

REGIONAL SECURITY



NATO POLICIES IN THE BALTICS: OBJECTIVES AND PRIORITIES

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The authors employ geopolitical analysis to identify the core characteristics of NATO's current policy towards the Baltic Sea region. After the demise of the Soviet Union, the region was considered as one of the safest in terms of military security. However, in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, the region has witnessed a growing tension in relations between NATO and the Russian Federation. A comparative analysis of NATO's official documents on the Baltics shows that the chief pretext for increased military presence in the region is the alleged need to defend the Baltic states from the Russian threat. Special attention is paid to the attempts of Western military strategists to encourage the neutral Nordic states — Sweden and Finland — to accede to NATO. This would lead to the organisation's northern enlargement. The current situation suggests that to ease tension in the Baltic Sea region Russia has not only to respond adequately to emerging military threats but also to launch an awareness campaign to explain its position and dispel the myth about Russia preparing to start a hybrid war against the Baltic States.

Keywords: NATO, Baltic Sea, political strategy, military tension, Russia, Baltic states

Introduction

In November 2016, President Vladimir Putin approved a new version of the “Foreign Policy Concept

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of the Russian Federation” [1]. Only three years have passed since the approval of the previous Concept but this short period was so full of serious changes in world politics that the necessity of its updating became evident.

The Ukrainian crisis after Euromaidan, the introduction of anti-Russia sanctions and countersanctions, growing activity of the “Islamic State” in the Middle East had a serious impact on the foreign policy of our country. That is why alongside with the reconfirmation of the principles and approaches declared in the 2013 Concept the new edition contains a number of changes.

Thus, in the 2016 Concept we see new aspects concerning the relations with the West. Paragraph 61 criticizes the containment policy adopted by the NATO and EU member-states against Russia; their policy runs counter to the growing need for cooperation and addresses transnational challenges and threats in today’s world [1, c. 51]. Special attention in this connection is paid to the necessity for Russia to “build its relations with NATO taking into account the degree to which the Alliance is ready to engage in equitable partnership, strictly adhere to the norms and principles of international law, take real steps towards a common space of peace, security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region based on the principles of mutual trust, transparency and predictability, to ensure the compliance by all its members with the commitment undertaken within the Russia — NATO Council to refrain from seeking to ensure one’s security at the expense of the security of other States, as well as with military restraint obligations as per the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between the Russian Federation and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization of May 27, 1997” [1, c. 27—28]. Therefore the Russian Federation maintains “its negative perspective towards NATO’s expansion, the Alliance’s military infrastructure approaching Russian borders, and its growing military activity in regions neighbouring Russia, viewing them as a violation of the principle of equal and indivisible security and leading to the deepening of old dividing lines in Europe and to the emergence of new ones” [1, c. 28].

In order to withstand such tendencies it is very important to identify the reasons for and consequences of the visible growth of confrontation between NATO and the Russian Federation in the Baltic Sea region. Though this question has been raised already by such specialists as N. Mezhevich [2; 3], Yu. Zverev [3], K. Khudoley [4], A. Nosovich [5; 6], S. Zalevsky [7], V. Volovoj, I. Batorshina [8], V. Konyshev, A. Sergunin, S. Subbotin [9] and others, the results of our research are not only relevant but are quite new as they are based on the latest NATO documents, officials speeches, works of analysts and experts from the North Atlantic Alliance that for the most part had not been scrutinized by Russian political scientists. It gives us an opportunity to reveal the real objectives and intentions of the NATO strategists regarding the Baltics in today’s confrontation with Russia.

The Baltic Sea Region in the North Atlantic Alliance Strategy — a Change of Priorities

There is no doubt that the Baltic Sea is of special geopolitical significance for both Russia and a number of European countries — NATO member states and those that keep their neutral status. On one hand, the military forces of the NATO Alliance and those of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) contact here directly. On the other hand, the importance of the Baltics regarding global economy, trade development and the direct access to the World Ocean is beyond any doubt.

