

Russia, the Baltic Region, and the Challenge for NATO

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The August 2008 Russia-Georgia war sparked great unease in the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and in Poland about the willingness of the United States and other key members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to defend them against Russian military pressure or even a possible attack, unlikely though that might seem.

One of the consequences of this apprehension was an effort by NATO military planners in December 2009 and January 2010 to expand the alliance's Eagle Guardian "defense plan," which initially applied only to Poland, and have it cover the whole "Baltic region." Senior U.S. and German officials tried to keep the revised contingency planning secret, but some details began leaking out in early 2010, and then the posting of huge collections of secret documents on the Wikileaks website in 2010 and 2011 left little doubt about what was going on.¹ Neither the United States nor especially Germany had initially wanted to produce contingency plans to defend the Baltic states, for fear that such an effort would damage relations with Russia if it became publicly known. But persistent pressure by the Baltic governments spurred U.S. and German officials to agree to a compromise whereby the already existing Eagle Guardian plan for Poland would be expanded, an approach that was not especially welcome in Warsaw. Polish officials were, however, willing to embrace the expanded contingency plan, provided that Poland was treated separately in it and that U.S.-Polish bilateral military cooperation would increase.

¹ In 2010 and 2011 the Wikileaks website posted more than 750,000 classified U.S. State Department and Defense documents. My policy memo draws on some of the documents posted there, but I do so with reservations. Even though I have long believed that the U.S. government classifies and over-classifies far too many documents and that the declassification process is often dysfunctional, I am dismayed by a venture like Wikileaks, which systematically disregards proper legal channels for declassification and arrogates to itself the task of deciding what information should be available. One of the results of every Wikileaks disclosure is that the United States and other governments become more secretive and less willing to share information—precisely the opposite of the result that Wikileaks claims to be promoting. Having said all that, I face the reality that hundreds of thousands of documents posted on Wikileaks in 2010 are readily available to anyone using a non-U.S. government computer. These documents have not been officially declassified, but it is difficult for researchers simply to ignore them. Scholars certainly did not ignore the Pentagon Papers during the forty years from the time they were released until they were officially declassified in 2011.

One of the risks is the intensification of a security dilemma in which the steps taken by large NATO states to protect the security of smaller allies are seen as threatening by the Russian authorities, who then take military steps to counter NATO preparations, which in turn could lead to even greater efforts by NATO. The initial cycles of the security dilemma, as shown below, have already been apparent. The different interests and outlooks of the NATO states involved in Baltic defense gave Russia possible avenues for trying to play the parties against each other and thereby undercut the military planning, but instead the Russian authorities responded in ways that hardened, rather than weakened, NATO's resolve. At a time when xenophobic anti-Westernism has pervaded Russia's political discourse and Russian political leaders have been playing up supposedly "threatening" actions by NATO, the security dilemma may heighten the risk of a crisis or confrontation.

Initial Arrangements

Poland became a member of NATO in 1999, and the three Baltic states were brought into the alliance in 2004. Because Poland is a relatively large country and has a relatively strong army, and because it does not border on the main part of Russia, NATO governments led by the United States subsequently agreed to devise Eagle Guardian contingency plans for the reinforcement and defense of Poland against an unspecified enemy. That draft contingency plan was slated to be updated and revised (as all such plans are as they are being drafted) in the wake of the August 2008 war. Eagle Guardian is explicitly *not* directed against any specific adversary, but few observers doubt that the main contingency for which NATO military planners must be ready in the case of Poland is an incursion by Russian forces into Polish territory.

The status of the three Baltic states, from the time they were admitted into the alliance, has always been different from that of Poland. Given the tiny size of these three states and their geographic proximity to Russia, the Russian army could rapidly occupy them if Russian political leaders ordered it to do so. Before the NATO governments decided in November 2002 to invite the Baltic states to join the alliance, some analysts had questioned whether NATO would really be willing to protect its new Baltic allies against a possible military threat from Russia. To avoid inflaming the situation with Russia after the Baltic states were admitted, NATO deliberately excluded the three of them from allied contingency defense plans. Because the Baltic states were entitled to full protection under Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty (the "common defense" provision), the initial eschewal of contingency planning for them was abnormal, and the Baltic governments were never happy about it. Nonetheless, they had little reason to press the matter so long as the threat from Russia appeared purely hypothetical.

