

## THE EVOLUTION OF US POLITICAL PRIORITIES IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION IN THE 2010s

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**P.E. Smirnov**

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Institute for the US and Canadian Studies  
of the Russian Academy of Sciences  
2/3 Khlebny pereulok, Moscow, 121069, Russia

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*The fundamental geopolitical changes in the Baltic Sea region after the end of the Cold War caused the United States to revise its priorities in that part of the world. The process became especially apparent in the second decade of the 21st century when the Ukraine crisis brought to light the consequences of NATO and EU enlargement to the former Warsaw Treaty allies and the Baltic States. This article shows how the US, motivated by the need to ‘contain’ Russia, was developing its overall approaches to ensuring its political leadership in the Baltic region. It demonstrates how Washington is planning to reduce the vulnerability of certain nations of the region to Russia’s military and non-military influence and what steps the US and its NATO allies have taken in this direction. It is argued that, although the Western military buildup in the Baltic Sea region and the US attempts to neutralise Russian ‘hybrid’ instruments are unable to increase substantially the defence capabilities of NATO allies in the Baltic, the security dynamics in the region are likely to turn it into an arena for a struggle between Russia and the West. Russia will benefit from seeing the Baltic region nations not as tools in the Russian-US confrontation, but as partners in regional cooperation aware of their own interests.*

**Keywords:**

Region, security, NATO, war presence, military training, rotation, infrastructure, energy security, hybrid warfare

### Introduction

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The Baltic Sea region has always been of particular importance for Russia from a civilizational, geopolitical and socio-economic viewpoint. Even in the period of bipolar confrontation between the Soviet Union / the Warsaw Pact and NATO, this region was an example of the opposing sides adhering to certain ‘rules of the game’ despite mutual rivalry, thus avoiding uncontrolled tension as well as any attempts to revise the borders between the existing spheres of influ-

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ence. Non-aligned status of Sweden and Finland, alongside the specific position of the latter due to its special relations with the Soviet Union, contributed to this situation. NATO presence in the region was rather limited, especially since Norway and Denmark did not allow the deployment of military bases and nuclear weapons on their continental areas.

The situation changed fundamentally due to *perestroika* in the Soviet Union, followed by the collapse of the socialist bloc and the USSR itself, and Moscow's former allies' accession to the European Union and NATO. The Russian Federation, with its positions in the Baltic Sea Region drastically weakened in comparison with those of the former Soviet Union, found itself in disadvantaged condition while trying to curb the expansion of those institutions.

The United States, due partially to its own ambitions, but in a greater extent motivated by the needs of its new NATO allies with their constant sense of inevitable 'Russian revenge', received the chance to become a major actor in the Baltic region.

The second decade of the 21st century, and especially the period after the Ukraine crisis in 2013—2014, is of particular importance from a research point of view, since it was when a new confrontation reality between the Russian Federation and the United States / NATO started to develop. The Baltic Sea region is an integral part of this confrontation. After the coup d'état in Kiev in February 2014, reunification of Crimea with Russia, and hostilities breaking out in the Donbass, for which the West blamed Moscow, Washington and NATO moved on to a new stage of a confrontational model of behavior in this area.

Yet, despite the bipartisan support of this line in the United States, the specific methods of its implementation were subject to various changes. The advent of Donald Trump's administration with its 'America First' slogan could not but affect the credibility of Washington among its major allies, including the Baltic Sea region.

This article is aimed at tracing the basic political and military priorities of the United States in the Baltic Sea region: how they were shaped and how they changed; in what ways Washington reacted to the changes in the security situation in the region and in Europe in the 2010s; how those varying objectives of the United States reflected in decisions taken within NATO; how the US uses non-military mechanisms (primarily in the energy sphere) in the Baltic Sea region to contain Russian influence in Europe. I use both the comparative historical method (tracing the evolution of the US approach to the Baltic Sea region over the second decade of this century and comparing Barack Obama's and Donald Trump's attitudes), and the analysis of individual issues shaping Washington's policies in this area.

The article takes into account that the Russian and world studies on the problems of the Baltic Sea geopolitics lack consensus on where the borders of this region lie, that the physical and geographical view of the concept of 'region' may differ significantly from the socio-economic and security one [1]. At the

same time, I agree with the opinion that a strict definition of the ‘region’ and concrete interpretation of its geographical boundaries largely pre-determine foreign policies of a given country [2, p. 14]. Relying on this approach, I adhere to a broad understanding of the Baltic Sea region, which includes the Russian Federation, Germany, Poland, the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland). This concept took shape after the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) was established in 1992, which, alongside the above-mentioned 10 states, includes Iceland (since 1995) [3, p. 1152–1153].

## **What is behind the US interest in the Baltic Sea region**

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The breakup of the Eastern bloc, and especially the accession of Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to the European Union and NATO at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, actually made the Baltic Sea an ‘internal sea’ for these political, economic and security institutions. Prior to the Ukraine events in 2014, the rivalry between Russia and the West in the region did not go beyond a relatively peaceful framework, but after the reunification of Crimea and the outbreak of the conflict in the South-East of Ukraine, geopolitical confrontation, along with the growth of military tension, began to return to this part of Europe. Yet, I agree with Lukas Milevski from Leiden University, who claims that geopolitics ‘had never gone away’ before the events of February/March of 2014, ‘it had only been ignored’ — at least as far as planning for Baltic defense by NATO was concerned [4, p. 61–62].

The fact that the inclusion of the Baltic states in NATO in 2004 was primarily a political act not accompanied by the development of detailed defense plans for these states until the middle of the next decade (except in the event of a direct ‘Russian attack’) demonstrates the lack of strategic interest of the United States in this region before the Ukraine crisis necessitated adjustments to American foreign policy planning. According to the Finnish scholar Jan Hanska, it was highly infrequent that American leaders would mention Baltic states in their speeches of the ‘pre-Ukrainian’ period with the exception of Poland, such mentioning being the main indicator of Washington’s interest in the Baltic Sea region [5, p. 21]. However, the sharp rise in the Russian-Western confrontation after the Ukraine crisis has led to a noticeable change in the criteria for American participation in the affairs of the Baltic Sea region, and made the mission of ‘containing’ Russia top priority again.