NATO in the context of the geopolitical evaluation of the regional situation should be understood in two ways. Firstly, as a political and military multilateral actor, and secondly, as a framework for cooperation used by the United States for strengthening its position in this part of the global geopolitical space. For a certain period of time the NATO, strategy did not focus on the Baltic Sea region as a priority area of potential military conflicts. The Baltic Sea region used to appear on the agenda only when some incidents occurred: for example, NATO analysts mention in this respect the cyber-attack on Estonia in 2007, which they attributed to Russia [10]. But after Crimea's reunification with Russia the situation has changed drastically as the Baltic states are now considered by the NATO (especially, Americans) strategists as the next target for Russia's 'aggression' on the post-Soviet territory. From this point of view, there is a direct link between NATO and the USA role in global politics. Jan Hanska, a Finnish defense specialist, argues that, even if the Baltic Sea region has never been a high-priority area in US geostrategy, the superstructure of NATO ties the US to its stability to such a large degree that, should the US fail to protect its allies in the area, the whole credibility of its foreign policy and strategy would collapse. Even if the Baltic Sea region is not of direct importance to the US, it cannot afford to stand on the sidelines" [11, c. 15].

During the Cold War, the American policy toward the Baltic Sea region was built on containment of the USSR by strengthening allies and exerting pressure on neutral countries such as Sweden and Finland. This was done both openly and behind the scenes. In the President Ronald Reagan era, the focus was not on the Baltic region *per se*, but rather on the countries along the borders of the Eastern Bloc. After the fall of the Berlin wall and the withdrawal of Russian troops from Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia in 1993—1994, the USA was eager to increase its influence, but not actual presence, in the region. Instead, the NATO framework was

used. The Partnership for Peace (PfP) program was introduced as a first step towards membership in the Alliance. After the Baltic States joined NATO in 2004 and the war on terrorism intensified in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Baltic Sea region was considered one of the most peaceful places of the world and the American interest in its military presence here reduced. The NATO exercise *Steadfast Jazz* in autumn 2013, which was to signal strategic reassurance to the Baltic States and Poland and shed light on the new NATO Response Force (NRF), only attracted an American participation with 160 people (compared to France 1,200 and Poland 1,040) [12]. It was a sign not only of USA reduced defense budget, but also of its assessment of low tensions in the Baltic region.

Now, as we have already mentioned, the Baltic Sea begins to play a central role in the strategic confrontation between Russia and the West, so we have to look at the USA and NATO strategy in this region.

The Baltic States Security as a Declared Aim for the NATO Growing Presence in the Region

During the last years of Barak Obama's presidency it became obvious that the United States wanted to strengthen its presence in the Baltic under the pretext of the need to protect the Baltic countries from Russia. An analysis of numerous materials prepared by both American military experts and pro-American leaders in Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and a number of Nordic countries seems to be convincing enough to testify to this [13—19]. Let us try to analyze the most typical and important positions from the point of view of security that are reflected in them.

The main concern is the fact that from the military point of view, the Baltic States — Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — are isolated from other NATO members. It could be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to respond to an incident in the Baltic Sea region without the acquiescence of non-NATO countries. That is why the main task is to make Finland and Sweden a part of the NATO, and to make the ruling elites of these countries change their neutral status.

The Nordic countries play an important role in guaranteeing the security of the Baltic States. They have close relationship based on their cultural and historical commonality. Denmark and Norway have done a lot to develop Baltic military capabilities since the collapse of the USSR, and Sweden and Finland, although not members of NATO have a close security relationship with them. At the same time, much concern is expressed about the dependence on non-NATO Sweden and Finland, which being important allies for the USA and loyal partners of NATO are not

obligated to come to the assistance of any NATO member in the event of an armed attack. The USA should be prepared for such a situation. In connection with this, the case of Afghanistan — a landlocked Central Asian country several thousand miles away from the continental United States — is worth mentioning. The USA intervention had a questionable, and at times wavering support from neighbouring countries and from countries having poor regional infrastructure. However, it did not prevent Americans from conducting full-scaled military operations there. The conclusion is that with the right planning and preparation the USA and NATO could do the same in the Baltics, even with Russia's Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) strategy in the region and even without Sweden or Finland's support (though it will be not easy).

