

SECURITY IN THE BALTIC
REGION AS A PROJECTION
OF GLOBAL
CONFRONTATION BETWEEN
RUSSIA AND THE USA

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This article considers the problem of security in the Baltic region, namely, that of Poland and the Baltics. The authors rely on the works of Karl Deutsch, Emanuel Adler, on Michael Barnett's theory of security communities and Barry Buzan's regional security complex theory, address Steven Mann's controlled chaos theory and the concept of Intermarium. Their starting assumption is that the situation in the Baltic depends largely on the politics of external powers — Russia and the United States, — being a projection of their global geopolitical confrontation.

The US strategy thus becomes a major part of the equation. The authors believe that since the end of the second Iraq war the American elite has been divided along ideological lines into adherents of the chaos theory and traditionalists thinking in terms of sharing control with the other centres of global power.

The US strategy in the Baltic region does not seek an open military conflict with Russia. On the contrary, the US strives to preserve the current level of confrontation between Russia and the EU, convincing the latter of the reality of the Russian threat. Countries that traditionally support confrontation with Russia, Poland and the Baltics, serve as a conduit for Washington strategy in Europe and a cordon sanitaire. This function is implemented through the Intermarium project meant to separate Russia from the EU. The four countries are rather active in this area, striving to attain the status of the US principal partners in the region and Europe in general.

To retaliate, Moscow does everything within its power to 'separate' Brussels from Washington, yet the US influence is still very strong in Europe.

Key words: Baltic region, regional security complex, Barry Buzan, US strategy, chaos theory, Intermarium, Russia-EU relations

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The Baltic region — from a community to a regional security complex

The Baltics — Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia — and Poland have found themselves in the midst of the global confrontation between Russia and the US (NATO). Although it is possible to study the relevant processes practically, the problem leaves room for an effective theoretical approach. In this context, it is appropriate to consider the concept of a security community, which was formulated by Karl Deutsch and later developed by Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett [13; 20], and Barry Buzan's idea of regional security complex [17].

The former suggests a constructive approach to solving any problem that has prevailed in a certain region. Such an approach is based on common interests, values, identity, and trust rather confrontation. One might have supposed that, after the Cold War, the Baltic region would become a territory of peace and accord. Moreover, the accession of Poland and the Baltics to NATO must have boosted these hopes. There was a possibility that NATO membership would help these countries to overcome the distrust of Russia's foreign policy and lay a foundation for improving the complicated Russian-Baltic relations.

However, practice shows that no reset took place in Russian-Baltic relations in 2004—2016. This is explained by the fact that the primary motivation behind Poland's and the Baltics' accession to the Euro-Atlantic structure was the four countries' pragmatic intention to ensure national economic, military, and political security through gaining access to the resources of the EU and NATO. The Baltic political elites tried to prevent Russia's dominant influence on their countries and to distance themselves from the military, political, and economic institutions and organisations established by the Russian Federation [29]. Thus, the Baltic States contributed to a rift between the EU/NATO and Russia rather than to the formation of a 'security community' in the Baltic.

The Ukraine conflict exacerbated the poor relations between Russia and the Baltics. A 'security community' did not emerge in the region. Barry Buzan's concept — a development of Deutsch's, Adler's and Barnett's ideas — provides a more effective framework for an empirical study. Moreover, it focuses on security, which is being brought to the foreground in the Baltic region.

To be more specific, Buzan suggests four levels of analysis [17, c. 51]. The first, domestic, level requires examining the features of a concrete state of the region (its politics, economy, and identity). The second one — the level of state-to-state relations — focuses on interactions between the region's countries. The third — regional — level concentrates on the interactions between neighbouring security complexes. Finally, Buzan considers the global powers, whose interplay can have a decisive effect on the region's development.



The authors of this article believe that the fourth level of analysis is crucial to the Baltic Sea region. In this context, the global powers are the US and Russia. It can be stated with a high degree of certainty that the situation in the Baltic is merely a projection of the global geopolitical confrontation. Whereas Moscow's position is rather consistent and clear, the American elite has recently demonstrated a lack of a single strategy, which cannot but affect Washington's policy in the Baltic region. Thus, the analysis will start with a description of the dual (or even triple) approach of the United States.