The steps taken by Washington and its allies to protect Poland and the Baltic states from the alleged ‘Russian aggression’, and Russia’s measures to strengthen its defense capability in the Baltic Sea region with NATO approaching its borders constitute just one example of growing tensions between Moscow and the West. This is the reason for some experts in various countries to draw parallels with the Cold War era [6; 7; 8]. Not all scholars think it relevant to carry over

the term ‘Cold War’ to the contemporary period. For example, Lukas Milevski believes that this analogy is based just on the fact that NATO has mostly the same adversary, and that is the only similarity with the Cold War era. Now there is no need for the West to impose a new containment upon Russia counting on its collapse and the defeat of its own ideological project, since this project is practically non-existent. Moreover, the West, according to Milevski, has an interest in encouraging Russian interventionism beyond its borders, as in Syria. “Russian activity in Ukraine is clearly distasteful but has proven bearable to the West. But Russian activity in the Baltic states should be unacceptable as it would be tantamount to rolling back the borders of the West...” [4, p. 70–73].

Konstantin Khudoley (Saint Petersburg State University) argues that we now have “a struggle between two capitalisms — state-driven authoritarian capitalism and its liberal democratic counterpart. It is a confrontation between institutions rather than between socio-political systems or civilizations.” He thus suggests that we speak not about the cold, but about the ‘cool’ war in the Baltic Sea region [9, p. 5].

It seems that ideological and value-driven arguments used by Washington in the current confrontation with Russia serve primarily as a cover for its efforts to preserve the geopolitical order that was established in Europe after the collapse of bipolarity, and that is increasingly justified in Western political and academic circles by the concept of Rules-Based International Order. Advocates of the ‘neo-containment’ of Russia keep blaming it for violating those arbitrarily interpreted ‘rules’. Many of them (including, in particular, the former Supreme Allied Commander Europe (NATO), General Philip M. Breedlove and the former deputy Secretary General of NATO Alexander Vershbow) argue that the Baltic Sea region has become the central arena for the West in counteracting this ‘Russian revisionism’ which took shape under President Vladimir Putin [10, p. 1]. It is rather the ‘containment’ paradigm towards Moscow — where the latter is capable of weakening the Western positions — than some long-term strategy, that currently determines Washington’s line in its relations with Russia in the Baltic Sea region.

The increasing interest of the US foreign policy community (in particular, American legislators) in the Baltic Sea region in the period after the start of the Ukrainian crisis is evidenced by the fact that in July 2019, the US Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) held its first ‘field hearing’ outside the United States on the territory of that region, in Gdansk.

In this regard, Washington makes the most of the pro-American, rather than pro-EU, aspirations of the Eastern European and Baltic political elites, since it is the United States that they see as the main guarantor of their Western anchor. According to Vadim Volovoy and Irina Batorshina, “the interest of the political circles of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in the US leadership on the European continent is motivated not only by coinciding interests in the Baltic Sea region, but also by the obvious lack of solidarity and enthusiasm of the Western European countries in sending their troops to protect the Baltic states” [11, p. 35].

The Baltic Sea region, and Central and Eastern Europe as a whole, is used by the United States as a tool for ‘educating’ other NATO allies who are not always eager to be involved in a confrontation with Moscow, as well as to contribute sufficient money for defense needs and to sacrifice mutually beneficial economic projects with Russia. The above-mentioned scholars believe that “all the US/NATO military-political ‘maneuvers’ in the Baltics and Poland are just a geopolitical game, aimed at strategic confrontation between Russia and Europe <...> America does not need a coherent European Union (especially as a federal entity), which would be able to develop a partnership with the Eurasian Economic Union. Therefore, the Europeans must be convinced that the Russian threat is real.” [11, p. 33–34]

It is the former Warsaw Pact members and the Baltic states that exhibit the greatest zeal in meeting the military spending standard of 2% of GDP. By 2020, this benchmark, approved by NATO at the Wales Summit in 2014, was achieved by all former participants of the ‘Soviet bloc’ in the region. Latvia reached it for the first time in 2019. At the same time, Norway (1.8%) and especially Denmark (1.32%) are still lagging behind the established standard.<sup>1</sup>

Concurrently, the larger part of the American expert community studying the Eastern European region considers the Baltic republics to be especially vulnerable in the face of a hypothetical ‘Russian aggression’ and actually undefendable by the North Atlantic alliance. This vulnerability manifests itself in the following main directions:

- disadvantageous geographical position — the region almost entirely borders on land with the Russian Federation and Belarus, which makes it easier for Moscow to ‘occupy’ their territories, if necessary, in a short period of time;
- meager armed forces of the Baltic states (all three countries, taken together, have slightly more than 20,000 troops);
- critical dependence on the supply of Russian oil and gas, despite certain and not unsuccessful efforts to reduce this dependence;
- a high proportion — especially in Latvia and Estonia — of the Russian-speaking population, which for the most part does not share the nationalist agenda imposed by the dominant ideology and is subject to the information influence of Russia.

Long-term nature of these factors notwithstanding, the specific methods of implementing Washington’s political objectives in the region depend on the perception of the threat that dominates in the United States at one time or another, as well as on the ways various groupings of the US ruling class prioritize those objectives. During the Obama presidency, the US behavior in response to the ‘Russian aggression’ after the Ukraine crisis of 2014 was largely reactive in its character. It was aimed at confirming the US readiness to support the Baltics by deploying additional military contingents in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

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<sup>1</sup> Chart: NATO Defense Expenditure. Statista. 2019. Dec. 3. URL: <https://www.statista.com/chart/14636/defense-expenditures-of-nato-countries/> (accessed 01.07.2020).

on a rotational basis and intensification of NATO military exercises there. In early September 2014, Barack Obama visited Estonia. At a meeting with the presidents of the Baltic *troika* Toomas Hendrik Ilves, Andris Bērziņš, and Dāvis Grybauskaitė, he reaffirmed American obligations to protect the security of these states in accordance with Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.<sup>2</sup> These attitudes predetermined the decisions of the NATO summit in Newport (Wales, UK) in September 2014. At the same time, the summit confirmed that the United States and its key NATO allies did not want to cross a certain threshold in confrontation with Russia, in particular, in meeting the Baltic and Polish desires to have the NATO military presence on their territories on a permanent rather than rotational basis.

