from the Security Investment Programme for the modernisation of the Siauliai airfield, a base for the Baltic Air Policing mission. According to the Lithuanian authorities, these funds will enable the completion of the development of the airbase in line with NATO standards.

Increasing the support for Baltic Air Policing is a result of a number of factors. The war between Russia and Georgia in 2008 and the Russian Zapad and Ladoga exercises in 2009, which rehearsed attacks on new NATO countries, strengthened the arguments of the Baltic States that the Alliance has to demonstrate determination and readiness to defend all its members. The New Strategic Concept approved during the NATO summit in Lisbon in 2010 reconfirmed that territorial defence remains the core task of the Alliance. Adding to that, the idea of providing countries that have no combat aircraft with military help fits nicely into the concept of “smart defence” announced by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen in 2011. Last but not least, greater support for Baltic Air

Policing was also the result of the decision by Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to increase their financial contribution to the mission from €2.2 million in 2011 to €3.5 million by 2015. Beyond that date, host nations are supposed to contribute €5 million a year, which should cover most of the expenses incurred by allies performing four month deployments at the Baltic States.

Problem of Low Defence Expenditures. The tiny Baltic States with their small budgets are among the worst military-capable members of the Alliance. They have tried to strengthen defence cooperation since the beginning of the 1990s to make the best use of their meagre resources and create added value to their security. All three countries have been debating for years whether to spend the billions of euros necessary to build up their own air force or rely on visiting NATO planes and save the money, which could then be used for building other useful Alliance capabilities. Successful examples of regional cooperation include the Baltic Naval Squadron (BALTRON) and Baltic Air Surveillance Network (BALTNET).

Notwithstanding their important contributions to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, the Baltic States have recently been perceived as security consumers, adding no extra value to the security of NATO. Estonia, with defence expenditures of 1.8% GDP, was the only one of the three countries that comes close to NATO's suggested level of spending of 2% GDP, while the military budgets of Lithuania and Latvia are 0.8% GDP and 1.2 % GDP respectively.

Cooperation in other areas crucial to the Baltic States' security is also failing. Baltic Air Policing over Estonia had to be suspended temporarily in 2011 as all three country's helicopters for search-and-rescue missions were out of service. Similar problems may soon become a reality for Latvia as its helicopters will become outdated in 2015. And also for Lithuania, which needs to have its fleet replaced by 2016.

Effective Deterrent. The air policing mission represents the only NATO military presence in the Baltic States and is perceived by Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as the most visible contribution of the Alliance to their security. Although the risk of a direct conventional attack on any of the three countries is regarded by their authorities as minimal, Russian military planes are very active in the area. The western borders of the Baltic States are contiguous to air corridors used by planes travelling between the Kaliningrad exclave and the main territory of the Russian Federation. Consequently, intrusions into the airspace of the Baltic States are not infrequent. In 1992, a few years after Lithuania regained independence, it experienced 2,500 violations of its airspace. The number dropped to a mere four intrusions in 2004 when Lithuania and the other Baltic States joined NATO. But unofficial reports state that in 2011 such cases have again become more common.

Even though the very presence of NATO does not prevent inadvertent incursions, it can discourage pilots who would like to provoke an incident. The inability to intercept "rogue" planes could suggest that Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are not full-fledged members of NATO. Consequently it could give other countries outside the Alliance additional leverage against former Soviet republics. A viable deterrent is also necessary to minimise the risk of spying missions over the territory of NATO countries. (During the Czech rotation in 2009, a Russian plane suspected of carrying out such activities was intercepted.) Baltic Air Policing also has another practical dimension. It speeds up the modernisation of infrastructure and helps to adjust it to the standards of NATO, thus making it possible for the quick deployment of NATO troops in a crisis situation.

Conclusions and Recommendations. Protection of the Baltic States' airspace by NATO allies costs significantly less than building the same capability in the three countries, which would have to buy their own combat planes (at an estimated cost of €1.5 billion). Therefore granting the status of "smart defence" to the mission and its indefinite extension is a positive development. By doing so, the Alliance has kept its security promises to Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia before their accession, which will have a beneficial influence on the general attitude towards the "smart defence" concept. The success of this idea depends largely on the willingness of the Member States to cede the responsibilities for their defence in certain areas to other countries in line with their specialisation. It is also an important message to countries such as Poland that the Alliance is determined to maintain the security in the region, thus encouraging them to implement other forms of cooperation within the "smart defence" framework. Nevertheless, long-term prospects for cooperation depend on the attitude of the Baltic States, which will have to make a proportionately larger contribution to common security. Not only will they need to keep their declarations to increase their financial contributions to the mission, but they will have to meet their NATO obligations and increase defence expenditures to 2% GDP. They will also need to make better use of available resources, which can be achieved by common procurements of crucial military equipment.