

THE 'COOL WAR' IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION: CONSEQUENCES AND FUTURE SCENARIOS

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The relevance of this topic is determined by the Baltic region playing a special role in the current confrontation between Russia and the West, which is most accurately defined by the term 'cool war'. Russia borders on the EU and NATO in that region. In this study, I aim to demonstrate the impact of the 'cool war' on international relations in the region and explain why the preservation of the status quo is the most likely scenario. I conclude that, in recent years, a certain regrouping has occurred in the region: there has been a stepping-up on the activities of the US and NATO, whereas the influence of EU institutions has decreased. A deep rift has developed between Russia and all other states in the region. There are five possible mid-term scenarios, ranging from outright confrontation to effective cooperation: an armed conflict, a dramatic aggravation of the current tensions without an armed conflict, the continuation of the 'cool war', the normalisation of relations, and a transition to large-scale cooperation. I argue that the 'cool war' scenario is the most likely, and the other four belong to the realm of the politically possible. Although the improvement of relations with the other states in the region is not very probable, Russia will benefit from taking every possible step towards it.

Keywords:

Baltic Sea region, cool war, Cold War, foreign policy of Russia,
USA, NATO, European Union

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Introduction

The deterioration of the world situation is visible in the confrontation between Russia and the West. Many politicians, experts, and journalists refer to it as a ‘new Cold War’. This designation, however, is not universal. On February 4, 2019, Sergey Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, stressed in his speech that we were facing a new era rather than a new cold war.¹ According to Gültekin Sümer’s definition, which is the most accurate in my opinion, a cold war is ‘the highest stage of a polarized tension between two actors’. At the time of the Cold War, two actors monopolised world politics. Convinced that they were acting in the best interests of humanity, they made international relations extremely ideologised. Firstly, any step taken by one actor, no matter how insignificant, was interpreted by the other as an existential threat. Secondly, both societies felt that they had an enemy that threatened their very existence. Thirdly, there was a threat of escalation to an all-out war [1].

I believe that today we are facing a completely different phenomenon. Firstly, the Cold War was not a mere confrontation between two power blocs but rather a conflict between two antagonistic socio-political systems, each seeking to destroy the other. What we have now is 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 civilisations. The goal of the actors is not to destroy each other but to change those international rules that, in their opinion, jeopardise their interests. The conflict is not antagonistic, and reconciliation is essentially possible. Although both parties are filled with fervour, the tensions do not stand comparison with the hatred of the Cold War.

Secondly, unlike the Cold War, today’s confrontation is not global. Many countries of Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the post-Soviet space do not have a stance on the conflict.

Thirdly, the major areas of confrontation have changed. At the heart of the Cold War were the arms race and, to a lesser extent, ideological struggle. Today, the front line of confrontation runs through the realms of economy and cyberspace.

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. The speech and question and answer session given by Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov at the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, Bishkek, February 4, 2019. Official Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Available at: http://www.mid.ru/posledniye_dobavlenniyeh/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQUMdqBY/content/id/3499736 (accessed 10.02.2019).

Fourthly, countries are engaged in dialogue more deeply than they were during the Cold War: secret services and the military maintain contacts, which were unthinkable in the past; collaborations in culture, science, and education maintain their momentum.

Today's situation is described more accurately by the term *cool war* [2]. Naturally, this does not mean that one should underestimate the dangers and threats that might arise in the future. The major problem here is international processes becoming less manageable and less predictable. In this article, I aim to demonstrate how the cool war affects international relations in the Baltic Sea region and to explain why the continuation of the cool war is the most likely scenario. As for methodology, I analyse the evolution of international relations in the Baltic Sea region to describe the behaviour of the key actors in the region and to identify major trends. Moreover, I rely on the scenario method while taking into account the areas and intensity of interactions between Russia and the other countries of the Baltic Sea region.

New trends and new problems

International relations in the Baltic Sea region have been affected during the cool war by two major trends. These are the regrouping of the countries that belong to the 'traditional West' and the rift in relations between Russia and other Baltic Sea states.

The major factors behind the regrouping of the 'historically Western' states are the increasingly active stance of the US in the region, the growing role of NATO, and the shrinking role of the institutions of the European Union.

Between the end of the Cold War and the Ukraine crisis of 2014, the US paid limited attention to the Baltic Sea region. The Northern Europe initiative came to a halt when George Bush Jr replaced Bill Clinton as president.² Although, the US welcomed the accession of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia to NATO, its support for the new members was quite irregular. For instance, in 2006, Dick Cheney made critical remarks against Russia at a conference in Vilnius.³ When deciding on a missile defence system in Poland, the US relied on global rather than regional vision.

Today, Washington has become a prominent actor across many areas: economics, security (including cybersecurity), politics, etc. Note that the increased

² The Northern Europe Initiative // United States Department of State Archive. Available at: <https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/eur/nei/index.html> (accessed 10.02.2019).