After Donald Trump took office in 2017, the new administration's views on security alliances began to change markedly, which reflected the new president's desire to challenge multilateral transnational institutions and, in general, to discredit the principles of global governance [12, p. 131—133]. This often gave rise to incorrect interpretations of the 45th President's views as isolationist, especially since at first Trump spoke about the 'obsolescence' of NATO, and even admitted withdrawal of the Article 5 obligations for those NATO allies who did not comply with the 2% GDP benchmark of military expenditures [13, p. 133]. In the National Security Strategy of the United States approved by Donald Trump in December 2017, much more emphasis than in similar earlier documents is placed on encouraging allies and partners among 'frontline states' on the eastern flank of NATO to "better defend themselves".<sup>3</sup>

The US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019, as well as its pulling out of the Open Skies Treaty (OST), which President Trump announced in May 2020, also contributed to a serious erosion of American leadership in shaping Western political priorities on the NATO eastern flank. The main pretext for US withdrawing from OST was directly related to the Baltic Sea region and came down to Russia's restrictions on inspection flights over the Kaliningrad region.

At the same time, Donald Trump, as his speech at a meeting with the Presidents of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia Raimonds Vējonis, Dalia Grybauskaitė, and Kersti Kaljulaid in Washington in early April 2018 shows, tried to detach the US priorities in the region from the Ukraine crisis, although he still complied with NATO's decisions taken as a response to this crisis. He emphasized the importance of the support granted by those countries to the United States in the fight against ISIS, mentioned that the Baltic countries constitute an important

<sup>2</sup> Remarks by President Obama and Leaders of Baltic States in Multilateral Meeting // The White House. President Barack Obama. 2014. September 03. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/03/remarks-president-obama-and-leaders-baltic-states-multilateral-meeting> (accessed 09.06.2020).

<sup>3</sup> National Security Strategy of the United States of America. December 2017. The White House, Washington, DC, 2017. P. 48.

market for American goods,<sup>4</sup> pointed out their cooperation on energy security, collaborating in diversifying energy sources, supplies, and routes throughout the Baltic region, including expanding exports of U.S. liquefied natural gas (LNG).<sup>5</sup> Energy security, understood as a chance to promote the interests of American energy companies, has become the most conspicuous of the new accents made by the Trump administration on the eastern flank of NATO.

Furthermore, under the 45th President — although the problem itself was not ignored under his predecessor — the United States enhanced its efforts in countering Russian ‘hybrid threats’, primarily in the digital and informational spheres, as well as in holding back ‘Russian interference’ in domestic policies of NATO countries and especially in the Baltic states as the most vulnerable.

Alongside that, Donald Trump prioritizes counteracting the growing power and expansion of China, in particular its Belt and Road Initiative, in which the Baltic countries are assigned an important transit role. For instance, A. Wess Mitchell, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, points out that the Eastern European region has become a major target of Russian and Chinese attacks, each of them having instruments to establish control over that region. For Russia, these instruments are the military aspect, propaganda, energy tactics with the use of corruption ties; while China relies on trade and investment offensive, and ‘debt-book diplomacy’.<sup>6</sup>

Since the beginning of the Trump presidency, a hypothetical war confrontation with China has been weighed out as a possible variant not only in the Pacific, but also in more remote regions. The Baltic Sea region, Northern Europe and, more broadly, the North Atlantic are no exception here, as in its Silk Road strategy China openly proclaims its intention to become one of the Arctic powers. After *Maritime Cooperation*, the first Russian-Chinese naval drills in the Baltic Sea in July 2017, the US military and political establishment has received tangible evidence that even here, Moscow and Beijing are capable of

<sup>4</sup> Yet, the total trade turnover between the United States and the Baltic states is not large, although it has grown during the Trump presidency, making up about \$ 1.3 billion with Estonia, more than \$ 1.2 billion with Latvia, and nearly \$ 2 billion with Lithuania (data for 2018). Source: *Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania: Background and U.S. – Baltic Relations* // Congressional Research Service. 2020. Jan. 02. URL: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R46139.pdf> (accessed 24.06.2020). The situation is similar with trade between the United States and Poland — about \$ 13.5 billion in 2018 — about 10 times less than the trade turnover between Poland and Germany (*Poland exports, imports and trade balance by Country and Region. 2018. World Integrated Trade Solution*). URL: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/POL/Year/LTST/TradeFlow/EXPIMP> (accessed 24.06.2020).

<sup>5</sup> *Remarks* by President Trump and Heads of the Baltic States in Joint Press Conference. 2018. April 3. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-heads-baltic-states-joint-press-conference/> (accessed 23.06.2020).

<sup>6</sup> *Remarks*. A. Wess Mitchell, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs. Atlantic Council. Washington DC. 2018. October 18. URL: <https://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2018/286787.htm> (accessed 29.03.2020).

joining forces to counterbalance the American power, and that the challenges for American leadership in Europe can no longer be considered just within European framework.<sup>7</sup>

## **Military Aspect**

**The ‘Russian threat’ as the main challenge.** Before the Ukraine crisis, Washington’s policy concerning its military presence in Europe, including the eastern flank of NATO, was largely determined by the assumption that the main threats to US national security came from outside Europe. Prior to these events, as Vladimir Batyuk argues, the military policy of the US administration towards NATO allies under President Barack Obama remained, in principle, the same as under George W. Bush: “to reduce as much as possible the number of American troops in Europe, which are capable of taking part in military operations in the land theater (ground forces, marines, tactical aviation), replacing them with units deployed in the United States and arriving in Europe on a rotational basis — for the duration of exercises and other events [14, p. 142—143]”.

In this context, some countries of the Baltic Sea region have been assigned a significant role in deploying the American ABM systems in Europe. As part of Phase 3 of the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) to the deployment of European missile defense systems, which was announced by President Barack Obama in 2009 and officially intended to neutralize the Iranian and North Korean missile threat, Washington planned to deploy 48 SM-3 interceptor missiles in 2018 in Redzikowo, northern Poland, in the framework of the Aegis Ashore project. However, commissioning of this facility was delayed twice. In February 2020, its postponement to 2022 was again announced. Additionally, in September 2012, General Stanislaw Kozieci, secretary of the National Security Council of Poland, spoke for building a national Polish missile defense system, this time openly targeted against Russia. As Valery Konyshhev, Alexandre Sergunin and Sergey Subbotin note, “it is in Poland and the Baltic countries, where the most radical and anti-Russian sentiments regarding the deployment of missile defense systems have developed”. However, as these scholars remind, these countries’ appeals to re-target the European missile defense system against Russia were not well received at the NATO Wales summit: Germany, in particular, opposed this idea, believing that a step like this would be an unnecessary provocation vis-a-vis Moscow [15, p. 53].

