

THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS AND THE KALININGRAD REGION OF RUSSIA AS A SUB-REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX

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The formal indivisibility of security, which theorists in the field of international relations speak of, is an indisputable thing. Although the development of military technology, the format of globalization, a critical attitude towards classical geopolitics have led to an underestimation of the spatial factor, regionalisation has once again proved that it is an integral part of globalisation and its alter ego. At the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, political developments in Europe are closely connected with military security. Although this interdependence is not new, the regional security system has been relatively stable for quite some time. The steadily, albeit gradually aggravating situation around the Kaliningrad region and the Republic of Belarus has caused a response — coordinated cooperation in the framework of the Union State. The consequence of which was the formation of a sub-regional security complex (SRSC), which includes the Republic of Belarus and Russia's Kaliningrad region. And a theoretical justification for the formation of this complex is the focus of this article. The authors determine the floating boundaries of the SRSC, where spatial effects of military-political ties take on a special character. This study aims to apply and adapt the concept of regional security complexes to the military-political space of the eastern part of the Baltic Sea. The practical implications of this research include substantiating the interconnectedness and interdependence of security doctrines and practices in a troubled region of Europe.

Keywords: the Republic of Belarus, Kaliningrad region, Russian Federation, Baltic Sea region, USA, NATO, regional security complex, subregional security complex

Introduction

The end of the Cold War fundamentally changed the military-political and military-strategic situation in the world. Yet, it took several more decades to understand the obvious: ‘great power war is now too dangerous and costly to be rational’ [1]. Within this paradigm, a global conflict is improbable, but a regional one is possible. Escalation on the brink of war (a tool for attaining

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foreign policy goals as old as time) has been pursued in the Baltic region as a whole and in particular around the Kaliningrad region, which became an exclave of the sovereign Russian Federation after the USSR was dissolved.

The continued build-up of tension at Russia's western borders is obvious: this fact is recognised by all the parties to the potential conflict. The question is what research approaches can be adopted when analysing the situation.

This study aims to operationalise the concepts of a regional security complex (RSC) for a concrete geographical region.

To reach this goal, several objectives will be reached:

- substantiating the possibility of applying the RSC theory to study security at the interface of the post-Soviet space, on the one hand, and Eastern and Northern Europe, on the other;
- providing evidence for the formation of a Belarus–Russia's Kaliningrad region subregional security complex;
- determining the composition and delimiting the subregional security complex.

Theoretical framework of the study

It must be assumed that, despite the growing unpredictability and the evident increase in the amount of chaos, the international system continues to exist. Chaos does not dismantle the international system: the former is presently a characteristic of the latter.

We build on the definition proposed by Barry Buzan and Richard Little: international systems are 'the largest conglomerates of interacting or interdependent units' [2, p. 69]. This interpretation does not preclude the examination of major regions (constituents of states) as parts or a special level of the international system. 'The reference object of security is the state as a rational political formation whose behaviour is conditioned by national interests and striving for unfettered might and absolute power, whilst security is perceived as defence from the invasion of external enemies and threats' [3, p. 47]. The question arises here as to the status of regions. Can one or several regions act as references for a country or an RSC?

We are prone to agree with the expert opinion that Buzan and Wæver have built their regional security complex theory on Karl Deutsch's concept. For Deutsch, security communities are not so much a group of states that are geographically proximate or imperilled by a common enemy as countries sharing common basic values, having similar socio-political and economic systems and pursuing more or less similar social ideals.

Buzan and Wæver placed emphasis on security issues and accepted Deutsch's theory at the level of regions.