Historical examples that prove the necessity for military operations to have an access to Swedish and Finnish airspace, sea, and land are used as additional arguments. For example, during the Crimean War (1853—1856) and the Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War (1918—1920), the Swedish fortress of Viapori (known today as Suomenlinna in Finland) and the Åland Islands played a crucial role. During both World Wars, the Skagerrak and Øresund Straits — both of which border Swedish waters and serve as a gateway to the Baltic Sea—were highly contested. During the Cold War, Denmark's Bornholm Island was an area of contention between the Soviet Union and NATO. In the 21st century these considerations have not disappeared.

The Danish Straits consist of three channels — Øresund, the Great Belt and the Little Belt — connecting the Baltic Sea to the North Sea via the Kattegat and Skagerrak Seas. These straits serve the Baltic Sea countries as import and export routes. They are especially important for Russia, which has increasingly shipped its crude oil exports to Europe through them [20, c. 225]. Overall, approximately 125,000 ships per year transit these straits. The conclusion is made that if the USA needed to intervene militarily in the Baltic States, access to the Danish Straits would be vital. According to American strategists, it would be naïve in the extreme to think that Russia did not factor the importance of these three islands and the Danish Straits into their Baltic Sea contingency planning. It would be just as irresponsible for the U. S. not to do the same [21].

Another extremely important matter in the military confrontation in the Baltics is the Kaliningrad Oblast. American specialists have the following vision of the situation: Kaliningrad is a small Russian exclave along the Baltic Sea (slightly larger than Connecticut), bordering both Lithuania and Poland. Kaliningrad is part of Russia's Western Military District, and approximately 25,000 Russian soldiers and security personnel are stationed there. It is home to Russia's Baltic Navy, which consists of around 50 vessels, including submarines. However, the most important fact is that Kaliningrad is the heart of Russia's A2/AD strategy [21].



Russia has the advanced S400 air defense system in Kaliningrad. In October 2016, it deployed Iskander-M missiles there. The Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov explained that it was Russia's reaction to NATO creating an "entire anti-Russian missile system" in Europe [22]. NATO strategists are mainly worried that these missiles can carry nuclear or conventional warheads and have a range of 250 miles, placing Riga, Vilnius, and Warsaw within their reach. Besides, Russia has facilities for storage of tactical nuclear weapons in the Kaliningrad region. Whether nuclear weapons are presently there is a matter of much debate. Western Russia is modernizing runways at its Chernyakhovsk and Donskoye air bases in Kaliningrad that can be used to fly near NATO airspace. It is Russian planes flying from or to the airbases in Kaliningrad that are blamed for causing aerial incidents with NATO planes.

American specialists have no doubts that Russia's A2/AD coverage over the Baltic Region, coupled with Finland and Sweden's reluctance to join NATO, makes defending the Baltic States a highly difficult task. That is why they propose a number of measures that could help the USA to fulfill their NATO obligations concerning Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania [21].

Firstly, to make all possible steps in order to improve relations with the Nordic countries. Automatically it will lead to developing cooperation with the Baltic States that are under strong influence of the North European states

Secondly, to encourage Finland and Sweden to join NATO. The very wording of this task is worth citing: "Ultimately, the Swedish and Finnish populations will decide whether to join NATO, but the U. S. should pursue a policy that encourages NATO membership for these two Nordic countries. Until they join NATO, they will not benefit from the Alliance's security guarantee".

Thirdly, to prepare contingency operations to defend the Baltics that do not include support from Finland and Sweden. The U. S. should plan and rehearse defense of the Baltic States without these two countries. "However unlikely this might be, until Finland and Sweden become full members of NATO, it would be irresponsible for U. S. military strategists not to plan this scenario". This training should include scenarios in which Russian forces capture the Åland Islands and Gotland.

