

CSS | ISSUE BRIEF

BALTIC AIR POLICING

New Trends and Operations

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INTRODUCTION

Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which lays down the principle of Collective Defence, says that an attack on any NATO member country would be considered as an attack on all NATO members.¹ This ensures the security of all member states from foreign aggression. To that end, NATO runs Air Policing missions in multiple strategic areas, with contributions from other member countries as well, to ensure the safety of that airspace and rendering any required assistance.² One of these missions is NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission, which commenced in 2004 when the three Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia joined NATO. Since these countries did not have the ability to properly guard their own airspace, NATO member countries with Air Policing capabilities voluntarily contribute assets to the mission. Responsibility for handling this mission is rotated between the volunteer nations every four months.

THE SITUATION

The three Baltic Nations, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia are all former Soviet Republics. Russia considers the former soviet republics as being part of Russia's sphere of influence and has not hesitated from intervening in the affairs of countries in the region, most notably with its intervention in Georgia and in Ukraine. Naturally, these 3 new democracies feel threatened by an increasingly assertive and expansionist Russia. To counter Russia, these Baltic states, along with a lot of the Eastern European countries that formed the erstwhile Warsaw Pact, have

¹ "Collective Defence - Article 5," NATO, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm.

² "NATO Air Policing: Securing NATO Airspace," NATO. 2021.

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132685.htm.

sought closer relations with the West, hoping to be admitted into the European Union and NATO. The small size of these 3 states makes them an easy target for Russian aggression, which is compounded by their proximity to both Russia and Belarus, a close Russian ally. Thus, they need to have large forces to try and counter the Russians. However, given the rather size of these countries and their economies, these armies are rather small and can only afford to equip their army as light infantry. These countries have almost negligible navies, with only minesweepers and a few patrol boats, and with almost no air force, save very few transport helicopters and trainer aircraft, with no air defence fighters.

Russia understands that trying to provoke a conventional conflict with the Baltic countries might end up in provoking a war with NATO. Even though Russian forces outnumber the NATO forces in the Baltics, and would probably win early victories, it might not be able to defeat the reinforcements that NATO members are bound to send. This is something the Russians want to avoid, and thus they are increasingly reliant on non-conventional means to try and cause trouble to the Baltic countries. Like with Ukraine, Russia aims to influence the sizeable Russian minorities in these regions to try and stoke the flames of instability. Russia has also resorted to methods such as cyber-attacks, most infamous of which, was the 2007 cyberattack on Estonia.³ Russia does also violate the airspace of the Baltic countries in a show of force. Other methods to try and intimidate the Baltic states include conducting exercises close to the borders of these countries. This mix of unconventional methods mixed with use of traditional shows of force has been referred to as Hybrid-Warfare, which is something that Russia has pioneered.

Estonia was one of the first countries to argue that Russia was following a revisionist policy and had already started acting to counter it. Estonia is one of only 5 NATO members to allot 2% of the nation's GDP for defence, and the only Baltic country to do so. Yet, its small economy means that it cannot effectively defend itself against the Russian threat and depends on NATO to secure its borders. Thus, Estonian policymakers focus on improving their relations with the West to improve their security situation. However, they are also focusing on expanding

³ Stephen J Flanagan et al., "Deterring Russian Aggression in the Baltic States through Resilience and Resistance," *RAND Corporation*, April 15 2019, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2779.html.

their own capabilities by buying some old CV-90s and Leopards to bolster their forces. They have also decided to set up Russian language news channels to help counter Russian propaganda.⁴

Latvia, with a population of only two million, and with a sizeable Russian minority, is a perfect target for Russia. Still, the Latvian government did not focus too much on security, devoting only 0.9 % of its GDP for defence as of 2014 before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This invasion galvanised the Latvian government into preparing countermeasures to Russia. However, these plans will take long, and Latvia depends on NATO for its security. One aspect they have focused on is developing assets that could participate in the NATO deployment in Afghanistan. Thus, it aims to show that it is contributing to the alliance and hopes to get more NATO support.⁵ As with Estonia, Latvia has also decided to set up Russian language channels to counter Moscow's propaganda.