³ Vice President's Remarks at the 2006 Vilnius Conference. May 4, 2006 // The White House. Available at: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/05/20060504-1.html> (accessed 10.02.2019).

activity of the US in the Baltic Sea region enjoys support from both the country's political elites (almost all the relevant bills and resolutions receive votes from both Republicans and Democrats in Congress) and the general public. According to recent polls, unprecedented 54% are in favour of the involvement of the US troops in a hypothetical military conflict between Russia and the Baltic States [3]. On the other hand, almost all the counties of the Baltic region, which have a friendly relationship with the US, are aligning with Washington rather than Brussels, viewing the former as the best guarantor of stability. All of them would welcome stronger US presence in the region and the country's greater involvement in the Baltic affairs, although they may differ in how they see the desired forms and extent of such involvement.

A logical continuation of this trend is the growing role of NATO. Although Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia have been members of the alliance for quite some time, NATO infrastructure was almost absent in these countries. Now a battalion-size battlegroup operates in each country on a rotational basis as a proof of the commitment of the alliance to its obligations towards its allies.⁴ The concerns expressed by some members of the Baltic elites regarding President Trump's commitment to NATO obligations were quickly dispelled. Since the 2014 NATO summit in Wales, connections and collaborations between NATO, on the one hand, and Finland and Sweden, on the other, have been growing [4; 5]. In autumn 2018, the largest post-1991 NATO exercise took place in and around Norway.⁵ Although focused on the Arctic (which is quite logical since the Nordic countries, including Sweden and Finland, were involved), it affected the situation in the Baltic Sea region. Almost all the countries of the region view NATO as the major factor in ensuring their security and participate in various defence projects of the EU [6]. However, most Western analysts believe that NATO could ensure the security the Baltics States, using a range of military and non-military means. An influential American commentary on the issue says: 'NATO possesses a powerful military deterrent, but its political deterrent is more powerful still' [7]. The NATO factor will very likely play a growing role in the Baltic Sea region.

Until recently, the EU and its institutions contributed enormously to the Western policy towards the Baltic Sea region. Today they are playing a smaller yet noticeable role. The new state of affairs is a result of the internal problems of the EU: the failure to adopt a constitution, the financial crisis of 2008, the

⁴ Boosting NATO's presence in the east and southeast. 2018. 10 Sept. // NATO. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed 10.02.2019).

⁵ Trident Juncture 2018 Press Conference. 10 Oct. 2018 // NATO. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_159119.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed 10.02.2019).

Greece debt crisis, the migrant crisis, the 2016 Brexit referendum, etc. All the above made the ideas and accomplishments of the Union less attractive to some of its residents and gave a boost to Eurosceptics. Moreover, people in the new member states expected a greater effect of accession and a more rapid increase in living standards. An ideational and political differentiation has occurred in the Baltic Sea region. The positions of Liberalism and Euro-optimism became weaker. Right populists have gained ground in Germany. In Poland, the ruling Law and Justice party has embraced a policy that is being condemned by the EU as contradicting European values.⁶

Euroscepticism is growing in the Nordic countries. Critical attitudes towards the EU are becoming visible even in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia [8]. Differentiation affects the political moves of these states: they back contrary positions on such important issues as migration and the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Although the Baltic Sea states were among the creators of the sanctions regime against Russia, there are nuances to their relations with the country.

Overall, differences between the Baltic Sea members of the EU are growing. These differences, however, will never go beyond a certain limit. Despite the escapades of individual politicians, it is hard to imagine any Baltic region country to embark on the journey of leaving the EU. Most of the local population and elites understand that they benefit from their EU membership. Moreover, the complications of Brexit (difficult negotiations with Brussels and a domestic political crisis) are another discouraging factor. The 2019 European Parliament elections proved that Eurosceptics and populists have a limited influence on the Baltic Sea states. Apparently, the problems faced today by the EU are a crisis of concrete forms of European integration rather than of the phenomenon per se.

One might conclude that the positions of the 'historical West' have strengthened and even consolidated to a degree in the Baltic Sea region.

At the same time, the Chinese factor is becoming more conspicuous in the Baltic Sea region. China works there along three avenues: strategic partnership with Russia, the 16+1, and the Belt and Road Initiative [9]. The country supports Russia by criticising any anti-Russian sanctions imposed without explicit UN Security Council authorisation, particularly, by the Baltic Sea members of the EU. In summer 2017, the first Russian-Chinese maritime exercise was held in the Baltic Sea [10]. It aroused immense interest because it preceded the *Zapad* Russian-Belarusian manoeuvres. The 16+1 initiative was launched to boost collaboration between the PRC and former socialist countries of CEE,

⁶ The resolution of 15 November 2017 on the situation of the rule of law and democracy in Poland (2017/2931 (RSP)) // European Parliament. Available at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+P8-TA-2017-0442+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN> (accessed 10.02.2019).

including Poland and the Baltics. Remarkably, the fifth prime ministers' meeting within the initiative took place in November 2016 in Latvia.⁷ China's Belt and Road Initiative is meant to include as many states as possible, including those in the Baltic region. Both the 16+1 and the Belt and Road give priority to economic projects. The Chinese pay special attention to IT, communications, transport, development, and infrastructure [11]. Today, Beijing does not have any significant political differences with the Baltic Sea states; it rarely makes political statements regarding the situation in the region.