Fourthly, to prepare for a fast military reinforcement of Europe. During the Cold War, the USA could move conventional military forces rapidly from the United States to Germany in the event of a war with the Soviet Union. The USA should consider holding a similar exercise focused on defending the Baltic States.

It is also necessary to pay special attention to the so-called "Kaliningrad Factor". The USA needs to work with its NATO allies to develop a strategy dealing with the Russian A2/AD capabilities in Kaliningrad. In

particular, this requires close cooperation and planning with Poland. “No credible defense of the Baltics can be carried out without neutralizing the threat from Kaliningrad”.

And finally, “Moscow should not interpret Sweden and Finland’s non-NATO status as a green light to intervene in the Baltic States because NATO cannot come to their defense. Conversely, until they decide to become full-fledged members of NATO, Stockholm and Helsinki should not expect the Alliance to come automatically to their assistance if they are attacked by Russia, and NATO members should not give that impression. NATO needs to plan for all eventualities in the Baltics—otherwise Russia will take advantage of the situation”.

Hybrid Wars in the Baltics — a Myth or Reality?

A number of western experts think that in case of a conflict between Russia and the Baltic States there are high chances for the involvement of the Russian-speaking minorities in it that will give Russia an opportunity to use the idea of their rights protection for justifying military intervention. The former NATO adviser on security matters, retired Major General Frank van Kappen, a member of the upper house of the Parliament of the Netherlands, presupposes that activities in the spirit of a modern ‘hybrid war’ could be the following ones [23]: “Putin in any case is not going to enter the Baltic States in a tank, because then he would openly declare war on NATO. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty states that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all member countries. Instead, we can see the same scenario that has been observed so far. One can, for example, escalate the situation in the Estonian town of Narva, where many Russians live. Another hybrid war, contacts with local organizations, and then Narva declares independence. Estonia reacts harshly. Russia declares its duty to protect Narva’s Russian speaking population from neo-Nazis. If Russia attacked Estonia, then everything would be simple. It would be a war against NATO, and he would lose it. I am absolutely sure. The price of war is millions of lives. However, nobody wants a war. If Putin resorts to a hybrid war, then NATO will not resort to Article 5. Simply a new People’s Republic of Narva will be proclaimed. Narva will ask to join Russia. Is it a reason for applying Article 5? And if not, then all NATO members from Eastern Europe will exclaim: NATO is worth nothing. In this sense, Putin will score NATO a goal”.

Estonian experts from the International Centre for Defense and Security Kalev Stoicescu and Henrik Praks [15], analyzing the same scenario, think that Russia would make a decision, depending on NATO and EU’s reaction, and the degree of resilience of the attacked countries. In the worst case, such a conflict would evolve into a full- scale war.



At the same time, in their opinion, the Kremlin attempts to follow any Donbas-like scenario (no matter what they consider it to be) in the Baltic States would have notable limitations and deficiencies. First, the Kremlin has not achieved its desired results in Ukraine with these tactics. Second, the North Atlantic Alliance and its “Eastern Flank” have carefully studied Russia’s “hybrid warfare” and Ukraine’s counter actions, which would help if necessary to respond swiftly and adequately. In addition, in this case Russia would compromise its primary advantage — rapidly gaining the initiative and upper hand by exploiting the elements of surprise and time. The first days would be crucial, and if Russia hesitated to intervene militarily, the Allies would likely have time to respond and take control of the situation. More than that, without unambiguous Russian military support, the “separatists” would have little chance to control sections of Russia’s borders with the Baltic States, which would be vital for their success. However, Russian military support would lead inevitably to open conflict with NATO.