Chaos theory, realism, and neo-isolationism in the US foreign policy

The second Iraq war is a watershed event for the understanding of the global US strategy. When the project of the Near and Middle East democratisation, which had been launched under the pretext of the war on terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11, failed, the US strategic thinkers were faced with a problem of revising their approach to global politics and finding new enemies and the methods to overpower them. At this point, a serious ideological conflict took place.

The Russian expert on international relations, Sergey Karaganov, stresses, 'It is important to understand that our partners have failed and lost their way, especially, the American partners... There are open conflicts between different elite groups. The US has lost its strategic vision' [1].

In developing this thought of the influential expert on international relations, one must stress that the principal goal — the US global dominance — has never been questioned. However, different ways to attain it have been proposed. The US elite can be divided into two and, since recently, even three groups (it is important to understand that the corresponding division lines run through almost all political institutions of the country — the President's Administration, the State Department, the Pentagon, the CIA, etc.).

The members of the first group can be called proponents of the controlled chaos theory, which was formulated by Steven Mann [4]. This theory suggests that the US must be ready to encourage and exploit chaos and create hotspots of tensions if this corresponds to the country's national interests. George W. Bush laid the groundwork for a transition to this strategy [7] when the democratisation experiment in the Near and Middle East — which was backed by his team's neo-conservatives such as Dick Cheney — threw Iraq into chaos. Apparently, it was decided to use this situation to the benefit of the US. Probably, the so-called Arab Spring was a conscious continuation of this trend.

The second elite group can be referred to as 'traditionalists'. Its members advocate the classical theory of neo-realism. Veterans of the Cold War, they think in terms of spheres of influence and they are ready for a new round of division, should circumstances call for it. The moderate political wing was represented by Barack Obama, who — according to Henry Kissinger — can be called an ideological rather than strategic realist [30]. The conflicts in

Ukraine and Syria showed that he was not inclined to escalate tensions with Russia and that he was ready for negotiations to mitigate the situation in the war zones. However, Obama had difficulty in dealing with the influence of the ‘hawks’ in the mentioned regions.

Hillary Clinton is a ‘hawk’, a politician who believes in the need to increase political, military, and economic pressure on Russia in order to weaken the country, for instance, by creating hotspots of tension (chaos) at its borders — in Ukraine and the Baltics, where NATO forces have been deployed. The traditional realist Kissinger, who already met Donald Trump to discuss the future foreign policy of the US, said in 2015, ‘If we treat Russia seriously as a great power, we need at an early stage to determine whether their concerns can be reconciled with our necessities. We should explore the possibilities of a status of non-military grouping on the territory between Russia and the existing frontiers of NATO... breaking Russia has become an objective; the long-range purpose should be to integrate it’ [30].

In this context, it is important to consider the following. The advocates of ‘chaos’ deny the existence of any alternative centres of power and strive to beat any rival, whereas ‘realists’ concede the possibility of being the first power among equals.

It would be appropriate to examine a case of the competition between these approaches. The scene of action is the Near and Middle East. The Arab Spring that spread across the region strongly resembles the ‘controlled chaos theory’ in action. Probably, its authors were considering Syria and, later, Iran as its next victims. In 2013, under the pretext of the use of chemical weapons by Bashar al-Assad, the US was ready to start a military operation against Damascus.

At that point, the President of Russia Vladimir Putin approached his counterpart in Washington with a proposal to dispose of Syrian chemical weapons together. It is important that Barack Obama agreed to the Russian President’s plan. Thus, the US leader and his team of ‘realists’ (including the then Secretary of State John Kerry) did not let the aggressive wing of the American elite to generate another hotspot of ‘great chaos’. The civil war in Syria has not ended so far. However, Assad managed to prevent the Libyan scenario. Moreover, he concluded a treaty with Iran. Thus, attacks on ‘preachers with a nuclear bomb’ were off the agenda. A similar confrontation can be observed in Ukraine¹.