The rift between Russia and the other states is of more consequence to the future of international relations in the Baltic Sea region. At this stage, the Baltic Sea states, to a varying degree, consider Russia a violator of international law and threat to their security. The EU viewed the country as a strategic partner in 1991–2104 and tried, albeit not always consistently, to make it part of multilateral collaboration. Now even these attempts are a thing of the past. In practice, Russia treats both NATO and the EU as rivals, not as partners. Overall, the West has adopted a policy of soft containment. The US legislation of 2017 explicitly embodies this new approach [12].

The economic situation is deteriorating. After the beginning of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, the EU, Norway, and Iceland imposed sanctions on Russia (the measures were expanded later). Moscow responded with countersanctions, which included a ban on agricultural imports. The economies of both parties have adapted to the sanctions regimes. The Russian economy, however, sustained considerable losses because the sanctions coincided with a dramatic drop in oil prices and several other negative factors. Strained international relations have affected the economy of north-west Russia — the region that was the country's principal international trade operator for almost twenty years. Exports and imports shrank; the revenues of the largest exporters fell; the rates of economic growth and fixed-asset investment decreased [13]. The sanctions and the countersanctions, however, dealt a blow to both current business ties and future contracts. Because of uncertainty, businesspeople are opting for short-term deals and avoiding large projects requiring substantial investment. Whenever possible, international businesses from the Baltic Sea region are trying to replace Russians with partners from other countries.

In view of the proportion of energy exports in the EU–Russia bilateral trade and the contribution of levies on energy sales to the national budget revenue, any change in energy markets has a tremendous effect on the country. This

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia. 5th Meeting of Heads of Government of Central & Eastern European Countries and China (16+1). May 16, 2016. Riga, Latvia. Official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia. Available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/ru/sotrudnichestva-stran-centralnoj-i-vostochnoj-evropy-i-ki-taya> (accessed 10.02.2019).

explains the ferocity of the ongoing struggle over Nord Stream 2. The German government and businesses are welcoming the project, whereas the US and some Baltic Sea states are opposing it. The US adopted a law mandating special sanctions to prevent the construction of the gas pipeline.⁸ Sanctions may cause Russia to incur substantial extra costs, covering which may prove difficult amid socioeconomic constraints. At the same time, US corporations are offering to arrange LNG shipment to Europe. Today Russian gas is cheaper than its US counterpart is. In the near future, however, the products from the two countries will compete for the markets. Of special interest here are the positions of Poland and Lithuania. The government of Poland has announced a plan to give up Russian gas by 2022.⁹ Restructuring the energy sector to cut down on and finally give up Russian gas purchases is part of Lithuania's 2018 strategy for national energy independence.¹⁰ Probably other states will follow the example of the Baltic country, albeit it not that ostentatiously. The outlines of a new divide running across the energy industry are becoming clear. This divide will have far-reaching consequences.

There is a serious rift between Russia and the other Baltic Sea countries as regards security issues. The region used to be one of the most peaceful during the Cold War and immediately after it. This is not, however, the case anymore. Mutual suspicion replaced long-standing trust.

A major trend in today's international relations, which has a profound effect on the Baltic Sea region, is the decay of the system of disarmament and arms control agreements. After the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, a missile defence base was sited in Poland. Russia's objections were ignored. The West interpreted it as the unwillingness of the country to accept that the former Warsaw Pact states had moved beyond Russia's sphere of influence. Russia suspended its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe in 2007 and completely withdrew from it in 2015.¹¹ The reason for this decision

⁸ Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (H.R. 3364). 115th Congress Public Law 44. 2017. 8 Feb. Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/3364/text> (accessed 10.02.2019).

⁹ Poland aims to stop importing natural gas from Russia after 2022. Available at: <http://www.thenews.pl/1/9/Artykul/326978>, Poland-aims-to-stop-buying-Russian-gas-after-2022-FM (accessed 10.02.2019).

¹⁰ National Energy Independence Strategy of the Republic of Lithuania. P. 14. Available at: <http://enmin.lrv.lt/en/sectoral-policy/renewable-energy-sources/legislation-2> (accessed 10.02.2019).

¹¹ RIA Novosti. Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Russia suspends CFE partnership. March 10, 2015. RIA Novosti website. Available at: <https://ria.ru/20150310/1051832783.html> (accessed 10.02.2019).

was the discontent of the Russian military with the treaty's flank restrictions.¹² The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987, which symbolised the end of the Cold War, was terminated in August 2019. All the above makes the situation in the Baltic Sea region less predictable. The region is ramping up its military capacity. Although it is incomparable with what was going on during the Cold War, militarisation is starting to affect the atmosphere in the region. Measures to build trust and increase control are becoming less efficient; moreover, they are used selectively in practice. The grievances of the parties are addressed either nominally or not at all.

