



Issue 2

The Headlines of Today. The Battles of Tomorrow.

Est - 2016

An alliance in disarray

NATO's 28 member countries

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was created in 1949



Brexit adds uncertainty to Baltic tripwire

On 24 June the voters of the United Kingdom awoke having made a momentous choice in the country's history the previous day – a decision to leave the European Union. The result of the UK's 'Brexit' referendum has been a strategic earthquake to political elites, both in Britain and on the European mainland – who are only attempting to deal with the consequences of what may be the biggest geopolitical shift since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Europe, facing its own deep divisions thanks to stagnant economic growth, migrant crisis,

terrorism and structural challenges is now at its most divided in years – and thus ripe for further splits – whether from internal causes (other countries voting to leave) or external threats (of which we will come to later).

It is important to remember that the UK remains a firm member of NATO – and this, not the EU, is the premier Western military alliance. The fear is, however, that contagion from the fallout of Brexit as the UK and EU attempt to disengage from each other, could negatively affect other international organisations – and will be a huge distraction for policymakers and diplomats at all levels. Once 'Article 50' (the official UK 'notice to leave')

is triggered, this too, may have unknown effects. For example, should negotiations turn nasty this may see the UK sidelined or frozen out of key positions in other sectors.

If these are the diplomatic shockwaves – what are the defence consequences? While scare-stories of an 'EU Army' have been overblown and help fan the flames of the UK 'Leave' campaign, it is a truism to say that the EU has been working on expanding and deepening security and defence cooperation among nations. Initiatives such as the EU Naval Task Force off the Horn of Africa, EDA (European Defence Agency) which attempts to co-ordinate R&D and run joint training

and the Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation (OCCAR) which deals with support of in-service programmes (such as the A400M) have attempted to harmonise EU defence.

The UK's decision to leave then, robs the EU of one of its two most capable and 'can-do' militaries and creates a new vacuum in where the UK previously took a leading role. It is ironic, for example, that the HQ of the EU's Naval Force (that deals with piracy off the coast of Africa) is in Northwood in the UK.

But even before Brexit, there were increasing signs of splits in NATO itself between ex-Warsaw Pact countries now feeling Russia breathing down their neck, and those in Western Europe who see the threat as overblown, or NATO's reactions actually having the opposite effect and provoking Moscow. In May, for example, the German Foreign Minister described Exercise Saber Strike as 'disastrous' and 'sabre-rattling'. Stocks of munitions in Germany, meanwhile have fallen to two days, well below NATO's standard of 30 days – despite it being two years since Russia's Crimea intervention.

Baltic tripwire

It is no surprise then that the NATO countries most feeling the threat of a resurgent Russia are the tiny Baltic states of Estonia,

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128th Surface Brigade off the coast of Kaliningrad.

Latvia and Lithuania. After Moscow's annexation of Crimea and its undeclared 'hybrid' war in Eastern Ukraine, these states fear that they are next in line to be brought back into Mother Russia's bosom – especially as they stand between Russia and its military enclave of Kaliningrad. With Russian forces enjoying a 10-to-1 superiority in ground troops against NATO there, analysts fear a Baltic incursion could be over extremely quickly. A Rand report from February 2016 estimated that NATO would be able to resist Russian forces for 60 hours, before defeat. This, then is not a Fulda Gap-type scenario where NATO's goal is to hold the line in West Germany,

in order to buy time for Atlantic convoys of troops and supplies to tilt the balance – the geography simply does not allow for that. Meanwhile, in a recent techno-thriller, *War with Russia* by a former NATO Deputy SACEUR, General Sir Richard Shirreff, also warned that unless substantially reinforced, the Baltics could be swiftly invaded. More worryingly, his novel also exposed the kind of high-level diplomatic arguments and divisions within NATO command – even in the face of clear and present danger.

One advantage for the West may be in the air, where despite local quantitative superiority of Russian air power, NATO still has a slight edge in 4.5 generation

modern fighters such as the Eurofighter, Gripen and Rafale that have been regularly deployed to the region since 2004 as part of the ongoing Baltic Air Policing (BAP) initiative. However, it is worth remembering that although these are multi-role fighters, in the BAP role they are configured for Quantitative Risk Assessments (QRA) and air defence – rather than what could be a full-on conventional air, sea and ground assault.

The view from Moscow

Meanwhile for Russia, the current crisis in Western European capitals and the lack of a joined-up response represents an ideal opportunity to recover the Baltics into 'Greater Russia' and deliver a killer blow to permanently split NATO. The goal here would be not a general war with all of NATO, but a swift, sharp action to push NATO forces further away from Moscow's backyard. *Maskirovka* and 'hybrid' warfare, such as cyberattacks on Baltic states' Internet would sow confusion, and present a *fait accompli* to the world, as in Crimea. Once a take-over is in place, then NATO would be forced into one of two unpleasant choices, escalation (probably resulting in nuclear

war) to recover Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania or acquiescence, in which case the alliance politically is finished. Done correctly, some argue, it could be an almost bloodless victory.

The desire to reunite the tiny Baltic states into the fold is not just an aspiration from President Putin either. Some commentators in the west argue that NATO expanded too far, too fast in the aftermath of the Cold War, without taking Russia's bloody history and desire for buffer space around its borders into account. Furthermore they argue EU meddling in Ukraine, help set Russia and the west on a new collision course. The West's sponsoring of 'colour' revolutions (eg Orange in Ukraine in 2004) and its support for the Arab Spring and intervention in Syria, reinforce perceptions that destabilising President Putin is a long-term goal,

There is another factor in Russia's timeline. While its advanced S-400 SAM systems in the enclave of Kaliningrad extends a threat umbrella over the airspace of Eastern Poland, the establishment of the US Aegis Ashore Anti Ballistic Missile (ABM) facility in Poland, set to become operational in 2018 threatens to turn the tables. Though NATO describes this ABM system as purely defensive and aimed at



Eurofighter.