Another scenario widely discussed in NATO is a Russian military incursion following a sudden incident (i. e. a provocation). Western military specialists accuse the Russian armed forces (especially airborne troops, army aviation etc.) of constant preparation for such scenarios by training for example the takeover of “unknown airfields” just behind the eastern borders of Latvia and Estonia, e. g. military exercises in the Pskov Oblast taken place from 15 to 20 February 2016 with the participation of 2,500 troops.

Such a sudden “incursion” would undoubtedly surprise the attacked nation and NATO, and might be exploited by Russia to demonstrate the Alliance’s vulnerability and inability to defend its entire territory, and to provoke political divisions in the Western camp. Nevertheless, such an overt aggression would automatically be seen as an act of war against NATO (Article 5), which would lead to a political, economic and military response.

The third scenario, described by NATO strategists, is based on the idea that Russia will try to separate the Baltic states from the rest of the territory controlled by NATO and then will occupy them. In this context they mention large-scale military exercises “Zapad”, involving the Western MD and other forces, and “Union Shield” together with Belarus), as well as massive no-notice combat control exercises (e. g. in December 2014 and March 2015). According to the western military specialists, Russia has attacked Georgia in August 2008 and Ukraine closely following such scenarios. This would be a far bigger political blow to NATO and the EU that — if successful — would also allow Russia uncontested strategic military advantage in the Baltic Sea area, and could possibly “solve” the question of the Kaliningrad exclave. The Kremlin would have no problem finding a pretext, especially if US/NATO-Russian relations become critical elsewhere (e. g. in Syria).

NATO experts are forced to recognize the fact that Russia has proved its ability to impose effectively A2/AD in the maritime environment and the airspace surrounding the Baltic States. The conclusion is that a Russian invasion through Belorussian territory towards the Kaliningrad Oblast through the 100 km wide Suwałki Gap (Polish and Lithuanian territory), coupled with operations against Estonia and Latvia from the Leningrad and Pskov Oblasts could follow the air and maritime blockade if NATO did not react in a timely and forceful manner, and did not have a proper forward presence in place.

The main conclusion is the following one: while any of the scenarios described above may occur, NATO's military planners must be aware that Russia — even if it does not wish a large-scale war with NATO — would not miss a opportunity to benefit from NATO's political differences and sub-regional weakness in the Baltic Sea area.

Donald Trump and the “Baltic Problem”

The main question today is whether there have been any changes in the NATO Baltic Sea strategy since President Trump and his team came to power in the USA. Donald Trump statements during his electoral campaign regarding NATO and particularly the Baltic States caused panic among political elites of this region. They were worried by his answer to the question about his commitment to defending NATO allies if an enemy attacks them. He said that he would first look at their contribution to the alliance [24]. Moreover, the situation in this sphere was not as favourable as the American administration would like it to be: Estonia met its defense commitment spending a little bit more than 2% of GDP, the basic minimum on defense, the situation with Latvia and Lithuania was much worse. The governments of these two countries had given a promise to the previous USA administration during the Baltic Forum held in Riga in August 2016 and attended by Vice-President Joseph Biden to increase defense spending [25]. These promises were given in the situation when the Baltic allies of the USA expected a considerable financial help from Washington.

As it was stressed after the meeting in Riga, "each of the Baltic allies has received more than \$ 30 million" within the framework of the American programme for supporting the European Allies for NATO. Only in 2016, each of the three countries received more than \$ 9 million [25]. Now it will not be easy for the Baltic countries, especially for Latvia, given their economic situation, to increase their contribution to NATO. At the same time, it should be noted that other countries of the North Atlantic Alliance do not all share calls for increasing military



spending. Thus, the German Minister for Foreign Affairs Sigmar Gabriel during his visit to Estonia in March 2017 reminded about the lessons of the World War II, stressing the fact that the increase in military spending would inevitably cause concerns among neighbouring countries. Earlier, in February European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said in his speech on the sidelines of the international Munich Security Conference that Europe must not cave in to U.S demands to raise military spending, arguing that development and humanitarian aid could also count as security [6].