A special case is the cyberspace situation. Recently there have been no conflicts in the region comparable to the accusations against Russia of interference in the 2016 US elections. A similar concern arose only in Sweden before the parliamentary election of 2018.¹³ At the same time, the Baltic Sea states have suspicions against Russia concerning lesser episodes. The most important in this respect is the virtual absence of prospects for cybersecurity cooperation between Russia and the other Baltic Sea states. The parties are guided by completely different principles when developing their policies in this field. In this situation, it is very difficult to find common approaches even to concrete issues.

The political rift consisted of a dramatic reduction and even severance of contacts at the highest level, including the summits of the Council of the Baltic Sea States. Ministers of foreign affairs and other officials do not meet on a regular basis any more. Such meetings, if any, focus on current affairs. Parliamentary ties proved to be the most stable. The Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference continues its work without major disruptions.¹⁴ Russia and the other Baltic Sea states support opposite positions on almost all urgent international problems: the 2014 referendum in Crimea, the situations in the Donbas and Syria, etc. The Baltic Sea states supported London over the Skripal affair and expelled Russian diplomats in solidarity with the UK. The situation is aggravated by propaganda campaigns: Russia sharply criticises the US, the EU, NATO, and individual countries of the region, particularly, Poland and the Baltics. In their turn, these states and organisations have launched a propaganda campaign against Russia. The last but not the least, both sides suspect each other of intervention in their

¹² RBC. Russia offers NATO compromise on CFE. May 16, 2008. RBC. Available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/15/05/2008/5703cc899a79470eaf76a9eb> (accessed 10.02.2019).

¹³ Swedish PM warns of foreign influence ahead of 2018 poll // Radio Sweden. Available at: <https://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2054&artikel=6655535> (accessed 10.02.2019).

¹⁴ The 27th Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference Mariefhamn 26–28 August 2018. Available at: <http://www.bspsc.net/annual-conferences/the-27th-baltic-sea-parliamentary-conference-mariehamn-26-28-august-2018/> (accessed 10.02.2019).

domestic affairs. Moscow believes that the Russian opposition has support from not only the US and the EU, but also individual Baltic Sea countries (first of all, Lithuania), whereas the EU countries are convinced that the Russian leadership supports their far-right and far-left forces to weaken the Union as severely as possible.

The situation is better in culture, education, science, tourism, student exchange, cross-border cooperation, etc. Collaborations in those fields were curtailed (primarily, by the Russian side) for financial rather than political reasons. Most projects are, however, short-term. Alas, they cannot alter the current atmosphere of alienation.

Therefore, the main consequences of the cool war for the Baltic region are as follows:

- the West has consolidated and strengthened its position; the significance of the US factor has increased;

- new tangible and sensitive divides have appeared between Russia and the other states of the region;

- the space for cooperation between Russia and the other Baltic Sea states has shrunk.

In effect, Russia's situation in the Baltic Sea region can be called 'soft isolation'. Overcoming it will require time, concrete targeted steps, and, most importantly, the restoration of trust and commitment to cooperation from all the states and international organisations in the Baltic Sea region.

What lies ahead: scenarios for the future

Probably the best method for estimating the prospects for international relations in the Baltic Sea region is scenario-building that relies on the principles formulated by the French school of *La prospective*. One of its prominent members, Michel Godet, suggested that scenarios should rely on structural analysis in view of internal and external variables affecting the strategic choices of actors [14; 15]. In the Baltic Sea region, the strategies of local actors are determined by domestic situations, regional trends, and the global context. In view of the apparent rift in relations between Russia and the other states of the region, one can expect these actors and their strategic choices to influence the situation in the region. Analysis of their interactions creates a framework for building concrete scenarios. Key indicators to be used in the scenarios are the general tenor of interactions (tendency towards cooperation or conflict) and their intensity (the degree of cooperation or conflict). If the current situation is used as the reference point, scenarios should estimate the potential for cooperation or conflict between actors. Once the intensity of interactions is determined, one can consider individual scenarios. Depending on the intensity of interactions, the

conflict behaviour of actors may translate into various scenarios ranging from growing regional tension (a low conflict intensity) to a global conflict (a high conflict intensity). There are diverse theoretical scenarios for cooperation: from a warming in relations (a low cooperation intensity) to effective cooperation (a high cooperation intensity).