The personification of the third group is Donald Trump. For a long time, it was completely unclear what Trump’s programme was and who the people

¹ The influential German magazine *Der Spiegel* published a detailed account of how the ex-Commander of NATO forces in Europe and his supporters consciously exaggerated the Russian threat in Ukraine to lobby the decision on supplying lethal weapon to Kyiv, which would have naturally exacerbate the conflict in Donbass. At the same time, Breedlove and his supporters complained about the politically naïve and counterproductive policies pursued by Barack Obama and Angela Merkel, who tried to ease the tension. (URL: <https://russian.rt.com/inotv/2016-07-26/Spiegel-povedal-zachem-bivshij-glavkom> (accessed on 10.09.2016).



behind his march to power were. All the statements on domestic and especially foreign policy, which were made by the eccentric politician, reminded of endless improvisation. Some clarity came from Trump's interview with *The Washington Post*. He formulated several simple theses, which revealed a professional touch and a clear strategic vision. Trump said, 'we built schools in Iraq and they'd be blown up. And we'd build another one and it would get blown up. And we would rebuild it three times. And yet we can't build a school in Brooklyn... Ukraine is a country that affects us far less than it affects other countries in NATO, and yet we are doing all of the lifting, they're not doing anything. And I say, why is it that Germany is not dealing with NATO on Ukraine? Why is it that other countries that are in the vicinity of the Ukraine not dealing with — why are we always the one that's leading, potentially the third world war, okay, with Russia? Why are we always the ones that are doing it? And I think the concept of NATO is good, but I do think the United States has to have some help... South Korea is very rich. Great industrial country. And yet we're not reimbursed fairly for what we do. We're constantly, you know, sending our ships, sending our planes, doing our war games, doing other. We're reimbursed a fraction of what this is all costing' [12].

Trump acts as a conduit of the classical position of American isolationism. He virtually proposes a revised Monroe Doctrine, which asserted the right of the US not to intervene in the affairs of the outer world and to concentrate on its own development. As Trump put it, 'I do think it's a different world today and I don't think we should be nation building anymore. I think it's proven not to work. And we have a different country than we did then. You know we have 19 trillion dollars in debt. We're sitting probably on a bubble and, you know, it's a bubble that if it breaks is going to be very nasty. And I just think we have to rebuild our country... And at what point do you say hey, we have to take care of ourselves. So, you know, I know the outer world exists and I'll be very cognizant of that but at the same time, our country is disintegrating, large sections of it' [12].

Isolationism has not been dominant in the US foreign policy so far. However, Donald Trump's victory in the presidential election suggests that the country's foreign policy can be seriously adjusted. In his speech in Cincinnati, Ohio, on December 1, 2016, Trump said, 'We will pursue a new foreign policy that finally learns from the mistakes of the past... We will stop looking to topple regimes and overthrow governments... Our goal is stability not chaos, because we want to rebuild our country' [23]. At the same time, the meeting between Donald Trump and Henry Kissinger suggests that the President's nationalistic isolationism can be compatible with the position of 'traditionalists' at some points.

A sign of possible changes in the US foreign policy agenda were the first appointments of the newly elected President. For instance, he appointed the CEO of ExxonMobil Rex Tillerson, who is often dubbed 'Putin's friend' in the West, the Secretary of State and Michael Flynn, who believes that the main priority of the US foreign policy is the fight against international terrorism, which requires cooperation with Russia, the National Security Adviser [21].