After the Ukraine crisis started, numerous expert publications appeared in the United States and in the West as a whole, where a ‘Russian aggression’ against the Baltic states was discussed as a highly probable scenario (although there were also

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<sup>7</sup> US to monitor Russian-Chinese naval drills in Baltic Sea. Stars and Stripes. 2017. July 20. URL: <https://www.stripes.com/news/us-to-monitor-russian-chinese-naval-drills-in-baltic-sea-1.478931> (accessed 24.07.2020).

a few experts who admitted that such an attack was unlikely<sup>8</sup>). As a rule, the authors of such publications believe that NATO will be able to defend these states for a very short time, if such defense would be at all possible. A report edited by LTG (Ret.) Ben Hodges, former commander of United States Army Europe, argues that Russia is “bolstering and modernizing forces in its Western Military District and is transitioning the Kaliningrad exclave from an Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) threat to a potential launching platform to support a limited ground invasion or attack against a NATO Ally”. Alongside this, Russia, according to the authors of this report, “continues aggressive air and maritime domain behavior against Allies and Partners and has threatened Denmark and Sweden with nuclear attack, rehearsing such a scenario... on more than one occasion” [16, p. 4].

NATO was greatly worried about the Russian-Belarusian military exercise ZAPAD 2017 with the participation of more than 100,000 troops, as well as about the above-mentioned Russian-Chinese exercise Maritime Cooperation.

An expert from the Jamestown Foundation argues that “failure to defend in place for the first 30 days means a quick collapse before NATO can realistically intervene, the [Russian] occupation of the Baltic States, and the probable splintering of the Alliance” [17, p. 22].

It has also become a commonplace among Western analysts to ascribe to Russia an intention to take control of the Suwalki Gap — a section of the Polish-Lithuanian border, through which it would be possible to establish communication between Belarus and the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation.

Many American experts (especially those with Polish or Baltic background) tend to speak about hypothetical military implications of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, which could allegedly be used by Russia as a pretext to significantly expand its military activity in the region [18].

To address those challenges, which became especially acute after the events around Ukraine, the United States launched the Atlantic Resolve Operation in April 2014 funded in the framework of the European Reassurance Initiative. In 2017, the latter was transformed into the European Deterrence Initiative, envisaging periodic deployment of additional armored and airborne units in Poland and the Baltic countries. In the Trump years, its funding boost was especially significant — up to \$6.5 billion in 2019 from \$985 million in 2015. After that, however, the administration’s requests for its implementation slightly decreased.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> One of these experts believes, in particular, that Moscow will not take such actions as long as there are no attempts on the part of NATO to block Russian access to the Kaliningrad exclave, and that the Russian-speaking residents of the Baltic countries, unlike Russians in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, cannot be used by Russia as a launching pad for a ‘hybrid’ invasion, since most of them remain loyal to their states. *Person R. 6 reasons not to worry about Russia invading the Baltics*. The Washington Post. 2015. Nov. 12. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/11/12/6-reasons-not-to-worry-about-russia-invading-the-baltics/> (accessed 29.07.2020).

<sup>9</sup> *The European Deterrence Initiative: A Budgetary Overview*. Congressional Research Service. 2020. June 16. URL: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IF10946.pdf> (accessed 26.06.2020).

Under the Foreign Military Sales program, Washington has also supplied the Baltic states with various defense articles and services worth more than \$ 500 million, and via the Direct Commercial Sales process, they have received nearly \$ 350 million worth of defense articles from the United States since FY 2015. Besides, in the framework of Foreign Military Financing (FMF), the United States has made a \$ 250 million contribution to these three countries to develop their defensive capabilities, such as electronic and hybrid warfare, border security, maritime and air domain awareness, increasing the Baltic states' interoperability with NATO armed forces.<sup>10</sup>

**Baltic Sea region on NATO agenda.** Washington assigns the leading role in the implementation of its political priorities in the Baltic Sea region to the North Atlantic Alliance, especially, as was mentioned above, due to the need to develop detailed defense plans for the Baltic states within NATO, which became acute in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. Following the outbreak of that crisis, the function of the NATO Baltic air-policing mission was expanded. The NATO summit in Wales in September 2014 decided to establish a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), which was followed by the Warsaw summit decision in July 2016 to deploy four battalion-sized battlegroups on a rotational basis in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence posture. These battlegroups are led by the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany. The headquarters for the multinational division was also established in Poland [19].

In July 2018, at its summit in Brussels, the North Atlantic Alliance approved the 'Four Thirties' initiative, which assumes that, from 2020, the Alliance will have 30 mechanized battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 combat vessels ready within 30 days or less. These forces must, if necessary, reinforce multinational battalions in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.<sup>11</sup>

Since January 2017, armored brigade combat teams of the United States — each for a period of nine months and numbering about 4,500 troops — have also been transferred to Poland, supplemented by a combat helicopter brigade. In June 2019, the presidents of the United States and Poland, Donald Trump and Andrzej Duda, agreed that the American rotational military presence in that country would be increased by an additional 1,000 troops. It is also planned to deploy a squadron of American MQ-9 Reaper drones in Poland.

Not in the least, these steps are viewed by Washington as compensation for its unwillingness to deploy US troops on the Polish territory, as well as in the Baltic countries, on a permanent basis. However, a number of experts in the United

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Security Cooperation With the Baltic States. U.S. Department of State. Bureau of Political-Military Affairs. 2020. June 11. URL: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-the-baltic-states/> (accessed 19.06.2020).

<sup>11</sup> Brussels Summit Declaration. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 11–12 July 2018. North Atlantic Treaty Organization. URL: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_156624.htm#14](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm#14) (accessed 27.06.2020).