Impact of the August 2008 War

In the wake of Russia's August 2008 war with Georgia, unease in Warsaw and all three Baltic capitals about potential threats from Russia over the longer term became palpable. Even though Polish and Baltic leaders at the time did not seriously expect that Russia would contemplate an armed attack against their states in the immediate future, they

worried that the grim fate of Georgia in August 2008 might befall them too if they failed to take steps to prevent it. The implied parallel was, of course, inexact at best. Georgia was (and is) not a member of NATO and has never been granted even a Membership Action Plan (MAP), which is a prerequisite for any new member state. At the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, allied governments had discussed the possibility of extending a MAP to Georgia and Ukraine—a proposal championed by the United States—but French and German opposition to the idea (stemming mainly from their concerns about Russia’s reactions) prevented the necessary consensus. As a result, when the war with Russia began four months later, Georgia formally was just the same as any other non-member of NATO and lacked any guarantees of protection against attack. (One could argue that if NATO *had* granted a MAP to Georgia in April 2008, U.S. and West European officials might have had much greater influence in August 2008 when they urged President Mikheil Saakashvili to avoid giving any pretext to Russia for an armed conflict. In part because Georgia had no MAP, Saakashvili disregarded the NATO countries’ advice and responded to Moscow’s provocations with a clampdown in South Ossetia, affording a pretext to Russia to embark on a large-scale military incursion into Georgian territory.)

Although no one should have been surprised that NATO did not intervene on behalf of Georgia in August 2008, the televised images of Russian forces overrunning Georgian positions and pushing rapidly toward Tbilisi came as a jolt to many of the newer members of NATO, above all the Baltic states and Poland. After all, the Western alliance had been establishing increasingly close ties with Georgia over the previous four years. Even though Georgia did not receive a MAP in April 2008, NATO governments did unanimously approve a declaration at the Bucharest summit welcoming “Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO” and pledging that Georgia and Ukraine “will become members of NATO.”² This declaration amounted to nothing in formal terms, but informally it fostered a perception that Georgia had developed a special relationship with NATO that would soon be culminating in formal membership.

Thus, the stark outcome in August 2008, with Georgia left to Russia’s mercy, was bound to spark deep anxiety among smaller NATO governments that had long had uneasy relations with Russia. On August 15, 2008, right after the Russia-Georgia war ended and with Russian forces still occupying large swaths of Georgian territory, the U.S. embassy in Latvia reported to Washington that “events in Georgia have dominated the news and discussion here like few other events in recent memory.” The fighting had caused Latvian officials to “look at Georgia and think this could easily be them.” The embassy stressed that “key figures” in the Latvian government were expressing doubts about whether “the West is fully prepared to deal with a resurgent Russia,” and they worried that Baltic membership in NATO might not “provide them the assurances of their security that they had hoped for.” On a visit to Washington soon thereafter,

² “Bucharest Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008,” Point 23.

Latvian Foreign Minister Maris Riekstins emphasized the urgency of dealing with the “new threat” posed by Russia, especially because Russian armed forces had been conducting exercises along the borders with Latvia and Estonia, a reminder of the exercises that preceded Russia’s invasion of Georgia.

In mid-October 2008, senior officials from the Lithuanian Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs transmitted a series of papers to the U.S. mission at NATO headquarters specifying the sorts of concrete guarantees Lithuania and the other Baltic states were hoping to receive in light of what had happened in Georgia. The papers called for the permanent deployment of U.S. combat forces on all three countries’ territory, the reinforcement of air defense and anti-tank systems, expanded sea defenses, and the staging of bilateral military exercises with U.S. troops each year on the territory of the Baltic states. Lithuanian officials also called for NATO military planners to draft contingency plans for the fulfillment of Article V obligations vis-à-vis the Baltic states, adding to the plans already in place for other NATO members.

Neither the German nor the U.S. government was initially ready to proceed with the last of these proposals. Barack Obama’s incoming administration wanted a consensus within NATO before taking any action on the matter, but U.S. officials found that “Germany continues to regard proposed NATO contingency planning to defend the Balts against possible Russian aggression as counterproductive and unnecessary.” Germany’s reluctance to do anything that might erode NATO ties with Russia was shared by many in the Obama administration, which had come to office proclaiming a “reset” of relations with Russia.