Despite the change of power in the White House, it is difficult to imagine that the new American administration will someday reject the idea of NATO expansion in the Baltic Sea region, or the idea of making Finland and Sweden join the Alliance. No wonder that during the visit of the Defense Secretary Jim Mattis to Finland in March 2017, the ‘Russian aggression’ was habitually discussed, but the main attention was paid to the military contribution of Finland to the counter-ISIS fight [27]. In any case, we are sure that the key role will be played not by the United States but by public opinion and political elites of the Nordic countries. Sweden may make some practical steps in NATO direction only after the 2018 parliamentary elections if the Moderates and their potential right-wing allies win. The current centre-left government does not think it necessary for the country to become a NATO member. Peter Hultqvist, the defense minister reiterated his opposition to joining NATO, despite recognizing a rising threat from Russia. “Whatever happens, the countries around the Baltic Sea need to keep together. However, the solution for us is not a NATO membership. We have our geographic position and our own history, as does Finland”. Mr. Hultqvist said Sweden was increasing its military capabilities and boosting its relationships with two other Baltic countries, Poland and Germany [28].

At the same time Donald Trump's unpredictability is used as a new argument by NATO supporters who are trying to prove to the Swedish society that under the new US administration the bilateral defense agreement signed by Sweden and Finland with the Barack Obama administration can be inadequate [29]. The main argument is that cooperation with 28 states, and not one (even if it is as powerful as the USA), can be more effective.

The Finnish government is against seeking a NATO membership at the moment but keeps this option in mind. Alex Stubb, the former Finnish prime minister, wrote recently in the Financial Times that he was concerned Mr Trump could do a deal with President Vladimir Putin of Russia to stop NATO enlargement. “This would leave a security political vacuum in northern Europe, especially Finland and Sweden . . . [whose] ‘NATO option’ would be made null and void,” he added [30].

We should not think that "President Trump will leave the Baltic States as they are" [5]. Firstly, the defense cooperation agreements signed in January 2017 by the previous US administration with Lithuania and Estonia, which formalize the deployment of new military units in these countries and the status of American servicemen is still in effect [31]. Secondly, since the beginning of 2017, in the framework of the so-called strengthening of the "Eastern Flank" of the Alliance, the forces and assets of the US 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team and the battalion tactical groups of the bloc member countries arrived in Poland and the Baltic States, which together with the national armed forces continued to improve the Baltic bridgehead [32].

No matter what Donald Trump's personal opinion is, he has to take into account the system of military-political relations that has already developed in the United States and in the world, the geopolitical interests of America and their interpretation by the country's power elites, the nature and degree of influence of the military-industrial complex on the political decision-making process in Washington. In this respect, it seems appropriate to quote an abstract from President Dwight D. Eisenhower's "Farewell Address" delivered 17 January 1961: "In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together" [33]. We are sure that it is the interests of the military-industrial complex that are behind the escalation of tension in Russian-American relations. And it is extremely difficult to resist them. Hence, we can assume that even if there is some softening of bellicose rhetoric, the strengthening of pragmatism in US foreign policy, the Baltic region will unfortunately remain the arena of confrontation between NATO and Russia.

At the same time, certain shifts in the US policy will inevitably influence the position of the NATO leaders, since it is this country that plays a system-building role in this military-political organization. Thus, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg during his official visit to Denmark in March 2017 had to confess: "NATO sees the concern about terrorism and cyber attacks, but we don't see any imminent threat against any NATO ally, including the Baltic States" [34].

It is also necessary to take into account the fact that, as American defense expert Samuel Gardiner points out, the security of the Baltic States is not included in the top 10 most important topics for the new US admin-



istration [5]. Obviously, for President Donald Trump, problems related to the Middle East and North Korea seem much more important, which, however, does not mean a loss of interest in the Baltic region, which is a zone of direct contact between NATO and Russia. Hence, one can conclude with some confidence that the situation in the Baltics directly depends on the general context of the relationship in the framework of the US-Europe-Russia triangle. Meanwhile we have to agree with the opinion of the President of the Russian Association of Baltic Studies N. M. Mezhevich that "the geopolitical configuration in the Baltic region acquires an increasingly pronounced character 'all against Russia' or 'Russia against all'. It does not answer the interests neither of the European Union, nor of Russia, and in an atmosphere of mutual distrust and suspicion creates the potential threat of escalating misjudgments into a direct military confrontation with unpredictable consequences" [2].