States support the desire of Washington's new NATO allies in the region to provide more robust American military presence on their territories [20]. General Ben Hodges, former commander of United States Army Europe, in particular, believes it necessary to deploy American units in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, whose tasks would include logistics, intelligence, communications, as well as air and missile defense.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from this, Poland is viewed by Washington as one of the most promising markets for American arms in Eastern Europe. At the end of January 2020, a \$ 4.6 billion deal was signed between Poland and the United States for the purchase of 32 F-35A Lightning II fighter jets. It provided not only for the purchase of aircraft, but also for simulators, training of Polish pilots, and logistics package for the Polish side. This was the second major deal for the supply of American fighters to Poland after the purchase of 48 F-16 aircraft in the 2000s. One should also mention the 2018 US-Polish deal for the supply of Patriot missile systems to Warsaw.

The decisions taken by NATO after 2014 to increase its military presence in the Baltic region indicate that in this issue the United States does not experience significant problems even with those allies in 'old Europe' (in particular, Germany and France) who are not eager to sacrifice the benefits of their ties with Russia. Donald Trump's arrival in the White House, which brought a considerable conflict potential to the US-European relations, did not fundamentally violate the intra-Western consensus on the need to rebuff the 'Russian expansion'. Turkey's bid to block the adoption of the defense plan for the Baltic states and Poland was the only stumbling block in reaching agreement on the Baltic issue by the Alliance at the London NATO summit at the end of 2019. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan demanded that the allies agree to recognize the YPG Kurdish armed groups in Northern Syria as terrorist, in exchange for Ankara's approval of this plan. It became evident that for a key US ally in NATO, its own geopolitical environment is far more important than the problems of the remote Baltic Sea region, and that Russia, as Rachel Ellehuus from the Washington based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) warned, was quick to play on the resulting fissures between Ankara and NATO [21]. Nevertheless, in late June 2020, Turkey withdrew its objections to the adoption of the defense plan for Poland and the Baltic countries.<sup>13</sup>

The 2014 events have become a pretext for NATO to significantly increase the number and scale of its military exercises in the Baltic Sea region. Thus, the Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI) notes that in the period from 2014 to 2019, the number of exercises conducted by NATO in the Baltic and neighbor-

<sup>12</sup> Judson J. Do the Baltics need more US military support to deter Russia? Defense News. 2019. July 16. URL: <https://www.defensenews.com/land/2019/07/15/do-the-baltics-need-more-us-military-support-to-deter-russia/> (accessed 26.07.2020).

<sup>13</sup> NATO puts defence plan for Poland, Baltics into action, officials say. Reuters. 2020. July 2. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-baltics-turkey/nato-puts-defence-plan-for-poland-baltics-into-action-officials-say-idUSKBN24320B> (accessed 27.07.2020).

ing regions in cooperation with partner states, grew from 155 to 310 [22, p. 22], the largest of them being *Joint Warrior*, *Anaconda*, *Cold Response*, *Saber Strike*, *Baltops*, and *Trident Juncture*.

Yet, COVID-19 forced NATO, as well as countries that are building up military cooperation with it, to reduce the scale and number of their exercises, and this directly affected the Baltic Sea region (similar measures were taken by Russia). Since the pandemic affected a multinational battalion deployed in Lithuania, the major NATO military exercise Defender-Europe-20 in the region was postponed and held in a modified form in June. The Aurora-2020 exercise scheduled for May — June 2020 in Sweden, to which the United States was supposed to send the largest foreign contingent, was canceled. Such global scale emergencies can have a direct impact not only on the combat readiness of NATO forces, but on the credibility of the alliance as a whole [23].

After the start of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, the Baltic Sea region has been prone to a large number of dangerous military incidents between Russia and NATO. Noteworthy in this context are the incidents of June 2017 and August 2019, when NATO fighters tried to approach the plane of Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu. Some experts holding alarmist views, in particular Loren B. Thompson from the Lexington Institute, even believe that it is from the Baltic Sea region that a war with the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons is most likely to start. The formal reason for this may be the necessity to defend Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, or a threat to the Kaliningrad region. The likelihood of such a war, according to the expert, is conditioned primarily by the proximity of the Baltic states to the centers of Russian political and military power, Washington's commitment to provide security guarantees to all NATO allies, and at the same time, the limited resource available to NATO to protect these states with the help of conventional forces [24].

There are some scholars specializing in the Baltic and other Eastern European regions, who admit (as Ulrich Kühn from the Carnegie Endowment, for example, does) that an overreaction to the threat of a 'Russian aggression' against the Baltic states is as dangerous as under-reaction, and that the main danger for the region lies in the escalation of the Russian-NATO military confrontation there. Still, such experts obviously constitute a minority in the US (and, more broadly, Western) academic community [25, p. 23—31].

The United States and NATO are also preoccupied with infrastructural isolation of the Baltic states from the rest of NATO territory, with the lack or poor technical condition of main highways and railways that could be used for transferring troops and military cargo from Western Europe to this region. This isolation is caused primarily by the impossibility of using the existing railway infrastructure — with its Soviet-legacy 1520 mm gauge and its East-West orientation — to implement the strategy of the Western alliance [26]. The EU-funded *Rail Baltica* project with a standard European gauge of 1435 mm, although economically controversial and unlikely to provide the cargo and passenger flow necessary for any return on investment in the foreseeable future, may make sense

from a logistical point of view, promoting NATO strategy not only in the Baltic Sea region, but in Central and Eastern Europe as a whole. Olevs Nickers from the Jamestown Foundation argues that *Rail Baltica*, thanks to its compatibility with the European track, will help NATO to move large volumes of military cargo from Germany and Poland to the Baltic states without interruption, saving time and limiting the numbers of personnel and transport equipment involved in the logistics, and therefore, having the potential to become crucial to the Baltic States' defense [27].

