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## **Baltic Military Cooperation: Challenges for Common Response**

The recent and continuing events in Ukraine have caused heated debates in the Baltic States about the risks of experiencing a similar scenario. Each country's defence strategy relies strongly on the security guarantees provided by the Washington Treaty's Article 5. However, since the Baltic are small states, closely linked by geographical and historical factors, NATO considers that the Baltic States should develop self-defence capabilities, resulting in a commonly determined defence strategy operationalized within a cooperation framework strategically forming an integrated unity. Baltic military cooperation has been regarded as merely formal, able to develop several common military projects, but still lacking common military capabilities.

The aim of the paper is to analyze whether the ambiguously assessed Baltic military cooperation can provide any tangible common military response to the increasing threat from Russia. The paper addresses three main questions. Firstly, what have been the successes and shortcomings in Baltic military cooperation? Secondly, what has determined the development of cooperation and what has hindered it? Last of all, what are the Baltic States' common military efforts to defend themselves from potential Russian military aggression? The methodology of the paper embraces the analysis of the conducted interviews with policymakers and researchers, and existing research done on this topic.

The theoretical part of the article lines out the motives of countries to cooperate within one region. Also it identifies the main reasons why countries, especially small states, decide to become a part of an alliance. The alliance provides security guarantees and deterrence towards potential external threat and it serves as a good cooperation platform for developing and strengthening armed forces of the member states. The first part of the empirical part of the article will focus on common Baltic military projects, as they can be regarded as the practical outcomes from Baltic military cooperation. The first common grand project was the development of the Baltic Peacekeeping Battalion which was launched in 1994 and aimed to reform and develop the armed forces of the Baltic States according to Western standards. This was followed by the Baltic Naval Squadron, with the aim of developing mine countermeasure capabilities in all three countries. The Baltic Air Surveillance Network military project provided a joint radar network. After joining NATO, the Baltic Defence College (BALDEFCOL) was established, providing common military education for the officers of the Baltic States' armed forces, thus shaping a common understanding about threats and the ways of addressing them. Despite the fact that Baltic States cooperation during the 1990s and the first years after joining NATO, was regarded as one of the normative examples for military integration in the Baltic Sea region the analysis reveals that only BALDEFCOL can be regarded as successful integration project.

The second part of the empirical part of the article analyzes the efforts of Baltic States' to strengthen their defence since the Ukraine crisis which basically means implementing of tasks identified at the NATO Summit in Wales. Among these tasks are to organize numerous military exercises, host military personnel of NATO member states, establish headquarters in each Baltic

State, provide contribution into the development of Very High Readiness Joint Task Forces and others. These efforts are crucial to provide the deterrence efforts of the Alliance towards Russia.

The paper concludes that despite the obvious necessity to cooperate which is characterized by common threats, operational realities, an absence of alternative cooperation platforms, and the complementary development of armed forces, there are still problems for the Baltic States focus their national interests and overcome the concerns about their sovereignty. Although there is very good cooperation and pooling efforts at the military tactical level when it comes to the big question of how to defend the Baltic States, differing strategic views significantly hinder all constructive attempts to come up with a tangible common response. Altogether there have been identified three main factors that significantly hamper cooperation – differing defence budgets, divergent strategic views and dissent of personalities.

The only factor that still disciplines the Baltic States to keep working together is the external pressure originating from NATO officials and particular member states who urge three countries to acknowledge operational realities and overcome their individual national interests. There are expressed concerns about the closing of the window of opportunity which opened due to the Ukraine crisis, when strategic partners were willing to increase their military assistance for the Baltic States. But they came across the unpleasant observation that the Baltic States do not speak in one voice due to internal disputes, but ask for assistance on a unilateral basis. It is especially worrisome in the case of the US, where younger generations of politicians do not share the same perception of Russia as a threat, because they are more troubled by the East Asia region. Hence, the Baltic States are urged to work intensively with European partners on convincing them about the seriousness of the Baltic situation. In this regard the tasks resulting from the NATO Summit in Wales have been utmost important to show the commitment of member states towards the Baltic States and additionally consolidating their individual efforts under one roof.

Key words: the Baltic States, military cooperation, differing strategic reviews, common threat