Naturally, future developments will depend on not only the situation in the Baltic Sea region, but also international relations in a broader, global context. In a mid-term perspective, however, international relations will follow one of the five scenarios: a military conflict, growing tension without military escalation, the continuation of the cool war, normalisation of relations, and effective multilateral or bilateral cooperation. Below I will consider all these scenarios from the most to the least confrontational

The first one is the military conflict scenario. Today most international conflicts are domestic crises expanded under the influence of international interventions. Many Russian experts criticise how the Baltics have developed since independence, stressing that they have failed to create attractive economic and political models [16]. None of these countries, however, shows signs of a domestic confrontation that can paralyse or destroy governmental structures as was the case in Ukraine and some Arab states. Although domestic tension in the Baltics is lower than in the latter countries, a regional conflict is possible in three other cases. These are a direct clash between Russia and NATO; a conflict triggered by an incident, a technical malfunction, or a misinterpretation of the intentions of the other side; a conflict in an adjacent region spreading to the Baltic Sea region.

A direct clash between Russia and NATO in the Baltic Sea region is possible only in the case of a larger, global conflict. In December 2018, President Vladimir Putin expressed his concern about the trend to lower the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons.¹⁵ Probably, one should pay attention to the experts believing that the Russian leadership's frequent declarations about the possibility of a nuclear conflict mean that the country does not rule out the hardest variant [17]. Some Russian military experts argue that nuclear disarmament went so far after the Cold War that nuclear conflicts would not lead to the destruction of humanity [18]. Moscow's most serious concerns in the Baltic region relate to the siting of missile defence elements in Poland and the potential placing of US medium- and small-range missiles. John Bolton, at the time National Security Advisor of the United States, stated that Washington did not plan to deploy me-

¹⁵ Vladimir Putin's annual news conference. December 20, 2018. Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/59455/> (accessed 10.02.2019).

dium- and small-range missiles in Europe.¹⁶ Moscow, however, did not take this statement seriously. The Committee on Defence and Security recommended the Security Council to consider a revision of national defence policy and to substitute the pre-emptive strike concept for the retaliatory strike one.¹⁷ Not all Russian experts share this point of view. Some of them (rightfully, in my opinion) believe that no substantial changes have taken place in that area and thus there are no grounds for revising the policy [19]. Despite tough rhetoric, direct and deliberate military confrontation between Russia and NATO is very unlikely.

A more complicated question is whether a military conflict can be triggered by an incident, a technical malfunction, or a misinterpretation of the intentions of the other side. A text written by a group of prominent politicians to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I describes a hypothetical incident: Russia holds a large military exercise in its regions bordering NATO states and shoots down a NATO surveillance aircraft, which approached the country's air space by accident. After that, the two sides exchange threats and ultimatums: Europe finds itself on a brink of a conventional conflict, which may devolve into nuclear warfare [20]. According to the US journalist Bob Woodward, whose statement, however, requires trustworthy evidence, the Russian military unofficially warned the US Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis that tactical nuclear weapons could be used if a conflict arose in the Baltics [21]. The contacts that Russia's Ministry of Defence uses to prevent incidents between its country and Finland (and some other states)¹⁸ are useful, yet they cannot solve all the problems. At the same time, the level of trust between Russia and the other Baltic Sea states, particularly, as regards security matters, is today at its minimum. Confidential agreements are impossible now.

A serious threat is a conflict in a neighbouring region spreading to the Baltic: this chiefly concerns Belarus and the Arctic. The social contract between Belarusian authorities and people has been malfunctioning, whereas measures taken by the country's leadership in this respect have caused even greater tensions [22]. At some point (it is difficult to say when exactly), Belarus will wit-

¹⁶ Bolton says we're a long way from deploying U.S. missiles in Europe. October 23, 2018 // Reuters. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nuclear-bolton-inf/bolton-says-were-a-long-way-from-deploying-u-s-missiles-in-europe-idUSKCN1MX2L9> (accessed 10.02.2019).

¹⁷ Finanz.ru. Putin receives proposal on pre-emptive nuclear strike. November 22, 2018. Finanz.ru website. Available at: <https://www.finanz.ru/novosti/aktsii/putinu-predlozhili-up-rezhdayushchiy-yaderny-udar-1027748608> (accessed 10.02.2019).

¹⁸ Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. Deputy Minister of Defence of Russian Federation Colonel General Aleksandr Fomin meets Permanent Secretary of] Ministry of Defence of Finland Jukka Juusti. December 10, 2018. Official website of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. Available at: https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12207555%40egNews (accessed 10.02.2019).

ness a transfer of power to younger politicians. The way the transfer will be carried out depends on how much external actors will intervene in the process. If the intervention is limited, the political class of Belarus will most probably achieve a compromise and the events will unfold peacefully, just as it happened in Armenia. Substantial intervention, however, may lead to outright conflict. Although the Russian leadership welcomes deeper and broader integration within the Union State, it continues to stress that the unification of the two countries is out of question.¹⁹ Having taken a cautious position on the unification, Minsk is probing the ways to improve relations with the West. The West has many means to influence the situation in Belarus. According to some estimates, they are greater than those of Russia [23]. There are no signs, nevertheless, that the West is ready to exploit its enormous potential and enter another confrontation with Russia. Although it does not seem likely that the Ukrainian scenario will repeat in Belarus, such a turn of events cannot be excluded. If a similar crisis arises in Belarus, it will involve all the neighbouring states to varying degrees.