While the need to repulse 'Russian aggression' after the events of 2014 was to a certain extent helpful in rallying the NATO member states under American leadership, there still remain doubts concerning the US readiness to defend its allies regardless of their geographic location, size, share in world GDP, or contribution to the NATO military efforts. Although the Ukraine crisis has contributed to the growth of military confrontation in the Baltic region and increased the dangers associated with its escalation and the lack of generally accepted rules of the game between the opposing sides, a complete return to the Cold War model is unlikely. This means that in Washington's strategic plans, defense of peripheral states on the eastern flank of NATO bordering Russia, including a recourse to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, will inevitably have lower priority compared to the protection of the 'older' allies in Western Europe. After all, even the measures planned by NATO to increase its military presence in the region do not give the North Atlantic Alliance any real opportunities to compensate for the sharp reduction in the number of troops and weapons that occurred in Europe after the Cold War. I thus agree with Graham Allison from the Harvard Kennedy School, when he draws parallels between a hypothetical US war aid to Taiwan if it declares independence following the suppression of the protests in Hong Kong by the Chinese authorities, and an equally hypothetical possibility of NATO's helping Latvia, if Russia annexes a swath of its territory in retaliation for a Latvian government's crackdown on insurgent ethnic Russian workers at the Riga shipyards to argue that, in either case, an immediate military response from the United States or NATO (including Article 5 measures) is neither possible nor appropriate. To quote Allison, it means that "the time has come for an alliance-focused version of the stress tests for banks used after the 2008 financial crisis" [28, p. 38].

**United States, Russia, and 'hybrid warfare' in the Baltic Sea region.** In the period following the Ukraine crisis, the Baltic region was chosen by Washington as one of the main testing grounds to develop the strategy of countering the 'hybrid wars' allegedly waged by Russia against the West, and tested during the 'annexation' of Crimea. The RAND Corporation [29–31] shows a particular interest in studying this issue. The term "hybrid wars" itself has neither a generally accepted definition nor clear-cut criteria. Yet, in the period under discussion, the interpretation of this term by Western experts mainly boiled down to active combination of military and non-military methods by the rivaling parties in their confrontation, the use of tools related to winning political influence, superiority

in the information and economic domains, interference in electoral and other domestic political processes of rival states, especially by applying cyber technologies and hacker attacks.

The fact that certain countries in the Baltic Sea region, primarily Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, are viewed by American proponents of ‘containing’ Russia as a major target of the Russian ‘hybrid’ warfare, is determined by the continuing energy dependence of these countries on Moscow, their transport and infrastructure ties to the post-Soviet space, as well as by high proportion of ethnic Russians in the former two Baltic states. The situation when many Russian speakers are still deprived of citizenship — although certain steps are being taken to liberalize legislation in this area, and the number of non-citizens is decreasing for objective reasons — creates a basis for Russian influence, which the authors of US strategic concepts view as destructive. In this regard, even the most radical opponents of Russia in the US expert community admit that only by greater recognition of the Russian language, increased funding for Russian-language education, and citizenship rights for Soviet-era migrants, the Estonian and Latvian governments will be able to diminish Moscow’s influence, even if this contradicts the nationalist narratives surrounding the creation of those states [30, p. 31—33].

Since 2014, countering ‘hybrid’ threats has become one of the main issues at NATO summits. At the Warsaw summit in 2016 and the Brussels summit in 2018, it was mentioned in the final documents in the context of possible application of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, although without specifying the source the threat. At the Brussels summit, the Alliance agreed to set up counter-hybrid support teams, which would provide tailored targeted assistance to Allies upon their request.<sup>14</sup>

The NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence, established in Tallinn back in 2008, plays a significant role in developing the Alliance’s strategy for countering ‘hybrid’ threats. Representatives of 25 countries, including non-NATO members Austria, Finland and Sweden, take part in its work.

**Finland and Sweden in US and NATO military planning.** The Russia-West confrontation is eroding the non-aligned status of Finland and Sweden, who are increasingly involved in joint military activity with NATO (including their participation in military exercises, in particular *Aurora*, *Baltops* and *Cold Response*), although officially, joining NATO is still not on their agenda. At the NATO Summit in Wales in 2014, the two countries signed memorandums with NATO to join the Alliance’s Host Nation Support program, which makes it possible to invite NATO forces in crisis situations and to hold joint exercises.

In the expert community, both in these countries and in the United States, discussions on more active American military presence in the Baltic Sea region,

<sup>14</sup> Brussels Summit Declaration. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 11—12 July 2018. North Atlantic Treaty Organization. URL: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_156624.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm) (accessed 21.06.2020).

as well as considerations of more tangible support to Washington by Helsinki and Stockholm, up to their possible accession to NATO, have already gone beyond the purely academic framework [17; 32–34]. An analyst from the Jamestown Foundation argues, in particular, that probable use of Swedish airspace, airfields and territorial waters by NATO would likely change the Russian position, complicate Russian planning, and alter the balance of forces in the region. “Accordingly, NATO should encourage Sweden and Finland to join the Alliance as full-fledged members in the event of Russian aggression” [17, p. 27].

Despite the growing incentives to strengthen security cooperation with the United States and NATO, Finland and Sweden still face serious obstacles to joining the North Atlantic Alliance. Finland, who has not given up the tradition of ‘privileged relations’ with Moscow even after joining the anti-Russian sanctions imposed after the Ukraine crisis, considers it counterproductive to let those relations deteriorate, which, no doubt, will happen if Helsinki joins NATO without any provocation from the Russian side. Furthermore, as Konstantin Khudoley and Dmitry Lanko point out, there are fears in Finland that if the country joins NATO, it will be dragged into a war in remote regions for defending alien interests [35, p. 17]. Sweden has similar concerns. In addition, it seems that Sweden, with its well-developed defense industry, is much less dependent on imports from the American military-industrial complex than Finland and does not want to increase this dependence, which will become inevitable if the country joins NATO. At the same time, in pressuring Russia on the Ukrainian issue or on the issue of the Russian military presence in the Baltic Sea and Northern Europe, in maintaining sanctions against Moscow, Stockholm can become an effective ally of Washington, making up for Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union in terms of influencing EU foreign policy [36, p. 383].

### **Baltic Sea Region and US Energy Security Interests**

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In the early years of the 21st century, the Baltic Sea and adjacent countries became for Washington one of the major arenas in countering Russian ‘energy weapons’. American experts who analyzed the issue of neutralizing the Russian influence in this area note, on the one hand, challenges of the regional scale (specifically, critical dependence of most countries in the region on Russian oil and gas supplies), and, on the other hand, threats that allegedly exist only in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as the former Soviet republics and are primarily associated with the electric power industry and related infrastructure. I am talking about their Soviet-legacy electricity grids synchronized with those of Russia and Belarus, the Baltic *troika*’s desire to abandon this synchronization by withdrawing from the BRELL electricity ring (the agreement on this ring was signed in 2001) and re-connecting their power grids to the European Union networks [37, p. 123–125].