The issues of regional security became an essential part of Russian research into international relations theory. As Aleksey Voskresensky cogently points out, 'global integrated regional studies rest on the assumption that, "between" the global approach, the real-world politics and state-to-state relations, there is a regional level, which emerged as the ever-transforming system transitioned from bipolarity/unipolarity to polycentricity' [4, p. 10]. If this is true, at the regional level there may be a 'fulcrum' around which a security system is built. A regional security complex is a group of states bound by a significant and unique set of relations regarding security, which ensures a high degree of interdependence between the countries [5, p. 25]. It is worth noting that interdependence is key here, which apparently has a bearing on military issues and a wide spectrum of economic and political problems. This aspect has been explored in the Estonian and Latvian context in the works of Lanko [6; 7].

The regional security complex theory (RSCT) is believed to originate from the works of the Copenhagen School affiliated with the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute (COPRI). The general ideas of RSC, however, were formulated earlier in Buzan's 1983 text *People, States and Fear*. He defined an RSC as 'a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national security cannot realistically be considered apart from one another' [8, p. 106]. Later, Buzan and Wæver were the most prominent contributors to the theory.

Buzan proposes a 'matrix' for area studies, which postulates four levels of interaction: the domestic political component of the region's states ('is the state strong or weak?'); state-to-state relations in the region; the RSC's interaction with other regions; the role of global powers in the region (the interplay between the regional and global structures) [9, p. 51].

Proponents of that school of thought endeavoured to define the concept of the RSC, its structure and dynamics, and transformations in approaches to national and global security, putting them into a regional perspective. For them, an international region is where the two security domains (national and global) interact and where major events and actions take place. The East Baltic area fits this definition squarely. In the case of the Kaliningrad region, the situation is somewhat complicated by the neorealist tradition not to deal with intra-state regions that do not have sovereignty and many of the rights and privileges enjoyed by even the smallest of states.

Sympathetic to the functional approach, Buzan and Wæver carefully criticise neorealism for having caused the realist international relations theory to 'evolve away from geopolitical and historical specificity towards abstract 'systemic' theory which operates with 'units' that are defined as alike and non-located' [9, p. 69]. This point, highlighted by Lukin, is pivotal in our study [10].

Although Buzan and Wæver are not specialists in political geography or integrated international regional studies, the RCST justly sees geography as a key factor in the analysis of security at a regional rather than global level. This is particularly evident in the case of the object of this study. Most states pay closer attention to the capabilities and intentions of their direct and immediate neighbours. In other words, Polish concerns about Russia's military efforts have more to do with the Baltic Fleet than its Pacific counterpart. Thus, 'spatial dependence accentuates the exceptional role of space in the regionalisation of international security. Space is the thread holding together a country's physical characteristics, public discourse and values. Certainly, the laws and rules of international security are shaped by the players themselves as their interest clash, and this necessitates resolving the conflict by force or consensus' [11, p. 39].

The regional level of analysis provides a more complete explanation of international relations phenomena, including security issues. 'The global and regional levels of security are connected through the mechanism of global powers penetrating into a regional complex' [10, p. 9]. We see the next step as possible as well: a complex of interests of states comprising an RSC may 'penetrate' not into a neighbouring country but into its region. Although this shaping of the problem has not yet been formalised theoretically, it is visible in academic discussion [12–14]. If the thesis about a hierarchy of regions has long been framed within international relations theories, the issue of an RSC hierarchy is much more complicated. In their 2003 book, Buzan and Wæver describe an RSC that has emerged in the post-Soviet space around Russia [9, p. 397–436].

We believe that Russia is too large to be seen as a single regional security complex. From the military-political perspective, Russia can be viewed as an RSC only in the conditions of a third world war, when the defence of Chukotka and Kaliningrad would be governed by the same strategic and tactic considerations.

Methods

Not every concept has adequate research methods. A complete theoretical and methodological apparatus is a sign of a theory, not a concept [15]. Thus, it is sensible to build on the approaches of global integrated regional studies, based on the presence of a regional level between the global approach to real world politics and international state-to-state relations, a level that emerged as the system transitioned from bipolarity/unipolarity to polycentricity and went into the state of constant transformation. 'What can once become global emerges at this level, and the global, as seen in a particular policy, acquires in practical reality a macro-regional and regional character.'