Even Western critics of the Russian leadership admit that the same two trends continue to dominate Moscow's policy in the Arctic after the Ukraine crisis of 2014. On the one hand, Russia views the West as a threat, yet, on the other, it is trying to establish constructive relations with other Arctic states [24]. The signs that the situation is taking a turn for worse have become evident: there is a general feeling of political uncertainty as to the demarcation of the external border of the continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean; dwindling cooperation on security; a deepening divide between Russia and the other Arctic states. At this stage, attempts to impose military control of disputed areas in the Arctic seem very unlikely. The same applies to a confrontation between Russia and NATO in the North Atlantic or an unintentional escalation of tensions at the Russian–Norwegian border [25]. NATO is equally cautious now in framing its policy ('low tensions' in the High North).²⁰ Of course, NATO will seek to expand its influence in the Arctic, however, without provoking a conflict. If the international situation deteriorates, a conflict may arise. Inadvertent escalation of tensions and even military confrontation can be triggered by misinterpreting the intentions of the other side. If such a conflict arises, it will very likely spread beyond the Arctic and involve the Baltic Sea states.

¹⁹ Izvestiya. Peskov on reaction of EAEU members to Belarusian integration. December 29, 2018. Izvestiya website. Available at: <https://iz.ru/829521/2018-12-29/peskov-rasskazal-o-reakcii-chlenov-eaes-na-integraciiu-belorussii> (accessed 10.02.2019).

²⁰ Joint press conference with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the Minister of Defence of Norway, Frank Bakke-Jensen at the Trident Juncture 2018 distinguished visitors' day // NATO Official Site. October 28, 2018. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_159853.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed 10.02.2019).

Events in Ukraine will inevitably affect the situation in the Baltic Sea region. The effect of the Ukraine crisis, however, will be limited and very unlikely to cause an open military conflict.

Thus, the probability of the most dramatic scenario, an armed conflict in the Baltic Sea region, is very low.

The second scenario is growing tensions without military escalation. Such a turn of events will be possible if tensions grow between Russia, on the one hand, and the US and the EU, on the other, regardless of the reason or if a non-military crisis arises in Belarus or the Arctic. Growing confrontation is possible in any field. The most likely consequences are the complete blocking of Nord Stream 2 and the countries in the region switching to gas supply from other sources than Russia; an arms race in the region (although the placing of medium- and small-range missiles in the region is improbable, other weapons may be deployed there); an escalation in cyberspace and a new wave of mutual accusations reinforcing propaganda campaigns, harsh rhetoric at international forums and conferences, and a reduction in political contacts and meetings; dwindling cooperation in culture and education (although dramatic changes to the worse cannot be expected).

This scenario may cause the Baltic Sea region to fall back to the days of the Cold War, which, however, is not likely to return in full force. This scenario is more probable than that of a military conflict is.

The third scenario is the cool war continuing and confrontation persisting at the same level as today, with slight oscillations. This turn of events may be prompted by both internal and external factors. Trump believes that the principal rival of the US is China. He will try to avoid a serious escalation with Russia since it can encourage the country to forge closer ties with China on anti-Western grounds. The Baltic Sea EU states are not ready to make concessions to Russia, nor are they willing to increase confrontation, which is definitely against their interests. Russian elites believe that the national economy has generally adapted to the sanctions, that social and political stability has been ensured, and that the way to deal with the confrontation is to wait it out until the West gets tired of it. Although risky moves are possible, most of the population is tired of international tensions. The EU sanctions and the Russian anti-sanctions will remain, and there is no doubt that the US sanctions will not be lifted. The question is how much they will affect the situation in the region. The central issue is, of course, Nord Stream 2. If the cool war continues, the pipeline will be built, yet LNG supplies from the US to Europe will be arranged too. Europe is not likely to give up Russian gas in the foreseeable future. Gazprom, nevertheless, will have to comply fully with EU regulations and to take into account the competition when developing a pricing and supply policy. Although significant changes in the military are not expected, military capacities may be built up in the region [26]. The gradual development of relations between the

US, on the one hand, and Sweden and Finland, on the other, will continue, albeit at a slow pace [27]. Although Sweden and Finland will cooperate with NATO, they most probably will not join the alliance. The situation in the Baltic region will remain mostly unchanged. The intergovernmental dialogue will continue. Presumably, it will be more constructive as long as concrete urgent issues are concerned. Cooperation within short-term projects in culture, education, science and tourism and joint efforts of twin cities and border areas will develop at the same pace. Contacts in those areas may dwindle for financial rather than political reasons.

Global and regional actors are not interested in a dramatic deterioration in relation, nor are they ready to make concessions. Thus, the above scenario seems to be the most likely.