Lithuania, which shares a border with the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, was one of the most outspoken NATO members when it came to denouncing Russia's actions against Ukraine. This is because, Lithuania itself feels extremely threatened by Russia's attitude. Despite being larger than both Latvia and Estonia, it is still a middle-income country with very limited military means. The Russian invasion of Crimea galvanised Lithuania into significantly increasing its defence spending under a five-year-plan. However, Lithuania still needs NATO support to ensure its sovereignty is not infringed upon by Russia. Luckily, Lithuania's Russian minority is too little to cause them any issue. Another reason for this is because Lithuania has allowed all residents of the country to be citizens and allows Russians to speak and study their own language in schools, thus making them better integrated and with almost no resentment or feelings of discrimination.⁶

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⁴ Chivvis et al., "NATO'S Northeastern Flank: Emerging Opportunities for Engagement," *RAND Corporation*, 2017. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1400/RR1467/RAND_RR1467.pdf

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Given their relatively modest economies and lack of an air force, NATO extended the courtesy of air policing capabilities to the Baltic countries. It officially began exactly a day after these three nations joined NATO. NATO members take turns deploying to the Baltic region, on four-month rotations, with the Air Forces of the host nations providing the infrastructure and support staff. All aircraft were originally based at Siauliai Air Base in Lithuania. However, the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 resulted in NATO guaranteeing to devote further resources to the defence of the Baltic Nations. Part of this was the stationing of another contingent at the newly made Amari Air Force Base in Estonia, thus effectively doubling the size of the Air Policing force stationed in the Baltics. These forces are coordinated by NATO's Combined Air Operations Centre, located at Uedem in Germany.⁷

The primary task of this contingent is to ensure the security and integrity of the airspace of these three countries. Russian aircraft, especially military aircraft flying from Kaliningrad to the Russian mainland, account for many violations of NATO airspace. The aircraft stationed in these areas are placed on what is called as a Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) and are expected to get airborne in 10 minutes. Working in coordination with Ground based Radars, and with air operations centres, these ground radars detect any approaching Russian aircraft. These QRA are meant to intercept Russian aircraft, who usually fly without using transponders or filing flight plans. The NATO aircraft, upon interception, aim at getting visual confirmation on these aircraft, and then escort them away while ensuring that their intentions are not hostile.

The following is the interception procedure followed by NATO's Air Policing missions, whenever they detect an unidentified aircraft⁸:

1. Detection: Radar Picks up movement of all the aircraft within and near NATO airspace. The following types of aircraft are then reported to the Combined Air Operations Centre in Uedem;
 - Aircraft that are not using their transponders
 - Aircraft that are not in radio contact with civilian Air traffic controls
 - Aircraft that have not filed a flight plan

⁷ "Baltic Air Policing," NATO, <https://ac.nato.int/missions/air-policing/baltics>.

⁸ "How does Air policing work," NATO, <https://ac.nato.int/missions/air-policing>

2. **Decision:** The commander of the Combined Air Operations Centre decides whether any Quick Reaction Alert Aircraft need to be sent to intercept the unidentified aircraft or not. It is also analysed as to which aircraft are in the most suitable position to intercept the aforementioned aircraft.
3. **Launch:** The selected aircraft at NATO airbases are scrambled to intercept the incoming aircraft. NATO aircraft placed on the Quick Reaction Alert are expected to be airborne within 10 minutes. Upon take-off, these aircraft are guided by ground Radar units towards the direction of the aircraft they are to intercept.
4. **Interception:** The interceptor aircraft approach the unidentified aircraft from astern (behind). The lead interceptor manoeuvres and takes a position on the port (left) side of the unidentified aircraft, slightly above and ahead of the unidentified aircraft. The interceptor aircraft will also match the speed and heading of the intercepted aircraft, and at night-time may flash its navigational lights.
5. **Identification:** Interceptor Pilots are to fly their aircraft in accordance with the rules laid down by the International Civil Aviation Organisation. While there aren't any official restrictions on where the intercepting aircraft should be, it is generally agreed that they should maintain a safe distance, and not fly closer than required to establish visual contact with the captain of the intercepted aircraft.
6. **Escort:** If such a situation arises that requires the intercepted aircraft to be escorted, the interceptors can either direct the aircraft to land at a nearby airfield, or escort them out of NATO airspace. In case it is a proven hijacking situation, then NATO relinquishes control over the interceptor aircraft, and hands authority over those aircraft to the government of whichever nation's airspace the hijacked aircraft is in. The national government can use those aircraft however it sees fit, in order to resolve the situation.
7. **Return:** Once the situation has been resolved, the interceptor aircraft break away from the intercepted aircraft by going into a shallow dive and a hard turn.
8. **Report:** The Combined Air Operations Centre monitors the entire intercept throughout the duration of the intercept, and then sends reports about the same to Headquarters Allied Air Command at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany, where all the information regarding intercepts is registered.