Nonetheless, both Poland and the Baltic states continued to express deep misgivings about Russian intentions. In April 2009, the Polish prime minister’s chief of staff informed the U.S. embassy that the Polish parliament had “expressed unanimous support for a large U.S. military footprint in Poland to bolster Article 5 guarantees.” He left no doubt that, from Warsaw’s perspective, “Russia, not Iran, poses the greater threat to Poland.” Subsequently, when a group of U.S. senators met with a senior Polish national security official, Witold Waszczykowski, he warned them that “Moscow is trying to regain its sphere of influence.” Waszczykowski “stressed the critical importance of an increased U.S. or NATO presence for Poland’s security” and voiced dismay that U.S. leaders apparently did not share his view of the urgency of the threat: “How long will it take for you to realize that nothing will change . . . with Russia?” When the senators asked him “whether Warsaw felt assured that NATO would honor its Article 5 commitments to Poland,” he replied: “we still have our doubts.” He told the senators “that some European members—particularly France—prefer talk to action,” and he added, “that’s why we bought F-16s and not French Mirages, and why we went through with the Missile Defense deal” with the United States.

In subsequent communications with the U.S. government in 2009, Polish officials repeatedly affirmed that “Poland ‘wants U.S. boots on the ground’—not necessarily as a tripwire, but as a deterrent.” The national security adviser to the Polish president, Sławomir Nowak, similarly “stressed Poland’s strong interest in ‘deepening’ military cooperation, ideally to include a large U.S. footprint in Poland.” The Polish

government's concerns about Russia and its desire to host countervailing U.S. military deployments expedited the redrafting of NATO's Eagle Guardian plan in the wake of the August 2008 war.

All three Baltic governments also continued to express grave concerns about the long-term threat posed by Russia. They highlighted the provocative nature of Russia's "Zapad 2009" military exercises, which involved large-scale attacks by Russian forces against the Baltic countries' territory and nuclear strikes against Poland. In October 2009, Estonian officials urged NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen to support contingency planning for the Baltic states, akin to the arrangement in place for Poland. In conversations with U.S. officials in the fall of 2009, Baltic leaders raised this same issue over and over.

Contingency Planning for the Baltic Region

The vigorous efforts by Poland and the Baltic states to gain closer military ties with NATO, especially with the United States, came to a head in October 2009, when the U.S. ambassador to NATO, Ivo Daalder, recommended endorsement of a German proposal to expand the Eagle Guardian plan to encompass the whole Baltic region. Daalder pointed out that "leaders in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are pressing hard for NATO Article 5 contingency planning for the Baltic states," and he noted that President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had already spoken in support of the idea. But Daalder conceded that such a move would entail a potential tradeoff: "The Baltic states clearly believe that the Russian Federation represents a future security risk and desire a contingency plan to address that risk. And therein lies the problem. . . . [P]ost-Cold War NATO has consistently said that it no longer views Russia as a threat." Daalder emphasized that German officials were particularly wary of anything that might detract from NATO's efforts "to work cooperatively with Moscow."

To get around this problem, Daalder urged acceptance of Germany's suggested expansion of Eagle Guardian. The proposal was unanimously approved at a NATO meeting in mid-December 2009. When Daalder and his German counterpart met with the Polish and Baltic delegations to discuss the new initiative, they claimed it was just "a routine adjustment to ongoing contingency planning," and they emphasized that everything about the Eagle Guardian expansion "should remain in restricted NATO circles and was not for public consumption." Polish and Baltic officials readily agreed (as they had earlier) not to discuss the matter in public, but they voiced some reservations about the move itself. The Baltic governments indicated they "were grateful for this initiative," and the Estonian ambassador to NATO described it as "an early Christmas gift," but all three Baltic ambassadors "stressed the need to ensure this would be a real plan to defend their countries rather than a simple appendage to the Poland contingency plan." Polish officials' concerns were the opposite: namely, they worried that contingency plans for Poland would be delayed and might be diluted by the inclusion of the Baltic states in the same document.

