

SECURITY INSIGHTS

Baltic and Central European Security After the Ukraine Crisis

By Matthew Rhodes and Ruta Buneviciute



Introduction

The Seimas (parliament) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania and the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies co-organized an international conference on “Baltic and Central European Security” in Vilnius, Lithuania 19-20 November 2014. Over sixty officials and scholars from the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Sweden, and the United States analyzed the impact of the Ukraine crisis and renewed tension with Russia on regional and Euroatlantic security.

This paper draws freely on discussions at the Vilnius conference in an attempt to capture and extend their major points. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has profoundly challenged international order. The Euroatlantic community retains a significant edge in both present power and future prospects relative to Russia, but it will need to remain united in implementing agreed policy responses as well as develop effective means of countering Russian hybrid warfare. While Germany and the United States must continue to offer leadership in these tasks, geography gives Baltic, Central European, and Nordic countries a particular stake and role in their achievement.

Russia’s Challenge

With bitter irony, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the annus mirabilis of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe turned into an annus horribilis. Russia followed seizure of Ukraine’s Crimean peninsula in February-March with increasingly “implausibly deniable” involvement in separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine. By year’s end, nearly five thousand people had been killed and more than a million had fled from their homes. Cold War-style military probes, jeremiads against the West, and hints of attacks elsewhere accompanied these moves.

Russia’s acts shattered the perception that state-based territorial threats no longer menace Europe. President Putin and other leaders justified their moves with expansive claims over a distinctive “Russian world” of territories historically part of the Czarist or Soviet empires, particularly those with sizeable Russian or Russian-speaking populations. Romanticized nationalist themes also increasingly substitute for slipping performance legitimacy for these officials’ internal governance against the rule of law and other liberal values these officials view as decadent and weak.

Deepening concerns, Russia’s modus operandi has exemplified a concept of hybrid, non-linear, or “new generation” warfare. As described in a February 2013 article by Russian Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov as well as in the December 2014 military doctrine, this flows from a perception of permanent conflict with multiple, mutually reinforcing components or phases, of which only the higher end are explicitly military in nature. Earlier stages focus on penetration of a target society through such means as non-transparent business ties, appeals to pan-Slavic sentiment, and fanning of Russian minority grievances. This can progress toward espionage and infiltration of state structures, including political posts and security forces as in Ukraine. A recent variant has lent financial and other support to anti-EU extremist parties in Europe.

Comprehensive information operations accompany such efforts. Slickly packaged propaganda celebrates President Vladimir Putin as a heroic leader standing against duplicitous foreign powers and their agents in the Russian opposition. Complementary efforts exaggerate Western countries’ internal flaws and counter critical views of Russia in external media with floods of online comments. Russian sources depict Ukraine’s change of government in early 2014 as a

Western-sponsored fascist coup and alternately deny Russia's subsequent involvement or justify it on grounds of self-determination and humanitarian assistance.

Finally, rising investment in military modernization has included improved training and equipment for special forces, such as the "little green men" in unmarked uniforms deployed inside Ukraine. More technological examples have extended to cyber attacks, brandishing of Russia's nuclear arsenal, and research into "twenty-first century" biological, ecological, and radiological weapons. Together these tactics seek to generate sufficient confusion and resignation to neuter opposition to Russian goals. Parallel aims are division of the West and discrediting of democracy as "feckless pluralism."

Euroatlantic Response ("Five Ds")

Despite partial precedents such as Russia's 2008 war with Georgia and President Putin's speech to the 2007 Munich Security Conference, NATO and the European Union were caught unprepared by Russia's moves against Ukraine. Different threat perceptions and economic interests left initial responses uncertain and reactive. Nevertheless, over the course of the year, the Euroatlantic community took notable steps across five areas.

First have been efforts at ***de-escalation***. Approaches have included direct discussions between individual heads of state or government and Russian President Putin; meetings of EU, Russian, Ukrainian, and American foreign ministers in Geneva in the spring; a trilateral "Contact Group" of representatives from Russia, Ukraine, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, who were also joined by eastern Ukrainian separatists for cease-fire negotiations in Minsk in the fall; and four-party "Normandy format" meetings talks among officials from France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine. All these fora have sought diplomatic "off-ramps" from at least the most acute phases of the crisis.