The theoretical approaches adopted in this article draw on the findings of Russia's leading expert Prof. Voskresensky, who has summarised all existing basic approaches to the regionalisation of world politics [16; 17]. Methodologically, the only possible way is to consider first the key issues of international regions' hierarchy and only then move on to those of RSCs.

The adopted methodology, partly borrowed and partly original, is based on the concept of an international region, whose features are as follows:

- continuity of the territory (including the water area), i.e., direct transport links are possible within the boundaries of the region;
- presence of authorities (in different forms and with different functions: from deliberative, whose decisions are not binding, to directive, whose decisions are executed as international agreements having priority over the national legislation);
- relatively close economic ties (trade, investment) between the constituents of a region [18, p. 33].

Today's international regions are characterised by 'multiscaledness', and this notion is the key to understanding regions within functional approaches. Obviously, regions can be formed with a view to political and/or economic analysis, based on the findings of identity and security studies. When delimiting a region, an apt approach is to distinguish between 'rigid' regions with irrevocably delineated borders and those with volatile boundaries. RSC studies, in turn, require an approach not limited to determining significant territorial constant but encompassing regional properties that, at first sight, have little to do with the geographical map.

Such an approach has been proposed by Swedish researcher Gunnarsson, who defines the region as an interaction between actors and institutions within a geographical area [19]. A similar angle has been adopted by Buzan. For him,

a region is ‘a geographically clustered subsystem of states that is sufficiently distinctive in terms of its internal structure and process to be meaningfully differentiated from a wider international system or society of which it is a part’ [20, p. 22].

Another important approach to exploring and analysing international integration is the core element of Deutsch’s security community theory. Without mentioning the word ‘geography’, the American political scientist, points out the fact that when defining a region, we postulate a group of countries connected more closely to each other in terms of many parameters than to other countries [21]. Security communities are groups of states that have converged to the point where they recognise the need for integration or amalgamation. Such integration does not necessarily imply direct geographical neighbourhood but produces the effect of cohesion due to the commonality of regional security interests [22].

Research on globalisation as a pronounced but not the only trend in world development has incorporated a range of approaches relating to spatial analysis, including that of international relations. This concerns concepts such as ‘death of distance’ [23], ‘borderless world’ [24] and ‘the end of geography’ [25; 26]. All of them reflect actual and verified trends falling within the domain of the RSCT. Another salient approach is ‘boundless zoning’ proposed by Prof. Smirnayagin [27].

Firstly, methods for studying RSCs seek to prove the existence of the object of study. Secondly, they strive to identify the borders of RSCs with the second objective being no easier to achieve than the first one.

In our opinion, the characteristics of the regional complex comprising the forces and assets of Russia’s western military district, Poland and the Baltics are such that the existence of an RSC in the region is obvious.

Meso-regional RSCs (mesoRSCs) around Russia

According to Buzan and Wæver, it is more correct to speak of not a Russian RSC but an aggregate of regional theatres, i.e., meso-regional Russia-centred RSCs. At the time of writing (the early 2000s), they identified four subregions [9, p. 414–429], which we propose to view today as mesoregional security complexes (mesoRSCs)¹:

- 1) the Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia);

¹ Buzan and Wæver’s RSCs are also complexes of a megaregional level (megaRSCs).

- 2) the Western 'theatre' (Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova);
- 3) the Caucasus²;
- 4) Central Asia.

There are, however, some doubts over the agency of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the context of such an RSC. Buzan and Wæver acknowledge the complex structure of the Russia-centred RSC. As early as 2003, they stressed that the Baltics 'have generally managed to move out of the post-Soviet sphere' [9, p. 414]. Lithuania's, Latvia's and Estonia's 2004 accession to the EU and NATO and their subsequent integration into the structures of the two associations, as well as the post-2014 geopolitical and military-political changes in the Baltic region, seem to have removed the mesoRSC of the Baltics from the post-Soviet megaRSC and made it part of the megRSC of the European RSC³.