The fourth scenario is normalisation and gradual improvement in relations. It requires several conditions to be met: the lowering of tensions between Russia, on the one hand, and the US, NATO, and the EU, on the other; the resumption of serious constructive dialogue covering not only isolated issues but also the whole range of problems existing in the Baltic region; a significant reduction in military activities; the resumption of the summits of the Council of the Baltic Sea States; a gradual weakening of sanctions and countersanctions (lifting them in the most favourable case); abandonment of economic measures as a political means; closer cooperation in culture, education, science, and tourism. Going back to the 2014 situation, however, is impossible. This unlikely scenario largely depends on the situation in the global arena and relations between Russia and the West.

The fifth scenario is not only normalisation and improvement in relations, but also a dramatic shift to effective cooperation in the Baltic Sea region. Unlike the fourth scenario, it requires not only the leading actors but all the states in the region to come to an understanding. Cooperation between states and civil societies is necessary here.

In the mid-term, developments in the Baltic Sea region will be affected by both the domestic situation in each country (which will be more or less stable) and relations between major actors at a global and local level. Although the most likely scenario from this perspective is the continuation of the cool war, an increase in confrontation is more possible than a shift towards cooperation. The two extreme scenarios (a military conflict or effective cooperation) are possible in theory albeit improbable in practice.

Russia in the Baltic Sea region: ways out of soft isolation

The perspective adopted in the Global Forecast for 2019–2024 of the Russian International Affairs Council has become dominant in the Russian expert community. According to the forecast, Russia's relations with the other Baltic

Sea states will remain strained [28]. Although there is a strong tendency towards confrontation, one cannot fully agree with the above conclusion. A number of events of spring 2019 may be harbingers of an improvement. These are the International Arctic Forum in Saint Petersburg attended by the leaders of Sweden, Finland, and Iceland, who held bilateral negotiations with President Putin; the visit of President of Estonia Kersti Kaljulaid to Russia; a meeting of the Russian and Polish ministers of foreign affairs, the first in several years. These meetings show that, in the Baltic Sea states, there are influential circles that want normal relations with Russia. An objective interest of Russia is bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the Baltic Sea region rather than deeper confrontation, new rifts and conflicts, or stronger isolation. To overcome confrontation trends or, to begin with, to weaken them, Russian should be more active. At first, Russian initiatives can focus on issues of secondary importance. If they receive a positive response from the other side, problems of greater significance can be addressed. Russian initiatives should not seek to aggravate differences within the EU, NATO, and the Baltic Sea states, nor should they arouse such suspicions.

Firstly, it is necessary to move the problems of the Baltic Sea region up Russia's foreign policy agenda.

Although Russia has taken a turn to the East, its relations with the West remain significant in practice. Collaborations between Russia and the West focus on the struggle against terrorism, international crime, and drug trafficking, arms and arms race control, advances in science and technology, and conflict resolution. In the short term, the EU will remain Russia's major trade partner, and the Baltic Sea region will play a considerable role in relations between Russia and the West. The Russia–NATO and the Russia–EU border runs across the Baltic region, which has become a litmus test showing in what direction the relations between these actors will develop.

Whichever turn the situation takes, Russia should pay increased attention to the Baltic Sea region. Dmitry Lanko is right to stress that 'a region becomes a region only when it is perceived as such by the political and intellectual elites of states far beyond its borders' [29]. The above applies to the Baltic Sea region, which is perceived as such in many countries of the world. Of course, Russia's position in the region is very peculiar. No one in Russia or beyond it doubts that the country's Northwestern federal district is part of the Baltic Sea region, yet the country as a whole is never considered as such. International activities in the Baltic Sea region should, however, be one of Russia's priorities. The EU has devised a Baltic Sea strategy,²¹ which goes beyond the EU member states. Russia does not have a similar federal-level document. The 2016 Foreign Policy

²¹ European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2009/EN/1-2009-248-EN-F1-1.Pdf> (accessed 10.02.2019).

Concept of Russia has only isolated mentions of the Council of the Baltic Sea States and the Northern Dimension.²² Although the documents of the North-western federal district address some Baltic problems in more detail, that documentary framework is not sufficient. When developing a Baltic policy, Russia should take into account that the countries of the region are not destined to play a passive role. They can have a certain influence on international processes. Whether this influence is positive (conducive to lowering tension) or negative largely depends on the balance of political powers in the region.

An important contribution to creating a favourable context for political dialogue may be the abating of the propaganda campaign against the Baltic Sea states. Although this does not mean that Russia cannot criticise these countries for unfriendly moves in the international arena, Russian officials should not comment on the domestic processes in these countries and propaganda should not portray the Baltic Sea states in a negative light only. Anti-Baltic propaganda is playing into the hands of anti-Russian circles, which try to present Russia as the arch-enemy. An important issue is the perception of past events. Some of them will remain a sore point for a long time. However, these differences should not affect the current political situation. The perception of the past should not be an issue of intergovernmental relations. It should be reserved for discussion by historians, public figures, and civil society. Russia may score political points by doing unilateral favours to these countries. A strong move by President Putin was to lay flowers on the grave of Field Marshal Mannerheim in Finland in 2001.²³ A national hero in Finland, Mannerheim is an ambiguous historical figure in Russia. Since no Soviet or Russian leader had done so before Putin, his gesture received a positive response from the general public and political circles in Finland. Such steps could be taken in relation to other countries. It is worth reconsidering the proposal of the famous diplomat Yuri Deryabin on returning the interbellum symbols of presidential power to Estonia [30]. Of course, there are many other possibilities. Since the Baltic Sea states are democracies, the best way to improve relations with them is, if not winning affections (which is an arduous task), then achieving mutual understanding with both the ruling classes and the general public. In doing so, it would be wise to avoid contentious issues. Such gestures would look like acts of good will rather than unilateral concessions.