Second has been ***de-legitimation*** of Russian aggression. Although Russia's veto has blocked measures by the United Nations Security Council, in late March a General Assembly resolution condemned the annexation of Crimea. During the same period, the United States State Department issued two top-ten style lists of Russia's "false claims about Ukraine." Western leaders boycotted a planned G-8 summit in Sochi in June, reverting to a G-7 format session in Brussels instead. NATO officials also shared satellite images and other data on movements of Russian troops and materiel along and across the border with Ukraine; this included the role of a Russian-supplied Buk missile in the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight 17 over eastern Ukraine in July.

Third has been ***defense***, though only in a limited sense for Ukraine itself. Military assistance to that country has thus far entailed only non-lethal items (field rations, binoculars, body armor, cold-weather gear, etc.) as well as limited intelligence sharing, training, and defense reform advice. Calls for delivery of weapons such as Javelin anti-tank missiles have been resisted on grounds that these would fuel the Russian narrative of Western meddling without decisively shifting the balance of forces on the ground.

Greater measures have reinforced collective defense within NATO. As part of efforts to reassure newer Allies in particular, in March the United States doubled the number of jets in the Alliance's air policing mission in the Baltic states (a level others have since doubled again), deployed an F-15 squadron to Poland, and initiated AWACs air surveillance flights over Poland and Romania. Though short of the permanent basing of two brigades called for by Poland in April, the Americans and others also increased rotational training exercises to maintain "persistent presence" of NATO troops along the Alliance's eastern flank. NATO's Wales summit in September adopted a Readiness Action Plan for upgraded reception facilities and a quickly deployable, brigade-size "spearhead" force as well as a renewed pledge by Allies to lift defense spending toward two percent of GDP. NATO also concluded host nation support agreements for enhanced cooperation with Finland and Sweden.

Fourth has been ***denial*** of strategic victory to Russia. The swift control of Crimea and display of revived military prowess further boosted Putin's popular support. Showing these to be "champagne effect" tactical gains with greater costs than benefits is meant to bring pressure for reversals and deter further aggression by Russia or other revisionist powers.

Most notable in this regard have been coordinated sanctions adopted by the European Union, United States, and others. Successive rounds have frozen assets and barred travel for dozens of officials and business figures, restricted investment and trade in energy and defense, and constrained Russian access to international finance.

Fifth has been support for the political and economic ***development*** of Ukraine. This is arguably both the most important and most difficult line of effort, as pervasive corruption and state weakness made Ukraine particularly vulnerable to Russian hybrid warfare in the first place. International assistance to Ukraine has thus targeted both immediate needs and longer-term reforms, conditioning aid for the former on progress toward the latter. An early centerpiece was a \$17 billion loan package from the International Money Fund in April. The European Union separately approved another €11 billion in loans and grants,

concluded the Association Agreement with Ukraine that Russia had sought to stop, and launched a rule of law advisory mission for civilian security sector reform. The United States extended a \$1 billion loan guarantee as well as other financial and technical assistance. These partners also supported the conduct of Ukraine's presidential election in May that was won by Petro Poroshenko and parliamentary elections in September that returned a coalition government headed by Arseniy Yatsenyuk.

The Way Ahead

At the start of 2015, the Ukraine crisis remains unresolved. The combination of preexisting weaknesses, the halving of the global price of oil, and the sanctions regime is pushing the Russian economy toward recession and potential financial crisis. Nonetheless, diplomacy appears stalled, and fighting continues to flare in eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian leaders face at least a further \$15 billion of debt and have managed only halting steps toward internal reform. The situation thus continues to challenge the West's capacity to respond.

The essential starting point from here for the Euroatlantic community is unity and solidarity in implementation of measures already agreed. This includes maintenance of sanctions until Russia clearly steps away from confrontation. This will be tested beginning in March as successive restrictions come up for annual renewal within the EU. It also means expeditious progress in operationalizing NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (and other aspects of the Readiness Action Plan) by the next summit in Warsaw in mid-2016 as well as on actually raising Allied defense spending. Similar follow-through must be shown on delivery of pledged assistance to Ukraine and rejection of diplomatic deals at its expense or without its involvement.