The geopolitical events of 2014⁴ and subsequent years (primarily, the 2020 political crisis in Belarus) caused the mesoRSC of the Western 'theatre' to dissolve. The trajectories of its constituents parted. Ukraine and Moldova are transitioning from the post-Soviet megaRSC into the EU-Europe megaRSC. They have mostly withdrawn from the former but have not yet become a rightful part of the latter. Now they comprise the Southwestern mesoRSC, which occupies a marginal position at the interface of the post-Soviet and European megaRSCs.

Russia-Belarus mesoRSC

Unlike Ukraine and Moldova, which have clearly gravitated towards the West since at least the early 2000s, Belarus, despite technically being part of the Union State with Russia, tried to keep a geopolitical balance between its eastern neighbour and the West throughout the 2010s. This 'equidistance' foreign policy strategy, which went hand in hand with Russian-Belarusian military cooperation, was revised after the 2020 presidential election. Russian-Belarusian convergence in national, most importantly military, security intensified. It is possible and sensible to aver that a Russia-Belarus mesoRSC has eventually emerged, having broken off from the mesoRSC of the Western group of post-Soviet states. The combination of the political-legal formalisa-

² According to Buzan and Wæver, it includes both North Caucasus and South Caucasus.

³ It is also undergoing a transformation after Brexit.

⁴ They, however, started much earlier.

tion of Russian-Belarusian agreements and the actual steps taken in the field promotes the debate on a Russia-Belarus mesoRSC from the level of proving the existence of the object to that of a study proper.

If a conflict with NATO occurs (no other potential enemies of this mesoRSC are visible), conventional warfare, which is improbable but not impossible, will chiefly involve the regional military group, whose creation was specified in bilateral agreements between Russia and Belarus, and the joint air defence system. The military group consists of the armed forces of the Republic of Belarus and Russia's 1st Guards Tank Army⁵. These are, foremost, forces and assets located in Belarus and within Russia's Western military district with headquarters in St. Petersburg⁶. The district was established during the 2008–2010 reform to bring together the Leningrad and Moscow military districts⁷. However, a recent examination of the Union State's response forces has demonstrated that if the forces and assets of the Regional group are not sufficient to ensure the security of the Union State, the troops of other Russian military districts, including the Eastern district, may be involved in the operation [28].

Belarus-Russia's Kaliningrad region subregional security complex (SRSC) within the Russia-Belarus mesoRSC

The Russia-Belarus mesoRSC is not territorially cohesive since it includes the Kaliningrad region — Russia's exclave that does not share a border with the mainland. It is separated from the rest of the country by foreign states, one of which is Belarus (a 'dividing sate' in Yuri Rozhkov-Yuryevsky's terminology) [29, p. 158]). This circumstance, the role Belarus has in maintaining the connection between the region and mainland Russia, and the rising threats to national security (primarily, military ones) necessitate distinguishing a nascent Belarus-Kaliningrad SRSC within the Russia-Belarus mesoRSC.

⁵ Belarusian general says Russian forces ready to assist Belarus in defence, 2021, *Interfax*, 16 May 2021, URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/766204> (accessed 20.06.2022).

⁶ Western military district, 2015, *Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation*, 22.08.2015, URL: https://structure.mil.ru/structure/ministry_of_defence/details.htm?id=9793@egOrganization (accessed 20.06.2022).

⁷ Commander of Western military district congratulates personnel on 151st anniversary of district formation, 2015, *Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation*, 22.08.2015, URL: <https://structure.mil.ru/structure/okruga/west/news/more.htm?id=12053498@egLNews> (accessed 20.06.2022).

The formation of a Belarus-Kaliningrad SRSC in response to shared threats to military security

The SRSC is emerging largely as a response to shared military security threats to Russia's Kaliningrad region and Belarus: heightened military activities and the build-up of NATO forces and assets at the Russian border.