²² The Foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation. Approved by decree of President of the Russian Federation No. 640 of November 30, 2016. Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/41451> (accessed 10.02.2019).

²³ Presidential Executive Office. Vladimir Putin lays flowers at graves of presidents of Finland Marshal Carl Mannerheim and Urho Kekkonen at Hietaniemi cemetery. September 3, 2018. Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/39984> (accessed 10.02.2019).

Although the detectable trend towards the erosion of arms control agreements is likely to persist, it should not become an obstacle to small local steps to lower military tension. Freezing the arms race in the Baltic Sea region when the opposite trend dominates world politics does not seem feasible. A more realistic plan is encouraging reciprocal steps to restore trust.

Despite all the difficulties, Russia should try to stimulate political dialogue on the problems of the Baltic Sea region, building on the positive developments of spring 2019. These attempts will be successful only if they are supported by other moves: negotiations with the US (available data suggest that they never address the Baltic Sea as a separate issue); negotiations with NATO (probably, in the framework of the Russia–NATO Council); negotiations with the European Union and with each Baltic Sea state. The latter point requires special attention. The Baltic Sea states are members of NATO and the EU. Thus, Washington and Brussels will take into account their positions when conducting negotiations with Russia. Regardless of the outcome of Brexit, the influence of the UK on European affairs will diminish, whereas that of medium EU states (Poland and, to some degree, Sweden) will grow. Dialogue with the mentioned states is necessary to improve the situation in the Baltic Sea region. An important aspect of bilateral negotiations with Lithuania and Estonia may be accelerating the ratification of border agreement.

It would be logical to encourage economic, cultural, research, and academic ties, as well as collaborations between regions and border areas. Selective engagement [31] can be very effective in this case. The economies and trade of the Baltics remain closely connected to Russia [32]. The other Baltic Sea states are also interested in business contacts with the country. Although the Northern Dimension did not meet all the expectations, one should not underestimate its effectiveness when it comes to individual projects. Sanctions against large Russian corporations lend urgency to collaborations between small and medium enterprises. The Baltic Sea region is among the world's leaders in the uptake of ICT advances (this holds true for both the elites and the general public). The Northwestern federal district may benefit from the experience of the Baltic Sea states in the area. Saint Petersburg State University, the Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, and other northwestern universities aiming to break into the top-100 in the world are committed to cooperation with their counterparts across the Baltic Sea region. Saint Petersburg, a world cultural centre, can become even more attractive as a destination for people (particularly, intellectuals) from all the Baltic Sea states [33]. The geographical location of Kaliningrad will always make it an attractive city to visit [34]. Experts maintain that cross-border cooperation can develop despite a deteriorating international situation. Moreover, it has the potential to strengthen Russia's position [35]. Success is possible if Russia acts pragmatically and does not react to minor changes in

the political situation. The Baltic Sea region has a complex and largely successful system of multilateral and bilateral cooperation, which has proved itself viable. Preserving this system is in the interest of all the countries.

Of course, improvement in relations will depend on whether the Western partners take steps in response. Since the border between Russia and the EU runs across the Baltic Sea, a positive development would be visa-free travel to the Schengen area for short-term visits of Russian citizens, first of all, young people and students. This step would contribute to the expansion of contacts and lighten the atmosphere.

Despite the unfavourable situation, if Russia carries out an active policy to develop bilateral and multilateral cooperation, there is a chance to reverse negative trends and break out of 'soft isolation'.

Conclusion

To summarise, my study into the current condition and prospects of international relations in the Baltic Sea region shows that the most likely scenario is the continuation of the cool war with minor fluctuations towards lower or higher tension. That scenario is increasingly possible because none of the regional or global actors is interested in escalation, nor is it ready to make concessions. Since compromises and the end of confrontation are impossible, the cool war between Russia and the West is likely to persist, whereas the domestic situations in the countries of the region will be relatively stable. Therefore, the situation will freeze at the current level of selective engagement. This fragile balance can be upset by a hasty move from almost any actor. The continuation of the Cool war and soft isolation is apparently against the interests of Russia. This situation precludes mutually beneficial partnerships in various fields. Russia, however, still has a chance to implement an active policy, to break out of soft isolation, and to restore its standing in the Baltic Sea region.

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