The differing concerns of the four governments were allayed by U.S. assurances that the planning for Poland would not be delayed and would be in a separate chapter

of its own, and that the contingency plans for the three Baltic states would not be purely “cosmetic” and would deal with “realistic scenarios.” On this basis, the expansion of Eagle Guardian began in early January 2010 and was formally approved by NATO’s Military Council on January 22, 2010. The new plan designated a minimum of nine NATO divisions—from the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and Poland—for combat operations to repulse an attack against Poland or the Baltic states. Throughout the drafting, U.S. and German officials firmly stressed that “such planning should not be discussed publicly. These military plans are classified at the NATO SECRET level.” Subsequently, after sketchy information about the revised document began leaking to the press in the first half of 2010, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton advised U.S. diplomatic posts to evade questions from journalists by simply informing them that “NATO does not discuss specific plans.”

The goal of “complete secrecy” for the planning process was attenuated by the initial leaks and was then undermined altogether in late 2010 when Wikileaks released a large number of relevant State Department documents. Soon thereafter, leading Western newspapers reported on all the secret deliberations pertaining to the revised Eagle Guardian plan. The public disclosure of the Eagle Guardian materials evoked a harsh reaction in Moscow, where officials claimed to be “bewildered” and “dismayed” that NATO, after issuing countless “proclamations of friendship,” would be treating Russia as “the same old enemy in the Cold War.” The Russian ambassador to NATO at the time, Dmitri Rogozin, denounced the alliance for engaging in “warmongering,” “odious discrimination,” and “flagrant hypocrisy.”

Benefits and Risks

The expansion of the Eagle Guardian plan helped to alleviate the Baltic governments’ anxiety about military threats from Russia, and in this sense it may have given the three states greater confidence about improving ties with Russia. The revised planning was less successful in addressing Polish leaders’ concerns because it was not accompanied by a sharp increase in U.S.-Polish bilateral military cooperation and U.S. troop deployments on Polish soil. These shortfalls resulted in a net deterioration of U.S.-Polish ties.

The disclosure of NATO’s deliberations and planning documents at an early stage in the Obama administration tarnished the administration’s much-ballyhooed “reset” of relations and eroded NATO’s credibility in its dealings with Russia, including its repeated statements insisting that “NATO does not view Russia as a threat.” Perhaps if Dmitri Medvedev had stayed on as Russian president, the damage from the disclosures would have abated relatively quickly and would not have hindered closer ties via the NATO-Russia Council. But with the return of Vladimir Putin and the Russian government’s growing invocation of flamboyant anti-Westernism, the adverse impact of the disclosures will not dissipate anytime soon.

Among other things, the Russian army since 2010 has stepped up its military exercises simulating attacks against the Baltic states and Poland. The Zapad 2013 exercises that are due to be held later this year will apparently be similar to Zapad 2009 and Zapad 2011, including preventive nuclear strikes against Poland. NATO can offset

such posturing by responding with its own Steadfast Jazz exercises of rapid-response forces, but Russia's shift toward belligerence and military competition is bound to take its toll.

All of this raises the question of what would happen in the unlikely event that Russia did attack the Baltic states. Presumably, the United States and other NATO member states would feel compelled to uphold Article V by embarking on military action to defend the Baltic states, as envisaged in the Eagle Guardian plan. In so doing they would in effect be going to war against Russia. At worst, such a step would risk escalation to a nuclear exchange; at best, it would require the NATO countries to fight in a region in which they would be at a severe geographic disadvantage. On the other hand, if the United States and its allies decided not to fulfill Article V in the Baltic region and to refrain from intervening against Russian forces, this would gravely damage the credibility of all of NATO's defense commitments. Why would any country want to belong to an alliance that refused to protect its members against external aggression?

The drafting of the expanded Eagle Guardian plan was a valuable and necessary process for NATO, but the public disclosure of it entailed significant costs. The dilemma that would face the alliance if the "unthinkable" were to happen in the Baltic region might be easier to manage now that contingency plans are in place to offer a range of options, which can be tested in command-staff and live exercises. In the end, however, the choices NATO governments will have to make will be onerous no matter how good the plans are. If proposals to integrate Russia fully into the West had made greater headway in the 1990s, the military dimension of NATO's ties with Russia might have steadily decreased. Instead, military aspects nowadays are more salient than ever. Under Putin the prospects of a NATO rapprochement with Russia are largely nonexistent, lending an even sharper edge to military jockeying in the Baltic region and elsewhere.

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