“ It is important to remember that the UK remains a firm member of NATO – and this, not the EU, is the premier Western military alliance. ”

intercepting missiles from rogue nations aimed at European cities, Moscow believes it is also orientated to negate its tactical and short-range missiles. In addition, like the S-400, Moscow believes the Aegis/SM-3 could also act as a formidable long-range SAM system if required, denying them their own airspace over the military region of Kaliningrad.

Another consideration in any timeline for action is that the US F-35 stealth fighter is now heading into service in greater numbers. The US Marines have already announced initial operating capability (IOC) and are set to deploy to the Pacific in 2017. The USAF declared IOC for the F-35A on 2 August, while UK F-35Bs will arrive back at RAF Marham in 2018, with 24 scheduled to be in service by 2023. These in itself do not constitute a strategic shock (the US already fields F-22 and B-2s and Russia will induct T-50s in the near future) but they do shift the balance between aerial offence

and defence. For Russia, which has invested heavily in developing and modernising its triple-digit SAM systems, the introduction of the F-35 into widespread service with the US and its allies threatens to undermine one of its key advantages – that of its highly lethal air defence. Indeed, in mid-July, the commander of USAF's Air Combat Command, Gen Hawk Carlisle was reported as saying that he would like to see the F-35 conduct some Baltic Air Policing.

There is also the factor of Russia's declining economy and diminishing financial reserves. Western sanctions put in after the invasion of Crimea and depressed oil prices are depleting cash reserves and making life harder for the everyday Russian. The clock is therefore ticking – leave it too late and Russia's ongoing military modernisation plan may stall and eventually run out of funds. A short, successful hybrid conflict to retake the Baltic States would therefore

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boost President Putin's popularity at a time when it is particularly needed.

NATO's imminent deployment of ground troops from several nations including Britain, Germany, the US and Canada raises the stakes somewhat and is seen by Moscow as a direct challenge. If Moscow is to act, the window of opportunity is closing, a surgical severing of the Baltics from NATO is much cleaner and less likely to escalate, than close quarters fighting with US troops in the streets of Riga.

Finally, while Brexit has sent shockwaves around European capitals, there are signs now that NA-TO is beginning to get its act

together and move, if not to a Cold War footing, then to prepare for a serious conflict in Eastern Europe and the Baltics. Increased numbers of US-led troop exercises such as Saber Strike, Anakonda, BALTOPS 16 (with over 6,100 maritime, ground, and air force troops from participating nations training for maritime interdiction, anti-subsurface warfare, amphibious operations, and air defence), plus deployments of F-22s, A-10s and even B-52s to Europe just this year are designed to reassure allies and send a message to Moscow that Washington is ready to up the ante too. While Russia itself is boosting troop numbers and its military exercises,



US Aegis Ashore Anti Ballistic Missile (ABM).



US F-35 stealth fighter.

NATO is now slowly waking up. Furthermore, although not by default fitted with them, the vertical launch systems (VLS) on the Aegis Ashore batteries are capable of firing conventional- and nuclear-tipped Tomahawk cruise missiles, which from Russia's point of view constitutes a grave strategic threat as well as a blatant violation of the INF treaty."

Bigger than Brexit?

However, even if the Alliance holds together for the moment, it

could face a bigger test later this year if Donald Trump becomes President in November – who promises to recast the US guarantee to NATO and return to isolationism. Speaking in an interview with the NYT in July, Trump caused alarm in European circles by appearing to throw NATO's Article V (an attack on one, is an attack on all) under a bus and say that US help to the Baltic (or other) states would depend on whether he judged they had made 'obligations' in return.



Saber Strike.

The flip side of this is if Trump (or Clinton) do pressure European NATO nations to make good on their promises and commit to the NATO goal of 2% spending – then this will take time to put in place. With a defence industry that has been progressively run down since 1991 and the end of the Cold War, it is unknown how fast industry could respond to a 1930s-style crash rearmament plan. Weapon systems today (and training of specialist troops to fly, sail or fight them) require years if not decades to spin up to full production and readiness. While Russian has undoubtedly been modernising its forces, any Baltic conflict is still likely to be a 'come-as-you-are' type affair.

Summary

In short, while NATO, not the EU, remains the premier Western military alliance to counter any aggression, Brexit is proving to be highly distracting as diplomats work to understand how the UK may extricate itself from the EU. Second, the recent

Turkish coup attempt on 15 July and that NATO country's slide into authoritarianism have also exposed fault lines among the Alliance. The pronouncements of Donald Trump, even if just rhetoric, will undoubtedly encourage hardliners in Moscow that the US no longer takes its treaty responsibilities seriously and a window of opportunity has opened up. In 1990 an ambiguous message from the US State Department to Saddam Hussein about US interests in the Gulf, help set off a chain reaction which led to the invasion of Kuwait and shockwaves that still echo around the Middle East today. Finally, and perhaps most worryingly, there is the nuclear angle. Smaller conventional forces than the Cold War days and hints from Moscow about there being no clear dividing line between a conventional and tactical nuclear conflict, raise fears that any flashpoint in the Baltics, with either the survival of NATO or Russia's entrenched President at stake, could quickly escalate out of control. The world has entered a dangerous new era.