By the end of 2021, about 4,500 US troops were stationed in Poland; it was planned to increase this number by at least 1,000 people, and the infrastructure was being created for a rapid build-up of forces to 20,000⁸. Poznań is home to the forward command of the 5th US Army Corps and the 1st Infantry Division of the US army [30]⁹. In Lithuania's Pabradė, a town at the Belarusian border, a US tank battalion has been on rotation since October 2019 [31] (the 1st battalion of the 66th Armor Regiment and the 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team of the 4th Infantry Division since May 2022)¹⁰. In August 2021, Lithuania opened Camp Herkus for US troops, seeking to make the rotational presence of US troops permanent [32].

Poland's 33rd Air Base in Powidz is used to build a logistics hub for US arms and equipment as part of the Army Prepositioned Stock-2 system: 360 m USD worth, this is the single largest NATO infrastructure project launched over the past 30 years. The logistics hub will be put into operation in mid- or late 2022. It will store the equipment of a US armoured brigade combat team: about 85 main battle tanks, 190 armoured combat vehicles, 35 artillery and four armoured vehicle launched bridges along with hundreds of supporting equipment sets and pieces. If now the deployment of a US armoured brigade in Poland takes 45–60 days, the logistics hub in Powidz will reduce this period to 4–7 days (only the personnel will arrive by air, and they will be equipped with prepositioned assets) [33].

⁸ President ratifies Polish-US defence cooperation agreement, 2020, *PRESIDENT.PL*, 09 listopada 2020, URL: <https://www.president.pl> [8, p. 106]. Later, Buzan and Wæver were the most prominent contributors to the theory./news/president-ratifies-polish-us-defence-cooperation-agreement,37163 (accessed 20.06.2022).

⁹ Press Release — 1st Infantry Division Forward assumes authority of Atlantic Resolve Mission Command Element, 2021, *US Army Europe and Africa*, July 20, 2021, URL: <https://www.europeafrica.army.mil/ArticleViewPressRelease/Article/2700249/press-release-1st-infantry-division-forward-assumes-authority-of-atlantic-resolve/> (accessed 20.06.2022).

¹⁰ US deploys 'combat ready' units to Lithuania, 2009, *LRT.lt*. 2022.06.09, URL: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1715317/us-deploys-combat-ready-units-to-lithuania> (accessed 20.06.2022).

Szczecin is home to the headquarters of NATO's Multinational Corps Northeast¹¹; Elbląg, of the Multinational Division North East¹². A multinational combat team of NATO's enhanced forward presence led by the US is stationed in Poland's Orzysz and Bemowo Piskie, and a similar team led by Germany in Lithuania's Rukla¹³.

In the framework of the Baltic Air Policing mission¹⁴, fighter planes of the NATO member states' air forces were deployed to the Šiauliai Air Base in Lithuania in March 2004, on a rotational basis. Sometimes, BAP uses the Polish air base in Malbork¹⁵ 80 km away from the border with the Kaliningrad region.

Since February 2022, the number of US troops stationed in Poland and Lithuania nearly doubled, having reached 10,000 and over 1,000 people respectively. According to Lithuania's minister of national defence, the combat team of NATO's enhanced forward presence counted 1,600 people on 11 April 2022, compared to 1,103 people on 10 February [34].

B-52H US strategic bombers, equipped to carry nuclear warheads, and B-1B aircraft have flown more than once at the border of the Kaliningrad region, practising attacks on the territory [35; 36]. The commander of the US Air Forces in Europe and Air Forces Africa General Jeffery L. Harrigian publicly confirmed that plans to destroy Russia's integrated air defence system in the Kaliningrad region existed and were perfected [37].