However, this isn't the sole duty of the contingents stationed in the Baltic states as part of the Baltic air policing mission. Another very important aspect of the force stationed in the Baltics

is that they run continuous exercises along with the air forces of these nations, and as such pass on valuable knowledge to them and help in training them up to NATO standards, This is also invaluable for these countries, who may plan to build up their Air Forces, and will, as a result of the expertise gained from NATO exercises, have a solid base of expertise to build it up on.

CRITICISM & OBSTACLES

The Baltic region is viewed as the most vulnerable flank of NATO due to its extreme proximity to Russia as well as the fact that the countries of the region are small and do not have substantial security capability to be able to effectively counter Russia in the region. Thus, it has been argued that NATO needs to really ramp up its involvement in the region if it wants to effectively counter Russia.⁹ One major aspect which needs attention is the Baltic Air Policing mission. As of now, this is only an air policing mission, which several scholars have argued, is not enough to protect the airspace of the Baltic countries, and by extension presents a weak spot in NATO's air defences. They advocate for the Air Policing mission in the Baltics to be further upgraded to an Air Defence mission, placing all the three Baltic countries as a single entity for Air Defence purposes.

Russia also has significant Anti-Access/Area denial (A2AD) Capabilities in the Baltic region, in the form of S400 Batteries in the vicinity of Kaliningrad and St Petersburg, the range of which covers a significant portion of the airspace of the Baltic countries. Moreover, the current NATO deployment of 8 fighters in 2 airbases is no match for the 27 fighter-bomber squadrons and the 6 battalions of attack helicopters that the Western Military District of Russia has at its disposal.¹⁰ To effectively combat this, the Baltic countries need to focus on acquiring new sensors, radars, training its ground crews to operate these new systems, invest in new communications technologies, invest in more Medium Range Air Defence Systems, and supplement its existing Air Defence stocks. However, all this will be expensive, and NATO

⁹ Harper, Christopher "Baltic Air Defence: Addressing a Critical Military Capability Gap," *International Centre for Defence and Security*, June 15, 2018. <https://icds.ee/en/baltic-air-defence-addressing-a-critical-military-capability-gap/>

¹⁰ Harper, Christopher et al., "Air Defence of the Baltic States," *International Centre for Defence and Security*, May 2018. https://icds.ee/wpcontent/uploads/2018/06/ICDS_Report_Air_Defence_Christopher_Harper_Tony_Lawrence_Sven_Sakkov_May_2018.pdf

would have to help them acquire these technologies, along with helping them be integrated with NATO's command and control structure and air defence network.

RECENT TRENDS

Russia, in recent times, has been extremely aggressive towards not just the three Baltic countries, but also against Finland and Sweden, who also share a Baltic coast but are not NATO members. The best example of this was the Russian air force practicing bombing Stockholm¹¹. Thus, NATO accounts for these two countries being vital in any Baltic Scenario. NATO established a program called as "The Partnership for Peace." This was aimed at improving relations and cooperation between former Soviet Bloc nations, and other European Nations who were not a part of NATO, including Sweden and Finland. 2021 saw a major milestone in NATO relations with Sweden and Finland when both these Partnership for Peace Nations decided to join NATO in the exercise Ramstein Alloy 21-1¹², a training exercise conducted by Baltic Air Policing members. Thus, they are both unofficially tied to the Baltic Air Policing mission. There has also been a rather large increase in military spending by all 3 Baltic countries, who have resolved to improve their capabilities to be better able to contribute to both NATO efforts, and their own security.

CONCLUSION

The NATO Air Policing Mission, in pure military terms, is nowhere near guaranteeing the security of the Baltic States, with the balance of power being overwhelmingly in favour of Russia's Western Military Command. However, it is more of a political tool for now than a military one, as it shows the willpower of NATO to defend its members. The rotational basis of members assuming responsibility is an attempt to get NATO directly involved should Russia try to attack these countries, and by extension it would mean fighting against NATO itself. However, now both NATO and the Baltic States have started taking measures that will ensure

¹¹ "NATO Secretary General's Annual Report," NATO, 2015.

https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_01/20160128_SG_AnnualReport_2015_en.pdf

¹² Jennings, Gareth, "Partnership for Peace Nations join NATO for Baltic Air Policing Training," *JANES*, 20 April 2021 <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/partnership-for-peace-nations-join-nato-for-baltic-air-policing-training>

that the NATO Air Policing mission isn't just a political deterrent, and that one day it might prove its military worth as well.