The Baltic Intermarium

Let us try to project the above approaches to the Baltic region, starting with the ‘chaotic’ and ‘realistic’ ones. Russian media often talk about NATO’s preparations of a strategic position to attack the Russian Federation, especially in the context of the deployment of a missile defence system. For instance, the military expert Igor Korotchenko states, ‘Today, Russia is an actual military adversary of the US. Thus, NATO’s system of mission and operation planning does not only consider a war with Russia possible, it is preparing for such a war. The statements made by the former and current SACEURs reflect this fact, showing the tip of the iceberg. These political statements require a relevant framework. It consists in the fact that, without waiting for the decision of the Warsaw summit, the Alliance started to build military infrastructure on the territory of the countries that can become a support base for groupings aimed against Russia. These are the Baltics, Poland, Romania, and other states’ [3]. Frants Klintsevich, the deputy head of the Security and Defence Committee of the Federation Council, commented on the deployment of NATO forces in the former Soviet military bases in Eastern Europe as follows, ‘They have many serious plans in the framework of the so-called global strike. In effect, they are building a base that can receive equipment and become a platform for bigger plans’ [2]. However, the Alliance keeps insisting that it is simply responding to Moscow’s actions in Ukraine.

The point is not that Russia and the West have different reference points. The Kremlin believes that the red line was crossed when the US and the EU supported the coup in Ukraine but the US and the Europeans explain their actions by the ‘annexation of Crimea’. Obviously, the West understands that Moscow is right. However, it continues to interpret the events in its own favour. The question is to which end the West does it or, in other words, whether a military showdown between Russia and NATO is possible.

Politicians, the military, and experts not only in the West but also in the Baltics concede that a total war between Russia and NATO is highly improbable. In an interview with the Swiss newspaper *Neuer Zürcher Zeitung* in December 2015, the President of Estonia Toomas H. Ilves said, ‘Fears that Russia will directly attack the Baltic nations, or even launch a hybrid war, are exaggerated... We are a NATO member and Russia will not pit itself against NATO’ [22].

Similar opinions are found in the reports of national secret services. For instance, a 2016 report of the Estonian Information Board stresses, ‘Although unlikely, the use of military power against the Baltic States cannot be entirely ruled out’ [6]. Lithuania’s secret services believe that the military strengthening of the Baltic States and NATO defence capabilities are considered as a scare tactic aimed to reduce the probability that Russia takes a step from preparing a conflict towards the actual use of military force [5].

This leads to a simple conclusion: all the political manoeuvres of the US/NATO in the Baltics and Poland are a geopolitical game aimed at a strategic confrontation between Russia and Europe.

The logic behind it is very simple. The US does not need a cohesive — and especially federative — European Union, which could become a partner



of the Eurasian Economic Union. Therefore, it is imperative to convince the Europeans that the Russian threat is real. This was accomplished to a degree. For instance, the decision on deploying NATO multinational battle groups in the Baltics and Poland was reached at the Warsaw summit in July 2016. Moscow's actions in the Baltic region have been mostly reactive. Russia's leadership has to respond by strengthening the country's military potential at its western borders (the nuclear-capable Iskander missiles and the Bastion mobile anti-ship defence system have been sent to the Kaliningrad region). This quickens the spiral of confrontation, turning the Baltic region into 'a most vulnerable point for escalation due to a number of factors that correlate with the above common Russia-NATO framework' [8].

At the same time, the Baltic region is not perceived as a scene for 'controlled chaos', since it is part of the common Euro-Atlantic civilizational and institutional space. The US 'hawks' and 'realists', although they compete fiercely in other parts of the planet, agree that it should become a 'geopolitical fence' between Russia and the EU. In this context, the concept of *Intermarium* seems very relevant.

At the end of 2016, the head of Stratfor George Friedman addressed the idea of *Intermarium* in his speech to the Chicago Council of Global Affairs [24]. The concept was formulated by the Polish politician and military commander Józef Piłsudski. It suggested establishing a Polish-led alliance of nations, spanning from the Baltic to the Black Sea and comprising the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Finland, and the Baltics. This would create a 'buffer zone' between Russia and 'old' Europe — primarily, between Russia and Germany. According to Friedman, this is a major foreign policy goal of the US, because, otherwise, Germany's capital and technology joined with Russia's natural resources and labour force would produce an unbeatable combination.