Reconnaissance aircraft of NATO member states, primarily the US and the UK, constantly fly over Poland at the Russian and Belarusian borders, and in

¹¹ Multinational Corps Northeast, 2022, *NATO*, URL: <https://mncne.nato.int> (accessed 20.06.2022).

¹² Multinational Division North East, 2022, *NATO*, URL: <https://mndne.wp.mil.pl/en/https://mncne.nato.int> (accessed 20.06.2022).

¹³ NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence, 2021, *NATO*, March, URL: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/3/pdf/2103-factsheet_efp_en.pdf (accessed 20.06.2022).

¹⁴ Baltic Air Policing, 2022, *NATO Allied Air Command regional complex* [11, p. 9]. We see the next step as possible as well: a complex of interests of states comprising an RSC <https://ac.nato.int/missions/air-policing/baltics> (accessed 20.06.2022); Baltic Air Policing: Lithuania, 2022, *Phantomaviation.nl*, September 2021, URL: <https://phantomaviaRtion.nl/Country/Organizations/NATO/NATO-Air-Policing-Missions/NATO-BAP-Lithuania.htm> (accessed 20.06.2022).

¹⁵ Baltic Air Policing: Poland, 2021, *Phantomaviation.nl*, September 2021, URL: <https://phantomaviation.nl/Country/Organizations/NATO/NATO-Air-Policing-Missions/NATO-BAP-Poland.htm> (accessed 20.06.2022).

the international airspace over the Baltic Sea [38]¹⁶. In December 2019, the US deployed to Šiauliai two Beechcraft RC-12X Guardrail airborne signals intelligence collection platforms. The aircraft make reconnaissance flights at the borders of the Kaliningrad region and Belarus almost daily¹⁷.

The armed forces of Poland and Lithuania, which are NATO member states, are being built up and modernised. On 17 September 2018, the 18th Mechanised Division with headquarters in Poland Siedlce was created about 100 km away from Brest [39]. Following the Dragon-21 exercise held in June 2021, the command of the division was certified, thereby achieving full combat readiness¹⁸. The divisional forces will be built up until 2026¹⁹. The Polish military media wrote straightforwardly that ‘the reason for the formation of a new division is defence from potential aggression from Belarus’²⁰: the new unit is preparing for warfare against the country. The Griffin 2nd Motorised Infantry Brigade headquartered in Klaipeda was created in Lithuania in 2016 and focused on action against the Kaliningrad region [40].

On the pretext of response to the migration crisis, Poland concentrated troops at the Belarusian border, including 23,000 personnel, tanks, anti-aircraft and other heavy weapons. Particularly, the 10th Armoured Brigade of the 11th Cavalry Division was involved, along with the 12th Mechanised Brigade of the 12th Mechanised Division, the 15th Mechanised and 9th Cavalry Brigades of the 16th Mechanised Division, the 15th Air Defence Regiment of the same division, the 6th Airborne Brigade and special task forces units (Nile and Commandos), and the 1st Pomeranian and the 10th Opole Logistic Brigades²¹.

¹⁶ US Air Force arraigned for in-depth reconnaissance in Belarus, 2021, *Izvestiya*, 18 December 2021, URL: <https://iz.ru/1266200/2021-12-18/vvs-ssha-ulichili-v-razvedke-navsiu-glubinu-territorii-belorussii> (accessed 20.06.2022).

¹⁷ Guardrails in Lithuania, 2021, *Scramble*, 23 April 2021, URL: <https://www.scramble.nl/military-news/guardrails-in-lithuania> (accessed 20.06.2022).

¹⁸ Dywizja Zmechanizowana: nowe struktury, ludzie i procedury na starym sprzęcie [KOMENTARZ], 2021, *Defence24*, 02.07.2021, URL: <https://defence24.pl/sily-zbrojne/18-dywizja-zmechanizowana-nowe-struktury-ludzie-i-procedury-na-starym-sprzecie> (accessed 06.01.2022).

¹⁹ Nowa dywizja Wojska Polskiego, 2022, *Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej*, URL: <https://www.gov.pl/web/obrona-narodowa/nowa-dywizja> (accessed 20.06.2022).

²⁰ Nowa polska dywizja — jak będzie wyglądać? [ANALIZA], 2018, *Defence24*, 15.05.2018, URL: <https://defence24.pl/polityka-obronna/nowa-polska-dywizja-jak-bedzie-wygladac-analiza> (accessed 20.06.2022).

²¹ A new eastern campaign, or how Poland’s planing to annex the lands of Western Belarus, 2021, *Military-Political Review Meso-regional RSCs (mesoRSCs) around RussiaBelVPOwæver, it is more correct to speak of not a Russian RSC but an aggregate of regional theatres, i.e. meso-regional*, 20.12.2021, URL: <https://www.belvpo.com/126498.html> (accessed 20.06.2022).

The Ministry of Defence of Belarus called this response inadequate and resembling strike group formation²².

Examining the build-up of the Polish and Lithuanian armed forces leads one to conclude that the two countries coordinate their military policies to the same degree as Russia and Belarus do. Moreover, the sequence of decisions on escalation is irrelevant in this case: more important is the interrelatedness of security threats to the Kaliningrad region and Belarus.

There has been a growing number of publications in the media on the possible directions of NATO military operations against the Russian exclave [see 41]. Characteristically, military activity in the Kaliningrad direction is usually linked to the possibility of a regional conflict involving Belarus. The very existence of the Suwalki Gap discussion confirms that there is a mesoRSC that unites Lithuania, Belarus, Eastern Poland and the Kaliningrad region of Russia into a single problem area.

It is via Belarus and with the help of the Belarusian Armed Forces that Russian forces in the Kaliningrad region will get support and assistance in case of war. In such a case, as it is believed in the West, the Russian troops stationed in the Kaliningrad region and Belarus and the Armed Forces of Belarus could take control of the Suwalki Gap [42], cutting off the NATO forces in the Baltic States and depriving them of the possibility to get reinforcements and supplies by land [43].

For more on the US and NATO military activity in Poland and the Baltics, see our 2019 and 2021 expert reports [44; 45]. As at the time of editing this article, the most recent works on the issue include contributions by Prof. Khudoley and Dr Lanko [46].

The institutional and military framework for the Belarus-Kaliningrad SRSC

This range of threats from the US and NATO has a decisive role in how the Belarus-Kaliningrad SRSC is formed as regards military security. In institutional terms, it is framed by an agreement between Russia and Belarus on the joint ensuring of regional military security, which came into force on 14 May 1999²³. This agreement contains the term ‘region’ defined as the ‘territory of Belarus and Russia’s regions contiguous with the state border of Belarus,

²² Belarus’ and Russia’s aircraft patrol Union State borders, 2021, Parliamentary Assembly of the Union of Belarus and Russia, 21.12.2021, URL: <https://belrus.ru/info/samolety-belorussii-rf-proveli-patrulirovanie-granic-soyuznogo-gosudarstva/> (accessed 20.06.2022).

²³ Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on ensuring of regional military security, 2022, *Electronic legal document and technical standard database*, URL: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/901796828> (accessed 20.06.2022).

including the aerospace, within which a group of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus and the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation will be deployed and act jointly to ensure the security of Belarus and Russia'. One of such Russian territories is the Kaliningrad region.

In military terms, as open sources suggest, the Belarus-Kaliningrad SRSC can be delimited by superimposing the zones of responsibility of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus, some units of Russia's Western military districts (the 1st Armoured Army²⁴, 6th Combined Arms and 20th Guards Combined Arms Army [47, p. 9–23]), the Joint Regional Air Defence System of Russian and Belarus, and the Russian forces and assets located in the Kaliningrad region [47, p. 42–51].

