Commentary
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How the Belarus Crisis Will Impact Baltic Security

Yauheni Preiherman

Summary

Keen to avoid an armed conflict on its own territory, Minsk still has a strong interest in preventing any further escalation of the tense standoff between Russia and NATO in the Baltic region.

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The Baltic Sea region has always been important for the preservation of peace in Europe. During the Cold War, the iron curtain dividing Europe ran through the region's western part. Then, after tensions were temporarily defused, the line of contact between the often divergent interests of Russia and the West shifted to the eastern part of the Baltic region.

This geographical shift—linked to many countries from the former Soviet bloc joining NATO—is not the only difference between the two eras, however.

> Compared with the Cold War period, the role of small states in the Baltic region has grown considerably, giving them new opportunities to influence regional affairs, sometimes defusing tensions, at other times ramping them up.

Raising the stakes

The new role of the small Baltic region states became especially noticeable after 2014, when events in Crimea and Donbas rocked the European security system. Since then, two opposing models of behavior have been in evidence, as demonstrated by Belarus on the one hand, and NATO members Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia on the other.

The NATO countries' course of action has been to increase the stakes by focusing on and often exaggerating the threat posed, in their opinion, by Russia. The theory was put forward that these countries could become Russia's next military target after Ukraine. Any action or statement by Moscow concerning foreign and defense policy was interpreted as nefarious or even downright hostile, and Russia responded in kind.

Take, for example, the reaction of the Baltic states and Poland to the joint Zapad-2017 military exercises conducted by Russia and Belarus. Official comments and leading media outlets in those countries suggested that the Russian troops taking part would either remain on Belarusian territory forever more, or would use the war games as a cover for a full-scale invasion of the Baltics or Ukraine.

These fears turned out to be unfounded, and the Russian troops returned home as planned. But the experience left a bitter taste on both sides, and added to tension in the region.

Poland and the Baltic countries chose this approach for both emotional and rational reasons. On an emotional level, the historical narrative of an aggressive Russia that inflicted pain and deprivation on their parents and grandparents forces people in these countries to look at modern Russian policy through the prism of the past.

> The rational aspect of this approach is that by sustaining regional tension, the leaders of these countries count on getting an additional guarantee of their security in the form of increasing military aid and the physical presence on their soil of NATO troops.

And indeed, following their 2014 and 2016 summits, NATO members decided to deploy four multinational armed contingents to Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia on a rotating basis to act as a deterrent against Russia in the region.

Minsk, on the other hand, opted to go in a different direction back in 2014. As an ally of Russia both within the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Union State, it took its responsibilities seriously. The Belarusian authorities and society saw an increase

in military and political tensions in the region not as an advantage, but as a risk, and so chose the approach of trying to reduce those tensions. Minsk called on the other Baltic region nations to join it in this approach.

The Belarusian attempt

Minsk's logic also has both an emotional and rational foundation. Deeply engrained in Belarusian society is the historical memory of the destruction and enormous loss of life caused by war in the region. Then there is the rational understanding that a further growth in tension between Russia and the West will inevitably turn Belarusian territory into a frontline restricted area, which will only add to the country's security problems and lead to new restrictions on economic cooperation with the EU.

In an attempt to defuse tension in the region, Belarus has tried to be very open on security matters, inviting observers from NATO and most of the Baltic region countries to the Belarusian part of the Zapad-2017 exercises. When the United States withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, the Belarusian leadership announced it was prepared to continue to abide by the treaty, and called on other countries in the region to introduce a moratorium on the production and deployment of corresponding missiles.

Minsk's biggest-scale and most ambitious initiative is Helsinki 2: a plan for a broad dialogue on issues of international security amid derailed strategic stability. These initiatives have elicited interest in Berlin, Paris, and Washington, which would love to see the electrified region as less of a headache.

After the Belarus political crisis

The crisis that has developed in Belarus following the contested August presidential election has complicated the state of affairs in the Baltic region even further. Poland and —in particular—Lithuania have become the European vanguard in the fight against Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. His regime, meanwhile, has accused Vilnius and Warsaw (and with them, all of the EU and NATO) of being behind the protests that have rocked the country since the vote. Several weeks after the election, Lukashenko said he had moved half of the Belarusian army to the border with Poland and Lithuania due to the "increased concentration of NATO troops" on the country's western borders.

Clearly, there can be no talk of increased trust or security on Minsk's part in these conditions, and it looks like a line will soon be drawn under Belarus's initiatives to increase transparency and minimize military risks. In this respect, the Belarusian crisis has undoubtedly significantly worsened security in the Baltic region.

Strategically speaking, however, little has been lost.

> Minsk still has an interest in, at the very least, preventing any further escalation of tension in the region, since if the geopolitical confrontation leads to an armed conflict, it's highly likely to involve Belarusian territory. Ideally, it would still like to find a stable model for regional security that could offset the tense standoff between Russia and NATO.

Russia and the West would also like to avoid an armed conflict in the Baltic region, though they have shown little real readiness to stop the buildup of their confrontation or the militarization of the region.

Of course, there are always unpleasant surprises in international relations, even when they are in nobody's interests. Either by mistake, or through lack of communications, missiles get fired, planes are shot down, and other military incidents occur. Their consequences are unpredictable, so the main task for the Baltic region as a whole is to avoid such surprises, and not to cross the point of no return and prompt the uncontrolled escalation of the confrontation.

As the situation in Belarus stabilizes—as violence decreases and the spiral of Western sanctions and countersanctions by Minsk comes to an end—it's important to return to Belarusian initiatives aimed at reducing tension in the region. One example could be finding an opportunity to apply existing bilateral agreements between Minsk and its neighbors on additional confidence-building and security measures in the interests of the Baltic Sea region as a whole.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations