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Beyond Deterrence:

Regional Stability through Confidence Building and Arms Control

After the end of the Cold War the Baltic Sea Region has been transformed from a highly militarized zone into a region of intensive cooperation. It has come to be perceived as the 'island of stability' on the European continent and as a possible bridge between Russia and Europe. However, since 2014 there has been an obvious shift towards a more confrontational way of thinking about the regional security environment. In consequence, the Baltic Sea region has emerged as one of the main areas of confrontation between Russia and NATO in the security realm.

This begs the question: How can we design effective conflict management instruments to solve the increasingly tense security situation in the region? Which tools are at our disposal to prevent (military) conflict and mitigate risks of escalation?

Historically speaking there have always been two basic approaches in international conflict management: The first one is deterrence, the second is reassurance. Although they are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they stem from different perceptions of other state's intentions and provide opposing recommendations of how to deal with the resulting security risks.

In short, deterrence strategies take the perception of threat for granted. They assume that (potential) opponents want to change the status quo and, eventually, may attempt to achieve territorial expansion, regime change or the subversion of societal cohesion. Given this judgment of intentions, increasing military capabilities are interpreted as evidence for aggressive behavior. In turn, defending the status quo requires military strength and resolve in order to discourage the opponent from proceeding with its aggressive behavior.

Reassurance strategies, by contrast, assume that states primarily seek security within the anarchic setting of international relations. Increasing military capabilities of (potential) opponents are viewed as an expression of their own subjective 'insecurity' and the fear to lose out against others. Hence, these strategies attempt to reassure (potential) opponents of one's own benign intentions, reducing miscommunication and misguided threat perceptions.

How do these two conceptual prepositions play out in practice in the Baltic Sea Region?

Since 2014 the actors within the region, primarily Russia and NATO, but also Finland and Sweden, have increased their military engagement. Both the volume of military expenditures, particularly in the three Baltic states, the number of military exercises and the quality of deployment have gone up. From the perspective of NATO and its partners, these measures have been necessary to counter possible Russian aggression after the annexation of Crimea. In essence, Russia is predominantly seen as a power willing to change the status quo, either due to conventional military deployment or what has been termed 'hybrid or new-generation warfare'. Moreover, there are well- known national sensitivities, particularly in the Baltics, which lead to fears that the Russian intervention in

Ukraine could become a precedent to be repeated in Estonia or Latvia with its numerous Russian-speaking minorities.

In this context at its Wales Summit in September 2014 NATO reaffirmed its commitment to collective security, established the readiness action plan with the very high readiness joint task force (VJTF) and integration units (NFIU) on the Eastern flank, and expanded the NATO response force (NRF) from 13,000 to 40,000 troops. NATO's Warsaw Summit in July 2016 further strengthened the emphasis on deterrence and defense establishing an enhanced forward presence in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuanian and Poland with four multinational battalions and a tailored forward presence with a multinational brigade in Craiova, Romania. The 2018 Brussels summit sought to further strengthen the level of readiness by initiating the so-called "four thirties" process, that is having 30 mechanised battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 combat vessels, ready to use within 30 days or less by 2020.

This increasing move from intra-alliance assurance to emphasizing deterrence is also visible in the re-naming and re-structuring of the European Reassurance Initiative, initiated by President Obama in 2014. Since 2017 it has been known as the European Deterrence Initiative with a significant increasing budget.

Russia, on the other hand, sees itself as a status quo power and views NATO, and the United States above all, as a challenger to the status quo in the post-Soviet space. In the Baltic Sea region, Russia is primarily concerned with two issues: free territorial access to the Baltic sea for maritime transport given its enormous economic importance and the security of Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg. Russia's military force posture in the region follows two logics that are, however, difficult to distinguish for external observers:

First, modernization efforts in the context of the ongoing military reform since 2008 and second, (particularly since 2014) a more specific deterrence strategy tailored to the regional security environment. Another challenge concerns the level of uncertainty about the possible missions that is whether capabilities are offensive and/or defensive in nature. Finally, one needs to admit that the level of what is perceived as the 'militarization' of Kaliningrad depends very much on the chosen timeframe for comparison.

Two examples to may suffice to illustrate these points:

First, in 2016-2017 and again in March this year the Kaliningrad oblast received in total four battalions of S-400 Triumf Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (the same that have been recently arrived in Turkey). They replaced four battalions of older S-200V and S-300V SAM systems. Thus, in quantitative terms the facts on the ground have not changed, although there is a definite qualitative improvement.

Second, in summer 2018 Russia formed an armored tank battalion within the 11th Army Corps stationed in the Kaliningrad oblast, which in 2018 received 30 additional T-72 tanks. Hence, in total, the number of tanks in the region increased, yet one needs to keep in mind that in 2010-11 the force was drastically reduced. At the time more than 800 tanks were withdrawn from Kaliningrad. In addition, the force posture in the Pskov Oblast neighboring Estonia and Latvia has remained stable for two decades.

Nevertheless, Russia is indeed increasing its military capabilities in the region, particularly those that provide anti-access and anti-denial functions. This includes, for example, now permanently deployed Iskander-M short-range ballistic missiles (that replaced obsolete Tochka-M SRBM), Bastion coastal

missile system with Oniks anti-ship supersonic cruise missiles and the already mentioned S-400 Triumf systems.

The main problem, however, concerns not these capabilities as such but diverging attributions of mission and threat perceptions. Russia can point to strategic deterrence and, for example, criticizes the purchasing of US Patriot missiles and JASSM cruise missiles by Poland, the Aegis Ashore site in Redzikowo and temporarily deployment of High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) in Estonia (and their sale to Romania). In turn, the ultimate fear of some NATO member is that Russia may employ both its anti-access and anti-denial capabilities in Kaliningrad and the vulnerability created by the Suwalki Gap – the 100km stretch of land on Poland's border with Lithuania dividing the Russian enclave on the Baltic Sea from Belarus – to prevent access to the North-Eastern flank of NATO, presenting the Alliance with a Crimea-style fait accompli.

To sum up: The overall regional security situation in the Baltic Sea region increasingly appears to resemble a deterrence model of conflict management: All participants are convinced that they are status quo powers that are potentially insecure, because of the aggressive behavior of the other side. In consequence, the partners practice deterrence to show strength and resolve.

Unfortunately, the chosen strategies entail problematic political consequences for all parties involved.

First, there is amble space for misperceptions of motives, intentions and overall goals, which is amplified by the obvious lack of trust between the partners. As a result, the movement of military units but also encounters in the Baltic air space can lead to dangerous incidents based on miscommunication.

Second, the focus on deterrence, has the tendency to become a self-fulfilling prophecy: Based on a false definition of the situation states initiate deployments that over time make the originally false conception come true. A status-quo power without malign intentions may come to perceive deterrent measures as a threat to its security resulting in a security dilemma.

Third, and this is a particular problem in Russia-NATO relations, deterrence rhetoric is sometimes pursued not for actual military purposes or to communicate resolve but to assure allies of intra-alliance solidarity or to strengthen bilateral relations. NATO's four multinational battalions and the more recent US-Polish declaration on defense cooperation regarding the US force posture are a case in point. This can create both wrong impressions on the target state and set in motion a domestic political campaign that mistakes alliance assurance (which, no doubt, is a very important aspect) for effective deterrence.

Finally, the overall emphasis on deterrence has led to an increase of hazardous incidents on and above the Baltic Sea between Western and Russian aircraft and vessels that could easily run out of control.

Given these inherent dangers, we need to ask ourselves, which political and military alternatives are there to reduce risks of escalation? How can we either replace or at least augment the present deterrence policies to ensure that a regional arms race (in terms of increasingly more deployments) does not take place?

The larger aim of these alternative measures would be to deal with the consequences of deterrence strategies (which are conducted in parallel), that is reducing the level of uncertainty about missions – whether they are offensive and/or defensive – of present and planned deployments. More and better

information through confidence-building should relax the strategic need for deterrence and brinkmanship. Because these measures work within a different normative framework, they may also lay the foundation for a return to wider security cooperation in the future by re-establishing trust between the partners. The key to both is transparency and verification.

Unfortunately, existing mechanisms to provide confidence building and arms control in the region stem dominantly from the 1980s and 1990s. However, they are increasingly dysfunctional and deteriorating. There are both geopolitical, operational and technological reasons for this development.

First, the various NATO enlargement rounds, and the collapse of the Warsaw Treaty Organization in summer 1991, have left the cornerstone for conventional arms control in Europe, the CFE Treaty, politically outdated. As it is well known the treaty was aimed at the reduction of military deployments needed for rapid mobilization and surprise attack and indeed brought significant reductions of certain offensive capabilities. These concern the treaty-limited equipment (TLE): battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, artillery, combat aircraft and attack helicopters. Today, however, the overall and national ceilings are way above existing deployment levels, whereas important modern capabilities such as air-defense systems and naval forces, remain unregulated.

Attempts to reform the CFE and adapt it to the new security environment (ACFE) ultimately failed due to NATO's insistence on Russian compliance with the 1999 Istanbul Commitments, whose provisions, however, were unrelated to the treaty as such. In December 2007 Russia finally suspended the implementation of the treaty and withdrew from it altogether in March 2015. Since 2007 there have been

no CFE-related inspections on Russian territory, whereas in 2012 NATO (November 2011) likewise ceased to carry out its treaty-obligations in relation to Russia. However, treaty obligations, including inspections, notifications and information exchange, with Belarus continue.

On the other hand, the three Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, have never been members of the CFE, nor have Finland and Sweden. This situation is amplified by the suspension of former bilateral agreements on confidence- and security building measures between them and Russia which were terminated by Moscow in 2008 after the CFE suspension and in 2014. Hence, this particular area of the Baltic Sea region, which, however, is at the center of contention, lacks a legally binding limitation of national or foreign stationed forces and suffers from minimal transparency.

Besides deployments, military activities in the OSCE area are regulated by the Vienna Document on Confidence and Security Building Measures. Here the main point of contention for several years have been the quotas for military exercises. Currently, military activities with 9,000 or more troops require notification in advance, whereas exercises with 13,000 or more troops are subject to obligatory observations. Given the trend to smaller exercises almost no military exercise in Europe is subject to these formal mechanisms. Instead member states notify partners about one major military exercise or military activity below the thresholds following the Vienna Document Plus 9/12 from October 2012.

In addition, Russia with is nominally larger exercises often evades notification and inspection measures by splitting up larger exercises into smaller units with several operational commands or by conducting numerous large-scale snap-

exercises without the prior announcement to the troops involved, which do not require notification. Moreover, as in the case of the CFE, certain important capabilities such as drones and naval forces, remain unregulated by the Vienna Document. Whereas different proposals to reform the Document along these lines have been on the table for some time, Russia currently argues that a reform can be realized only if the overall security situation changes, that is: NATO would need to renounce its deterrence posture towards Moscow.

Given this difficult political situation, how can we move forward in strengthening reassurance strategies?

The best option would clearly be to engage in a political dialogue with the aim of a complete redesign of regional conventional arms control and military confidence-building in Europe, that is creating an entirely new continent-wide security regime. Given the overall lack of trust, severe disagreements and geopolitical contentions in protracted territorial conflicts, ranging from Transnistria to Abkhazia, such a development is highly unlikely, if not, right-away impossible.

Yet, as I have tried to argue greater military-to-military dialogue and transparency measures, but also diplomatic-political signals, can still play an important role.

For example, Russia could agree to provide notification and invite NATO officers to military exercises unregulated by the OSCE's Vienna Document. Moscow could also reiterate the commitment it made in 1999 in the Annex to the CFE Final Act to show due restraint with regard to conventional deployments in the Kaliningrad and Pskov oblasts. Bilateral agreements on Vienna Document-like evaluation visits — could be revised or even expanded following Chapter X "Regional Measures" of the Vienna Document.

In turn, NATO could publicly announce that it is willing to uphold the threshold of "substantial combat forces" on the Eastern flank implied by the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act and propose to clarify the exact meaning of this term in negotiations with Moscow. At the moment, NATO deployments remain below the threshold, but more and more voices are calling for the termination of the Founding Act which would destroy a highly important starting point for future conventional arms control in Europe.

Given the deterioration of the CFE in combination with the diverging threat perceptions, the Baltic Sea region should in the long-term strive to construct its own sub-regional stability regime. This would probably include the mutual acceptance of present level of forces with a clear commitment to the compatibility of arms control and national defense. In order to prevent the isolation of single states (or to establish different zone of security), but also to provide for sufficient operational depth (given the diverging ability to relocate forces between NATO and Russia), the geographic zone of such a stability regime should be wide, including besides Russia and the three Baltic states, Poland, Belarus and even Eastern Germany.

If it would be possible to exert the necessary leadership and political will to move towards such a concept, then there can be no doubt that the Baltic Sea area could once again become that 'island of stability' with possible spillover effects for the entire OSCE area.