The above is not a deliberation of a single expert. These conclusions are corroborated by the following facts. In September 2015, the Three Seas Initiative bringing together the countries of the Baltic-Black-Adriatic Seas region — a revision of Piłsudski's *Intermarium* — was presented at a forum chaired by the President of Croatia Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. The initiative was supported by the United States — Joe Biden visited Croatia to negotiate with Grabar-Kitarović [16]. The first meeting of the stakeholder countries — Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, and the Czech Republic — took place on September 29, 2015, in New York at the Atlantic Council. One of the key goals of this initiative is strengthening economic partnerships and running joint energy and transport projects [14]. The plans to build a gas pipeline to connect the Baltics' and Croatia's LNG terminals betray the anti-Russian sentiment of this initiative and the ambition to minimise the Russian presence in the European gas market under the pretext of diversifying energy supply.

According to Buzan's levels of analysis, the only question left is why Poland and the Baltics are ready to serve as a conduit for the US interests in Europe.

There are several reasons for such behaviour.

Firstly, it is the tragic historical memories of relations with Moscow. Russia's actions in Ukraine have contributed to the subconscious phobia and



the principal desire to oppose Moscow. Secondly, the Baltic Republics and Poland have traditionally relied on the US rather than the EU for their security, viewing the latter as a tool to improve their economic well-being. Here one may recall the memorandum prepared in November 2015 by the Lithuanian conservative party ‘Homeland Union — Lithuanian Christian Democrats’ and titled *Strategy for Political Deterrence of Russia in the Baltic region*. The authors of the report — Andrius Kubilius, Rasa Juknevičienė, Laurynas Kasčiūnas, and Žygimantas Pavilionis — are convinced that the US presence in the region has to be strengthened. ‘We need the US leadership and we believe that the current US administration underestimates Russia’s political regime and we need this leadership back in the region’ [27]. The document suggests that the goal of Lithuania is to become a strategic partner for the US in the Baltic. To this end, they are ready to coordinate the national interests of Lithuania and the US as regards ‘disseminating Western values eastward of the country’s borders, thus weakening Putin’s regime and authoritative politicians’.

Lithuania’s preoccupation with the US leadership on the European continent is explained by not only on the countries’ common interests in the Baltic Sea region but also the recently revealed lack of solidarity and enthusiasm among the Western European states about sending their troops to defend the Baltics.

According to a survey carried out by the Pew Research Centre in June 2015, most respondents in Germany (58%), France (53%), and Italy (51%) said that their countries should not send national forces to defend NATO allies in case of a military conflict with Russia [15; 25]. Moreover, even Britain is becoming increasingly sceptical about NATO. For instance, the leader of the Labour Party Jeremy Corbyn called for a refusal to commit to NATO obligations when speaking to a party audience on August 19, 2016. His words were met with applause [18].

The results of surveys carried out in Western European states are a worrying signal to the Baltic politicians, who are coming to believe that the stronger the US presence in the region, the safer the Baltics. The ‘America first’ motto is promoted aggressively at the local expert level to substantiate the need to deploy US troops in the Baltic and to instil confidence that the US will react to Russian aggression immediately, whereas other NATO allies will tarry, discussing the decision on military support at the political level [28].

Thirdly, the Stratfor Decade Forecast for 2015—2025 emphasises the role of Poland as a potential leader of the EU and an anti-Russian coalition and, probably, the key ally of the US in Europe [19]. Poland is striving to live up to this status. For instance, Warsaw insists on withdrawing from the 1997 Russia-NATO act and mitigating the periphery position of the new NATO members through ensuring ‘an equal level of security’ between Western Europe and the new Alliance members. One may recall the words of Poland’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Witold Waszczykowski, ‘NATO cannot have two levels of security, namely one for Western Europe with US troops, with military bases and defence installations and the other for Poland, without these elements’ [26].



The Baltics understand and approve of Poland's increasing role as a counterweight to the possible rapprochement between Russia and the EU. Thus, the local political circles are ready to acknowledge Poland's leadership in the region and curb their own regional ambitions. This holds especially true for Lithuania. On November 13, 2015, the Seimas discussed the issue of Russian deterrence in the Baltic Sea region. Lithuanian conservatives stressed, 'We are open to Poland. Poland is witnessing a revival of authentic political forces with clear values. We believe that today's Poland deserves to be a responsible regional leader and Lithuania can support such regional leadership' [27].