Conclusion

The analysis of the NATO experts and generals' views on the security problems in the Baltic Sea region allows us to draw a number of conclusions.

Firstly, there is an obvious trend toward a direct confrontation with Russia. As an excuse, the situation in Ukraine and the problem of Crimea are used. However, if there were not a Ukrainian crisis, the situation in the Baltic would worsen anyway. The very logic of the development of relations between Russia and NATO in recent years is a quite convincing evidence of this.

Secondly, the main goal is to involve neutral states — Sweden and Finland — in the orbit of the Alliance's activities. Thus, the expansion of NATO to the East is complemented by the desire to expand it to the North, which certainly worries Russia and, first of all, its bordering regions with Finland — the Leningrad Oblast and the Republic of Karelia. If these two countries join NATO it will not only increase tension in the region, but also inevitably lead to significant additional defense spending by the RF. At the same time there is a polarization of public opinion in Finland and Sweden, a growing split in the society over the issue of NATO membership and relations with Russia.

Thirdly, the hysteria over Russia's aggressive intentions in the Baltic region is also used for solving financial problems. It is quite natural that the USA seeks to pass part of the military spending on its NATO allies, who, without seeing a direct military threat to themselves, are reluctant to take steps that are unpopular among voters. At the NATO summit in

Wales in 2014, it was agreed that each of the member countries would allocate at least 2% of their budget for defense. However, this agreement has not yet been implemented by all [35, c. 50].

Fourthly, pointing out on the internal vulnerability of the Baltic States that have a significant percentage of the Russian-speaking population, NATO strategists practically do not even raise the issue of the ethnopolitical tension causes, do not call for the development and implementation of programs for their integration into the society, which would increase the level of loyalty of Russian-speaking communities to the countries of their permanent residence, thereby leaving no opportunity for Russia to win them over.

Fifthly, the focus of NATO and, above all, the United States on strengthening its presence in the Baltic Sea region (in the broad sense of this concept) threatens the ties that have developed as a result of many years of cooperation between the Baltic countries, including Russia. The emphasis on the military component clearly draws lines of division between NATO member states (Denmark, Poland, Germany, the Baltic countries and Norway), neutral states (Sweden, Finland), and the CSTO allies (Russia and Belarus).

Sixthly, assessing the NATO overall strategy as a military-political bloc, it is necessary to take into account the existing differences among members of this organization in understanding the situation and their readiness to follow Washington policy. And here we are talking not only about the traditional opposition of the 'old' and 'new' Europe, typical of the political process within the EU, but also about a more complex configuration based on the attitude towards Russia and its individual political decisions.

The increasing tension in the Baltic Sea region causes a great concern to Russia that is forced to retaliate to growing NATO presence in the region. In this respect, not denying the importance of the military component, we would like to accentuate the necessity of intensifying the information efforts to explain the Russian position with regard to the most acute problems in relations with the Baltic countries, Sweden and Finland in order to prevent speculations about the real interests of the Russian Federation in the region.

The military rhetoric of NATO strategists, accompanying the discussion of any topics related to the presence of Russia in the Baltics, is a concern not only to Russia, but to other Baltic countries. The most reasonable groups of the Baltic States political elites are aware of the danger of escalating tensions in the region that even during the Cold War strove to follow the slogan "The Baltic Sea is a sea of friendship." Only in this case it will be possible to hope for the opening of a certain window of opportunity, if not to improve, or at least to stabilize relations between Russia, the Baltic countries and NATO in the Baltic Sea region.

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