Ever since the George W. Bush administration, Washington has been firm in its efforts to weaken Russia’s energy influence in Europe, presenting its allies

dependence on Russian oil and gas as a major threat to national security. One of the threats of this kind for Washington is Russian-German cooperation in constructing the Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines on the bottom of the Baltic Sea, bypassing the territories of Poland and the Baltic countries. The United States makes the most of the hostile approach of these states towards these projects. Since the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, arranging US liquefied natural gas (LNG) supplies — simultaneously with supplies from Norway, Qatar, and other alternative sources — has been the main instrument for Washington in promoting its concept of energy security in the Baltic and other regions of the CEE. The first steps in this direction were taken by the Obama administration, yet it is only with Donald Trump that the policy of replacing as much of the Russian gas as possible with American LNG — including the markets of the Baltic Sea region — has been implemented consistently, pursuing the main goal of disrupting any energy alliance between Russia and the European Union.

To promote American energy resources at the Baltic and other East European markets, the Three Seas Initiative is used. First supported by Washington during Barack Obama presidency, this project, also known as the Baltic, Adriatic, Black Sea (BABS) Initiative, comprising 12 states of Central and South-Eastern Europe and going back to the Polish inter-war intermarium concept, was launched in 2015 by Polish President Andrzej Duda and Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. In July 2017, President Donald Trump attended the Three Seas Initiative summit in Warsaw and delivered a keynote on re-orienting the region's oil and gas market from Russian supplies to alternative sources, including LNG from the United States. He spoke of the need to build new energy infrastructure in the region, provide greater access to energy markets, and remove barriers to energy trade.<sup>15</sup>

At the Munich Security Conference in February 2020, Michael Pompeo, the US Secretary of State, announced a new US aid package up to \$1 billion for Central and Eastern European countries of the Three Seas Initiative.<sup>16</sup>

The promotion of American interests in the energy sector of the Baltic Sea region has a strong link to the issue of combating the ‘hybrid’ threats. In early October 2019, during his tour of the Baltic States, the US Secretary of Energy Rick Perry participated in the conference of Partnerships for Transatlantic Energy Cooperation (P-TEC) in Vilnius and, with his colleagues from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, signed a declaration of guarantees, providing for protecting the energy infrastructure of these three countries from cyber attacks.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Read Donald Trump’s Remarks at the Three Seas Initiative Summit in Poland. Time. 2017. July 6. URL: <http://time.com/4846780/read-donald-trump-speech-warsaw-poland-transcript/> (accessed 10.06.2020).

<sup>16</sup> *The West is Winning*. Speech Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State. Munich, Germany. Munich Security Conference. 2020. February 15. URL: <https://www.state.gov/the-west-is-winning/> (accessed 06.06.2020).

<sup>17</sup> Secretary of Energy Rick Perry’s Keynote Address at the 2nd P-TEC Meeting. U.S. Embassy in Lithuania. 2019. October 7. URL: <https://lt.usembassy.gov/secretary-of-energy-rick-perrys-keynote-address-at-the-2nd-partnership-for-transatlantic-energy-cooperation-p-tec/> (accessed 27.05.2020).

In the Trump era, the Nord Stream 2 project, has become the main target of attack by the United States, as a part of shaping the US energy strategy in Europe, since projects like this not only make Germany (as well as other countries, to which Russian gas can be transported by pipelines) dependent on Gazprom, but also contribute to the ambiguity of political outlook of the European elite. The US sanctions against Nord Stream 2 have become part of the overall sanctions policy against Russia and are incorporated in various legislative acts, starting with The Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) signed by President Donald Trump in August 2017, as well as into the defense budget legislation. However, these measures affect not only Russia, but those European companies, which participate in the project. Actually, some key EU regulations, in particular the Third Energy Package, adopted in 2009 and requiring companies operating in the energy sector to separate energy supply and generation from the operation of transmission networks, play into the hands of Washington in its desire to complicate (if not completely disrupt) the implementation of Nord Stream 2. The same applies to the amendments to the EU Gas Directive approved in 2019, which extend the norms of the Third Energy Package to pipelines going to and from third countries.

Poland has virtually become the main agent in the strategy of promoting the American LNG in the Baltic Sea region. It does not intend to renew the long-term gas supply contract with Gazprom after 2022, and expects to replace the major part of gas from that source with supplies from alternative sources. Apart from purchases from Qatar and planned supplies of Norwegian gas through the Baltic Pipe gas pipeline, which is under construction, in 2018–2019, the Polish state-run PGNiG signed several contracts with US companies (*Cheniere, Ventures Global LNG, Sempra Energy*) for the purchase of LNG. As a result, from 2023 Warsaw is planning to receive nearly 10 billion cubic meters of American LNG annually (this is about half of the current gas consumption in the country), and expects to become a distribution hub for gas supplies to other countries of Eastern Europe.

Lithuania is another ally of Washington in countering the Russian ‘energy weapons’. In 2012, the NATO summit in Chicago decided to transform the Lithuanian Energy Security Center to the accredited NATO Energy Security Center of Excellence (ENSEC COE). In August 2017, the first cargo of US liquefied natural gas was delivered to the port of Klaipeda, where Lithuania had equipped an LNG terminal in 2014. Agnia Grigas, a Lithuanian American expert on energy geopolitics, then expressed confidence that “the United States is now a powerful global gas supplier and that American companies are willing to compete even in Gazprom’s most traditional markets” [38]. Latvia and Estonia are also supportive of projects for LNG terminals and gas pipelines on their territories, viewing these as hubs for transporting LNG to other countries which seek to reduce their dependence on Russian gas and oil (in particular, to Belarus).