A related imperative is strengthened capacities against hybrid warfare. Whole of government efforts to boost domestic detection and resilience should include specialized training and equipment for civil security agencies. Meanwhile, though Russian propaganda outlets such as RT television need not be blocked, greater effort should be given to engaging presentation of truthful counter-narrative, including over the internet inside Russia. Decreased dependence on Russian energy and closer scrutiny of Russian business in the West would also lessen the risk of these becoming sources of leverage or disinformation. Finally, the West should play to its advantage of good governance, the best inoculation against hybrid-style pressure, by promoting shared recovery from the 2008 financial crisis, upholding liberal values, and concluding shared projects such as the European Energy Union and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership.

In the meantime, NATO and EU members must consider further steps in case current measures do not stop Russia (which, unfortunately, appears the case now) as well as further steps if they do (which could become so later). This will include difficult decisions regarding further financial and military aid for Ukraine, longer-term force structure in NATO's East (arguably consistent with the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act's expression of intent not to do so under "the current and foreseeable security environment"), and heightened sanctions such as cutting Russian access to the SWIFT international financial system. All will involve balancing the value of Euroatlantic unity (a center of gravity for Russia) against the risk of drift toward lowest common denominators. Space can also be left for discrete cooperation and potentially different future relations with Russia.

Leadership from, and the working relationship between, Germany and the United States will remain critical across these issues. Under a de facto division of labor, America has provided the bulk of vision and resources for military reassurance within NATO. Though both should be more broadly shared over time, given the psychological importance of visible Allied presence, the U.S. should work to develop a long-term basis for its regional deployments, which might include reevaluation of recent force structure decisions. Over the medium term, it could also respond to calls to authorize liquid natural gas exports to Europe as part of efforts to diversify Allies' energy mix.

Meanwhile, Germany has played the central role in both diplomatic engagement and EU sanctions toward Russia. This reflects Germany's increased strategic weight on the continent as well as the ability of Chancellor Merkel and President Putin to speak each other's native language. Given these roles, German leaders should resist lingering pressure for premature appeasement of Russia while raising their investment in Allied defense commensurate with recent acknowledgments of increased responsibility for international security such as Minister of Defense von der Leyen's concept of "leading from the center."

The Euroatlantic response is not, however, simply a matter for great powers. Direct exposure as well as deep connections to Russia and Ukraine give the countries of Central and Northern Europe a particular role to play. Given different priorities to their west and south, serious engagement by these states will be needed to maintain community focus on the evolving Russian challenge.

Several specific types of action would be constructive in this regard. First, regional states can share their insights on Russian behavior within the EU and NATO. Their opportunity to do so is now enhanced by the fact that the Secretary General of NATO is

Norwegian and the President of the European Council is a Pole. Second, with several countries spending one percent or less of GDP for defense, they can practice solidarity by raising defense budgets toward NATO's two percent goal. This might bring modest gains to Alliance military capabilities but would add moral credibility to pleas for further support from others. Third, regional leaders should avoid "politically schizophrenic" statements that echo Russia's narrative even as their substantive policies (mostly) support Euroatlantic lines.

Finally, these states can strengthen their regional cooperation. For example, the Visegrad Four might build on military collaboration for their 2016 EU Battlegroup to offset strains of divergent political stances toward the present crisis. Scandinavian countries could further involve the Baltic states in Nordic Defense Cooperation, even if they are not ready to include those countries as full members or to rely on that framework for collective defense. Poland and Lithuania can ensure contentious minority and historical property issues do not preclude closer Polish-Baltic coordination in areas from intelligence sharing to support for Ukraine. All these types of measures would simultaneously strengthen the region's international standing and counter divide-and-rule tactics by Russia.

Conclusion

The immediate shocks of the Ukraine crisis in 2014 are yielding to an extended period of challenges from Russia to Euroatlantic security. The EU and NATO have moved beyond their initial confusion but will continue to be tested in providing effective responses for their members and partners. While other fora exist, conferences such as that in Vilnius will remain important opportunities for building mutual understanding and networks among security professionals in the most affected countries who will be tasked with working through the issues described in this paper.

About the Authors

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