Thus, the Polish-Lithuanian and Polish-Baltic interests converge when it comes to security policy in the region and promoting the anti-Russian European agenda.

Finally, the anti-Russian sentiment can be used for domestic policy purposes. As a rule, the Baltics' right politicians place a heavy emphasis on geopolitical threats emanating from Russia. The Moscow argument has always helped the conservative political parties to mobilise support from their electorate. Here one may recall that the anti-Russian rhetoric was becoming increasingly belligerent on the eve of the autumn parliamentary elections in Lithuania. Even the left parties, for instance, the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania, were forced to support the anti-Russian sentiment, which they had not adopted before, under the influence of the aggressive media campaign.

Russia's response

Apparently, Russia's leadership understands the opponent's strategy. At the same time, it cannot but give a symmetric response and strengthen national security. Russia positions itself as one of the leaders of the world that set the global agenda. This presupposes a need to react to challenges coming from an alternative centre of power. For instance, Russia's National Security Strategy of December 31, 2015 names 'consolidating the Russian Federation's status as a leading world power, whose actions are aimed at maintaining strategic stability and mutually beneficial partnerships in a polycentric world' a key national priority [10].

Therefore, Russia cannot ignore the actions of NATO, especially, the deployment of missile defence systems in Eastern Europe (note that such systems are designed for the launch of not only interceptors but also cruise missiles and that the range of such systems can be increased in the future). The deployment of additional personnel, changes in the Baltic fleet command, and the strengthening of the military potential of the Kaliningrad region seem to be logical steps.

However, understanding that the strategic goal of the United States is preserving the current rift between Russia and Western Europe urges the Russian leadership to overcome estrangement from the European Union and to restore trust that has been lost over the recent years.

Overall, the European Union demonstrates a trend towards political and, what is more important, economic weariness of the confrontation with Rus-

sia. This hypothesis can be corroborated by the visits of European politicians to Crimea, the unwillingness of certain EU member states to renew sanctions against Russia automatically, and the speech of the head of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker at the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum. At the Saint Petersburg Forum, Juncker said, 'I take the view that we must also talk with Russia — its leadership, its people. For some this may be a radical idea, for me it is common sense' [11].

Against this background, the term 'Putin's friends' was coined (it is used to refer to individual politicians and political powers in different EU countries [9]). However, it is too early to speak of a shift in the European public consciousness and the mind frame of the European elites. Moreover, the US influence on Brussels is strong enough to prevent the EU from a rapprochement with Moscow. However, there are grounds to believe that the situation may change for the better in a short-term perspective.

Conclusions

The strategic significance of the Baltic region, which had attracted only sporadic attention of the leading Western powers (primarily the US) before the Ukraine crisis, has increased dramatically. Regional security is likely to depend on the policies pursued by the two major players — the US and Russia.

For the US, the Russian deterrence on the eastern flank of NATO is a sign of confidence in the Alliance and the US foreign policy. At the same time, there is no intention to provoke Russia into a military conflict. The main goal of the US is to preserve the confrontation between Russia and the EU and prevent a possible rapprochement between Russia and Western Europe by creating a 'buffer zone' comprising Central and Eastern European states and the Baltics. An increase in NATO's military presence on the eastern flank and the stoking of militaristic attitudes through an aggressive anti-Russian information campaign reinforce the above trends and contribute to a further rift between Russia and Western Europe (foremost, Germany).

The actions of Russia's leadership are mostly reactive and they are aimed at compensating for the strengthening of NATO military forces in the Baltic region.

It is early to speak of a radical change in the European public consciousness and the mind frame of the European political elite, which could indicate a desire to normalise the relations with Russia. However, there are grounds to believe that the situation will improve when the new US administration formulates its position and the elections in France and Germany are held.

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