The main obstacle to expanding LNG supplies to the Baltic region from the United States is its high cost, especially in terms of delivery.<sup>18</sup> Since 2019, the Klaipėda LNG floating storage and regasification unit (FSRU) terminal has also been used to receive, in addition to Norwegian and American, liquefied natural gas from Russia's Novatek company, shipped from the LNG plant in the Baltic Sea port of Vysotsk. The report of the Lithuanian State Security Department issued in February 2020, voices concern about such trends, claiming that "Novatek is able to offer low LNG prices only because of preferential conditions for LNG exports granted by the Russian government," and adding that this is allegedly "a part in Russia's long-term game to restore its dominant position in the regional gas market."<sup>19</sup>

An 'energy shield' promised by the Trump administration to European countries does not provide any guarantees of stable supplies on more favorable terms than Russia is ready to offer. Nevertheless, these American promises allow the most anti-Russian governments of the Baltic Sea region to press for new concessions in bargaining with Gazprom, jeopardize the long-term contracts strategy of the latter, and create additional obstacles to Russian pipeline projects that do not suit them, primarily for Nord Stream 2.

## Conclusion

My analysis of key trends in the US policy towards the Baltic Sea region at a time when tensions between Russia and the West have escalated significantly, suggests the following conclusion. On the one hand, it is not the region the American strategic interest depends on. On the other hand, for Washington, the Baltic Sea region plays an important instrumental role as a testing ground for counterbalancing Russia's 'unacceptable' behavior and hindering any rapprochement between Russia and the European Union.

Indeed, the United States, as well as its key allies, opt for building up their military capabilities in the Baltic Sea region to counter the 'Russian threat'. Furthermore, the former Soviet Baltic republics are viewed by Washington as an important foothold in confronting Russia in the field of 'hybrid warfare'. In the period of Donald Trump's presidency, those objectives have become nearly the only compelling reason for aligning Washington's allies under American leadership, even those whose relations with the United States have noticeably chilled in that period (in the Baltic Sea region, this is primarily Germany).

<sup>18</sup> By the end of May 2020, the LNG imported from the US accounted for 5.47% of the total amount of imported LNG at the Klaipeda LNG terminal — since the start of the terminal's operations. Lithuanian LNG terminal proving to be a player in the global market. LNG Industry. 2020. May 26. URL: <https://www.lngindustry.com/liquid-natural-gas/26052020/lithuanian-lng-terminal-proving-to-be-a-player-in-the-global-market/> (accessed 04.07.2020).

<sup>19</sup> Russian gas imports via Klaipeda named as risk to Lithuania's energy independence. The Baltic Times. 04.02.2020. URL: [https://www.baltictimes.com/russian\\_gas\\_imports\\_via\\_klaipeda\\_named\\_as\\_risk\\_to\\_lithuania\\_s\\_energy\\_independence/](https://www.baltictimes.com/russian_gas_imports_via_klaipeda_named_as_risk_to_lithuania_s_energy_independence/) (accessed 04.07.2020).

However, the political trends that have dominated after 2014 are incapable of changing the main thing — the uncertainty about the US commitments to the allies in the region, including a possible application of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty for their defense. The advent of Donald Trump with his commercial and selfish attitude towards relations with allies, his withdrawal from key arms control treaties, trade wars with the most important US partners, have exacerbated this uncertainty.

Unlike the Barack Obama administration, which for the sake of defending the countries of Eastern Europe from ‘Russian aggression’ was ready to overlook the issue of the allies’ inadequate contribution to NATO defense, Donald Trump made it into a deal breaker. As a result of this — and due to the war that his administration unleashed on the Nord Stream 2 — the political cohesion of the Baltic Sea region countries around the United States has started to erode. In particular, the traditional German-Polish contradictions have aggravated, where Warsaw is confirming even more clearly that it finds itself at the forefront of the pro-American movement. This manifested brightly in June 2020, when President Trump announced his intention to withdraw 9,500 American troops from Germany due to Berlin’s failure to meet the 2 per cent NATO benchmark of defense spending, and its continuing adherence to Nord Stream 2, while Poland expressed its readiness to host these forces.

For Russia, the situation in the Baltic Sea region after the start of the Ukraine crisis has been fraught with even greater risk of drawing into an arms race and even a military clash with NATO, albeit unintentional. At the same time, this tension is forcing the leaders of at least some states in the region, even those who are not at all positive about Russia, to look for ways of restoring contacts with Moscow, given the danger that these states may become an arena of military operations, even with a use of nuclear weapons. An evidence of this, in particular, is the visit of the President of Estonia Kersti Kaljulaid to Moscow in April 2019, quite an unusual move given the current security situation.

Apart from trying to avoid an uncontrolled growth of tensions with Russia, in their contacts with Moscow the Baltic states pursue the goal of reconquering positions in the Russian market, encouraging Moscow to enhance transport co-operation, and hoping to stop the reorientation of Russian transit flows to its own Baltic Sea ports.

There are also signs of reviving the dialogue between Russia and those Nordic states that have so far tried to stay aside from such a dialogue, and have been rather active in anti-Russian information campaigns. In this respect, it is noteworthy that Prime Ministers of Sweden and Norway, Stefan Löfven and Erna Solberg, attended the ‘Arctic: Territory of Dialogue’ 5th International Arctic Forum in St. Petersburg in April 2019.

In 2020, Moscow proposed resume regular meetings of the heads of countries comprising the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS). It was put forward by the

Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, at the online CBSS ministerial meeting held in mid-May (because of the COVID-19 restrictions, the meeting had to be conducted via the Internet).<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, it seems that a real breakthrough in reforming the system of international relations in the Baltic Sea region — as well as in the entire contact zone between Russia and the Western alliance — will be possible only when the countries of the region perceive themselves as subjects with their own interests, and not just tools in the rivalry between Moscow and Washington; when they recognize that counting on further ‘geopolitical contraction’ of Russia and guaranteed American protection bears no prospects for building their own strategic priorities.

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<sup>20</sup> Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks at the ministerial meeting of the Council of the Baltic Sea States, May 19, 2020 // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. URL: [https://special.mid.ru/en/web/guest/soviet-gosudarstv-baltijskogo-mora-sgbm/-/asset\\_publisher/OvP3hQoCPRg5/content/id/4137846](https://special.mid.ru/en/web/guest/soviet-gosudarstv-baltijskogo-mora-sgbm/-/asset_publisher/OvP3hQoCPRg5/content/id/4137846) (accessed 25.09.2020).

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## The author

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**Pavel E. Smirnov**, Senior Research Fellow, Institute for the US and Canadian Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia.

E-mail: [smi-pavel@yandex.ru](mailto:smi-pavel@yandex.ru)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4757-8099>

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