The Russian armed forces based in the Kaliningrad region (and elsewhere) and the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus has been long considered by international experts as parts of a single military structure. It has been argued that all the Belarusian wartime land operations will be planned in Moscow and carried out under the command of a Russian general, whilst Belarusian anti-aircraft weapons are viewed as an extension of the Russian air defence system [48, p. 18]. It has also been maintained that 'Belarus plays an integral part in Russian military thinking and organization when it comes to the defence of the country's Western borders... [Belarus] is a buffer state, part of a Russian strategy of extended defence' [49, p. 57].

Military cooperation has been named the principal area of partnership between the Kaliningrad region and Belarus. Two main aspects are usually emphasised here. The first one is the significance of Belarus for the aerospace security of Kaliningrad. The divisions of S-400 surface-to-air missile system and S-300 in Belarus deployed in the framework of the joint air defence system ensure air security in the space between Kaliningrad and Belarus and can prevent NATO aviation from entering the space of the three Baltic States. The second aspect is the role Belarus has in taking control of the Suwalki Gap in case of warfare [50].

Further avenues of research on the Belarus-Kaliningrad SRSC

In this work, we focused on the place and role of the Belarus-Kaliningrad SRSC in ensuring military and military-political security since the complex develops chiefly in the mentioned area. At the same time, further research

²⁴ The core of the Russian part of the Regional group of the Union State forces .

should look at the role the SRSC plays in ensuring the economic security of Russia and Belarus. Without going into too much detail, it can be said that the socioeconomic ties between Belarus and the Kaliningrad region must be expanded and strengthened. Debate on an economic triangle Belarus-Kaliningrad-St. Petersburg (and the Leningrad region) should also be encouraged, partly because of Belarusian exports and imports being rerouted from the ports of the Baltics to the Russian ports on the Baltic Sea.

It is also necessary to reconfirm the borders of the SRSC. One might expect them to be fuzzy, i.e., the borders determined from the perspective of military-political and military security will not coincide with the borders identified from the perspective of economic security. But examining this issue in greater detail is beyond the scope of this article.

There is a need to explore the interactions between this SRSC and the other security complexes in the Baltic region from the perspective of military and military-political security (which prevail today) and from that of creating conditions for resumed economic cooperation, at least at the pre-2014 level [51].

Cross-border cooperation between the SRSC and the regions of neighbouring states deserves special attention. Despite the complications and tensions at the intergovernmental level, such collaborations may help preserve cooperation and dialogue, as well as simplify the possible future restoration and development of relations between the states.

Conclusions

Academic developments, including advances in security studies, require an interdisciplinary approach. Understanding regional and sub-regional security complexes is only possible as a two-way process, which might build on the international relations theory or integrated international regional studies. However, the classical geographical approach, where complexity is 'embedded' at the theoretical and methodological level, can also be a starting point for analysis. Whilst considering space as a systemic framework for the regional security system, we posit the primacy of political factors in the formation of a SRSC.

Drawing on our long experience of studying regional security issues in the eastern part of the Baltic Sea, we have found it possible to delimit subregions in the SRSC in question, identify its structure and prove its cohesiveness from the political-geographical and military-geographical perspectives.

Understanding the military aspects of security has a supporting role here, albeit the geographical borders of the region and subregions cannot be identi-

fied without the knowledge of the current technical capabilities of the forces and their deployment. The 'global powers' are spatial in two ways. Firstly, superpowers are territorial; secondly, they reformat dependent spaces, promoting their vision of security. This is how conflict zones with fuzzy borders emerge. These zones, or RSCs, are based on the mutual recognition of interpenetrating security conditions and consist of SRSCs. Together, they define a systemic spatial structure of global security policy.

The events related to the special military operation can be interpreted as a confirmation of our hypothesis. Although they unfold in another RSC, this complex overlaps with the object of this study as both include Belarus. The thesis that the existence of global security does not negate its regional structure has been tested. At the same time, the RSC itself is fuzzy and dynamic.

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